



Roger Wilksinon

The Search for Isabella

A Dr.J.J. Kitchen, with a group touring the lower Yangtze River in 1913, reported in the 'Argus' newspaper that he had met a Dr. Isabella Wilkinson in Hangchow (present day Hangzhou). He discovered she was a Melbourne graduate, and she showed them over her foreign mission hospital there. Isabella Wilkinson (1883-1936) was, at the time, one of a still small group of women in Melbourne to do medicine and had graduated in 1905/6. She was the sister of Dr John Francis Wilkinson, a respected physician in Collins St. and a lecturer at the University. Isabella's story is little known. There is, for example, no mention of her in that remarkable book 'Strength of Mind' which details the lives of many Melbourne medical women graduates. This paper plans to trace Isabella from childhood in 'marvellous Melbourne' through her school and medical education to her first resident days at the Melbourne Hospital. Thereafter her trail becomes less clear. From 1909 onwards, after a short period in England, she became a medical missionary in Southern China, later married and began raising a family. She experienced the Revolution of 1911-1912 first hand while in Hangchow. She returned to England with her Methodist missionary husband in 1927 and died of breast cancer in 1936. Isabella was a committed Christian in an age when there was absolute certainty that non-Christian races had to be converted to the 'undeniable benefits' of Christianity. In China's case there appeared to be a major misunderstanding of that country's long, proud history and her cultural and religious background. Isabella had a fascinating life within this framework.