BOOK REVIEW:


The presentation of history can be as undramatic as data in a spreadsheet or as intense as an eyewitness account of actual events. Nat Brandt is an award-winning popular historian with a nose for human drama and the ability to tell a good tale. Although primarily a writer of American history, Brandt has chosen to write about the experience of Western missionaries in China at a time of great upheaval and tragedy.

Massacre in Shansi is the story of eighteen Western, mostly American, missionary families during the Boxer uprising. The drama of the story derives not so much from the tragic end of these missionaries -- for in Shansi there was no way out -- as from their unbearable oscillation between hope and despair. Brandt relies heavily on the writings of the missionaries themselves to document the unfolding tragedy. Indeed, Massacre in Shansi is well-documented from published and archival materials, most notably the archival materials at Oberlin College (Fifteen of Brandt's subjects were, in one way or another, linked to "Oberlin in China").

Brandt provides considerable background information on the Shanxi missionaries and certainly enough information to convince most readers that the pool of missionaries dispatched to China was composed of rather ordinary people. While it would be somewhat unfair to accuse the missionaries (who were, after all, willing to endure hardship in pursuit of a higher cause) of being bland, there is little in their correspondence and diaries to suggest colorful or complex personalities. This impression may simply be due to the nature of the source materials. Missionary correspondence and diaries were clearly written for an audience rather than for personal reasons, and the focus of writing seldom drifts from what one might expect of godly people on a mission. Greater insight into missionary personalities would probably be gained from relatives and those who knew the missionaries in a context not constrained by religious expectations.

Brandt's narrative of the Shanxi mission on the eve of destruction is quite useful in understanding how little these missionaries have to do with any discussion of Western imperialism in China -- except to note, perhaps, that the Boxers got the wrong people. Aside from being in the wrong place at the wrong time, it's hard to imagine how the Oberlin Band of missionaries could have been more innocuous. Many of their faults were due to poor preparation for their China mission (Brandt indicates that almost nothing was done to prepare missionaries before their departure) and the rigors of living in an alien environment. The tendency of the missionaries to isolate their families from Chinese society, for example, was dictated by a very real susceptibility to disease. The progress of their work, moreover, was slow and frustrating with the genuineness of convert faith almost always in question. Ultimately, their work as well as their lives evaporated without much lasting impact. Not even the foreign secular community in China exhibited much sympathy or concern for the missionary lives lost.
The final days of the Shanxi mission are, of course, the dramatic high point of the book. Brandt makes the excellent observation that the missionaries in Shanxi were dangerously in denial about the growing turmoil. They had difficulty grasping the fact that they were targets. The Boxer unrest was, they felt, the result of drought (which would be resolved through a good rain) or was actually aimed at the Catholic missions rather than at the far less meddlesome Protestants. The Shanxi missionaries were further frozen in inaction by the contradictory behavior of local government officials which continued up to the very end.

*Massacre in Shansi* has blemishes that are to be expected from a writer who is not a China scholar by training. There are mistakes in names due to an unfamiliarity with the language, but most of these errors stem from the mish-mash of romanization schemes that make writing from the English language resources of the period a naming minefield. Compounding this difficulty is the unfortunate fact that some missionary writers created their own system of romanization. While it is, of course, always wise to be true to the original, readers warrant some help either in the form of Chinese character text (ideally) or in the form of pinyin romanization in parentheses.

Brandt makes no claim that this is the definitive work on the missionary tragedy in Shanxi. This is a work told from a missionary perspective and "... through their eyes -- a Western, American viewpoint, flawed by the missionaries lack of knowledge about China and the Chinese." (p. xiv) The obvious next step is to broaden our understanding of the Shanxi massacre through the very difficult work of re-constructing events from the Chinese perspective. With so many pieces now in place, this tragic puzzle deserves to be completed.

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