Mizo Studies Vol. 15 No. 03, pp. 176-183 ISSN : 2319-6041
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Across North America: Reginald Arthur Lorrain and the Making of a Missionary

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Abstract:

This article examines the North American years (1899–1902) of Reginald Arthur Lorrain, an Englishman who subsequently served for several decades as a Christian missionary among the Maras of the Indo-Burma borderland. Drawing on Lorrain's unpublished personal diary, the study traces his passage through the agricultural, industrial, and itinerant-labour economies of Manitoba, Ontario, and the southern United States, and argues that the hardship, physical risk, and social marginality he encountered there constituted a formative, if unintended, preparation for his later missionary vocation.

Read against the ideological backdrop of late-Victorian Muscular Christianity and imperial culture, Lorrain's North American experience is used here to illuminate the broader relationship between secular labour emigration, character formation, and missionary calling in this period. Conceptually, the analysis draws on Pierre Bourdieu's notion of habitus, Raymond Williams's structure of feeling, and Victor Turner's model of ritual transition to explain how this unremarkable labour migration came to function as vocational preparation. The article also considers how far ordinary Britons were influenced by imperial ideas, placing Lorrain closer to Bernard Porter's view that such influence was often unconscious than to John MacKenzie's argument that imperial ideas were widely and consciously accepted.

Keywords: Lorrain; North America; Missionary; Maraland; Borderland

Introduction

Reginald Arthur Lorrain occupies a distinctive, if understudied, place in the historiography of Christian missionary work on the Indo-Burma borderland. Born in England in the late nineteenth century, he emigrated to North America in 1899 in search of employment and, over the following three years, passed through the prairie agriculture of Manitoba, the nickel mines of Ontario, and the itinerant labour circuits of the northern United States and Texas, where he encountered sustained hardship, physical danger, isolation, and material uncertainty. This article argues that these experiences, undertaken without missionary intent, played a formative role in shaping the man who would later emerge as a missionary.

Following his return to England in 1902, Lorrain's career took a markedly different direction. He subsequently travelled to the hill country of the Indo-Burma borderland, where he devoted several decades to missionary work among the Maras. Maraland became not merely the field of his missionary labour but the place with which the remainder of his life became inseparably bound: he died there and was buried among the people to whom he had ministered. Reconstructed primarily from Lorrain's own diary and situated within the historiography of Victorian emigration, Muscular Christianity, and impe-

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rial culture, his trajectory from England through North America to Maraland offers a productive case study for understanding the experiences that shaped the missionary he became.

Theoretically, this reading of Lorrain's formation draws on Pierre Bourdieu's concept of habitus, the durable, embodied dispositions generated through sustained practical experience rather than formal instruction (Bourdieu 72). Approached in these terms, Lorrain's years of manual labour, physical risk, and social precarity in North America may be understood not merely as biographical background but as a habitus-forming apprenticeship: an unstructured, bodily education in endurance and empathy that would subsequently structure his practice as a missionary among the Maras.

This transformation can be better understood by drawing on conceptual ideas from cultural theory and anthropology. Raymond Williams's concept of a structure of feeling (132) refers to the shared attitudes and sensibilities of a particular generation before they are clearly expressed or formally defined. It helps explain the partly unspoken belief, common among young Englishmen of Lorrain's generation, that facing hardship abroad was itself a meaningful and worthwhile experience. The anthropology of ritual transition, most influentially theorised by Victor Turner through the three stages of separation, ordeal, and return (94–97), provides another way of understanding Lorrain's experience. Lorrain's departure from home, prolonged trial and hardship across the North American continent, and eventual return can be read or seen as a genuine rite of passage. Although he did not undergo any formal ceremony or consciously intend it as such, these experiences nonetheless prepared him for the new but critical role he would later take on as a missionary.

A Trial to His Parents

During the final decades of the nineteenth century, emigration agents travelled from town to town across England advertising, frequently with considerable exaggeration, the opportunities available in Canada for strong, healthy, hardworking young men, a country said to reward a man in opportunity what England offered him only in wages. This recruitment discourse addressed itself to a specific type of candidate: capable, restless, and possessing little enough to lose that a one-way passage appeared an attractive prospect rather than a risk. Reginald Arthur Lorrain, not yet twenty years of age and, by his own account, increasingly at odds with his father, closely fit this profile.[1**]

Lorrain's father, a London postmaster of modest means but respectable social standing, had paid twenty-five pounds, approximately three months' wages for a working man at the time, to apprentice his son to a grocery business. The apprenticeship collapsed within a year for reasons that remain undocumented. In April 1899, Lorrain departed for Liverpool and subsequently crossed the Atlantic, joining the broader current of young Englishmen of his generation who sought land, employment, and a measure of self-respect that circumstances at home had not afforded them. As he later recorded in the diary, he kept at the Mission Bungalow in Saikao (also spelled Serkawr), the optimism with which he had begun the journey did not long survive contact with the realities he encountered in North America.

Bred for an Age of Zeal

Reginald's departure may be read, in part, as a private matter: a difficult and increasingly unmanageable son leaving a household that had grown too small for him. Yet it was also a thoroughly ordinary move for a young man of his class and generation, occurring at a moment in British cultural history that lent such departures an almost inevitable quality. The ethos historians have termed the Victorian wind, an outlook of restless self-assertion blowing through England and the settler colonies alike, did not merely tolerate youthful restlessness; it actively cultivated and rewarded it. This ethos is best understood, in Williams's terms, as a structure of feeling: an inchoate but widely shared conviction, felt before it was ever theorised, that a young man's worth was proven through distance and hardship. A son who left the comforts of home to make his way in an unfamiliar and demanding environment was not an object of pity but of admiration, regarded as having proven his worth by enduring hardship far from

***Much of the account of Reginald's time in North America has been reconstructed from his Personal Undated Diary in the Mission Bungalow, Saikao, Mizoram.

the securities of domestic life. This ideal of character, forged through hardship and geographic distance, was central to the self-understanding of an empire whose reigning monarch was said, without irony, to rule over dominions on which the sun never set (Mangan 18). Lorrain, in this respect, was in every sense a product of his Victorian upbringing.

From the 1850s onward, the movement historians term Muscular Christianity contended that the Church of England had grown excessively bookish and insufficiently attentive to the physical dimension of Christian character. Taking its name and much of its early expression from the fiction of Thomas Hughes and Charles Kingsley, the movement held, as Clifford Putney summarises it, that Christian faith, physical health, and moral courage were inseparable (Putney 11–44). Its proponents regarded faith divorced from physical toughness as suspect, a conviction reinforced through public-school education, Sunday sermons, and youth organisations such as the Boys' Brigade. Character, in this framework, was demonstrated not in the classroom but on the playing field, in athletic contest, or, ideally, on the frontier itself (Hall 7-8; Faulkner 175-93).

Lorrain absorbed this cultural framework early and, evidently, without conscious reflection. Periodicals such as *Boys' Own Paper* regularly featured narratives of shipwreck, prairie settlement, and jungle expedition in which ordinary English boys discovered their true character through adversity. Rudyard Kipling published "The White Man's Burden" (290) in 1899, the same year Lorrain sailed for Canada, articulating what became the decade's most widely debated statement of imperial obligation: an appeal for England to commit her most capable young men to distant and unfamiliar service. Whatever the poem's political implications, it captured a conviction widely held at the time, that a young man's worth was measured by his willingness to endure suffering far from home, on terms not his own. Lorrain required no direct exposure to Kipling's verse to have internalised this expectation; for a young man of his background, it constituted an unstated but pervasive social norm, one that positioned an unfamiliar country as the proving ground on which his character had yet to be tested.

Empire in the Blood

It is tempting to characterise this restlessness as an imperial instinct, and the Victorians themselves frequently described it in precisely such terms, as a form of racial destiny rather than social conditioning. The ideology of the "civilizing mission" was closely connected to Victorian ideals of character, duty, hardship, governance, and moral improvement, which were often presented as qualities that enabled the British to govern and "civilize" peoples regarded as less developed. Missionary and imperial discourse overlapped so extensively in this period that the historian Andrew Porter devoted an entire monograph, *Religion versus Empire?*, to disentangling the two (91–115). Lorrain's own family occupied this overlap directly, and the family was very much part of this connection between missionary and imperial service. Within a year of seeing Reginald off at the Liverpool docks, his brother, James Herbert Lorrain, also left for a missionary post in the far corner of Northeast India, amongst the Mizos. In the Lorrain household, serving far from home in difficult conditions, whether in commerce, agriculture, or missionary work, was seen as a normal and worthwhile way for a young man to spend his life.

Contemporary historians are considerably more circumspect than their Victorian subjects about attributing such patterns to inherited disposition, and this disagreement merits examination rather than elision. John MacKenzie has argued that empire permeated British popular culture at every level, from schoolbooks to music halls to advertising (198–226). Bernard Porter, by contrast, contends in *The Absent-Minded Imperialists* that most ordinary Britons paid comparatively little attention to empire, and that treating the Victorian population as sharing a uniform imperial consciousness obscures significant differences of class, awareness, and competing loyalty (134 - 163). The evidence of Reginald's own diary places him closer to Porter's idea of the largely uninterested Briton than to MacKenzie's view of people deeply influenced by imperial culture. Nothing in his notebook suggests that he saw himself as an agent of empire when he boarded the S.S. *Mongolian*. Instead, he carried a more personal outlook, common among young men of his class and time: the belief that a man proved himself by travelling far from home, facing hardship, and enduring difficult experiences, and that the wider world was some-

thing for an Englishman to experience in this way.

This distinction matters for how the remainder of Lorrain's North American years should be interpreted. He was not dispatched to Canada by the Colonial Office, nor did he understand himself as an instrument of imperial policy. Yet the ideas that made his departure seem natural, the dislike of domestic comfort, the romantic view of the frontier, and the belief that hardship abroad built character in ways that an easy life at home could not, were themselves shaped by a culture deeply influenced by empire, even if individuals like Lorrain were not able to clearly express that connection. He travelled to Canada to recover from a failed apprenticeship, not to serve the Crown; yet the fact that these two motives were difficult to separate within the culture of his time is itself historically significant.

By the time Lorrain came to write his own account of his later missionary career, he required no historian to identify this overlap; he articulated it himself, in his choice of title. Following his North American years, Lorrain spent the remainder of his life engaged in missionary work among the Maras in the unadministered hill tracts of the Indo-Burma borderland, publishing an account of that experience under the title *Five Years in Unknown Jungle: For God and Empire*. The title is itself a significant piece of evidence: it indicates a man who perceived no contradiction, and felt no need to justify one, in placing 'God' and 'Empire' side by side as two closely connected parts of the same calling. Whatever combination of religious conviction and national sentiment had carried him across the Manitoba prairie in 1899 had, by the time he wrote his account of Maraland, only a few years after his arrival, this idea had become a settled and largely unconscious belief, showing how closely missionary and imperial identities remained connected for a man of his generation.

The Agents and the Advertisement

It is worth examining more closely the terms of the arrangement Lorrain entered when he accepted a farm posting in Manitoba through an emigration agent. Canada's labour-recruitment scheme of the 1890s presented itself, on the surface, as a triumph of imperial marketing, promising free land, fair wages, clean air, and prospects for the right sort of man. In practice, the scheme functioned as a supply chain for cheap and compliant labour, and the young men who embarked at Liverpool typically did not discover the discrepancy until they were already many miles from the nearest railway station, contractually bound, and without means of return. Historians of the period have not hesitated to characterise such arrangements as a form of indentured servitude presented as opportunity (Tinker 137, 140). Lorrain lacked the benefit of this retrospective analysis. He possessed only the labour recruitment agent's assurances, a steamer ticket, and the encouragement of his brother, James Herbert Lorrain, whom the Mizos would later know as Pu Buanga. James saw Reginald off at the Liverpool dock and, within the year, left for a missionary post of his own in farther India. The two brothers would later meet again there, a detail that would prove more significant than either could then have anticipated. Whatever difficulties awaited him on the Manitoba farm, those who had sold him the passage had little reason to warn him about them in advance.

An Ocean Crossing and the Tough Work Begins

The eleven-day Atlantic crossing aboard the S.S. *Mongolian* afforded Lorrain his first sustained experience of privation: rough seas, seasick fellow passengers, and shipboard concerts organised to pass the time, followed by an initial view of Halifax[2***] under snow. In retrospect, this proved a comparatively gentle introduction. The more consequential lessons began once Lorrain and a fellow recruit disembarked from the train in rural Manitoba to discover that the farm to which they had been assigned by the agents lay not at the station but some twenty miles beyond it, across open prairie, and that neither man was used to his new boots yet.

***After sailing from Liverpool, Reginald Arthur Lorrain entered Canada through the important Atlantic port of Halifax, Nova Scotia; from there he continued westward by the Canadian railway toward Manitoba. Halifax was, in that period, one of the principal gateways for those crossing the Atlantic from Britain to Canada, linked to the settlement of the vast new lands of the Canadian West.

The two men walked the full distance. By the time they arrived, their feet were raw and their provisions exhausted; several homesteads along the route had already declined to offer them shelter before they finally reached Rapid City after dark, secured a shared bed, and woke in the early hours to find the room infested with bedbugs, an introduction, as Lorrain later recorded, to a country that granted nothing without cost. Within days the two recruits were separated by the toss of a coin, and Lorrain found himself alone on the farm of a man named Neelands, a churchgoing Methodist whom Lorrain came to regard as gentle on Sundays and considerably less so for the remainder of the week. That a single individual could exhibit such markedly different behaviour was, Lorrain's diary suggests, more than the young Englishman, despite his developing tolerance for hardship, could readily reconcile.

What followed, according to Lorrain's later account, was less like ordinary farm work and more like a deliberate test, as though Neelands, the farm owner, wanted to find out how much hardship a newcomer could endure before giving up. Lorrain worked eighteen-hour days under unrelenting sun, laboured through flooded fields and hailstorms, and was placed, without warning, on an unbroken horse in what appeared to be a calculated attempt to have him thrown. A single day of rest could be obtained only after walking sixteen miles each way, because Neelands, who owned nine horses that were mostly left unused, refused to lend one. In every material respect, the posting constituted an unremunerated education in self-reliance, precisely the dimension of the emigration scheme that the recruiting agents never mentioned because it did not fit the positive picture they gave to potential emigrants.

Underground, and the Nearness of Death

By the time Lorrain left farm labour behind, the pattern that would characterise his North American years had become established: hardship arriving without warning, met by a degree of resilience that appears to have surprised even him. He subsequently took work in the nickel mines around Copper Cliff and Sudbury, where the physical danger intensified, and near-fatal incidents recurred with some frequency. A falling rail tie crushed his foot; on a separate occasion his leg was nearly severed; on another, only a box of candles carried in his sock prevented serious injury from a three-hundred-pound bucket. When blasting fuses were lit, the interval between ignition and detonation was, by Lorrain's own account, frequently no more than sixty seconds.

He worked a continuous thirty-six-hour shift after leaving an abusive foreman's employment, and on his first day at a subsequent posting witnessed a tunnel collapse that killed a fellow miner instantly. In January 1901, he learned of the death of Queen Victoria. In a remote Canadian mining town, he saw shops draped in black as people mourned the end of an era that had seemed distant from their everyday lives. When a smallpox outbreak closed the mine, Lorrain and his companions evaded the quarantine rather than face starvation, took work cutting firewood at seventy-five cents per cord, and subsequently walked twelve miles through deep snow to a logging camp, where conditions required breaking trail through drifts before teams could move timber in the spring thaw.

It would be a mistake, in recounting this period, to romanticise the hardship involved or to treat frostbite and infestation as incidental colour on a predetermined path. Lorrain's own record does not support such a reading. He complained, argued with employers, and left jobs when he felt he had good reason to do so, only to take another job when necessity required it. The available evidence suggests that he was an ordinary young man facing genuinely difficult conditions for ordinary reasons, earning wages, finding food, and securing shelter. There is little evidence that he saw these experiences as preparation for some larger purpose. In retrospect, this makes the course of his later life all the more remarkable. Lorrain was not consciously preparing for his future vocation; he was simply dealing with the demands of each day as they came. Only later did these experiences, taken together, acquire a greater significance.

South to Texas, and a Different Kind of Poverty

Toward the end of his North American sojourn, Lorrain travelled south across the border into the United States. He spent a week in New York, largely unmoved by the city's architecture but visibly affected by conditions in the Bowery, where he observed destitute men lining the streets. Lorrain's re-

sponse to this scene was not that of a detached observer but reflected an emerging concern with the circumstances of those whom society had largely abandoned, a concern that would later inform his missionary vocation.

From New York, Lorrain travelled to Texas, covering the distance between towns on foot with a forty-three-pound pack, and sleeping variously in cattle pens, wagon yards, and railway station waiting areas; on one occasion he narrowly avoided serious exposure after walking twenty-six miles into a cold north wind. He located relatives near Brownwood and spent a restorative period with an aunt who, in his own account, took considerable care of his welfare; he gained twenty-four pounds within a month under her care. By his own report, as in his diary, it was the first Christmas since leaving England that he experienced as a period of comfort rather than mere survival.

This period of stability proved temporary. In the autumn of 1902, Lorrain contracted typhoid fever, likely during a period of travel that had already taken him from Galveston to New York to Puerto Rico and back. On 27 October 1902, weakened but recovering, he disembarked at Bristol, having been absent, by his own reckoning, for four years, although the concluding phase of that period had, in practice, extended well beyond Canada's borders, into the mining camps, port towns, and transient routes of a continent considerably larger and more demanding than initial recruitment materials had indicated.

A Training Ground, in Retrospect

Unlike many of the young Englishmen who had emigrated under comparable promises, Lorrain returned to England. A number of his contemporaries remained permanently in North America, some achieving relative prosperity and others declining gradually into poverty without informing family at home. Lorrain's own return, initially into a position as a temporary clerk, appeared, superficially, an unremarkable re-entry and back into the ordinary English life.

The years that had left him with damaged feet, a leg he had nearly lost, and a case of typhoid had also provided him with something a grocery apprenticeship in London could not: firsthand experience of hunger, cold, physical injury, loneliness, and the need to endure hardship.

His North American years thus functioned as an informal but substantive education, conducted across an entire continent rather than within institutional walls. In the absence of formal instruction, Lorrain acquired experiential knowledge of privation, exhaustion, danger, and the discipline required to persist without recourse to easier alternatives. The prairie, the mine, the road, the railway platform, the logging camp, and the shared bunkhouse each played a part in shaping him in different ways.

Across this extended geography, from the open prairie to the depths of the mine to the streets of distant cities, Lorrain gained not merely a tolerance for hardship but an understanding of how ordinary people experienced it. He also came to understand how easily a sense of security could be lost and developed a greater ability to recognise others' suffering. These were lessons he could not have learned from his grocery apprenticeship in London and could not have gained fully from the literary and cultural ideas of Victorian society alone.

In this sense, the North American continent itself functioned as an unintended preparatory ground for the missionary career that followed. Considered against the cultural background that produced him, one that equated physical endurance with moral character, and that drew little distinction between missionary calling and imperial purpose, Lorrain's American years can reasonably be read as an unplanned rehearsal for his subsequent, more demanding posting in the 'excluded' and 'unadministered' hill country of the Indo-Burma borderland, among the people then known to others as the Lakhers and identified today as the Maras.

Using Turner's model of ritual transition, Lorrain's departure from England can be understood as the stage of separation, his years of labour and injury as the ordeal, and his return home in 1902 as the beginning of his return to society. Although this process was not planned or intentional, it closely follows the basic pattern of a rite of passage. He had travelled to North America as a difficult son fulfilling an ordinary expectation of his generation; he returned having acquired, without full awareness at

the time, much of what his subsequent vocation would require of him.

Unlike his North American sojourn, Lorrain did not return from this second and considerably longer undertaking. He spent several decades among the Maras following the period recounted in his book, and he ultimately died in Maraland and was buried there, among hills that had once been as unfamiliar to him as the Manitoba prairie had been in 1899. The young man who had disembarked at Bristol in 1902, evidently relieved to be home, became, in time, the older man who chose not to return to England at all, who had, by then, made a distant hill country, a foreign land, his own in a manner that no emigration agent's promise regarding America, or for that matter, Canada had ever achieved.

The young man who walked twenty miles in unbroken boots across the Manitoba prairie could not, at the time, have recognised the purpose toward which his experience was directed. Yet the same endurance that sustained him through a thirty-six-hour shift without sleep, the same instinct that led him to attend to a destitute man in the Bowery rather than continue past him, and the same willingness to accept a railway bench over turning back, accompanied him, ultimately, into the hills above the Indo-Burma frontier. North America did not, in any direct sense, produce Lorrain's missionary vocation; it is nonetheless difficult to account fully for the missionary he became without considering what he acquired from that continent, and from the process by which he came to endure its demands. The journey and the ordeal functioned, in effect, as an unintended course of instruction, and its lessons remained evident in his conduct long after he had departed its shores.

Conclusion

This article has argued that Reginald Arthur Lorrain's North American years, although undertaken without any missionary purpose, formed an important and largely unrecognised stage in the making of the missionary he would later become. Viewed through the conceptual lens and ideas of habitus, structure of feeling, and ritual transition, his experiences on the farms of Manitoba, in the mines of Ontario, and along the temporary labour routes of the northern United States and Texas appear not as a minor part of his life, but as a long period of learning through hardship, poverty, and isolation. His own diary suggests that he was shaped less by a conscious imperial or religious purpose than by the accumulation of ordinary hardships. Yet these experiences gave him qualities that he could not then have recognised as preparation for the demands of his later missionary life.

Placing Lorrain's experience within the wider history of Victorian emigration, Muscular Christianity, and missionary culture also reveals a broader pattern that is often overlooked in institutional histories of missions. The qualities needed for missionary service were not always developed in churches or missionary institutions. They could also grow out of ordinary experiences of migration, work, hardship, and life far from home. Lorrain's later decades among the Mara, and his eventual death and burial in Maraland, become more meaningful when seen against this earlier period of his life. His story therefore offers a useful example of how a vocation may begin to take shape long before a person recognises it, formed not only by deliberate choices but also by the unexpected experiences of everyday life.

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