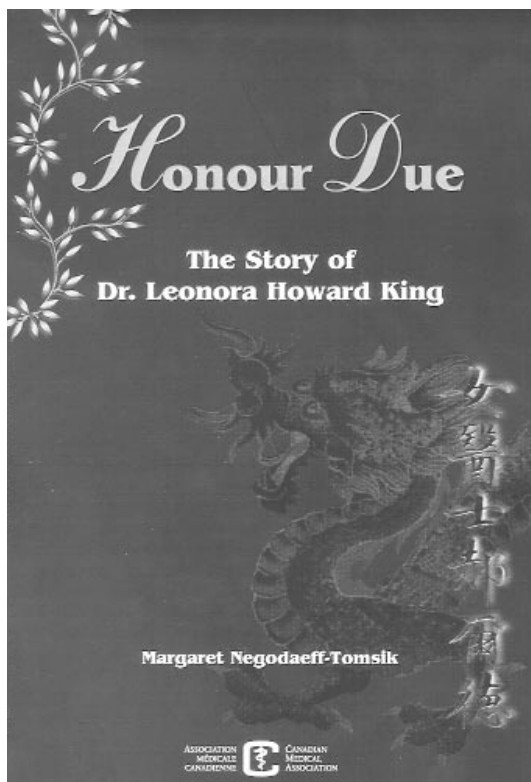


UTMJ Reviews – History of Medicine

Honour due: The Story of Dr. Leonora Howard King

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Caduceus and the Dragon

Honour Due: The Story of Dr. Leonora Howard King takes as its subject the tense meeting of Western missionaries and indigenous Chinese at the turn of the century. Motivated by the lure of adventure and paternalistic pity for the “naive heathens” of distant lands, many idealistic young Christians headed East under the sponsorship of Western missionary societies. Unfortunately, their self-righteous efforts to enlighten native Chinese were often met with disdain at best, and ridicule or violence not infrequently. Moreover, the small cohort of Chinese who were prepared to attend missionary lectures seemed more interested in the soup served than in learning about the Christian saviour. Perhaps somewhat cynically, a medical degree was consequently considered an invaluable asset for proselytisation. While provision of medical services was consistent with Christian notions of charity it also allowed missionaries better access to the masses they hoped to convert during vulnerable moments in their lives.

One of the most remarkable physician-missionaries to enter the Middle Kingdom was the Canadian born Dr. Leonora Howard King. Although raised on a farm in Ontario she was forced to seek medical training at the University of Michigan after being denied entry to

Canadian medical schools on account of her gender. In her last year of training, she was recruited by the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society for work in China. Over the course of the next forty-seven years, she had a profound impact upon countless Chinese women and children. She had the good fortune to win the respect of a highly placed Chinese official after successfully treating his wife. Dr. Howard King henceforth enjoyed this official's powerful patronage as both benefactor for her medical work and protector for her person during periods of tremendous anti-Western hostility and savage violence.

With the help of her patron she was able to open a number of free clinics for women and children, found a hospital, and establish a medical school to train female physicians. She is also rumoured to have helped sway China's diplomatic relations with the West. The story goes that when the former President of her medical school was appointed American Minister to the Court of Peking (Beijing), she vouched for his credibility via her patron on the basis of the Minister's role in assuring her own medical training. The Chinese court honoured Dr. Howard King for her contributions by making her the first Western woman to be elevated to the level of mandarin, a citation akin to knighthood.

Unfortunately, the author of *Honour Due* had the unenviable task of reconstructing Dr. King's life almost entirely from the accounts of contemporaries rather than from personal letters or diaries. The greatest frustration in reading this book is the absence of Dr. Howard King's own thoughts and observations upon the vivid personalities and events that surrounded her. Instead, Leonora's biography reads more like a generalised history of the Western missionary effort in China rather than a person-specific biography. The author attempts to make up for the lack of personal details with speculation upon what Dr. Howard King might have seen or thought. To the author's credit, her efforts are often richly evocative. Here is her surmised description of Dr. Howard King's initial entry into the city that would become her home:

In any season, the million residents of this thriving port sloshed through a quagmire of indescribable stench, the mud augmented every few metres by water carriers on their way to and from the great broad river of the stinking Grand Canal. Lanky yellow dogs covered in open sores skulked in alleyways just big enough for a donkey to pass through, snarling at each other over the bursting carcass of a rat that had recently made the long voyage from Singapore.

In all, *Honour Due* is a fascinating account of a remarkable period of history. It deserves to be read by anyone interested in the intersection of faith, healing, and Western imperialism.