6
'Writing on the Sand'

The First Missions to Aborigines in Eastern Australia

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When the establishment of a penal colony in New South Wales was announced, the minds of some turned immediately to future mission fields, to the time when 'all the savageness of the Heathen shall be put off, and all the graces of the spirit shall be put on'.[1] No doubt this writer was reasoning form past experience, since in all English colonising ventures from the time of Virginia in 1607, settlers were accompanied by missionaries charged with the task of converting the indigenous peoples to Christianity. Indeed, the spreading of Christianity had frequently been given as one of the main reasons for establishing colonies in the first place. But no missionary accompanied the first fleet and while Phillip was exhorted to 'enforce a due observance of religion' on his charges, he was not instructed to preach to the Aborigines.

This was probably a result of the rationalism or free-thinking which accompanied the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century, through which it became socially acceptable to challenge the teachings of Christianity and people in high places could profess atheism without incurring opprobrium.[2] The Enlightenment contributed to a developing attitude of respect towards ancient civilizations (as in India for example); it certainly contributed to the belief that it was *not* the role of English people to propagate their own religion.[3]

Two missionary societies existed when the first fleet left England — the Society for the Promotion of Christian Knowledge (founded in 1698) and the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (1701). These societies had concentrated largely on the dissemination of the Scriptures and on providing clergy for white settlers in colonial outposts, although the S.P.G. sent missionaries to minister to Indians and Negroes in North America and the West Indies.

It was the growth of the great evangelical revival in Britain which saw the establishment of the major Protestant missionary societies in the two decades between 1793 and 1813. Three of these Societies were to send missionaries to early

New South Wales: the London Missionary Society (founded in 1795), the Church Missionary Society (1799), and the Wesleyan Missionary Society (1813). This latter society sent the first man specifically appointed to work among the Australian Aborigines. He arrived in 1821, thirty-three years after the colony was established, by which time a whole generation of Aborigines had grown to adulthood knowing nothing but the depredations of the whites, and the consequent damage to Aboriginal society. Aborigines had, of course, resisted European advances, and the desire to curb hostilities was clearly a prime motive in Governor Macquarie's decision to start a school for Aboriginal children. He felt that the Aborigines, if educated, might be persuaded to forego their 'vindictive spirit'. While this Native Institution had some success in teaching Aboriginal children to read and write, it did nothing to lessen hostilities, especially on the frontiers of settlement.

People of conscience in New South Wales appealed through the public press for a definite Christian policy to be adopted towards the Aborigines.[4] The Home Government had also reached the conclusion that efforts should be made to convert them to Christianity, and Governor Darling's instructions included an injunction to that effect.[5] Archdeacon Scott, whose brief included the conversion of the Aborigines to the Christian faith,[6] acted quickly to begin a Christianising programme.[7]

Missionary activity had spread throughout the Pacific under the impetus of the newly-established missionary societies; Tahiti had become a Christian kingdom after the conversion of its Chief, Pomare. No doubt these perceived successes influenced the growing belief that missionaries would help overcome the Aboriginal 'problem'.

So it was that in the 1820s and 1830s Christianity was being put forward as a *solution* to the difficulties between Settlers and Aborigines. While many argued that to make Christians of the Aborigines would civilize them and stop them from disrupting the advance of white society, others saw Christianity as a means of atoning for the wrongs done to Aborigines at the hands of the whites. Indeed, it would not be exaggerating to claim that some believed the missionaries were appointed to act as the nation's conscience.

Certainly humanitarians in both Britain and Australia had worked hard to have missions established, but the Colonial Office's willingness to assist emerged from other motives too, and the missionaries seem to have been regarded somewhat in the light of workers on a rescue operation. They were to try to undo the damage that had been done.

William Walker, who arrived in New South Wales under the auspices of the WMS, began his mission some four years before this official change of heart had taken place. This did not mean, however, that he met with opposition or hostility; quite the contrary. Governor Darling expressed his pleasure that a mission was being established.[8] In spite of this official blessing, Walker's mission never really got under way. He began by wandering around the countryside talking to Aborigines, but quickly came to the conclusion that he should establish a permanent centre and encourage Aborigines to settle. This matter of settlement was to become a constant theme in Australian missionary enterprise. The Rev. Walter Lawry, secretary of the Sydney Committee of the WMS wrote to the London headquarters of the Society asking them to support a request for a land grant for an Aboriginal settlement.[9]

In the meantime, the WMS engaged the services of John Harper, a layman, who had come to the colony as 'a free servant to a gentleman'[10] to assist Walker. Harper

was sent inland to find a suitable site for a mission and he travelled to Wellington Valley, then the boundary of settlement, where an Agricultural Station was established. Controversy surrounded all aspects of this expedition. Not only were there money troubles between the two men and the WMS (Harper seems to have 'double dipped') but the claims Harper made met with public disbelief. After only a few months away from Sydney he claimed to have made considerable progress in learning the language and to have translated the first chapter of Genesis. This claim was challenged by the Attorney General, Mr. Saxe Bannister, whereupon the Wesleyan Society decided to hold a 'strict investigation'.[11] Harper was exculpated, but William Walker asserted that Harper's claims were false and that he was 'a dead weight upon the Society'.[12]

Archdeacon Scott did not believe Harper's report that there were five tribes around the Wellington district, consisting of some thousands of Aborigines all speaking the same language,[13] and anxious to be instructed by a white teacher.[14] He sent Richard Sadleir (an ex-Naval Lieutenant who had become involved in work among the Aborigines) to investigate Harper's claims. Sadleir found Harper's figures to be grossly exaggerated, and he reported that at the small school Harper claimed to have run, he found that none of the 'scholars' could read, some could write a few letters in the sand and one could repeat the Lord's Prayer.[15]

Harper abandoned the Wellington Valley district, stating that the mission was unlikely to succeed 'on account of the wicked examples here exhibited'.[16] After a fruitless search along the south coast for an alternative site,[17] Harper was appointed to serve as a catechist among the Aborigines in the Methodists' Richmond circuit. The local branch of the Society felt that they could not recommend him as qualified to work among white people.[18]

While the Wesleyans had been unfortunate in their choice of Harper, they fared little better with William Walker. Until 1822 he visited the Native Institution regularly, but from that time he was opposed in his work by the Rev. Samuel Marsden who had become a member of the Institution's Committee on the departure of Governor Macquarie.[19] Nevertheless, Walker was appointed to take charge of the girls when the Institution underwent organisational changes in 1824.[20] He soon ran foul of Archdeacon Scott who visited the Native Institution and found Walker, his wife and their assistant absent, while the children were left in the charge of a 'menial'.[21]

After several other problems including Walker's failure to supply the WMS with accounts, they severed his connection with the Society in 1826. The only record of his success in his Christianising mission was the baptism of some Aboriginal children, one of them the son of Bennelong.[22]

Five other missions were run in what was then New South Wales, most of them with land grants and government or other backing. These were at Nundah and Stradbroke Island in the Moreton Bay District, Reid's Mistake near Newcastle, Wellington Valley, and the Port Phillip District near present Geelong. They were variously supported by the three previously mentioned missionary societies, the Presbyterian Church and the Roman Catholics. All of them experienced the sort of problems already noted in Walker's mission; money difficulties, trouble with sponsors, quarrels among the missionaries themselves and failure to persuade the Aborigines to settle down and accept the missionary message.

The first land grant for a mission station was made in 1825. This was a grant of some ten thousand acres at Reid's Mistake on the shores of Lake Macquarie near Newcastle, and was assigned to the trustees of the London Missionary Society.[23] The Rev. D. Tyerman and G. Bennet Esq. were visiting the colony at the time on behalf of the LMS and they appointed the Rev. Lancelot Threlkeld to run the mission. Threlkeld had been a missionary on Raiatea and had met Tyerman and Bennet when they were visiting that island. Threlkeld's wife had recently died, leaving him with four small children, and he had decided to return to England. He travelled to Sydney on the same ship as Tyerman and Bennet.[24] Thus it was that Threlkeld happened to be in NSW when the agents of the LMS decided to establish a mission to the Aborigines. He had been in the Colony for two months when the proposition was made to him and a couple of days after accepting the position he married Miss Sarah Arndell.[25] His instructions from Tyerman and Bennet told him, among other things, to learn the native language, to show the Aborigines how to till the soil and build houses, and to establish a school. They pledged the society to support the mission, suggesting that as soon as Threlkeld could ascertain the amount required to maintain himself and his family he should let the Society know so that a fixed salary could be arranged.[26] After some delays a suitable site was selected and a house built for the missionary and his family. While the Aborigines cleared the ground for the cultivation of corn, under the supervision of a free white man and his sons, Threlkeld moved among them learning the language, writing down words and phrases and conversing with the Aborigines in their own tongue.[27] In return for their labour the Aborigines were supplied with food, clothes, tobacco and fish-hooks, but nothing was given to those who did not work, for Threlkeld believed that they should learn that rewards had to be earned.[28] He expounded his missionary theory in a letter to the Attorney General:

> first obtain the language, then preach the Gospel, then urge from gospel motives to be industrious, at the same time becoming a servant to them to win them to that which is right.[29]

In fact much more of Threlkeld's time seems to have been devoted to acquiring the local (Awabakal) language than to preaching the gospel. He published a Grammar in 1834, a Spelling Book in 1836 and Key to the Aboriginal Language in 1850.[30]

Long before this, however, he was in trouble with his Society. It seems that he had taken too liberally the injunctions of Tyerman and Bennet to charge his costs to the Society. The expense of his house, the upkeep of himself and his family in Newcastle during the long delay while the site was chosen and the house built, and the employment of free men to supervise the Aborigines had all cost the Society very dearly. The London Directors acted quickly to prevent further heavy expenditure. They resolved that Threlkeld be instructed to issue no more bills on the Society, and that in future the Rev. Samuel Marsden be requested to sanction any further charges made by Threlkeld against the Society.[31] This was as unfortunate as it was necessary, for Threlkeld had frequently displayed an antipathy to Marsden. He objected strongly to Marsden's being brought in as an intermediary, and a series of letters between the two men did nothing to ease the situation.

In March 1827 the Directors of the Society informed Threlkeld that his 'exorbitant expenditure' had to stop. They declared themselves unable to honour some of the

bills he presented and suggested that, in consultation with Marsden, he should sell enough missionary property to meet these bills amounting to £527.12.0d.[32] This suggestion presented an almost insurmountable difficulty, for the land on which the mission buildings were situated was held in trust for the LMS for the use of the Aborigines, and the Society held no legal title to it.[33]

On 15 December 1827 Threlkeld was arrested for debt, though allowed bail.[34] The affair was reported in the *Sydney Gazette* in a manner very sympathetic to Threlkeld. The correspondence between Threlkeld and Marsden grew acrimonious and the business dragged on until March 1828, when Marsden suddenly honoured the bills on behalf of the Society.[35]

The colonial government allowed Threlkeld four men on the stores to assist him to continue the mission,[36] but in 1828, before they had heard of this development, the LMS decided to close the mission and to dismiss Threlkeld from the Society.[37] When this became known in the Colony several people immediately subscribed to help Threlkeld retain the mission.[38] Archdeacon Broughton recommended to the Governor that he be granted £150 per annum to enable him to continue his valuable work of studying the Aboriginal language and translating the Scriptures.[39] The Executive Council,[40] and the British Government approved such an arrangement provided that Threlkeld gave the Archdeacon an annual report on his progress.[41]

Threlkeld continued his work on the language and was frequently called upon to act as interpreter when Aborigines were involved in court cases.[42] He translated sections of the Book of Common Prayer at Broughton's request.[43]

Yet the evangelising aspect of Threlkeld's mission proved fruitless and by the time he was fluent in the language there were scarcely any Aborigines left in the district to convert. There is no evidence of any conversions to Christianity during his fifteen years at Reid's Mistake. On one occasion Judge Burton was presiding at a trial, with Threlkeld acting as interpreter assisted by an Aboriginal man known as McGill. Burton questioned McGill closely as to his understanding of the nature of an oath, of truth and of future punishment, and was so impressed by his replies that he asked Threlkeld if he had baptised McGill. Threlkeld regretted that he had been unable to do so because in spite of McGill's obvious understanding of Christianity, his love of alcohol was inconsistent with the character of a Christian. This sort of attitude was typical: Aborigines who had absorbed undesirable aspects of European civilisation were considered by missionaries to be incapable of absorbing Christianity.[44]

Threlkeld's suggestion that the mission should be transferred to Newcastle, where a house for himself and huts for a hundred Aborigines should be provided, was rejected, and the missionary was informed that his appointment would cease from 31 December 1841.[45]

Like William Walker, Threlkeld had quarreled with his own missionary society and had also shown antipathy to Marsden, but Threlkeld made other enemies too. In 1836 he sued the Rev. J.D. Lang for libellous remarks made about the Lake Macquarie mission in Lang's newspaper the *Colonist*. The case attracted a great deal of public attention, and Threlkeld who had sued for £1000 received a partial apology and damages of one farthing.[46] Two years later the *Colonist* mocked Threlkeld's Annual Report in which he spoke of missionary hardships and sacrifices. The *Colonist* saw no hardships for a missionary living in a comfortable homestead, enjoying a liberal salary, while his flocks and herds made him rich.[47]

The same editorial spoke hopefully of a mission at Wellington Valley, established in 1832 by the CMS with the Rev. William Watson (a teacher from Yorkshire) and the Rev. Johann Simon Christian Handt (a Lutheran and former tailor from Saxony). They had been given the buildings previously occupied by the Agricultural Research Station, so that they were able to house themselves reasonably comfortably from the start. The mission was also granted ten thousand acres of land under the same terms as the Reid's Mistake Mission, and the Legislative Council made a grant of £500 per annum.[48]

Watson had taken some basic lessons in medicine before leaving England,[49] and as the nearest doctor was a hundred miles away[50] quickly found himself treating both whites and Aborigines. The missionaries began a school to teach whatever children they could encourage to stay with them. In the early days of the mission the Aborigines came in large numbers and Mrs. Watson was kept busy cooking for them, for they felt that if they treated the Aborigines kindly they would earn a good name among them.[51] Although many Aborigines left periodically the missionaries managed to persuade some parents to leave their children at the mission for short spells, and the Watsons 'adopted' quite a number of children over the years. Both men worked at learning the local language and Watson clearly became quite proficient, for he eventually preached in it.

Watson very soon began to quarrel with Handt. Both appear to have been rather difficult characters. Handt had quarreled with his former colleagues at a mission in Liberia, and Watson was to fall out with all his colleagues in Australia. Handt was moved from Wellington Valley because of his wife's ill-health, but the move can also be seen as an attempt by the Committee of the CMS to separate two uncongenial companions. He was appointed to Moreton Bay in 1837 in the triple role of chaplain to the penal settlement, missionary to the Aborigines, and superintendent of the school for white children. He studied the language, taught the children to read and write, and gave religious instruction to adults and children whenever possible. The Brisbane River and its bushland provided the Aborigines with plentiful resources however, and he found that he could not always lure them with food, though sometimes he persuaded them to work for him in return for food and fish hooks. When the penal settlement was closed in 1842 Handt was told that his services were no longer required. He ended his days as a hospital and prison chaplain in Geelong.[52]

After Handt left Wellington Valley, Watson was joined by another German — James Günther. He was a very different character from Handt, educated at Basle and ordained in the Church of England after three years further study at the Church Missionary Institute in London. The Günthers had not been at Wellington Valley long before the pattern of hostility between missionaries again emerged. There were quarrels over the Aboriginal children, arising from Watson's lack of confidence in the capacity of the Günthers to care for them. Like Handt before him Günther complained that Watson was unwilling to delegate authority.[53] Günther also complained of Watson's temper and coarse language, the latter sometimes even being employed in sermons.[54] The hostilities were exacerbated by the arrival of William Porter, an agriculturalist, who had been appointed by the CMS to take charge of the cultivation of the mission land in order to free the missionaries for their evangelical work. Porter was instructed to employ Aborigines as much as possible, and to take every opportunity he could to improve their spiritual state.[55] He arrived in 1838 and was apparently friendly with the Watsons to begin with, but by February 1840 he was threatening to resign unless Watson was withdrawn from the mission.[56]

One of the most serious difficulties arose over Watson's apparent obsession with the Aboriginal children. There was an unsavoury incident in which an Aboriginal woman took refuge in the Günthers' house to avoid Watson, who was demanding her child because he claimed he had been given custody by the child's father. Watson arrived with two constables and 'in a most unpleasant and passionate temper' rushed into the Günthers' bedroom and seized the child from its mother's breast.[57] The immediate result was that almost all the Aborigines left the mission station; the long-term effect was that for some months Aboriginal mothers and children were hidden when the missionaries approached. Günther said the women compared Watson to an eagle hawk and he later found that the missionaries had the name of kidnappers.[58]

Watson finally left the mission, taking all the children with him, and established a new station about five miles away which he called Apsley. Günther and Porter continued at Wellington Valley, but the numbers of Aborigines declined rapidly. In the midst of all his concerns about the future of the mission, Günther discovered that Porter had acted 'very improperly' with some of the Aboriginal women attached to the mission.[59] Porter was dismissed, and James Günther and his wife carried on without assistance for a few more months but the end was in sight. The Aborigines were either moving away or attaching themselves to the fringes of white settlement. Günther's Report of 1843 was one of despair,[60] and it was decided to close the mission. The Bishop of Australia gave Günther the living of the newly established Church of St. John at Mudgee, where he served until his death in 1879.

During the ten years of its existence the mission had encountered many problems. In the early stages the area suffered severe drought and the ground was so hard that the missionaries broke their plough.[61] In July 1833 they sowed ten acres of wheat which perished because of the dryness of the season.[62] In 1835 the River Bell became almost dry.[63] The mission was some distance from the river and all water had to be carried. In addition the Aborigines refused to leave the river bank for very long in hot weather.[64] In 1838 a Police Station was established in some old government buildings,[65] but after a series of letters and submissions to the Legislative Council it was finally removed to a village nine miles away.[66] The setting up of a post office and courthouse brought white settlement even nearer. Many young men trained by the missionaries to help with agricultural and other pursuits were persuaded to leave to work for other white people, making it impossible for the missionaries to continue their evangelising.[67] The missionaries complained that the introduction of two public houses in the neighbourhood did nothing to help the situation.[68] Many children had learned to read and write and do simple arithmetic. The missionaries were fairly successful at getting the Aborigines to attend Church services and family prayers, where they loved to join in the singing.[69] But there is no record of adult conversions at Wellington Valley, although the missionaries' hopes were raised frequently. A few children were baptised, but these were mainly orphans adopted by the missionaries. Watson could claim one convert at his breakaway mission of Apsley when Jane Christian Marshall was confirmed by Bishop Broughton.[70]

The year after Handt was sent to Moreton Bay, a group of Lutherans arrived there under the auspices of Dr. J. D. Lang and the Presbyterian Church. Lang said he selected Lutherans because of the shortage of Presbyterian ministers in the Colony.[71] The British Government agreed to pay the passages of the three missionaries chosen by Lang on the distinct understanding that the mission would make no

further claims on government assistance.[72] Three ordained men came to Australia, two of whom, (Eipper and Schreiner) had, like Günther, been trained at Basle. The third, Schmidt, was a minister of the Prussian State Church and had been trained at the Universities of Halle and Berlin.[73] Schreiner died soon after arriving in Sydney, and Eipper and Schmidt proceeded to Moreton Bay with ten missionary assistants who had accompanied them from Germany. These assistants were artisans and mechanics who had received some training at the Institution for the Education of Missionaries in Berlin.[74] Some of the men were accompanied by their wives and children. This large group set up their mission on land allotted to them at Noonga Creek (now known as Nundah), which they renamed Brook Kedron. They called the mission Zion Hill.[75] The missionaries were too busy building homes and producing sufficient food for themselves to have either time or food to spare for the Aborigines. Although Eipper claimed that they rewarded workers with food, Handt reported that so much was stolen from the mission gardens that the Commandant sent a party of soldiers to frighten and disperse the Aborigines.[76]

Another difficulty for the Lutherans was their dependence on private subscriptions. In 1838 they received £310.19.2d, but in the depression of 1841 only £93.0.2d.[77] Though matched from Colonial funds this sum was obviously quite inadequate.

They taught Aboriginal children in English because they did not have time to acquire the native language. Before long it became apparent that no conversions were likely to result from the mission. In his Annual Report for 1846, S. Simpson, Commissioner for Crown Lands, claimed that 'absolutely nothing has been done' to improve the moral condition of the Aborigines, and that the missionaries were in disharmony among themselves.[78] When the mission closed down most of the lay missionaries remained in the area.

A second mission in the Moreton Bay district also used non-English missionaries. The Roman Catholic Mission on Stradbroke Island was run by three Italians and a Swiss, all Passionist Fathers. They came to Australia with Archbishop Polding when he returned from a European visit in 1843. The leader of the mission was Father Raymond Vaccari, a man with a high reputation as a spiritual leader but a low one as a manager of people.[79] He was accompanied by Father Maurice Lencioni, a 'big, burly, easygoing Italian', with 'absolutely no talent for languages', Father Luigi Pesciaroli, a deeply religious man who found the vicissitudes of missionary life very disturbing, and Father Joseph Snell who had been brought up in Switzerland and was an adult convert from French Protestantism.[80] Polding had selected Stradbroke Island because it appeared barren, and thus unattractive to white settlers, although there was already a pilot station on the island.[81] The Fathers taught the Aborigines to draw the seine, an activity which was said to have delighted them greatly. They also persuaded some to help plant gardens in a drained bog. At the end of two years they had not learnt enough of the language to give religious instruction, although they had tried to improve the 'moral condition' of the Aborigines.[82] While the government provided the mission with land and sixty pairs of blankets, they gave no monetary support. Polding assisted them[83] and believed that the Fathers should therefore look to him for guidance, but they insisted on taking their guidance from the Sacred Congregation of the Propaganda in Rome.[84] The seeds of dissension were thus planted with the mission. They struggled on for a while but with white interference, unreliable food supplies and the vast distance from their home base,

they finally admitted the task was hopeless. Three of the Fathers left the mission in mid 1846, and Father Vaccari tried to continue alone. He was unable to produce enough food, and supplies no longer arrived regularly from Sydney. He blamed this shortage of food for the hostility of the Aborigines, who became so aggressive that it was necessary for Vaccari to apply for police protection.[85] He closed the mission in July 1847. A small wooden chapel which the Aborigines had decorated with shells, was all that remained. A few infants had been baptised there, but no adult conversions were reported.

The Wesleyans began a second mission, this time in the Port Phillip District. The Rev. Francis Tuckfield arrived in July 1838 and was soon joined by the Rev. Benjamin Hurst.[86] They called the mission Buntingdale. Like all the other missionaries Tuckfield and Hurst devoted as much time as they could to teaching the children and acquiring the language.[87] Aborigines sometimes came in large numbers; on one occasion the missionaries distributed a hundredweight of bread.[88]

Like other missionaries they gave food in return for such tasks as chopping wood, fencing, digging, or any other help in the gardens and fields.[89] Hurst disliked teaching and asked to be transferred to a white community.[90] He later said he despaired that the Aborigines could ever be converted to Christianity.[91] Tuckfield and his wife continued at Buntingdale for a further nine years, but finally admitted the task to be hopeless and were directed to abandon the mission.[92] Again, Aboriginal numbers had fallen markedly. Francis Tuckfield was appointed superintendent of the Geelong Council of the Methodist Church, but continued to visit the Aborigines whenever he could spare the time.[93]

In 1837 a government mission was established at Port Phillip and conducted by George Langhorne, an Anglican catechist. He largely concentrated on teaching the children, but the experiment was short-lived and yielded no converts.[94]

The aim of all the missionaries was the same: to Christianise and 'civilize' the Aborigines. Their methods of attempting this had much in common and the same problems were shared by all.

Perhaps the major difficulty was that posed by the Aborigines' semi-nomadic subsistence strategies. It was one thing for the Government to make generous grants of land, it was quite another matter to persuade the Aborigines to settle on them. Even those tribes whose territory formed part or all of the land grant were accustomed to making seasonal movements around that territory. Günther reported that during one three-year period some five hundred Aborigines had visited the mission, but 'a great majority of them remained only a short time, a few days, or even a few hours only'.[95] It was the same on all mission stations. The Passionists said they were frustrated by the 'wanderings' of the Aborigines,[96] and at Buntingdale missionaries complained that they would disappear without warning.[97] Günther, who admitted that the missionaries' patience was almost exhausted by the Aborigines' refusal to settle, called them an ungrateful and treacherous race who could not be depended on.[98]

Providing food was a way of persuading the Aborigines to stay long enough for the missionaries to instruct them in the basic tenets of Christianity. When European crops failed, as the potatoes did at Moreton Bay in 1840, the Aborigines ceased their visits, and the Lutherans could not begin a school because they lacked sufficient food for the children.[99] Food became a tool and even a weapon in the hands of the missionaries. It was used to teach behaviour patterns; it was given as payment for

tasks performed and withheld from those who did not cooperate. The missionaries used food to instil a sense of worthiness and unworthiness — only the 'deserving' were to be fed. This concept was totally alien to the Aborigines who used food neither as a tool nor a weapon. It is not surprising that the missionaries experienced many tensions in this area, and that the Aborigines frequently complained when they knew that food was being held back.[100]

Nevertheless, the ability to provide food gave the missionaries their longed-for opportunities to teach the Aborigines about Christianity; opportunities which were rarely missed. 'They never, I believe,' wrote Handt, 'go away again without hearing something of religion'.[101] While Günther acknowledged that the only reason most Aborigines attended family prayers was because of the prospect of a meal, he concluded that the missionaries were glad of the chance 'to make known unto them our great errand'.[102]

The evangelical emphasis on the role of the Scriptures was very important in missionary methods, and all made reading lessons an important part of mission life. This was not confined to the children, although most missionaries found more women than men showed a willingness to learn. In an attempt to persuade young men to learn to read, Watson gave them some tin letters 'as a means of amusement as well as instruction' promising a reward of peaches for those who could name the most correctly. He reported that they were amused and at the same time learnt the alphabet.[103] Unable to discipline Aboriginal children as they would Europeans, the missionaries worked hard to find other ways of persuading them to stay at their lessons apart from simply rewarding them with food. Watson sent to England for the apparatus to enable him to teach the children by the Infant School System which he claimed was a great success:

> The pleasing and amusing manner in which instruction is presented to them, makes it rather desirable than a task. The clapping hands, marching, etc., falls in so much with the native habits of corrobborring (dancing) and the black children are quite delighted with it.[104]

On the whole the missionaries experienced some success in teaching reading; the Wellington Valley Aborigines learned to read both English and their own language.[105] In fact, once they had acquired the skill they enjoyed reading so much that they considered it a punishment to be deprived of books.[106] It must have been particularly gratifying when one of the men asked Günther to teach him Roman numerals so that he could find the chapters in the Bible when they were given out at prayers.[107] On the other hand perhaps too much emphasis was placed on the connection between reading and Christianity. One Aborigine, on being given a task in the stockyard, remarked that if he had too much work to do he would never learn to read and couldn't be baptised. The missionaries discovered that he and others thought reading was a major requisite for baptism.[108]

The question of baptism was, of course, an important one. Most of the Protestant missionaries believed that adult baptism could be administered only after the candidate had experienced a 'conversion'. For many of the missionaries their own conversion had been a very dramatic and emotional experience which had led to a complete change in their lives and eventually to the mission field, as they became convinced of their sinfulness and of the saving grace of Christ. The possibility of

similar conversions among Aborigines was very remote indeed for theirs was a society which did not have a deep sense of original sin; a society in which future rewards and punishments played no part in a life which was, in Stanner's words, a 'one-possibility thing'.[109]

The Passionists clearly had a more Catholic view of the sacrament yet they too were reluctant to baptise because they could not keep the children away from their families. Father Pesciaroli asked what purpose their baptism could serve under such circumstances.[110] He said that if the plan to keep the children on the mission had been approved and funded, they would perhaps have baptised them.

Church attendance was, of course, a very important part of the observation of the Sabbath, but the missionaries were not so successful there. Like the Europeans around them, the Aborigines were willing to stop work on Sundays, but less willing to attend church services. While convicts could be ordered to marshall for church parades, and assigned servants required to attend divine Service, the missionaries could employ no such compulsion with the Aborigines. As with school lessons they had to try to make church services as attractive as possible, and this they did with music. At Moreton Bay Eipper reported that Aborigines enjoyed singing very much.[111] Watson declared he could almost imagine himself at St. Mary's, Islington, when he heard them singing, [112] and Aborigines at the Port Phillip school run by Langhorne were reported to be 'wonderfully fond of song'.[113] When an organ was delivered to Wellington Valley the Aborigines thronged to hear it played by Mrs. Günther.[114]

Perhaps the most difficult concept the missionaries tried to teach was the Christian view of sexual morality, for not only were Christian tenets sometimes in conflict with Aboriginal practice, they were also not observed by most whites in the community. Indeed, their outspoken criticism of the licentiousness among Europeans in the colony made many enemies. Confusion also arose when the missionaries believed it perfectly proper for both sexes to mingle in church services where strong Aboriginal tradition opposed such close proximity. At other times they tried to keep the sexes apart when Aboriginal law allowed them to be together. At one stage Watson moved the 'elderly' girls to a separate building where they could be locked up more securely; an action which enraged the Aboriginal men.[115]

The missionaries considered sexual relations between Aboriginal women and European men to be an enormous evil which they tried in vain to oppose. Watson realised that the women sometimes had little choice and believed the missionaries should persuade them that such behaviour was sinful. He said he longed for the day when Aboriginal women could say when tempted by men 'I dare not for fear of God'.[116]

The Aborigines were often quick to point out the contradiction between missionary teachings and white behaviour. When Handt reproved an Aboriginal man for having allowed a white man sexual access to his wife in return for tobacco, he replied that the white man should have known it was wrong and not asked for her.[117] Another man, Noowah, on being told that it was wrong to lend wives and that the great God said in his book that men should have one wife only and she should belong to him alone, replied:

> White fellow all about make a light God. Black fellow all about very stupid. What for white fellow always say you lend me yeener

> belonging to you, this night, so many nights, this moon etc. then I give you bread, I give you milk, shirt, etc.? When Black fellow make a light God then he *never never* lend yeener to white fellow at all.[118]

While the missionaries struggled to impart their values and morality they also tried to convey something of Christian theology. With the children this usually took the form of catechizing, a system which relies more upon memory than upon understanding. The children at Buntingdale could 'answer several important questions on the subject of Theology',[119] but Tuckfield did not say whether they understood the questions, or the answers. It concerned the missionaries that the Aborigines rarely asked questions. One question an Aborigine did ask concerned the colour of God. Handt assured him 'that he was neither black nor white, but bright like the sun'.[120] This question seems to tie in with the commonly held European belief that Australian Aborigines thought whites were the returned spirits of their dead relatives. An interesting variation of this came from Eipper at Moreton Bay:

> Since they have heard of England they imagine that it is the place of their regeneration or metamorphosis.[121]

A more serious implication for the missionaries was recorded by Handt:

> they think there is no doubt of becoming white people after death, but that their attempts to be like them before that time are useless.[122]

Tuckfield blamed an apparent deficiency of abstract terms in the local language for his inability to convey spiritual instruction and to discuss the ordinances of Christian religion.[123]

The most common complaint among the missionaries, however, was not related to the subtleties of theology but to the utter indifference displayed by the Aborigines towards missionary teachings, and their inattentiveness when spoken to on religious matters. Their journals frequently alluded to the despondency they felt. Watson graphically summed up this despair:

> We are very apt to think our giving instruction to them is like writing on the sand, the impression of which may be effaced by the first breeze or wave that passes over it; but as we know not what thoughts are entertained by them, or how often what we have said comes into their minds, and having the promise of God, we feel it to be our duty and desire to continue to sow.[124]

By 1848, only twenty-seven years after Walker's arrival, all of the first generation of missions in New South Wales had been abandoned. They had cost a great deal of money and much heartbreak. They had been run by Methodists, Anglicans, Lutherans, Roman Catholics and a Congregationalist. They had the backing of both the British and Colonial Governments. Three of the missionaries had arrived with previous experience; Handt in Africa, Threlkeld in the Pacific and Father Snell in Bulgaria. All the Lutherans, William Watson and James Günther had undertaken special missionary training. Yet their training and experience were of no avail. Some useful

linguistic work was done and many Aborigines learned to read and write and engage in trades, yet only one adult was baptised and there is no evidence that these first missions managed to leave any appreciable mark of the Christian faith. That had to await future missionary activity.

While the dedication and faith of the missionaries is not in doubt, their understanding of Aboriginal culture and spirituality was almost non-existent. Indeed, they were quick to condemn any signs of Aboriginal customs as wickedness and superstition. Mainly of humble origins themselves, the missionaries lacked the educational background which might have enabled them to appreciate and understand a culture so different from their own.[125] Not understanding, they condemned; and were unable to comprehend the Aborigines' rejection of them and their religion.

Notes

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5 *H.R.A.*, I, xii:125.

6 *Ibid*, I, x:598.

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9 Lawry to WMS, 15 July 1819, B.T. Box 50.

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13 Erskine to WMS, 24 May 1825, *ibid.*

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29 Threlkeld to Saxe Bannister, September 1825, *ibid.*
30 Champion, *op. cit.*:407.
31 Hankey and Burder to Threlkeld, 2 March 1826, Threlkeld *Statement*, pp. 13-14.
32 Hankey and Burder to Threlkeld, 27 March 1827, *Ibid.*: 31.
33 See footnote 23.
34 Threlkeld, *Statement*, p. 38.
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42 Gipps to Russell, 7 April 1841, *ibid.*, xxi:314.
43 M.L. Ms. No. A 1446.
44 Woolmington, *op.cit.*:291.
45 Deas Thomson to Threlkeld, 17 May 1841, Champion *op.cit.*.:385.
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Abbreviations

A.D.B.	Australian Dictionary of Biography
B.T.	Bonwick Transcripts
C.M.S.	Church Missionary Society
H.R.A.	Historical Records of Australia
L.M.S.	London Missionary Society
M.L.	Mitchell Library
P.P.	Parliamentary Papers
W.M.S.	Wesleyan Missionary Society