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Love and Death in the Mission Compound: the Hardships of Life in the Tropics for Victorian Missionaries and their Families

Drawing extensively on unpublished archive material, John Darch opens a fascinating window onto the harsh personal experiences of Victorian missionaries. Isolation, loneliness, extra-marital liaisons, disease and death are all here. Yet the very human frailties of these people make their achievements all the more remarkable.

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Introduction

When Bishop James Hannington remarked in 1885, with some disapproval, on the 'palatial residences' he observed at the Church Missionary Society (CMS) settlement at Frere Town and the fact that the missionaries lived 'in every comfort',¹ his remarks were, no doubt, received with some surprise on account of their rarity value, for luxurious accommodation and working conditions were not normally the experience of Victorian missionaries nor were they expected by their supporters at home. More typical were the remarks of John Geddie, pioneer Presbyterian missionary in the New Hebrides, who commented about one of his junior colleagues, James McNair: 'he is a very excellent man, but he is unfit for the hardships of missionary life.'²

Henry Venn, Honorary Clerical Secretary of the CMS and Victorian missionary strategist *par excellence*, was well aware of those hardships endured by his missionaries. He wrote in 1867: 'I often plead before the throne of grace that those who have sacrificed home comforts for the Lord's sake may experience such *comforts* abroad as may be consistent with the brightening of their final crown of glory. But *there* our hopes must be fixed – all short of final glory is such a poor thing'.³

1 Hannington to Lang, 9 Feb 1885. CMS. G3/A5/?L1 1885/25, quoted in Robert W. Strayer, *The Making of Mission Communities in East Africa*, Heinemann, London 1978, p 15.

2 Quoted in George Patterson, *Missionary Life among the Cannibals*, Toronto, 1882, p 483, see also p 484.

Two essential points need to be borne in mind as the hardships of missionary life are examined. First, the danger (which, of course, applies to all periods of history) of viewing the past through contemporary experience and assumptions. With one vital difference, many industrial workers and farm labourers in Victorian Britain endured living conditions and faced hardships akin to those on the mission field. Second, the faith and vision of the missionaries must not be underestimated. Though ordinary people with the inevitable frailties of human nature, a sense of divine calling permeated both their vocation and their organizational structure, if not their personal experience.⁴ As Professor J. F. A. Ajayi has observed, 'by definition, missionaries were incurable optimists with severely limited funds and resources but unlimited hopes and aspirations'.⁵

Isolation and loneliness

The vital difference referred to above was the isolation and loneliness which many missionaries had to endure. This should be seen as the key determining factor underpinning, and to a large extent exacerbating, all the other hardships of missionary life. Livingstone's relationship with Stanley can only really be fully understood when it is realized that Stanley was the *only* white man he saw in the last five or six years of his life. Even when working with others, missionaries were often isolated as the only white person (or family) on a particular island or in a particular mission station.⁶ W. G. Lawes wrote to the Directors of the London Missionary Society (LMS) from Niue in the South Pacific 1867 asking for leave to come home after nine years as they were the only missionary family on the island. He noted that 'we have never had an opportunity of visiting our brethren on other islands, not even those in Samoa. Our life here has been one of more than ordinary isolation.'⁷

In 1871, Commander George Palmer, who had had close dealings with the Presbyterian New Hebrides missionaries during his tour of duty in the south-west Pacific on board HMS *Rosario*, commented:

Doubtless the sketches of the missionary settlement look very pretty on paper, but unfortunately there are some things you cannot portray, such as insufficient food, brackish water, together with swarms of mosquitoes and other insects, and often, as at Dillon's Bay, a sweltering poisonous atmosphere, accompanied by fever and ague. The missionary schooner is often delayed on her annual

3 Venn to Lamb, 23 September 1867. *CMS Yoruba Mission Papers*, CA2/L4.
 4 For a useful survey of the reasons candidates offered for missionary service see Ruth Rouse, 'Missionary Vocation', *International Review of Missions*, (April 1917), pp 244-57.
 5 J. F. A. Ajayi, *Christian Missions in Nigeria, 1841-1891: the Making of a New Elite*, Longman, London 1965, p 57.
 6 The CMS Yoruba Mission papers, for example, are full of 'resolutions passed by correspondence'. This device, which meant

that business could be transacted, albeit slowly, was also an indication of the isolation of individuals. Unrest and warfare among the native population could exacerbate this isolation and David and Anna Hinderer trapped in Ibadan for five years during the Yoruba wars were so short of food they were obliged to sell their possessions in order to survive. Anna Hinderer, *Seventeen Years in the Yoruba Country*, The Religious Tract Society, London 1873, ch 6.

7 Lawes to Dr Mullens, 6 July 1869. *London Missionary Society South Seas Letters*, Box 32.

trip; and then the stores of flour, etc., are at a low ebb, and frequently injured by the damp, and the sugar swarming with ants. An English labourer would often turn up his nose at their daily fare.⁸

One of the greatest scourges of their isolation, for those missions without a resident doctor, was the distance from qualified medical attention when a family member was sick. It would have been unlikely, for example, that Presbyterian missionary John Paton would have simultaneously lost both his first wife and baby son if there had been a doctor on Tanna in February 1859.⁹

One therapy for isolation was the writing of letters. This was not only the missionaries' sole method of communication but also a means of influencing events and (not to be underestimated) a means of inducing letters in reply to alleviate loneliness. Professor H.E. Maude's reference to 'the prolix pens of missionaries' is no understatement – to the lonely and isolated missionary the pen and the letter it wrote was his sole point of contact with the outside world.¹⁰ Small wonder that missionary archives are so voluminous. As Professor W.P. Morrell has rightly stated, even 'the printed missionary material is a formidable mass of first-hand evidence... To go behind it and master the vast manuscript collections of the missionary societies would take a lifetime.'¹¹ The cause of this large volume of missionary archives was both the large number of missionaries in the field and also their prolific literary outpourings. For some, the letter was a means of contact with civilization, used to powerful effect by Livingstone, for example, in bringing the needs of Africa and the continuing scandal of slavery to the British national consciousness. For others, communication, whether strictly accurate or embroidered with wishful thinking, increased chances of funding for what were, after all, entirely voluntary agencies. And for some, the letter was simply an emotional lifeline to a home left far way and long ago and to which the writer might never return. Though it might take months for a letter to reach London and months more for a reply to return,¹² the mails were a vital psychological link with the mother country, a reminder that missionaries had not been forgotten; far out of sight but not yet out of mind.

There was, however, another important side to missionary correspondence. Though blissfully unaware that their writings would be read and minutely analysed by historians in succeeding centuries, they were only too aware that the words they committed to paper would find their way into missionary magazines and be read by their supporters at home. It was undoubtedly the case that in their official

8 George Palmer, *Kidnapping in the South Seas*, Edmonston & Douglas, Edinburgh 1871, p 56.

9 John G. Paton, *Missionary to the New Hebrides. An Autobiography*, 2 vols, Banner of Truth, Edinburgh 1965, pp 129-137.

10 Foreword to A. J. Schütz, ed., *The Diaries and Correspondence of David Cargill, 1832-1843*, Australian National University Press, Canberra 1977.

11 W. P. Morrell, *Britain in the Pacific Islands*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1960, p v. In view of the vast amounts of primary source material available it is ironical, as T. O.

Beidelman observes, that 'missionary studies are among the most neglected of a wide area of potential colonial research'. T.O. Beidelman, 'Social Theory and the Study of Christian Missions', *Africa*, 44 (1974), p 248.

12 W. G. Lawes wrote from New Guinea on 15 Sept 1884 to the editor of *The Times* to complain about kidnapping in eastern New Guinea. The letter was eventually published on 5 Dec 1884. Similarly, H. M. Stanley's letter to *The Daily Telegraph* requesting missionaries for Buganda was published on 15 Nov 1875. It was dated 14 April.

publications, the missionary society headquarters were happy to exploit both the hardships endured and the spectacular results achieved by their missionaries in the field in order to encourage financial contributions by their supporters.¹³

Controversy, alcohol and sex

Missionaries were no different from any other vocation, profession or trade in that from time to time disagreements broke out between them. There is little doubt that the isolation and loneliness they endured, combined with the often close living arrangements with other individuals from whom they could not easily escape, resulted in occasional outbreaks of hostility. Indeed, it should be remembered that few missionaries were as irritable and contentious as David Livingstone. Another obvious example comes from the late 1870s, when the LMS New Guinea missionaries gave up convening a mission meeting, largely because of perpetual disagreements between the senior missionary Samuel McFarlane and his two younger colleagues, W. G. Lawes and James Chalmers. McFarlane used his more frequent visits to London to influence the directors in his favour. In effect the mission split into an eastern and western section pursuing sometimes wildly different objectives. Only after McFarlane's retirement was the situation normalized.¹⁴

Frequently, disputes were referred to missionary headquarters for arbitration and missionary society secretaries in London were obliged to exercise the wisdom of Solomon, in the near impossible task of settling, by post, petty disputes that had begun months ago and thousands of miles away. Henry Venn, for example, had to deal with unrest in the Yoruba mission when Henry Townsend complained about Samuel Crowther ('improper conversation with a young female') and Charles Gollmer complained about James White ('oppressive conduct towards certain natives and writing improper letters'). Venn's solution in this case was to dismiss the charges on the grounds of unsatisfactory evidence.¹⁵

There was also an unpleasant tendency for missionaries, like schoolboys 'sneaking' to a master, to report fellow missionaries to headquarters behind their backs. James Calvert wrote from Fiji to the General Secretaries of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS) concerning a fellow missionary, John F. Horsley. Though the nature of the revelation is obscure (probably concerning Horsley's commercial interests) Calvert had no hesitation in proclaiming, 'I fully believe that he is a doomed man as regards the ministry'.¹⁶ Similarly Charles Barff

13 The Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (WMMS) implicitly eschewed such a 'numbers game' approach in its 1871 Annual Report: 'It must be remembered that the Christianity of a large number is only nominal. "Such an event," (the conversion of a chief followed by his people) writes the missionary in Rewa, "is spoken of as the conversion of thousands in a day, whereas it is nothing more than the opening of a door which we may enter, and entering begin to teach the first principles of Christianity".' WMMS Annual Report 1871, p 153.

14 See LMS Papua Correspondence, boxes 2 and 3; Diane Langmore, *Tamate - a King. James Chalmers in New Guinea 1877-1901*, Carlton, Melbourne University Press 1974, pp 29-34.

15 Venn's circular letter to Yoruba conference, 19 April 1861. CMS Yoruba Mission papers, CA2/L3.

16 Calvert to Gen. Secs, (Private), 1 Oct 1864. Calvert also wrote letters in order to try to engineer the dismissal of the British Consul in Fiji. Calvert to Boyce, 4 March 1869 and encs. WMMS Australian Correspondence, Box 532.

of the LMS in Tahiti, wrote to Dr Tidman at LMS headquarters reporting his fellow missionary, Alexander Simpson, Principal of the South Sea Academy on Tahiti, as a notorious drunkard.¹⁷ Barff's letter was superfluous, however, since the LMS directors were clearly already aware of Simpson's failings and dismissed him on 9 December 1850, before Barff's letter could have arrived in London.¹⁸

While references to alcohol as 'an obstacle to missionary progress' and 'a traitor which will do its best to blot out every blessing Christianity may bring', normally concern its adverse effect on indigenous peoples,¹⁹ Niel Gunson has noted the unfortunate effects of alcohol on the missionaries themselves: 'it was under frontier conditions that alcoholism made its greatest ravages, ministers of religion no more excepted than other groups. Removal from a familiar environment, the absence of familiar family patterns, and the sheer experience of vastness and strangeness, were but some of the conditioning factors.'²⁰

The death of David Cargill on Tonga in 1843 was assumed by the WMMS to be suicide occasioned by alcoholism and the Society duly covered up the circumstances so as not to scandalize their supporters. G. C. Henderson, Niel Gunson and the present author have all independently accepted this version of events.²¹ But another interpretation has been put forward by Albert J. Schütz, suggesting that Cargill's illness was dengue fever, a tropical disease with depressive side-effects, strikingly similar in appearance to those of alcoholism.²² Whatever the cause of his death, there was no doubting that Cargill's spirit-drinking habits were a source of discomfort to his fellow missionaries. James Chalmers in New Guinea was fortunate in being able to enjoy a tot of whisky in moderation.

The fact that most Protestant missionaries were married meant that problems occasioned by sexual deprivation were not as great as they might otherwise have been, and cases of adultery with other missionaries' wives are rare. More often, though still rarely, liaisons were formed with local women. One unusual case was that of a Methodist 'native minister' in the Gambia, Yorke Clements. He admitted adultery in 1874 and was removed from his post on McCarthy's Island, though this was never spelt out for missionary supporters at home, who were merely told about 'painful circumstances' occasioning his removal from office.²³ In Fiji Thomas Jaggar, who was Superintendent of the Rewa circuit, had an affair with a Fijian woman

17 Barff to Tidman, 26 Nov 1850. LMS South Seas Correspondence, 23/3/B.

18 Entry for Alexander Simpson in the Register of LMS Missionaries held at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London. It is interesting to note that there is no evidence that the Presbyterian missionaries in the New Hebrides ever fell out with one another. Could it be that their common hostility to the Pacific labour trade absorbed all their aggressive tendencies, which would otherwise have been turned inwards against one another?

19 Jesse Page, *The Black Bishop: Samuel Adjai Crowther*, S. W. Partridge, London 1908, p 274.

20 W. N. Gunson, 'On the incidence of alcohol and intemperance in early Pacific missions', *Journal of Pacific History*, 1 (1966), p 45.

21 See G. C. Henderson, *The Journal of Thomas Williams, Missionary in Fiji, 1840-53*, Angus & Robertson, Sydney 1931, pp 195-196; Gunson, 'Alcohol and intemperance', p 60; John H. Darch, 'Missionaries to the Cannibals', *Trivium* 17 (1982), pp 103-17.

22 Schütz, *David Cargill*, pp 244-46.

23 See correspondence in WMMS West Africa - Gambia Correspondence Box 295 and WMMS Annual Reports, 1875 p 123 and 1876 p 113.

and was dismissed from his post in 1848. Eighty years later the official history of the WMMS still clothed that matter with discretion, merely informing its readers that Jaggar 'through temptation ... fell out of the ranks' and 'returned from the field under discipline'.²⁴

The fact that those missionary wives who survived the ravages of life in tropical climes were often in poor health and may well have wished to avoid frequent childbirth in primitive conditions, may have imposed strains that were not always apparent to visiting observers of the domesticity of the mission compound.²⁵

For the High Church missions, the Melanesian Mission and the Universities' Mission to Central Africa (UMCA), the celibacy of the missionaries no doubt brought its own strains. One recorded incident was on the island of Nggela in the Solomons. Charles H. Brooke of the Melanesian Mission found solace for his loneliness in forming emotional attachments with his male pupils. When the mission authorities discovered his overt homosexuality in 1874 he was promptly dismissed.²⁶

One case with a happy ending was that of George Grenfell, a bachelor serving with the Baptist Missionary Society in the Cameroons. He resigned from the BMS because Rose Edgerley, his young Jamaican housekeeper was found to be pregnant with his child. Grenfell kept his promise to marry Rose and, after two years of secular employment, he was reinstated by the mission, which he served with distinction until his death in 1906.²⁷

Family life under strain

In general, for the Victorian missionary, family life was, of necessity, subordinated to the needs of the mission. One of the greatest Victorian missionaries was also one of the most notorious examples. David Livingstone's prolonged absences from home played havoc with his family's life. His wife Mary suffered financially and mentally, becoming moody and resentful. She took to drink and died on a rare visit to see her husband in 1862.²⁸ His eldest son, Robert, clearly suffered from being neglected by his father. He became quite uncontrollable and, as soon as he was able, left Scotland to enlist in the Union forces in the American Civil War, where he died from his wounds, aged eighteen.²⁹

From the New Hebrides, John Geddie bewailed 'the most painful sacrifice which missionaries are called on to suffer in these islands is separation from their children, whose interest and welfare demand their removal to a less polluted moral atmosphere.'³⁰ When Geddie next saw his daughter eight years had elapsed, she

24 G. G. Findlay and W. W. Holdsworth, *The History of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society*, 5 vols, Epworth Press, London 1921-4: vol III, pp 386, 432.

25 See Sir Harry Johnson's caricature of life in a mission settlement, nonetheless surprisingly accurate. *The Nineteenth Century*, XXII (1887), 708-724.

26 David Hilliard, *God's Gentlemen: a history of the Melanesian Mission, 1849-1942*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia 1978, p 90.

27 Brian Stanley, *The History of the Baptist Missionary Society, 1792-1992*, T. & T. Clark, Edinburgh 1992, pp 119-121.

28 See Owen Chadwick, *Mackenzie's Grave*, Hodder and Stoughton, London 1959, pp 110f.

29 See Tim Jeal, *Livingstone*, Heinemann, London 1973, pp 279f.

30 Quoted in James W. Falconer, *John Geddie*, Presbyterian Church in Canada, Toronto 1915, p 40.

had grown up and there was no mutual recognition.³¹ But at least she was alive. The mortality rate in missionary children in the tropics was high, though it needs to be viewed against the background of a not insignificant infant mortality rate in England at the time. Nevertheless, missionary correspondence is laden with emotional accounts of the deaths of children.

James Calvert sent his eldest child, Mary, back home from Fiji, only to hear of her death soon after reaching England.³² Samuel McFarlane's daughter, Maggie, died and was buried at sea on the way to New Guinea.³³ On 25 August 1876, W.G. Lawes in New Guinea plaintively recorded in his diary the death of his young son from malarial fever:

Our dear little Percy left us this afternoon. His little life has been full of suffering, and we cannot be sorry that it is exchanged for peace. How desolate our home will be now. He has been so much with us day and night and the house is so full of his mementoes.³⁴

In a smallpox outbreak in Yorubaland at the beginning of 1880, CMS 'native pastor' (and later bishop) Charles Phillips lost three out of his four children.³⁵ Across the continent in Mombasa, William Chancellor found solace for the death of his baby daughter by writing to CMS headquarters:

The Lord has laid his heavy hand upon us. On the 24th of May my dear wife gave birth to a strong healthy daughter, but on May 30th our little treasure went home to Jesus. Our windows having been so badly constructed admit a great draught, which struck our little darling.... We felt very much the want of medical aid, but that was impossible; the nearest medical man being ten days journey away. It was the Lord's will that our sweet bud should be culled and now it blooms in the fields of light above.³⁶

Little wonder that the CMS missionary, James Lamb, writing from Frere Town near Mombasa in 1876 advised against a new mission teacher bringing his children with him: 'On the whole I think it would be the wisest plan to leave their children at home. There must be considerable risk in bringing them to the tropics.'³⁷ James Hannington wisely left his family at home in Sussex, but he had only signed on for a period of three to five years on his first tour of duty in East Africa.³⁸ Missionary parents had the unenviable choice of splitting their families or risking the lives of their children. This was not, however, a problem exclusive to missionaries, but to all who worked in the tropics. Despite advice to the contrary John Pope-Hennessy could not bear to be parted from his infant son during his short tour of duty as Governor-in-Chief of the West African Settlements in the 1870s. The child soon died.³⁹

31 Patterson, *Missionary Life*, p 416.

32 Findlay and Holdsworth, *History*, III, p 451.

33 McFarlane to Whitehouse 13 Nov 1874. *LMS Papua Correspondence* 1/2/B.

34 Quoted in Joseph King, *William George Lawes of Savage Island and New Guinea*, Religious Tract Society, London 1909, p 92.

35 W. O. Ajayi, 'A History of the Yoruba Mission, 1843-1880', unpublished MA thesis, Bristol 1959, p 242.

36 Chancellor to Henry Wright, 12 June 1874. *CMS East African Mission papers*, CA5/05.

37 Lamb to Wright, 4 Nov 1876. *CMS East African Mission papers*, CA5/017.

38 E. C. Dawson, *James Hannington*, Seeley, London 1887, p.199; Hannington to CMS Committee, 23 February 1882, quoted in Dawson, pp 191f.

39 James Pope Hennessy, *Verandah: some episodes in the Crown Colonies 1867-1889*, Allen & Unwin, London 1964, p 116.

If children presented a problem on the mission field, wives were virtually *de rigueur* for Protestant missionaries of a non-celibate tradition and there were two particularly noticeable trends. First, for missionaries to marry in the brief period between receiving their posting and actually leaving Britain; second, for those who had been widowed on the mission field to acquire another wife, at the first possible opportunity, on their next furlough home.

The official history of the WMMS reveals, with a conspicuous lack of gallantry, that James Calvert got married in 1838 only because it was expected that missionaries to Fiji should be married.⁴⁰ One of James Chalmers' biographers was equally frank: 'At last the ship was ready, and the young missionaries were told to prepare for ordination, which was also to be followed by their marriage, and a speedy departure'.⁴¹ The experience of the Presbyterian, Peter Milne, may have been extreme, but is a stark indication of the way in which the severely practical Protestant missionary mind worked with regard to matrimony. Having been 'ordained to the work of the ministry and as a missionary to the New Hebrides on 26 November 1868', he recorded: 'One important question still remained to be answered – viz.: how was I to get married? For it was not considered expedient for me to go alone.' Milne was clearly a man of action and after two unsuccessful attempts on other ladies he married Miss Mary Jane Veitch three weeks later on 18 December 1868. The couple left London docks on 29 December.⁴² John Paton returned to Scotland in 1864, his first furlough after his wife's death, and did not leave without acquiring a second wife.⁴³

Things were much the same for missionaries in Africa. Having done one tour of duty in Yorubaland as a bachelor, David Hinderer married Anna Martin while on furlough in October 1852.⁴⁴ John Bowen, whose early death on the mission field is referred to later, was consecrated Bishop of Sierra Leone on 21 September 1857, married Catherine Butler on 24 November and almost immediately embarked for Freetown, arriving on 13 December.⁴⁵ A rare case of a missionary marrying a native woman was that of Charles Stokes of the CMS Nyanza mission. This happened after the death of Stokes' first wife and was so unusual a step and so completely unacceptable to his colleagues that Stokes felt obliged to resign from the CMS.⁴⁶

James Chalmers married his first wife, Jane Hercus, two days after his ordination in 1865.⁴⁷ After her death, in 1879, Chalmers remained single for eight years until his second marriage to Lizzie Harrison. However, it is probable that this gap indicates not so much his reluctance to remarry, as a lack of opportunity, since he

40 Findlay and Holdsworth, *History*, III, p 391.

41 William Robson, *James Chalmers*, Pickering & Inglis, London n.d., p 20.

42 Alexander Don, *Peter Milne of Nguna*, Foreign Missions Committee of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand, Dunedin 1927, pp 65f.

43 Paton, *Autobiography* I, p 86. The two pioneer missionaries on Fiji, William Cross and David Cargill were both widowed and both subsequently remarried.

44 W. O. Ajayi, p 87.

45 W. O. Ajayi, p 147.

46 Eugene Stock, *A History of the Church Missionary Society*, 4 vols, CMS, London 1899-1916, III, p 403n.

47 Richard Lovett ed., *James Chalmers: his Autobiography and Letters*, Religious Tract Society, London 1902, pp 57f.

failed to take a furlough until ordered to do so by his superiors. Thomas Beswick resigned from the New Guinea mission after two years' service in 1881 in order to marry Clara Coombes when the LMS directors refused to sanction the marriage on the grounds of her Clara's ill-health. After he had married Clara, Beswick was reappointed to the mission but died at Townsville, Queensland in August 1883 whilst returning to New Guinea.⁴⁸

The very first despatch from Ludwig Krapf, the pioneer CMS missionary in East Africa, contained news of the death of his wife before they had even arrived in Mombasa: 'the mysterious but ever sweet hand of our Heavenly Father thought good to make me mourn for my beloved wife whom he has removed by death to the blessed abode of his immovable kingdom.'⁴⁹ David Livingstone's brother-in-law, J. S. Moffat, clearly expressed his views about missionary wives to LMS headquarters in 1876:

My convictions have grown deeper for years that our pioneering work ought to be done by men alone. It is useless cruelty to take a lady into an undertaking where she does no good beyond affording a spectacle of resigned and devoted suffering: and possibly a hindrance rather than a help to the cause she would die to promote.⁵⁰

Death

Life was undoubtedly hard and death was a common feature of missionary existence. From Yorubaland Henry Townsend reported to CMS headquarters, 'it is not unusual for us to see our friends die around us'.⁵¹ Some missionaries would, no doubt, have agreed with Tertullian that 'the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church.' But there were very few European missionary martyrs *per se* in the south-west Pacific and even fewer in tropical Africa. Considering the opposition, threats and intimidation that they had to endure, remarkably few missionaries suffered violent deaths at the hands of indigenous peoples. Though Fiji was notorious to the Victorian public as the 'cannibal islands' only one Wesleyan missionary was ever actually murdered by cannibals: the unfortunate Thomas Baker was killed and subsequently eaten by a mountain tribe in central Viti Levu in 1867. The cannibal tribes of New Guinea also had a bad reputation, but the mission there had to wait until the dawn of the twentieth century for its first martyrs, the veteran James Chalmers and his young colleague, Oliver Tomkins, in 1901. The 'martyrs' isle' of Erromanga in the New Hebrides saw the death of LMS pioneer John Williams in 1839. Later the Gordon brothers, both in the service of the New Hebrides mission, were also murdered by the islanders, George in 1861 and James in 1872. But the death of Bishop J. C. Patteson on the island of Nukapu in September 1871 was by far the most publicized, and had the beneficial effect of

48 Diane Langmore, *Missionary Lives: Papua 1874-1914*, University of Hawaii Press, Honolulu 1989, Appendix 3, p 284.

49 Krapf to Dandeson Coates, 13 August 1844. *CMS East African Mission papers*, CA5/016.

50 Moffat to Dr Mullens, 6 July 1876, quoted in H. A. C. Cairns, *Prelude to Imperialism*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London 1966, p 58.

51 Townsend to Col Dawes, 30 Sept 1859. *CMS Yoruba Mission papers*, CA2/085 (a).

bringing the south Pacific and its problems before the British Parliament and public.⁵²

In those parts of Africa examined in my research (Gambia, Lagos and Yorubaland, British central and east Africa) actual martyrdoms of European missionaries are even fewer and all were in Buganda. Though it was eventually to become one of the greatest missionary success stories of the late nineteenth century, the initial attempt to establish the Nyanza mission was a painful and bloody process. The first to suffer death were Lieutenant George Shergold Smith and Thomas O'Neill of the CMS. Having been invited to enter Buganda by Kabaka Mutesa, they perished when their camp on the island of Ukerewé on Lake Victoria was attacked by the local chief in December 1877.⁵³ Bishop James Hannington, the first bishop of East Equatorial Africa, was captured on arrival in Buganda by a local chief and imprisoned for eight days. He was murdered in October 1885 on the orders of Kabaka Mwanga, thus becoming the best known of the victims of the persecution of Christians at the beginning of Mwanga's reign.⁵⁴

To speak exclusively of British martyrs, however, is to ignore the great number of indigenous Christians who suffered martyrdom for their faith, for whereas those who opposed the introduction of Christianity might think twice about taking the life of a white man, thus risking retribution from the British armed forces, there was no such risk in putting to death their own people who had forsaken tribal religion for the white man's creed. The massacres of Christian converts in Buganda in 1885-86, and the deaths of probably several hundred of the Polynesian teachers in New Guinea and the Pacific islands, are an indication that the real martyrs of this period (in terms of sheer numbers) were local converts, not European missionaries.

As far as the Europeans were concerned, their lives were infinitely more at risk from disease than from physical attack. The Gambia, for example, which was a highly unpopular posting for British officials because of its unhealthy conditions, took its toll of missionaries. The Revd J.W. Bell lasted but three weeks in the Gambia in 1874 and an unnamed colonial chaplain survived for only a month in 1869.⁵⁵ Along the coast in Lagos, conditions were also very unhealthy: Joseph Rogers, Chairman of Lagos Methodist District died of fever in 1882 after only one year in office;⁵⁶ Richard Paley, a young Cambridge graduate who travelled to Africa with the Hinderers to serve with the CMS at Abeokuta, died of fever shortly after arrival at Lagos; his wife died before reaching Sierra Leone on the return journey.⁵⁷

Notwithstanding their exalted rank, bishops were no more immune to the rigours of the tropics than were any other missionaries. Bishop Mackenzie of the UMCA died at the mouth of the Zambesi in 1862, less than a year after his arrival in

Africa.⁵⁸ The first Bishop of Sierra Leone, Owen Emeric Vidal, left England in December 1852 and died exactly two years later.⁵⁹ His successor, Bishop John Bowen, died of fever at the age of 44 in May 1859 after only eighteen months in post. Bishop Henry Parker, who replaced the murdered James Hannington in East Africa in 1886, lasted less than eighteen months.⁶⁰ Dr Joseph Hill, Samuel Crowther's successor as Bishop of Western Equatorial Africa, survived less than one month, both he and Mrs Hill dying within a few hours of each other in January 1894, a month in which seven European missionaries in his diocese died of malaria or dysentery.⁶¹

Conclusion

Despite the esteem in which Christians naturally hold their forebears in the faith, especially those who have undergone privation and suffering, it is important not to exaggerate the hardships of life for Victorian missionaries. It is also important to compare their conditions, not with modern standards of living, but with those of their own contemporaries in nineteenth-century Britain.

And yet some things do not change. A recent report by the Association of Vineyard Churches in Britain lists six 'common problems experienced today by missionaries'. Those who serve on the mission field today it would appear, even though enjoying the benefits of modern travel and information technology undreamt of by their Victorian predecessors, still suffer from the same fundamental problem of missionary life – loneliness.⁶²

But leaving loneliness aside, Victorian missionaries lived in an age when sickness, suffering and death were commonplace for all social classes. In a way perhaps incomprehensible to those living in a post-Christian era a century or more later, the mission field developed a positive popular image in an overwhelmingly Christian culture and, once the pioneering stage was past, no shortage of recruits. But perhaps this is less surprising than might be imagined when it is remembered the nineteenth century was very much a century of imperialism. The 'white man's burden' had moral and spiritual as well as political and territorial implications.

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52 The speedy passage of the 1872 Pacific Islanders' Protection Act was a direct result of the news of Patteson's death.

53 Stock, *Church Missionary Society* II, p 104.

54 See J. V. Taylor, *The Growth of the Church in Buganda*, SCM, London 1958, pp 56f.

55 Administrator Patey's report of 4 Aug 1869, enc. in Kennedy to Granville, 9 Aug 1869. *Parliamentary Papers* 1870, XLIX [C.149].

56 Findlay & Holdsworth, *History* IV, p 207.

57 Hinderer, *Seventeen Years*, pp 45-47; Stock, *Church Missionary Society* II, pp 63-65.

58 Jeal, *Livingstone*, pp 247f; A. E. M. Anderson-Morshead, *The History of the Universities' Mission to Central Africa*, vol. 1, 1859-1909, 6th edn, Universities' Mission to Central Africa, London 1955, pp.22-26.

59 Ajayi, 'Yoruba Mission', p 104.

60 Stock, *Church Missionary Society*, III, pp 418-20.

61 Ajayi, 'Yoruba Mission', p 253.

62 *Missions Task Force Report*, Association of Vineyard Fellowships, 1999, p.16.