BOOKS I HAVE READ: LETTERS ON MISSIONS

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A failed missionary writes an impassioned plea for others to get involved in the work that he couldn't do. Fascinating stuff from the late 1700s.
Category: Reviews

Letters on Missions Addressed to the Protestant Ministers of the British Churches is a lengthy title for a fascinating little book. And what's more, it's all available free online!

OK, I will admit that it isn't the most up to date book, first published in 1794. This means that the langauge and phrasing are not the sort of thing that we are used to today and at times the scanning of the pages is blurred. But what do you expect from a free read of a 200 year old book? However, whatever the problems of the presentation, the content is fascinating.

The author, Melville Horne writes out of the pain of effectively failing as a missionary in Sierra Leone. Circumstances, local politics, the climate and his family situation conspired to make it impossible for him to stay in West Africa.

> *If my readers are curious to know whether I did nothing in Africa as a missionary, I am sorry that a regard for the truth obliges me to answer, nothing but preach one single sermon by means of an interpreter.*

However, this apparent failure did not dampen his ardour for mission work and the bulk of the book consists of letters to English clergy, encouraging them to get involved in world mission.

The content of the letters is wide ranging including scriptural support for the work of mission, an outline of the strategy needed to work in West Africa, and a description of the sorts of people that are needed in mission work. The topics are all highly contemporary, though some of the solutions are less so!

However, the most pointed parts of the book are Horne's attempts to get the British clergy interested in mission at a time when their interest was concentrated almost entirely on the needs of the church in the UK. This is very familiar territory. It is evident from the preface that Horne had been widely criticised for his efforts to engage the clergy in mission work. For some time, he had actually withdrawn this book from sale because of the reaction to it. In the preface to this new edition, he explains why first wrote the book and repeatedly apologises for any offence that it has caused and then he gets right on and says that church leaders should consider serving overseas.

Letters on Missions is a fascinating historical document, but one which packs a contemporary punch. It deserves rescuing from the obscurity that it has fallen into.

When we consider this deep spiritual poverty of a major part of our fellow men, we are admonished, that it becomes us to do something for their relief. On this we seem agreed; but, I am sorry to remark, that we agree, more generally, to neglect our duty, than to acknowledge its obligation. Satisfied with the cold approbation of a duty, which it is impossible for us not to feel, we dismiss prospects of wretchedness too oppressive for our faith and love; and console ourselves with the unintelligible hope, that the Almighty will execute somehow, and at sometime, by worthier hands, a work too great, and too dangerous, for us little men.