



A conversation with

JULIA FLYNN SILER

author of

WHITE DEVIL'S DAUGHTERS

Q: You have written about many diverse subjects and places around the world. When and how did the idea for *THE WHITE DEVIL'S DAUGHTERS* come to you?

A: Six years ago, I came across a first-person account written by a woman named Donaldina Cameron who ran a rescue home on the outskirts of San Francisco's Chinatown. She described her experience of leading a group of around sixty girls and young women across the burning city in the hours and day after the 1906 earthquake and fires. Dolly's account, which was a report to her church supporters, was utterly harrowing. I could smell the smoke in the air from Dolly's vivid descriptions and taste the fear and chaos of the city. That's something I'm always searching for as an historian – strong, distinct voices and primary materials.

I grew up in California and had long been fascinated by San Francisco's history. After reading her harrowing description of living through that disaster, I wondered how I had not known about Cameron. I started digging into her story and realized there was a wealth of primary material not only the home's own records and those of the Presbyterian Church but also from immigration files at the National Archives. Just as importantly, I soon realized I could track down the stories that Dolly's previous biographers had largely ignored – those of the Chinese aides who made her work possible and the stories of the women who passed through the home on their way to freedom.

If there's a common thread between all three of my books, it's the subject of women and power. My first, *The House of Mondavi*, was a story that began with Mama Rosa, the matriarch, in the kitchen during board meetings and ended with her granddaughter casting a deciding vote in a billion-dollar takeover battle. My second, *Lost Kingdom*, was about a woman, Lili'uokalani, who was unexpectedly thrust into power as queen of the Kingdom of Hawaii, and who was overthrown. The third, *The White Devil's*

K N O P F Q & A

Daughters, is about trafficked women who find their way to freedom at a home run by other women. All three books explore larger stories of women's empowerment.

Q: Can you tell us a little about your research?

A: It took me more than five years to research and write this history. One challenge I faced was convincing the rescue home to open its private records to me. For more than a century, it had been protecting the confidentiality of the women and girls who took refuge there. But over time they came to trust me and to believe that I would tell these stories with respect and care. Eventually, they allowed me to review many key case files, including the infamous "Broken Blossoms" case in the 1930s that centered around two residents of the home who courageously testified against a powerful trafficking ring.

These files, some of which contained documents dating back to the rescue home's founding in 1874, offered me an invaluable glimpse not only into the lives of the thousands of people who passed through its doors, but also into the wider history of the city and the state – documenting moments of natural disaster, racist threats and the changing conditions for immigrants and women. I always sat down to review the files at the home in Chinatown itself, walking up the same steps as the teenager in the first scene of the book.

In addition to the home's private files, the grand-niece of one of my principal characters, Donaldina (Dolly) Cameron, shared a boxload of family material with me, including nineteenth century photos, letters, and Cameron's Bibles, in which she tucked treasures between its pages. I travelled to archives at Yale, Stanford, U.C. Berkeley and U.C.L.A., as well as the National Archives, to track down the astonishing journeys these women made from slavery to freedom.

Q: What were some of the discoveries that most surprised/intrigued you?

A: Although Congress passed the 13th Amendment abolishing slavery in 1865, the brazen practice of buying and selling women still thrived openly in San Francisco in the chaotic years after the Civil War. Auctions of Asian women took place openly on the docks, in full view of police officers and waterfront crowds. By the 1870s, these sales had moved to less public locations, but the sex trafficking of women continued well into the twentieth century – prompting a group of women to organize to found a rescue home in Chinatown. They did this fifteen years before the Hull House, the famous settlement home for immigrants in Chicago founded by the "mother of social work," Jane Addams. They were pioneers in what we now call the anti-trafficking movement.

But it's the story of the women who survived sex slavery that are most surprising. I was especially moved by the story of a Japanese woman who'd been forced into prostitution and escaped to the home. Unlike so many former sex slaves, who did not leave behind records of their experiences that scholars could later study, this woman became a writer and feminist activist who wrote movingly of her experi-

K N O P F Q & A

ence. She took what she'd learned at the home in San Francisco and opened a similar refuge for former sex slaves in Japan to which she eventually returned. She was even invited by Eleanor Roosevelt to visit the White House. Her descriptions of the experience of sex slavery are absolutely searing.

Q: Can you describe SF in the early 1870s?

A: Aside from the cobbled streets, gas lamps, and early cable cars, probably the first thing you'd notice if you were able to time-travel back to 1870s San Francisco was that there were very few women on the streets – particularly in the eight-square-blocks of Chinatown, the mostly densely packed neighborhood of the city where some twelve thousand people lived.

Some described Chinatown in those days as a “bachelor society” and census takers from 1870 recorded that for every ten Chinese men in the city, there was only one Chinese woman. The census takers counted nearly three-quarters of those women as prostitutes. The steamers from China which unloaded women bound for the city's brothels or cribs were mobbed by men, and importers of women worked closely with the city's police force to assure delivery of the human cargo.

Q: You write, “For Victorian-era women who did not have the right to vote and possessed almost no political or economic power outside the home, this movement held special appeal.” What was the appeal of this cause?

A: They were a group of mostly middle-class white church women who became outraged by the trafficking of vulnerable girls and young women from Asia and who decided to exert their power in a way that was acceptable during the Victorian era – by creating and running a home of their own as a charitable project, seemingly remaining in the private sphere of the home, which was considered the acceptable place for women to exert their authority at the time.

Supported by a few clergymen, journalists, and abolitionists, these women claimed the moral high ground in fighting what they considered a particularly egregious form of slavery in their midst. To wage that fight, they, ironically, ended up entering the public sphere – garnering publicity for their cause, lobbying politicians, and regularly appearing in the courts on behalf of other women.

Q: It was private citizens, not law enforcement or government, who led this movement. In fact, the corruption in those civic institutions was stunning. How did these women find the courage to go up against the police, the mayor...? the list goes on!?

A: These women were motivated by their faith and by their sense of injustice, as well as their desire to save souls. The fight they waged was exhausting and its leaders often felt discouraged. But they had the support of each other and faith in the larger purpose of what they were doing, grounded in their religious beliefs. These women were part of a wave of Christian evangelism known as the Second Great

K N O P F Q & A

Awakening, as well as a time of feminist agitation for women's rights. As women crusaded against slavery, many of those same activists began fighting for the right to vote. The fight against slavery took great courage: the women were spat upon, threatened, bombs were placed around the rescue home, and they faced nearly continual legal challenges from the slave-owners' lawyers.

Q: What did a typical raid/rescue look like?

A: Staffers at the home would receive a message that a child or young woman was in danger or distress. The superintendent and a colleague, usually a Chinese aide who could translate for her, would go to the apartment or brothel, sometimes accompanied by a police officer or a private guard. The Chinese aide would often make the first approach, asking to be let in. If the doorkeeper refused, the officer or guard accompanying the home's staffers would try to push their way through, or even break through the door. Finding the distressed child or woman was often challenging and some owners and brothel-keepers would attempt to hide them or whisk them away. Sometimes, though, women who wanted to leave their situations figured out how to escape to the home on their own, either by slipping away at moments when they were unattended or by convincing someone to help them. When Chinatown was quarantined at the turn of the century in an attempt to contain an outbreak of Bubonic plague, the home's superintendent disguised herself, climbed through a skylight and scrambled over a rooftop to reach a girl who needed help.

Q: It's hard to read this book and not see parallels to today's headlines —especially to stories of the human trafficking of young women and to the violence that erupts with fear of immigrants. Were those parallels something you had in mind while researching and writing as well?

A: This story of women who reached across racial and class barriers to together fight the enslavement of other women resonates strongly today. What that small group of women did in San Francisco's Chinatown more than a century ago was an early harbinger of #MeToo – women standing together to help each other. It's a story of radical empathy and female empowerment.

It also became painfully clear to me, particularly after the election in 2016, that the story of a group of women organizing to try to help a vulnerable immigrant population is relevant to what's happening today. The parallels between the Trump administration's proposed Muslim immigration ban and the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 are especially striking: the 1882 legislation was the first law implemented to exclude a specific ethnic group from immigrating to the U.S. It was one of the most shameful pieces of legislation ever enacted in America and was repealed in 1943.

Q: The mission house survived earthquakes, fire, and plague. Can you talk about some of the most harrowing incidents?

A: When the San Francisco earthquake struck in the early morning hours of April 18, 1906, the rescue

K N O P F Q & A

home housed nearly sixty girls, women, and babies; that large group traversed the city as it burned in the wake of the earthquake, and eventually they all crossed the bay to safety. For the first week after the disaster, they slept on the floor of a barn, with bedclothes lent to them by a nearby orphanage. For months afterwards, they felt threatened by traffickers and criminal tong members, who saw the chaos afterwards as an opportunity to recover what they considered their human property. It is a credit to the women who ran the home that the entire household was safe despite the fires, which eventually razed all of Chinatown and took thousands of lives.

Q: This is very much a history of women helping other women and some amazing relationships that were forged along the way. Are there one or two that stand out for you most?

A: I was moved by the decades-long friendship that developed between two immigrants: Dolly Cameron, the daughter of a Scottish sheep rancher who first arrived at the home in 1895 as a sewing teacher, and Tien Fuh Wu, a Chinese girl whose father sold her to pay gambling debts and who was later abused as a child slave in San Francisco's Chinatown.

At first, Wu strongly disliked Cameron and resented her as a newcomer (Wu had arrived at the home about 15 months before Cameron). They couldn't have been more different in terms of race, class, and opportunities, but eventually Cameron and Wu began working together and became each other's closest and most trusted friend. Toward the end of my research, I visited their graves to pay my respects. They are buried close to each other in the Cameron family plot, surrounded by dying grass and bare earth.

Q: The Occidental Mission Home is still thriving today. Can you tell us a little about its current mission?

A: Now known as Cameron House, the building on Sacramento Street is home to a thriving social services agency for San Francisco's Chinatown. It runs a food pantry, after-school programs for local kids, and educational and social programs – not to mention an annual community carnival. In San Francisco, the building is probably most famous these days beyond Chinatown for supposedly being haunted. Having explored the dark cellars where girls sometimes hid behind sacks of rice to elude traffickers, I can say it does feel like ghosts still live there.

FOR BOOKING INFORMATION:

Gabrielle Brooks / gbrooks@penguinrandomhouse.com / 212-572-2152

Nimra Chohan / nchohan@penguinrandomhouse.com / 212-572-2035