

Reflections on the life and ministry of the Revd. John Williams, pioneer missionary serving under the London Missionary Society 1816-1839

Brief Biography

Born at Tottenham High Cross, London 27th June 1796 son of John Williams and Margaret Maidmeet. Educated at a school in Lower Edmonton.

Apprenticed to a Mr Elias Tonkin ironmonger.

Invited to attend Whitefield Tabernacle, City Road 1814 on suggestion of Mrs Tonkin.

Applied to the Missionary Society 1815 for work in the South Seas

Ordained at Surrey Chapel 30th Sept 1816.

Married Mary Chawner Oct 29th 1816

Set off in the *Harriet* 17th Nov 1816. (to Sydney) Arrived in the Society Islands (Moorea) via Rio and the Cape Horn, Hobart and Sydney on Nov 17th 1817. From Sydney sailed in *the Active*.

Served in the (Leeward) islands of Huahine and Raiatea with Rev. Lancelot Threlkeld. On the latter island he had encouragement from Tamatoa, chief of Raiatea.

Williams was anxious to develop work in other groups of islands, but had no encouragement from the directors of the LMS.

1821 Travelled to Sydney for medical advice for himself and his wife. En route he lands native teachers on Aitutaki (the Hervey Islands – now part of the Cook Islands). Purchased ship *the Endeavour*. Travelled back to Raiatea. Ship renamed *Te Matamua* (“The Beginning”).

1822 Visited the Hervey Islands. Discovered Rarotonga. Left Papeiha, a native Raiatean teacher on Rarotonga. Rurutu and Rimatara were visited later in the year.

The Endeavour has to be sold.

Williams’ next visit to the Herveys (1827) was by chartered ship, also taking Rev. Charles and Mrs Elizabeth Pitman to Rarotonga. Bad weather saw him stranded on Rarotonga. Here he started the task of translating the New Testament. He started work on building his own ship called *the Messenger of Peace* which was launched in 1828 on a trial run to Aitutaki. By that time Revd. Aaron and Mrs Sarah Buzacott had come to Rarotonga.

John and Mary Williams return to Raiatea in the new boat. Using his new ship Williams visited Rurutu and Rimatara in 1828.

(1830) He revisited the Hervey Islands, found that disease had struck Rarotonga. The aim of the voyage was to visit the Samoan group. En route he called at the Friendly Islands (Tonga) where he made arrangements with the Wesleyan Missionaries about the division of the work in Tonga and Samoa. He settled 8 native teachers on the main island of Samoa – Savaii. Returned 1500 miles home via Rarotonga where the epidemic had run its course.

1831 (21st Sept) he returned to Rarotonga taking Mary and the family, intending to oversee the full translation of the NT. A horrific hurricane hit the island in Dec 1831, leaving Mrs Williams very ill, and much reconstruction work to do on the island. Sailed to Tahiti to get supplies and returned to Rarotonga.

1832 visited Samoa and Tonga but soon the *Messenger of Peace* need repairing. Realised that a visit to England was necessary

- (i) to recruit more missionaries for the Samoan group
- (ii) to get the Rarotongan translation of the NT printed
- (iii) to advocate the purchase of a suitable missionary ship
- (iv) write up his own book “A Narrative of Missionary Enterprises in the South Seas” to help promote the work.

1834-38 Journey to England. Advocacy work and the writing of his book.

The *Camden* was purchased and fitted out. Sailed to Samoa, and Rarotonga. Toured all the islands and set up mission station on Upolu in the Samoan group, where the family settled.

1839 on the *Camden* visited the New Hebrides (modern Vanuatu) – Rotuma and Tanna .

On 20th November 1839 at Erromanga Williams and his colleague Harris were murdered.

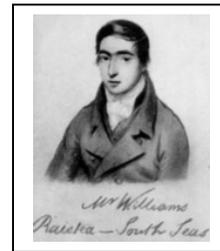
Mary Williams returned to England in 1841 (died 1852).

Their children: John Chawner (b.1818) and Samuel Tamatoa (b.1826) and William Aaron Barff (b.1833). (Samuel did not return to the islands in 1838 with the family).

7 ships under the John Williams name served the islands of the South Seas 1844-1968.

1: Call to Ministry

John Williams' call to be a missionary came through a gradual realisation that God was urging him to use his practical gifts and enthusiasm to work in the South Seas. Ever since Captain Cook had been murdered on Tahiti (in a similar incident that was to see the end of John Williams' life), and the public press had followed the story of the *Bounty* under Lieutenant Bligh, people had been fed with information of life on the Pacific islands and the great opportunities for trade and for the opening up of new fields for the gospel. The religious motivation over against the "glamour" of exploring new worlds has been a subject of wide debate in more recent times. Elizabeth M Sinclair in the preface to her thesis (B.A. Hons Otago Univ. 1982) puts the issue clearly:



"There has been a tendency in much of the present history writings on missions to emphasise the comprehensible this-worldly motives of the men who undertook such work. While this is a necessary corrective to the hagiographic accounts of earlier writers, in some respect modern writers have gone too far in the opposite direction. The power of the religious motive has not been sufficiently researched and accepted. The life of John Williams is a case in point. Ebenezer Prout's "Martyr of Erromanga" has become Gunson's Missionary Capitalist, the mana of the religious martyr has been quite rightly demythologised. But with John Williams it has been at the expense of denying his genuine achievements, and underestimating his Christian motives." (Hocken Library, Dunedin)

The beginnings of what became the London Missionary Society was inspired by the opportunity of taking the Gospel to the South Seas and other areas of the world. The sailing of the *Duff* in 1796 saw the first attempt to land missionaries on the islands. Tom Hiney in his recent book: *On the Missionary Trail* (published by Vintage 2001) has an impartial description of the reality of these early days. Very little was achieved and most of the 17 missionaries did not fulfil the purpose of the voyage. Henry Nott and John Jefferson (who died in 1807) made some headway in Tahiti. Nott became a father figure for the missionaries, living the whole of his life on the Society Islands. (His roots were in Bromsgrove Chapel now URC). The King of Tahiti Pomare and his son Pomare II had most volatile and unpredictable characters but in 1812 news came through to the churches that Pomare II had been converted. This was seen as a great breakthrough.

The church where Williams received his call would have followed these events with great interest, not knowing all the details. The urgent call went out for more missionaries and this was voiced by the minister of the Tabernacle chapel in North London where John Williams and Mary Chawner attended.

This would account for the poverty of training given to Williams. Urgency prioritised over training and preparation, although the emphasis of some of the Directors had been on choosing men from all walks of life. Academic prowess was clearly not a priority. Robert Moffat and seven other missionaries were ordained at the Surrey Chapel on the same occasion. Williams only 19, set down his call in a letter to the directors of the Society.

He was allowed to sit an examination which he passed and then had some instruction through Rev M Wilks of Whitefield Tabernacle, local ministers, alongside other trainees.

The "Missionary Society" (Later LMS) was founded by a group of evangelical clergymen and traders from different denominational backgrounds. Dr. Thomas Haweis, an Anglican, was their leader and had the idea that the best men to reach out to the islanders were people from the lower classes who had strong faith and motivation to take people out of savagery. The early years of the Society were not founded on the democratic working at the heart of later Congregational principles. All who went out were under the strict dictates of the directors. When the Revd. David Bogue of the Independent Church in Gosport joined the group, there was a clash of opinion. Bogue, a Scot in the Presbyterian tradition, wanted a seminary to train the prospective missionaries. (see p13 *"To live among the stars" Christian Origins in Oceania: John Garrett*)

The Call tested:

Once out in the field, John Williams' call was to be tested on a number of fronts, but his strong evangelical faith stood all the tests. He went out to literally convert the heathen, and he made no bones about the thrust

of his ministry. His disposition was such that he was an innovator and pioneer. He could not settle to a life of just sustaining the work. He needed to pioneer new work and was happy to leave that work in the hands of capable people.

The difference in the characters of Mary and John Williams came over in an address [“Memoire”] given by his son Revd. Samuel Williams at the Union Chapel on the death of his mother: (*See LMS/CWM South Seas personal papers – SOAS*)

“John was ardent, impulsive, enthusiastic and determined – enterprise and action were the elements on which he lived.

Mrs Williams was gentle, soothing and had a holy, quiet spirit and was a woman of prayer and great patience. She had to bear his frequent long absences....”

Health risks: The high risk of disease, epidemics, childbirth trauma was one of the expectations for the families of missionaries. Being so far away from home, there were limited supplies of medicines, no hospitals or access to medical help. These conditions could test the call of missionaries and many gave up. Interestingly enough in the early days of his work, John wrote to his parents saying clearly that if anything happened to his wife, he would return to London and finish his ministry:

Letter from Raiatea Sept 4 1819:

“ another interesting subject is my dear wife. We are very fond of each other and very comfortable and happy together. She is all I can wish her to be. I hope, if the Lord wills, she will be spared many years and I may not be called to experience the painful affliction that my dear sister Mary has that, as my dear mother says, “there is an uncertainty in all earthly enjoyments – here today, gone tomorrow!” – it is as well to be prepared to meet afflictions – that would I think be an unthinkable one – I should leave the island for England by the very first conveyance – should it please the Lord to take my dear Mary....” (*Personal papers LMS/CWM – SOAS*)

Lancelot Threlkeld, John Williams’ colleague on Raiatea, lost his wife (1824) and had to resign from the missionary work and go to live in Sydney. John and Mary Williams were both ill in 1821 and went to Sydney. Mary lost 7 children during the years on the islands, and on more than one occasion her life was in serious danger. John and Mary Williams came through all these things with their strong faith and sense of call.

Living Conditions: The call would also have been tested by the living conditions on the islands. The missionaries did not receive a wage of “salary” but were expected to “live off the land” and through the generosity of local people. This did not always work out and John Williams had to argue his case for expenses with the Directors. Eventually he managed to secure a salary of £30 a year for missionaries with an extra £20 for a wife and £5 for a child! With more and more traders coming to the islands the local people were growing wise to the art of buying and selling, and they were demanding higher prices for their goods. There were times in his ministry when John and Mary Williams had to be very inventive to grow crops, refine sugar in order to bring up their family.

The pattern of living for the missionaries was to expect some home comforts and to encourage the local people to adopt European practices in dress and in house building. To sleep “off the ground” on a bed was not natural to local people, so “bedsteads and bonnets” were novelties, but part of the expectations of accepting the faith. John Williams’ felt he should set an example in this regard.³

Testing of working with colleagues: Throughout his ministry John Williams had to accept collegiality and teamwork. In trying conditions this could prove a challenge. There is little evidence of theological differences, and John Williams was a good negotiator and peacemaker. There was bound to be friction between the initial pioneer missionaries: *Henry Nott and William Henry*, and the second generation missionaries: *William Ellis – who came in 1817 and Lancelot Threlkeld, Charles Barff, John Muggeridge Ormond, George Platt, David Platt and John Williams, and Robert Bourne* who arrived a few months later. Decisions about the progress of the mission was a key issue. Nott did not share Bourne and Williams’ enthusiasm for opening up new fields of service, before the work was consolidated in the Society Islands. Relationships with the London directors were not always good and Williams did not hold back with his views. The “second generation” of missionaries to the Society Islands also included people more academically qualified – people like John M Ormond who had undertaken a full theological course of study and was proud of his promotion of the nonconformist academy training. Unlike Nott and Jefferson, they were not averse to being critical and forceful. Consequently the LMS decided to send a delegation to assess

the work in a number of different areas. Tom Hiney's book (op cit) tells the story of the delegation *Daniel Tyerman and George Bennett* – who set off on 2 May 1821 to spend over a year examining the work.

Williams worked well with his contemporaries. Lancelot Threlkeld was on Raiatea. They were quite different in their ways, Williams being practical and Threlkeld more the thinker, but their compatibility was evident. John Williams also took it upon himself to help acclimatise new missionaries. Charles and Elizabeth Pitman who were the first full time European Missionaries on Rarotonga spent 6 months on Raiatea with John and Mary Williams before sailing to Rarotonga in 1827. Aaron Buzacott met up with Williams on Rarotonga and immediately found empathy in their gifts as Buzacott had been a smithy and knew the art of welding and working iron.

Williams had great collegueship with the native or "island" teachers and missionaries, and clearly had confidence in their abilities and newly-found faith. (see later chapter)

MOTIVATION

One significant factor in John Williams' ministry which gives us cause to reflect is his high motivation to sustain ministry and create new opportunities for the Gospel. There is no evidence of disillusionment or frustration, as each demanding situation is faced with devotional commitment and practical realism. If there was a recurring frustration it was with the Directors of the LMS in not going along with his demands for vessels for the carrying of the gospel to distant islands and new fields of work. This eventually led to his going to Britain himself to challenge the churches and the directors of the LMS with his dream for a permanent boat for the use in the islands. Only when you go out to the Pacific region and see the vast distances of water separating the groups of islands and the extreme and risky business of travel can you see Williams' point.

John Williams' high motivation is seen in a letter that he wrote to his son Samuel on Feb 7th 1839. He had just left Rarotonga and was on his way in the *Camden* to Tahiti, from where the letters would be posted. Sam would have been 18, having been left behind to conclude his education. His father writes:

"Oh the inestimable advantage of beginning to serve God while you are young. I began when I was 16 years old and only think upon what I been the means of accomplishing and am yet in the prime of life. I am truly thankful to God that he called me at all by his grace but that feeling is greatly increased that he called me in my youth..."

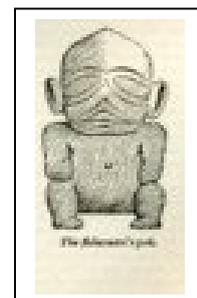
He goes on to encourage his son to keep the right sort of company and keep up his personal devotions. (Samuel later became a Congregational Minister, serving latterly at Hendon.)

CONVERSION AND THE FAITH

At the heart of John Williams sense of call and commitment was the urgent need to convert the islands. His faith was modelled on the patterns from the 18th century Evangelical Revival centred on Whitefield and Wesley. The preaching at the Whitefield Tabernacle would have been a development of the Calvinistic Methodist patterns promoted by George Whitefield, stressing personal conversion, and a belief that the resurrection command of Matthew 28 to "go into the whole world and preach the gospel" was a personal prerogative.

John Williams was highly influenced by this theological approach. But he was also a practical man and largely self taught in preaching and teaching. As time went by he grew wise to the methods that could be effective. He learnt to understand the island dependence on idol worship and the power patterns of kings and chiefs. The conversion of a chief could lead to a whole island or district taking up the faith. There were dramatic incidents of idols being burnt and practices of infanticide and cannibalism being abandoned. Henry Nott said that on one island three quarters of children were murdered at birth. He met one woman who had one child living and 17 of her children had been assassinated. They also used to get rid of the elderly and the disabled as a way of "culling" their society. Conversion meant a once and for all abandoning of these kinds of practices.

The teaching of the missionaries centred on the theology of the God whom you can't see or touch. Texts like Isaiah 2.18 "*The idols he shall utterly abolish*" were cited. In the present day Cook Islands much is made of the god **Tangaroa**, who was regarded as Creator and god of the sea. The carving which we see today is different from the original form where they were decorated with feathers, pearl shell, sennit and coconut bark cloth. A carving of the god was secured to the front of a *vaka* (canoe) for good luck. Other Polynesian gods in evidence were **Rongo**, the god of peace and agriculture and **Tane**, the fertility god and god of craftsmen.



The **Marae** were particular religious meeting places associated with the chiefs, high priests or clans. They generally consisted of an open court built up or defined by a curb of rocks. This was filled in to level the area and carpeted with white coral. A raised platform of stone or wood was erected at one end of the court and decorative carved posts were set up on the platform. Houses were erected close to the marae for the storing of the gods and ceremonial objects. The missionaries saw that the maraes were pulled down and objects burned. Today only a few stones remain of these maraes.

A closer examination of Polynesian spirituality would have revealed that some elements of thinking behind the gods or spirits they worshipped were nearer to Christian thought than was realised.

From a wall mounting in the Cook Islands Museum, Avarua, Rarotonga:

Traditionally speaking the Cook Islands, which were formerly known as the Hervey Islands did not have a concept of a creator, as the islands were believed to have emerged from the depths of the underworld, otherwise known as AVAIKI or the Nether World. These islands are merely the gross outward 'form' or 'body' whilst there still remains behind in the obscurity of the Nether world the ethereal essence or spirit. The primary essence of the Hervey Islanders is described as a point, then something pulsating, next something even greater- the everlasting. The universe is conceived of as the hollow of a vast coconut shell the interior that is named AVAIKI.



At the very bottom of this supposed shell is a thick stem, gradually tapering to a point, which represents the beginning of all things. This point is a spirit named the Root-of-all-Existence. Above this extreme point is a demon named Breathing or Life, stouter and stronger than the former one. The thickest part of the stem is the Long-Lived. These three stationary, sentient spirits constitute foundation and insure the permanence and well being of all the rest of the universe.

There is little indication that John Williams saw anything positive from these pre Christian practices, though this passage from his *Missionary Enterprises* hints at our learning a lesson or two!

"...and when the natives were going on a fishing excursion, prior to setting off, they invariably presented offerings to the god, and invoked him to grant them success. Surely professing Christians may learn a lesson from this practice. Here we see pagans of the lowest order imploring the blessing of their gods upon their ordinary occupations. Christians, go and do likewise!" (p31 Missionary Enterprises.)

Once the "conversion" of the people was underway, the task of the teachers and missionaries was to begin the slow re-education. Schools were set up and classes for adults and children. The sign that an island had really embraced Christianity was seen in the building of a church. There are accounts of congregations of thousands attending worship which required large buildings. Williams tells of individuals who came to faith after a long period of teaching.

In my own church (Raiatea) was an old blind warrior called Me. He had been the terror of all the inhabitants of Raiatea and the neighbouring islands; but in the last battle which had been fought before Christianity was embraced, he received a blow which destroyed his sight. A few years after my settlement in Raiatea, Me was brought under the influence of the Gospel and when our church was formed he was among the first members admitted. His diligence in attending the house of God was remarkable, whether he was guided by some kind friend who would take one end of his stick while he held the other. The respectable females of the settlement thought this no disgrace, and I have frequently seen principal chiefs, and the king himself, leading him this way to chapel. Although blind he attended our adult schools at 6 o'clock every morning, and by repeating and treasuring up what kind friends read to him, he obtained a great familiarity with the truths of the New Testament.

(p.96 Missionary Enterprises). John Williams goes on to describe in detail the death of this man of faith and his great example to the community.

This gives us an insight into the way that Williams' faith was renewed constantly by people who embraced the gospel and were changed and transformed by the teaching and preaching of the missionaries. A supreme example of this is the place of **Tamatoa** in the life of John Williams. Tamatoa was a 6 ft 11 inch former

warrior-chief on Raiatea. “*He was the patriarch of royalty in the Society Islands, his eldest daughter having the government of Huahine and his grand-daughter being the present (1830’s) queen of Tahiti.* Before coming to Christianity, this man was constantly drunk with the juice of the kava root. When visited by Mr. Bennett from the “Deputation” he was asked which was the worst crime he had committed. He replied: “*That of allowing myself to be worshipped as a god, when I knew that I was but a man.*” He was also under the influence of much of the alcohol that traders brought in, but on converting to Christianity he swore a solemn oath never to drink alcohol again. John Williams knew him for 15 years and vouched that he kept his promise. Tamatoa was constant in his attendance at adult school, and never missed any opportunity to be present at church. This man made such an impression on Williams that Mary and John Williams called their second son *Samuel Tamatoa Williams*.

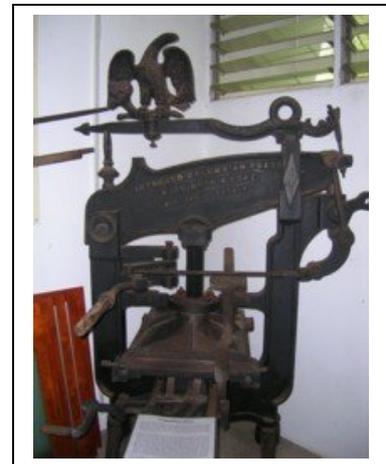
2. The place of Bible translation in the life of the Missionary’s work

John Williams and his contemporaries received no crash course in the Tahitian language before sailing out to the Society Islands. They learned the language as they went along. John and Mary Williams took little time in learning the Tahitian dialects. Immediately evident was the fact that the language was oral in form and had no written form. Henry Nott and John Davies had already started work on the translation of the Tahitian scriptures. They adopted the policy of recruiting help from the local people. King Pomare proved to be a real asset in this direction. He had originally come to the missionaries and asked “*I want to learn by talking marks – please teach me!*”

According to the earliest evidence, Nott translated Luke and Acts and John Davies St. Matthew. John Davies also made some inroads into compiling a Tahitian grammar. Soon after the arrival of John Williams the whole of the gospels had been translated into Tahitian, which helped Williams in his early teaching and preaching ministry.

It is one thing to have a translation, it is quite another to print it. As copies were urgently needed, the construction of a primitive press was urgent. A press was eventually set up at Bananuia in Tahiti. In the year 1832 the Directors sent out a new iron press to Huahine and the old wooden one was given to Mr. Buzacott on Rarotonga. Ultimately translation was taken on by the British and Foreign Bible Society but this was many years down the line.

In 1821 John Williams started to translate the book of Daniel while Lancelot Threlkeld took on Ephesians. This was the first translation work that Williams attempted. (*letter from Threlkeld to the Directors Raiatea June 2 1821*).



This “Columbian Press” was brought to the Cook Islands in the 1830’s and placed on the island of Mangaia for the printing of the Bible. It was brought back to Rarotonga and used in the government printing offices till the 1950’s.

The story of the translation of the scriptures on Rarotonga is worth noting. When Aaron and Sarah Buzacott landed on Rarotonga (1828) there was not one page of print in the language of the people. John Williams (when he was not building his ship) was attempting the translation of St. John’s Gospel and the epistle to the Galatians. His knowledge of Tahitian helped him with the Rarotongan language. The number of words was not very great, being limited by the simple lifestyle of the local people. The local idioms were a mystery to outsiders. Days of labour might only result in a few verses being translated. Aaron Buzacott called it a “Herculean labour”.

The gospels, a few hymns and a Scripture catechism were the first translations completed, but these were in written form. The first printed was I Peter. Aaron Buzacott put this into type at the mission press in Bananuia in Tahiti and thus taught himself the art of composing and printing. During the same voyage he called at Huahine and tried to print off the Gospel of Mark but was forced to leave the task unfinished. Charles Barff completed this and sent on the printing to Rarotonga. Once the old wooden press had been set up at Rarotonga, the task of bringing out copies proved more possible.

The team-work in translation is seen in a chart of the books produced by Aaron Buzacott in his book “*Mission life in the islands of Pacific*” (p180-3)

John Williams completed the following books in translation: *St. John, Romans, Hebrews, letters of Peter, John, James, Jude & Revelations.*

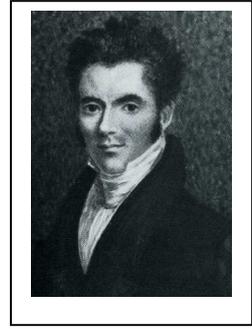
Aaron Buzacott translated *St. Matthew, I & II Corinthians;*

Charles Pitman translated *St. Mark and St. Luke, Acts, Galatians, Ephesians, Colossians, Philippians, I & II Thessalonians, I & II Timothy and Titus, Philemon.*

Aaron Buzacott saw to whole of the printing.

Also coming off the press was a hymn book translated by John Williams (25 hymns) and children's school books ("Rainbow", "Three Jews" and "New Heart").

The New Testament was taken to London by John Williams in 1834 and printed by the Bible Society in time for him to bring back the 5000 Bibles to the Hervey Islands in 1839. Writing to his son Samuel from the Camden on Feb 7th 1839, John Williams describes the scene on Rarotonga when the New Testaments arrived:



Rev Aaron Buzacott

"You would have been delighted to see the eagerness of the people of Rarotonga to obtain copies of the New Testament. They came with tears in their eyes, begging and beseeching that they might have one. And if Mr. Buzacott said "You cannot read", the reply was.. "but my son or my daughter can, and I can hear and understand what they can."

The Old Testament was translated after Williams' death. Charles Pitman translated 18 books and Aaron Buzacott the remaining 21. Aaron Buzacott's wife Sarah and daughter Sarah Ann* were part of the team. They gave considerable help in revision and proof reading. His son Aaron also helped with the compositing and printing. So much so that a letter came from Bible Society House dated July 8th 1851:

*(*the birth of Sarah Ann is mentioned in a letter from Mrs Buzacott – Missionary Enterprises p57)*

My dear Friend,

Your letter of report etc., was yesterday laid before our committee and their attention being especially drawn to the services rendered by your daughter in the course of the work, it was resolved to request Miss Buzacott to accept £10 as a small acknowledgement from the Committee of the Society, together with a copy of the Bible in Rarotongan and English, the latter of any kind or size she may select".

Acknowledgement of the work:

"The Rarotongan Bible is a sacred memorial, more enduring and honourable than the most costly mausoleum, of the self-denying labours of John Williams, Charles Pitman, and Aaron Buzacott. The highest ambition can desire no better mission or loftier place in the moral and religious life of a people than this, to be the translators into a new language of the inspired Word of God, thus enabling a new nation to read and study in their own mother tongue the wonderful story of redeeming love....." (p.187 *"Mission life in the islands of Pacific"*)

Hymnody: Anyone worshipping in the Cook Islands Christian Church will have noted the Cook Islanders amazing ability in the field of harmony singing. They were also adept at learning new tunes and developing their own styles of singing. John Williams had a good voice and used it to good effect. This quote from Aaron Buzacott's book will show how it was used on the isle of Aitutaki:

"The natives are devotedly fond of singing, and seem to have no sense of fatigue. Their urgent requests to be taught new tunes, often deprived our brethren of their rest. Mr. Buzacott writes:

"Fortunately Mr. Williams and I could take turns, and one rest while the other was teaching. With this exercise, my throat has sometimes been so sore, as to cause me to spit blood for several days. At one of these islands I was so completely exhausted, that at midnight, when Mr. Williams had been aroused to take his turn, I retired to rest in another room, determined not to get up again until morning light. Mr. Williams had a good voice, and kept up the singing for two or three hours, and then was fairly exhausted. The singers made such a noise with their stentorian voices, that sleep was impossible. After waiting a little while, one of them came to my room, to see if I was awake. I closed my eyes as if in sleep; the light was held up over my face, if perchance that might arouse me. He then returned to report that Barakoti (Mr Buzacott) was sound asleep. One of them said, 'Why did you not wake him?' He answered, 'I was afraid.' Another native ventured into

the room, and gently shook my head, but it was of no avail, and they either laid themselves down in the room of the teacher's house, where they had been practising, or went to their own homes." (P114 op cit)

*It was evident that John Williams composed Hymns in the Rarotongan Maori form, rather than import British hymns per se. This may account for the special nature of Cook Island singing and hymnody.

Notes on Charles Pitman and Aaron Buzacott:

Charles Pitman:

Born 18 April 1796 Portsmouth.

Ordained 1st Sept 1824 at King St Church Portsea.

Married Elizabeth Nelson Corrie

Sailed 21 Nov 1824 to Tahiti, and set off for Rarotonga with JW on 26th April 1827, arriving in Rarotonga on May 6th 1828.

Worked in Ngatangiia, Rarotonga until his retirement 1855 in Sydney. Suffered poor health throughout his ministry.

Mrs Pitman died 1860.

Charles Pitman died 1884 aged 88.

Aaron Buzacott

Born Mar 4th 1800 at South Moulton, Devon. His father was a whitesmith and ironmonger in the town and a member of the 1662 Congregational Church. His mother was an Episcopalian, then converted as a Congregationalist. Being "delicate in health" Aaron had a village education and then did three years work alongside a gentleman farmer, gaining considerable experience in agricultural matters. He then spent time in his father's business, which came in very useful in helping John Williams to build the *Messenger of Peace*.

He did three years study of general and classical literature at Hoxton Academy. Studied theology under Dr Bogue of Gosport, and Dr. Henderson at the old Hoxton Academy – used for a missionary college.

Appointed in 1826 to work in Rarotonga.

Ordained 17th Jan 1827 at Castle Street Church Exeter.

Married Sarah Verney Hitchcock (sister of Mrs C. Harvey and Mrs J. Sewell – other missionary wives.)

Sailed out Mar 13th 1827

Arrived Tahiti Aug 24th 1827 – had five months in Tahiti alongside Mr and Mrs. Crook

Son Aaron born here. Aaron became friendly with Samuel Williams.

Arrived Rarotonga 16th Feb 1828. Avarua.

"Aaron Buzacott and his wife and son arrived on Rarotonga on 16th Feb 1828 on their wedding anniversary. There was great excitement over the wife and baby landing – a vast host of men with tattooed faces arms and legs – men wore a skirt and women partially covered with a cloth, the children all naked (up to about the age of 10). John Williams welcomed them with the words that there was no danger. It being Sunday, the people were summoned by a kind of 2 ft gong made out of wood to evening worship. During the service Mrs Buzacott did not dare face the crowd until the close of public worship when she ventured to lift her eyes. She saw eyes from every quarter fixed on her, wide open mouths full of pearly teeth and long hair which had never known a comb giving the wearers a most hideous appearance."

Left 1842 ill health arrived Sydney

Returned to Rarotonga and then left for London in the John Williams

Returned to Rarotonga 1851-1852

Retired 1857

Died Sydney 20th Sept 1864

(see "*Mission Life in the Islands of the South Pacific*")

3: 'Native' Teachers and their importance in Williams' work

One of the features of the development of the work in the islands was the need to develop a leadership ministry which the islanders themselves could take up. "So great are the advantages on the side of a native teacher at the commencement of a Mission over a European," wrote Williams "one colour, almost one language, and a oneness of habit gives them these superior advantages" (*William and Barff Journal 1830 LMS*). There is no reference to ordination, but before "native teachers" (sometimes called "deacons") were taken on board ship to travel to other islands, they were set apart at a special service. As there was considerable risk in this kind of work and travel was precarious, there was no guarantee that some of these leaders would ever see their native island again. The distances were so great that it was not unusual for people to be stranded on a "foreign" island for years, having been blown off course in a gale. The missionary/trading ships often returned people to their own island.

In the years 1816-1839, all lay training was done by the missionaries themselves. After that date the Training Institutions at Avarua -Rarotonga – [Takamoa] (1839) and Malua - Samoa (1844) had an increasing influence. John Williams would have given a lot of his time in this direction. His instruction to the island deacons/teachers is clear and practical as seen in a letter written at sea on board the Endeavour:

Letter written at sea on board the Endeavour 6 July 1823.

"...May you have salvation through Jesus Christ in doing work for which you are chosen by the Church of Christ in Raiatia. This to you is a new work – I therefore think it well to give you some advise on how to act when you arrive at the land to which God will lead you. Plenty will be the difficulties which you will meet at the commencement (of your ministry), but be not cast down, remembering what Jesus said to his disciples – he says the same to you – lo I am with you always, even unto the end of the world. Jesus will not cast you off; he will never forsake you. His word will grow – it cannot be prevented."

(The following is in præcis)

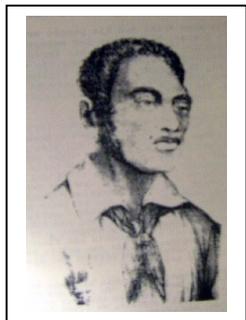
1. Pay good regard to your own hearts. Pay speedy attention to the Sabbath. Great faith is required for this work.
2. Outward appearances matter. You have become like a city erected on a hill. Many are the eyes that will be looking at you. Many brethren in all these islands (colleagues). The eyes of the Great Society in London. And all the believers in England. Eyes of both heaven and hell are looking at you. Be circumspect in your conduct.
3. Beware of envy and evil thinking. Treat everyone with respect. Be not obstinate to one another. Pray to God for direction.
4. As regards the work. Remember this work is the work of Jesus Christ. You will teach adults and children. You will preach. You will baptise and administer the ordinance of the Lord's Supper. As regards to Baptism, do not be hasty – let a little time elapse. Introduce the marriage ceremony. If a man has 2 wives, in his idolatrous state, let him put one away if it is agreeable to the wife to leave, if not let him retain both, but the putting away of one is by far the best, which you promote diligently by persuading, and not threatening, but in the case of the death of one of the wives, he commits sin if he takes a second. Perhaps if laws are established it may be accomplished then.
5. Pay regard to your possessions. The interior of your house is important. Make bedsteads and seats. Do carpentry and plastering. Let the women sew and make bonnets, mats etc.
6. Form a Missionary Society : but not in haste.
7. What you do with the old idols is important. Burn some and keep the best looking. Send them to Raiatea and then JW will send them to London.

Opportunities to spread the gospel came through the requests of islanders 100's of miles away from where Williams, Bourne and Lancelot Threlkeld were serving.

One of the earliest examples of this was the story of **Auura**, a chief of **Rurutu**, 350 miles to the south of Raiatea. When a severe epidemic hit the island, it was naturally blamed on the anger of one of the tribal gods. Two chiefs of enterprising spirit felt it would be inadvisable to stay on the stricken island "lest they be devoured by the gods" and built a huge canoe . With as many people as could be conveyed this canoe reached Tubuai in the Society Islands, where they had a time to recover. They set off again and hit a violent storm and so were driven onto the coral reef that surrounds the island of Maurua, the furthest west of the group. The Mauruans were most hospitable and as they had heard of the God Jehovah, they informed Auura of the new religion. They were astonished to find out that the White men who had come with this good news were on islands within sight of Maurua. So Auura and company set sail again, missed the entrance to Porapora and were driven onto the island of Raiatea. Here they were greeted with warmth and they learnt of

the “new teaching”. Being keen to take it back to their own island (if they could find it!), they persuaded John Williams to negotiate a passage on a passing vessel. The church agreed to set apart two deacons: **Papeiha and Vahapata** who came forward and said in the words of the prophet “*Here we are, send us!*” John Williams says they were set apart in an “interesting service” (p. 12 *Missionary Enterprises*), but unfortunately does not tell us the details of the liturgy. Every member of the church brought forward a gift as a testimonial – useful items for the two deacons in their work: (a roll of native cloth, a razor, a knife, a pair of scissors, tools, some elementary books etc).

Papeiha was to be the greatest of the island missionaries. After he had successfully established the Gospel on Rurutu, he joined Williams and Bourne en route to the Hervey Islands. The two missionaries had with them four island missionaries and their wives who had been chosen on Raiatea. John Williams describes fully Papeiha’s part in the initiatives needed to make inroads into some very difficult islands. On Mangaia, Papeiha helped with special negotiations. After a very inhospitable welcome (ME p21), Papeiha was not averse to upbraiding the chiefs because of their conduct. On this occasion Papeiha nearly lost his life as he was forced into a “tiputa” (a piece of cloth used to strangle people.) He had the presence of mind to use his fingers to stop the cloth having its dreadful effect. They left the island full of regret, resolved to send two single men to Mangaia at the first opportunity. Davida and Tiera from the church at Tahaa were able to fulfil this a few months later.



Papeiha was on course to be the bringer of the faith to Rarotonga.

This island was not on any charts and the *Te Matamua* nearly did not make it. They sighted the island just as they were planning to turn back, because provisions had run so low. Once more they thought they were having a good reception, led by Papeiha, taking some missionaries and their wives on the island. But the women again were subjected to abuse as one of the chiefs wanted to make one of the teacher’s wives as his own wife. (He already had 19 wives!). They had almost decided to give up on the island when Papeiha decided he would go back on the island himself and work in a solitary way. All he had with him as he left the boat was his native testament, some elementary books and the clothes he stood up in. He did suggest that another helper - Tiberio - should come from Raiatea. John Williams knew that he could not dissuade the brave teacher. Papeiha did have the backing of Makea, one of the chiefs, and the other 2 men and 4 women who were exiled Rarotongans returning.

When Williams returned three years later, the island of Rarotonga had given up their idols and were worshippers of the Christian God. Such was the effectiveness of the native teacher and his helpers.

The story of how this happened is found in a small book on Papeiha’s family published by the University of the South Pacific.

Papeiha’s name changed spelling when he came to Rarotonga to **Papaheia**. He married Te Vaerua the daughter of one of the ariki’s (chiefs). They had two sons and 6 daughters. One of the sons Isaia was educated in Britain and became a minister of the village community of Arorangi.

Papeiha’s grave is at the church at Arorangi village on Rarotonga.

(see “*History of the Papehia family*” by Taira Rere)

It is fitting that the first training institute for native teachers and missionaries should be on Rarotonga. The Takamoia College at Avarua still is active in training ministers for the Cook Islands Christian Church.

The part played by the “island” missionaries throughout the growth of the LMS work in the Pacific region is significant. Local researchers have tried to piece together some of the amazing stories.

Marjorie Tuainekore Crocombe has published a book entitled “*If I live*” (published by Lotu Pasifica Productions, PO Box 208, Suva, Fiji) on the life of **Ta’unga**, one of the few island missionaries who wrote down what he did. He was one of the first inhabitants of Rarotonga to read and write of the daily happenings he lived through as an LMS missionary in the New Hebrides, Niué, Rotuma, the Loyalty Islands and Samoa between 1842-1878. Marjorie Crocombe in her introduction says that very few people knew of Ta’unga and his adventures. Thanks to her translation of virtually lost manuscripts, the present generation can begin to understand the risks and sacrifice of people like Ta’unga, who came to learn of the Christian faith as a child in the village of Ngatangia through Papeiha and the work of Charles Pitman. He was trained as one of the first students at Takamoia Mission College, and in 1842 volunteered to serve in the Loyalty

Islands. He sailed out on the *Camden* to the notorious Isle of Pines, where many native teachers risked and some lost their lives. His diaries revealed many such risky incidents demanding courage and faith. Ta'unga was one of many who served, reminding us of the many "unknowns" who have helped forward the Gospel. Maybe this kind of "anonymous" ministry comes closest to the ministry revealed by St. Paul in his description of Christ "humbling himself and becoming obedient even to death..." (Phil.2.).

In reflecting on the place given to John Williams in the history of the LMS work of the Pacific, it is well to remember the many unnamed people who also were martyred. Soon after John Williams died, the LMS placed two Samoan teachers *Lasola and Taniela* on Erromanga near to Dillon's Bay. When next the *Camden* visited Erromanga, they had great difficulty in rescuing them because of their being treated like captives. A decision was taken to remove them by the *Camden* to the Isle of Pines in New Caledonia, where the LMS were opening up new work. They were murdered soon afterwards. These are the dreadful facts of Pacific ministry. At Erromanga a little further up the shore from where John Williams and James Harris were killed are the graves of two other missionaries who were murdered in 1861. They were George and Ellen Gordon. The Revd. George N. Gordon was a Presbyterian Minister from Prince Edward Island, Canada, and his wife Ellen from England. So the reality of martyrdom continued. (From 1857 the supervision of the New Hebrides Mission passed into the hands of the Presbyterian missionary conference. The LMS were partners in the work. (see "**Live**" - History of church planting in the New Hebrides to 1880 by J. Graham Miller, published by the Christian Education Committee, General Assembly of Australia, GPO Box 100, Sydney 2001).

4. THE GIFTS THAT JOHN WILLIAMS BROUGHT TO HIS MINISTRY

Already there has been ample mention of Williams' dedication and ability in the fields of Bible translation, Hymnody, motivation of local people, teaching and preaching.

He brought other gifts to bear in his unique ministry

(a) His practical gifts.

Coming from an artisan background, John Williams maintained the gifts he had learnt as an apprentice and developed new gifts. On the journey out in the *Harriet* he had paid special attention to the make up of the boat and its ability to weather the storms. The records show that soon after Williams started his ministry he helped the local people launch a half finished ship which he named after one of the Directors of the LMS "*the Haweis*". This took him no time at all (eight days is quoted!). It was not until he was marooned on Rarotonga that he decided to build his own ship, which he called "*the Messenger of Peace*". It was this exploit which attracted a lot of popular acclaim. He became known as *John Williams the Shipbuilder* in many biographies and this aspect attracted younger enquirers. It also fitted in well with the promotion of the work of the 7 *John Williams* ships. The story of the Building of the *Messenger of Peace* is well catalogued. It is all the more remarkable because of the lack of materials available on the island and the need to be inventive with the use of what was there. John Williams reflects on this in his "Missionary Enterprises" where he writes "*All persons going to uncivilised islands, especially Missionaries should seek that knowledge which may be easily applied, as they have to do everything themselves, and in situations where they cannot obtain the means in general use elsewhere...*" (p38 column 2). He was also up against conditions that could not be foreseen. For instance the *rats of Rarotonga* that ate his bellows were likened to the plague of Egypt! (On one occasion John Williams woke up to find 4 rats under his pillow!) The ingenuity and trial and error methods of shipbuilding mentioned can only draw our admiration They had no coal so they made charcoal from the *Tamanu (cocoa nut)*. When they wanted a length of twisted plank (having no apparatus for steaming), they bent bamboo to the shape required. They used wooden pins called *trenails* instead of using iron. For ropes they used the bark of the *hibiscus*, for sails they used mats on which the natives slept and even quilted them so that they would be strong enough to resist the wind. Williams reckons that the ship was completed in 15 weeks (ME p40 para 1). It was 60 feet long and 18 feet in breadth. The launch and trial run was 170 miles away to Aitutaki (Tahiti is 7-800 miles away). Within 6 miles from the shore the foremast broke, but a stump of 12-15 feet above

the deck was still in place, which enabled them to reach land with a makeshift sail. Within a few days they had repaired the mast and sailed again! The *Messenger of Peace* reached Tahiti safely with Mrs Williams, the family and King Makea on board. Such was their faith in the seamanship of John Williams and native crew. Once there it had a refit and was an enhanced vessel for its later voyages to Samoa. Clearly stories like this backed up by John Williams' detailed accounts in his *Missionary Endeavours* captured the imagination of people back home. Here was no ordinary missionary!

(b) His fascination and love of local people

Mention has been made of the relationship John Williams built up with local chiefs and his own trained teachers. As time went on he accrued a greater understanding of "native" customs and habits, but he never ceased to be amazed at their reactions. He was adept at watching people and analysing their responses. Sometimes the first interaction between the Europeans and local islanders brought memorable moments alongside understandable risks.

In the aforementioned letter to Samuel (Feb 7 1839), his father describes one such incident – the juxtaposition of the first two sentences may seem unfortunate!: *"We met a vessel which had on board a native from the Savage Islands. You would have been much amused to see him sit and stare at the missionaries' wives! Our cow was in the long boat and we took him there to see her. Immediately he got sight of her, he sprang back, set up a shout and gazed intently for five minutes, every now and then uttering an exclamation of astonishment!"*

In his earlier journeys, local natives from Aitutaki were brought face to face with Mrs Williams and their son John. Their reaction was their desire to grab the boy and make him into a king, so amazed were they at seeing the fair featured youngster. When the body language of the islanders got dangerous, the mother and son were ordered into the lower part of the ship.

Part of his "people watching" and reactions showed John Williams giving an example of the islanders' sense of humour . Both Williams (p134 ME) and Aaron Buzacott (Mission life in the South Pacific) make mention of this incident on Buzacott's and Nott's arrival in Matavai Bay 24th August 1827:. Williams writes:

A few years ago a venerable and esteemed brother Missionary came to England and being rather bald, some kind friends provided him with a wig. Upon his return to the islands, the chiefs and others went on board to welcome him; and after the usual salutations one of them said to the Missionary: "You were bald when you left and now you have a beautiful head of hair. What amazing people the English are: how did they make your grow again?" "You simple people" replied the missionary, "how does everything grow? Is it not by sowing seed?" They immediately shouted: "Oh, these English people, they sow seed on a bald man's head to make the hair grow!" One shrewd fellow asked if they had brought any of the seed with them. The good missionary carried on the joke for a while and then raised his wig.. The revelation of his "original head" of course drew forth a roar of laughter, when one of the natives shouted "Here see Mr (Nott), he has come from England with his head thatched" He has come from England with his head thatched!"

This is a slightly different version of the story that was told by Mr Nott whom Williams does not identify, but the gist is the same.

On a more serious note, Williams soon noticed how eloquent the islanders were and how they developed the practice of extempore prayer. One example given was a communion prayer offered quite spontaneously by one island deacon.

"Oh God, the mighty Jehovah, we praise thee for all the goodness wrought towards us: and now we are assembled around this table, do thou be with us. While we see the bread broken in our presence, may the eye of the heart be looking at the body of our Lord Jesus as broken upon the cross for us; and when we see the wine poured into the cup, may the ear of the heart be listening to the voice of the Lord Jesus saying 'this cup is the new covenant in my blood which was shed for the remission of sins.' May we never again take the spear of sin and pierce again his side...."

Although the idols were targeted for destruction, Williams does make reference to the skills of the islanders in their carving, their weapons, the construction of their canoes and their fishing

apparatus, the fabrication of their cloth. He also noticed their ingenuity in speech and metaphor which led them to re-interpret some parts of the Bible using indigenous phrases. e.g. “*Do not let our reception of the word of life resemble the eating of the aumea, but let it sink into the heart.*” (The aumea was a fish with a remarkable large mouth and open gills. The natives believed that food seized in the mouth quickly exited through the gills.) This metaphor parallel led the parable of the sower for the seed that did not take root.

(c) Williams the “naturalist”

The Missionary Enterprises reveals a number of detailed examinations of the flora, fauna and geology of the islands. This is not unusual for early missionaries as they were expected to make records of what they met for the perusal of experts at home. William Ellis who came to the Society Islands in 1819 was particularly skilled at this. Very early in Williams’ book (ME p5-10) a whole chapter is given to the geographical description of the Hervey Islands, and the geological structure of the islands in general. Although some of this may not stand up to modern scrutiny, it was in its time a very advanced and perceptive account of the knowledge available. He pays particular attention to the formation of the coral and the reefs surrounding the islands. He explains that the Hervey Islands were named by Captain Cook in honour of Capt Hervey R.N. one of the Lords of the Admiralty. Williams visited the island called Hervey twice, only to eventually find that the “miserable” group of people had virtually killed themselves off through war and argument as to who should be king. In the end only 8 people and some children survived. One geological problem that fascinated Williams was “how coral is formed”. He spoke out against the theory that it was produced by insects. His personal description was to say that they were solid masses of crystal limestone, built up over long periods of time, which actually compose all the islands and reefs.

Williams in his practical work soon found the uses of many of the trees. The hardwoods were especially used in the making of canoes and houses, and some are hollowed out into bowls and other receptacles. He makes special mention of the *tamanu (calophyllum)*, which has a veiny and beautiful grain and polishes well; *amai or miro*: the leaves were always used in religious ceremonies and the wood is easily worked; the *tou(cordia)*: a wide spreading tree that makes beautiful furniture. Many trees produce gums and dyes. The *candle-nut tree* has white foliage and the nut – the size of a walnut – is used – once the casing is taken off – as a substitute for a candle. The bread-fruit tree (famed in the story of the Bounty) cannot exist unless there is depth of soil, so this does well in Tahiti. The cocoa-nut however does not need depth of soil and so flourishes everywhere. The leaves are used for thatch and for baskets. The fruit provides both food and liquid, and is most valuable especially where there are no streams and springs.

Two incidents:

“Ground Force”

“On entering the harbour we were struck with the appearance of our house; for as the ship had been built just in front of it, much rubbish had been collected, the fence surrounding the front garden was broken down, and the bananas and shrubs destroyed. This was the state of things when we had left the island (*to go to Aitutaki*) but now not only was the fence repaired, and the garden well cultivated, but the dark red mountain plantain, and the golden banana, fully ripe were smiling a welcome to us through the splendid leaves which surrounded the trunks that bore them. It appears that Mrs Williams had intimated to the females who attended her for instruction, that it would afford her pleasure to have the pathway and garden put in order by the time of my arrival. They were delighted with the suggestion, and answered “We will not leave a chip against which, on his return, he shall strike his feet.” The following morning they commenced making the pathways. For this purpose they laid large flat stones for curb edging, and filled the intervals with *kirikiri* or small broken pieces of branching coral thrown up by the sea; and strewed black pebbles amongst them, which being intermingled with white coral, gave to the broad pathway a neat and lively appearance. They then planted the sides with full grown *ti (dracana terminalis)* trees, interspersed with gigantic taro or *kape (caladium odoratum)*. By their request their husbands undertook to repair the fence round the house, while they ornamented the enclosure with banana and plantain trees, bearing fruit which would be ripe about the time of our expected return; and the kind people appeared amply rewarded by observing the pleasure which their work afforded us.

(p.41 Missionary Enterprises.)

Chinese Bananas

In the personal letters of John Williams there is reference to the introduction of the Chinese banana to the Western part of the Pacific region. While on furlough, John Williams and his son

John visited the Duke of Devonshire at Chatsworth House and took an interest in the specimens that existed in the hot houses. In this way it was decided through the help of the Duke for the *Camden* to take out cases of specimens of the plant to the islands. One of the newly recruited missionaries who took on the task of propagating the species (*Musa Cavendishii* also known as *chinese banana*), Rev. William Mills (1836-1856), was eventually able to salvage just one of these plants and from it came all the bananas of this variety in Samoa, Fiji and other western Pacific islands. The variety had benefits over the normal banana as it was shorter in size and therefore could survive hurricanes. It also was very prolific in producing suckers and so it could quickly generate whole areas of land. It also had a good flavour. Mr Mills said that he managed to produce a bunch weighing 100 lbs. He was reminded of the parable of the mustard seed in the Gospel. (*letter in SOAS archive: Introduction of the Cavendish Banana into Polynesia*).

(d) John Williams an all round strategist: The opening up of the work in the Hervey Islands and the releasing of John Williams from his close association with the Society Islands especially Raiatea, brought the young missionary into greater prominence. He was a bold missionary strategist and was never more motivated than when he was opening up new fields of activity. He had been convinced from early days that the future lay in procuring the right kind of transport and creating new inter-island contact and support despite the hundreds of miles of ocean that separated the islands. Like St. Paul, he was always anxious to revisit places where work was set up and support island teachers.

One area where the strategy was tested was the decisions that had to be taken regarding the co-operation between the Wesleyan Methodist Missionaries in Tonga and the pioneering LMS work developing in Samoa. In 1830 in the *Messenger of Peace*, John Williams and Charles Barff set off for the Hervey Islands, Niué, Tonga and Samoa. They took with them a number of island teachers from Huahine, Raiatea and Borabora (in the Society Islands) and two from Aitutaki. Having left Rarotonga (sadly in an epidemic), they set sail for Tongatapu where they met and talked with Nathaniel Turner and Cross about the division of labour and the way the two societies could co-operate. John Williams could see that the relationships between the two societies could become strained. An agreement was reached that the LMS should concentrate their activities on the Samoan group and the Methodists would maintain the work on Tonga and develop Fiji. Here the outcome was not as Williams had hoped. He took this agreement as a clear way forward and told the LMS of the decision. Turner and Cross however took the conversation in general terms and did not inform their superiors. This eventually was to lead to problems in the apportioning of work on the Samoan islands.

He also knew the importance of keeping records and a journal. Eventually his *A Narrative of Missionary Enterprise* became a best seller and was put into the hands of commoner and nobility in order to advocate the Missionary cause. The four years he spent in Britain advocating the Missionary cause was all part of well worked out strategy for the good of the work of establishing a firm foothold for the Gospel in a part of the world where access was precarious and risks were high.

John Garrett sums it up eloquently:

“Williams achieved the standing of a Nonconformist social lion.... the wavering young missionary who in 1821 had limped into Sydney, in a state of indecision, for medical treatment, had developed into a celebrity. He basked in it. His euphoria sometimes verged on the fulsome; but he had a right to be celebrated. In the field he had become a remarkable all-round missionary. He was a pioneer, a translator, a ship-builder, a navigator and a fraternising evangelist with a taste for many customs of the exotic societies he revelled in describing. The detailed observations of Samoan life at the end of his 1832 journal show a clear eye and ability to record faithfully. The journal is mostly free of pious asides; it seldom attributes normal human events to special divine providence. He was a bold missionary strategist.....” (“*To live among the Stars*” p86).

5. The death of John Williams and postscripts.

One may reflect upon the importance of John Williams' death in the pattern of life in the Pacific islands and the spur, which it gave to even more missionary activity and enterprise. A death of this nature releases so many human emotions and feelings of guilt. We grow used to this fact in modern life after some tragedy or calamity. But this is nothing new. The story of the martyrdom of Stephen and other martyrs down the ages like Dr Martin Luther King have shown that sometimes people have made a powerful impact through their deaths.

The murder of John Williams on the beach of Erromanga on Nov 20th 1839, so soon after his return to the islands shocked the world of the Pacific Islands and Britain. The news of this tragedy took its time to reach the various islands, but once it did it drew forth a large number of tributes from colleague missionaries and local people.

The story of the murder has been retold and examined in many journals and books. In a memorial sermon delivered by the Revd. T. Binney on the Sunday morning of May 10th 1840 at the Weigh House Chapel, Fish St. Hill, full descriptions are given, quoting fully the account by Captain Robert Morgan and sent to the Revd. William Ellis. According to this eyewitness account, the move to go ashore was initiated by James Harris and agreed by John Williams.

.....Mr Harris stripped off his shoes and waded ashore and the natives ran to him. John Williams told him to sit down and the natives brought him some coconuts and opened them for him to drink. Mr Williams said he saw native boys playing which was a good sign. But there were no women – which is a sign that the natives resolve to do some mischief – they send the women away. Williams followed and offered his hand to the natives but they refused. He then asked that some cloth out of the boat be handed to the natives and he divided it among them. All three walked up the beach, Mr. Harris, Mr. Williams and Mr. Cunningham – they turned right (inland) and Capt Morgan lost sight of them. The next minute he turned round to see Mr. Williams and Mr Cunningham running – Mr. Cunningham for the boat and Mr. Williams straight for the sea, with one native close behind. Mr Williams fell backwards, the beach being stony, and at that point the native struck him with a club. A second native also struck him and another put arrows into the body. Capt Morgan was unable to retrieve the body as the natives were firing arrows at the boat. The body stayed on the beach for quite a time before the natives dragged it off the shore.

In Samoa Mrs Williams heard of the death of her husband through a messenger. Before the messenger had the chance to break the sad news, Mrs Williams asked,

“Is all well?”

“Yes, all is well” was the quiet reply.

Mrs Williams knew exactly what he meant. She had pleaded with her husband before he left Samoa not to land on Erromanga. (She remained on Upolu with her family until returning to Britain in 1841; her son John (and his wife Caroline) became British Consul on Samoa for 24 years.)

“The remains of Messrs Williams and Harris were fetched by our English ship of war called the “Pavorite”. Capt. Croker – taken to Upolu and there interred. When the captain of the ship asked the Erromangoans why they had murdered our friends, they answered: in retaliation for 100's of our people killed by the foreigners who came to cut sandalwood.” (From a report sent to the LMS 1840)

More details of the death of John Williams and James Harris are recorded in papers written by the Revd. Peter Milne – 33 letters written from 1869 onwards by Peter to his brother and sister-in-law, William and Elsie Milne of Scotland and later of Calcutta, where they were missionaries under the Church of Scotland. In these papers there is a description of the place where John Williams was killed and details of the link between Williams death and other deaths on Erromanga – notably George and Ellen Gordon of the New Hebrides Mission. The history of killing went on for a few years. By 1869, there were still little advance in the Gospel.

“When one first sets his foot on shore he feels he is on holy ground. The people of Erromanga are still heathen. There are only 8 baptised native adults in it but the soil at least is Christian and also the river and the sea, being already baptised not indeed by water but by blood. The soil was red with the blood of these Christian martyrs. The sea as you know on its left bank is already red with the blood of Williams, not many yards up the river with that of Harris, a little further on the same side but on the high ground the soil was wet with the blood of the Gordons whose bodies now rest in the valleys below, to that mountain valley, river

*and sea are all consecrated to God with the blood and dust of Christian martyrs.... We have seen the grave of the Gordons is surrounded with a wall of stone and lime. Next to it is the grave of **Kauiāui**, the murderer of Mr Williams and who was also concerned in the murder of the Gordons – he fell in battle some three years ago, his spear and the arrow that killed him are in Mr. Gordon’s museum. He had after all to be indebted to the missionary for his grave, a token perhaps of the final victory of Christianity over heathenism on E. The ground on both sides of the river for nearly a mile up is mission property being purchased from the sandalwood trader at the breaking up of that establishment. And there is a native burial place upon it. I have seen K’s widow – she is a kind hearted old woman and a constant attender at church. Her sons also attend church occasionally...”. (Letter 4 written from the New Hebrides, Knox College Archive, Dunedin)*

(Dated 26th Nov. 1869)

Note on Harris: James Harris was a gentleman on his way to England to train as a missionary in the Marquesas. Cunningham was a vice Consul. Statements were made by Cunningham and Capt Morgan. See *Missionary’s Farewell (CWML E13/2)*

Reactions:

Private Correspondence from Raiatea Apr 12 1840 from George Platt to William Ellis

“We are overwhelmed with sorrow at the mournful intelligence. Alas for dear Mrs Williams – how must she feel to come so far to be widowed in so short a time? I had written to him urging all the reasons....”?..” that he should not undertake the voyage, nor should he visit any more islands than he had teachers to place on them. It appears that he did not listen to my advice. He is gone, the career from which we anticipated so much is over. ‘Tis darkness all! Mysterious dark! You will have heard particulars long before this reaches you, and so I shall not detail them. I could not but mention it as a most dark and mysterious dispensation, one that weighs particularly heavy on my spirits, especially when I view it in its different bearings. We were elated with hope and now...so proportionately depressed for we have no one like him in mind or in body for the service – this requires both. To whom shall we look? Where shall the man be from to engage the arduous task? Where shall the determined perseverance, the active habits, the firm constitution, the cheerful “re....ation” under fatigue and deprivation be found which our lamented brother possessed? Alas Poor Williams. Oh that we could soon behold his like in the work! And as fully devoted, still my dear friend is in the hands of God....”

Letter from Aaron Buzacott to William Ellis dated June 2 1840

“A British ship the Sulphur with Capt. Belcher brought news of the tragic death of our dear brethren Williams and Harris. I cannot properly describe the painful emotions with which our minds have to the present moment been exercised.”He expresses thoughts for Mrs Williams and the children – and then affirms: “his blood shall not be shed in vain.... ‘by whom shall Jacob arise?’”

Extract from the minutes of the Meeting of the Brethren of the Samoan Mission held on March 30th 1840 at Apia, Capt Croker R.N. in the chair:

The Camden has returned to our shores bringing us heartrending intelligence that on the 20th of Nov last our beloved and honoured Brother the Revd. John Williams together with our esteemed friend Mr James Harris were barbarously murdered by the natives of Erromango, an island of the New Hebrides Group, while seeking to introduce among the knowledge of salvation by our Lord Jesus Christ. Mr. Harris was the first victim, and on the alarm being given, the rest of the small party who were on shore effected their escape to the boat. Our Brother Williams hesitated for a few moments then ran towards the water, when he was overtaken by the savages and cruelly massacred. While we cannot contemplate this most afflictive event without the keenest anguish, we would bow with devout submission to the unerring though inscrutable councils of the Most High and it not a little alleviates the poignancy of our grief that this honoured servant of Christ did not fall till he had planted the standard of the Cross on the islands of Rotuma and Tanna, the latter of which may be regarded as the key to that extensive group of islands where he finished his course.

We deeply sympathise with the widow and family of our departed Brother in the overwhelming distress into which they have been brought by the late painful dispensation of Divine Providence and we devoutly commend them to the tender compassion of our gracious Lord, not doubting but

that He who has enabled them to sustain with resignation the first shock of this heavy trial will continue to support and sooth their wounded spirits. We assure them of our utmost readiness to concur with them in such arrangements as the present circumstances may render desirable.

Apia April 1st 1840:

Dear Mrs Williams,

I have the pleasure of submitting the above extract from the minutes of the last meeting. Wishing you my consolation under your sad bereavement and the comfort which the promises of God are fitted to afford,

I remain

my dear Mrs Williams

Yours sincerely,

Wm Miles-Scott

Postscripts:

(a) Mrs Mary Williams:

(See “Euthanasia” A funeral sermon given by the Revd. Henry Allon preached at Union Chapel Islington Sunday morning June 27th 1852. Memoire by her son Samuel. (LMS/CWM Archives SOAS)

Mary was the youngest child of Thomas and Mary Chawner of Denson Hill, Cheadle, Staffordshire, born Sept 29 1795.

Her parents could not afford to give her full education, so she was taken from school at an early age. Her father had been an heir to extensive estates near Lichfield. To secure them he was involved in a very tedious lawsuit, which took him down to London. While in London he met a pious lady, a member of the Whitefield Tabernacle who introduced him to the preaching of the Revd John Hyatt. At home he spoke to his wife and family about this experience on many occasions, and longed for a chance to introduce them to the experience of hearing this preacher. Mrs Chawner was very keen to hear him. Denson was sold in 1808 and Mr and Mrs Chawner and their two daughters moved to London. The family fell on hard times and Mr Chawner, broken-hearted moved away from the family and died shortly afterwards in Wolverhampton.



Mrs Chawner and the 2 girls attended the Tabernacle and heard John Hyatt preach, His ministry was “as balm to their wounded hearts”. Young Mary heard a lot about the needs for missionaries and she longed that God would call her to service in a special way. She met John Williams at the church and her hopes were realised. They were married in 1816.

The memoir describes her part in the work: “how often her patience and her wisdom, her strength of soul, and her spirit of self-sacrifice were put to severe strength.”

John Williams writing to Emma East (see below) has this to say about his wife Mary on their arrival on Upolu:

“The chief had a little plastered cottage about 20 feet long and 10 feet wide which he cheerfully gave to Mrs W and family. It was small and low and hot and inconvenient, but my really good wife who is very similar to your very good Mama, one who says little but does a great deal who has been accustomed all her life, at least her missionary life, to make shifts, put up with it very cheerfully until a larger and better house could be found.....” Such was Mary Williams amicable disposition but sometimes she became very anxious.....

Excerpt from Mary Williams’ diary:

Sabbath: Dec 2nd Dec 1832

“very heavy rain, with high wind and tremendous seas rolling up to the garden fence, and tremendous destruction to the house. The thought of my dear John being out during this tremendous hurricane is distressing beyond expression. I have thought it impossible for them to bear up against it; yet I seem to hear the promise “Is anything too hard for the Lord? I desire to place all my trust in Him”.

Friday: “11 weeks have now gone and no signs of his return. Lord increase my faith and patience. I would not doubt thy mercy. I now place my desire and all my confidence in my heavenly Father.”

Her role was largely with the women of the islands. She was proficient in language and held regular meetings for the women. She was particularly involved in helping the blind, the deaf, and lame elderly women. She had 2 classes a week with about 40 attending. There were special seats in church for them. She identified herself with them and they called her “mama” out of pure love for her person.

She left the South Seas in 1841 and arrived back in England in Oct 1842. She joined the church at Stepney, ministered to by the Revd. Dr. Joseph Fletcher. In July 1845 she moved to Islington: She died at 8.30pm on 15 June 1852 after a very painful illness, having seen her children to the last. The Memorial service was held at Islington Union Chapel.

Mention should be made of the friendship that existed between **the Revd Timothy East** and his family of Carrs Lane Birmingham and the Williams family. The Revd. East preached at the first service that John Williams attended at Whitefield Tabernacle. There are a number of letters in the archives of the LMS/CWM (Personal Correspondence) that reveal the affection that the families had for one another, including a late letter of Mary Williams. One of the last letters of John Williams’ life was to Emma, Timothy East’s daughter. It is dated November 14th 1839 written from the Camden near the New Hebrides. There is a full description of the Mission Station on the Navigators Islands: the delight that “Carry” – son John’s wife has brought to the family, fun over the large looking glass where 20 people can look at themselves, (“they grin, they stare, they laugh, they jump and dance...!”) Also there are the family portraits in the new house, and the amazing musical clock that plays 16 tunes, 8 of which are hymns. The letter describes bringing two cows from Rarotonga, guinea fowl and pigeons. He mentions the fact the son John has begun preaching having already mastered Samoan, and the joy of the Sunday School of 200 children. The East family over the years were most supportive of the mission in practical and caring ways. (*Full letter in typescript available*)

Family Details:

Rev John Williams: born 27th June 1796 died 20th Nov 1839

Mary Chawner: born Sept 29th 1795 died 15 June 1852

They were married October 1816

Children:

John Chawner Williams born 7th Jan 1818 died 9 Nov 1874

m. 1st: Caroline Nichols b 28th June 1820 died July 1853

m. 2nd Amelia Crook

Merchant and businessman, became British Consul in Samoa for 24 years, then went to South Africa.

Samuel Tamatoa Williams born 10 Apr 1826 d.?

m 1852 Hester Goodbody b. 17 Oct ? d. 3 Oct 1904

Congregational Minister finally serving at Hendon.

William Aaron Barff Williams born Feb 5 1833 died 5th Aug 1904

M Sara Goodbody b 17 Oct 1830 d. 30 May 1890

William was a stationer-printer at 55 Moorgate St, near the LMS headquarters in Bloomfield St. Did much of the printing for the LMS up to 1903.

and seven others who died in infancy

(family graves in graveyard Cote Bampton Oxon.)

Postscript 2:

The ships named after the John Williams:

A further study is required to give justice to the significant part the ships played in the history and life of the mission movement in the South Seas region. These vessels in many ways kept the name of John Williams alive, fittingly so, as during the whole of his missionary life he echoed the need for a ship to take missionaries round the islands. The ships became floating churches as well as conveyances for hundreds of families both local to the islands and wider afield.

The description of the arrival of the John Williams 1 to the island of Rarotonga is worth keeping on record as it reflects the warmth of affection in which all the boats were held over the following 125 years.

The date is 1845 Avarua 24th January.

“I cannot describe to you our feelings on the arrival of the splendid Missionary vessel the “John Williams”. It is just such a vessel as was wanted. Our people especially the young were much pleased to hear of the love and compassion of the children and young people of England for the poor heathen and a substantial proof of which they had now before them. We were glad to welcome the return of brother Heath and our young friends and fellow labourers who accompany him.....after our friends landed a consultation was held respecting our brother and sister Mr and Mrs Geo. Gill. We agreed they remain here until the return of the John Williams in 5 months hence. The weather was fine for their arrival and with help from the boats we got the greater part of the goods off the boat. In the night it began to rain and continued to do so for nearly a week and in such torrents as to make the roads impassable. For some days all the lands were covered with water. The vessel also had encountered some heavy squalls of wind, so much so that she was missing her jib boom but had sustained no further damage. Our people here are also doing their best for the Jubilee Fund.”

Aaron Buzacott

From the first ship in 1844, the link between the children of the churches in Britain was maintained. The start of the Pilots Movement through the LMS and the then Congregational Church in 1936 helped to sustain the interest in the ships. Pilots was modelled on life aboard a ship and still maintains those key elements. Companies also have a “voyage” once a year which helps the children learn more of the world church. Other children’s groups and Sunday schools throughout the years have maintained their links through “News from afar” – the children newsheet of the early years - and personal contact through special material written and collated to help children and leaders. In the course of this sabbatical project people have sent personal material and reminiscences of that partnership. As Pilots archivist, I will continue to maintain the materials that give evidence of this very active period in the life of the church.

I have put together two further items to help Pilots leaders sustain and communicate the story of John Williams and the ships.

A John Williams “Life Chart”

A Power-point presentation including script which can be used for adults and/or children.

Glyn Jenkins March 2005

“A Missionary was never designed by Jesus Christ to gather a congregation of a 100 or two natives and sit down at his ease, as if every sinner was converted.... For my part I cannot content myself within the narrow limits of a single reef.” (John Williams: Sept 30th 1823)

SABBATICAL DIARY Dec 27 2004 – 20 Mar 2005

Dec 27 – Jan 6	Sweden	<i>Reading and note taking</i>
Jan 11	Visit to SOAS	<i>Research</i>
Jan 13	Visit to SOAS	<i>Research</i>
Jan 18	Visit to SOAS	<i>Research</i>
Jan 25	Visit to SOAS	<i>Research</i>
Jan 30	Fly to LA	
Jan 31	Arrive in Rarotonga via Tahiti	<i>Visit Takamoa Theological Institute Meet the Director and students Shown round Mission House</i>
Feb 1	Avarua	<i>Research in library and its museum Enjoy a Cook Island Maori evening</i>
Feb 2	Visit Titikaveka & Ngatangiaa	<i>Research in Avarua library Located place where “Messenger of Peace” was built</i>
Feb 3	Tour of the island with the Wainwrights	<i>Meet Charles and Paddy Wainwright – descendent of John Williams; arrange to visit Aitutaki</i>
Feb 4	Visit new library and museum in Avarua – books bought at the University of the Pacific.	<i>Aitutaki visit cancelled because of the cyclone Meena approaching. Explore inland roads; Taro planting areas</i>
Feb 5	Take advice about the cyclone and decide to seek flight out (pm) Arrive Auckland 8pm	<i>Visit local market; Visited Roman Catholic Cathedral in Avarua. Called at Arorangi church and met previous minister’s widow.</i>
Feb 7-10	In Auckland 10 th fly to Christchurch	<i>Two visits to Museum seeing Maori and Pacific Island artefacts, Maori demonstration; Research in Museum archive library.</i>
Feb 10-12	In Christchurch	<i>Local visits at leisure</i>
Feb 12	Drive to Dunedin	
Feb 13	Dunedin	<i>First visit to Hocken Library and the John Williams Exhibition at the First Presbyterian Church. Evening visit to University Library to see microfiche of John Williams’ diary. Made copies of the journal.</i>
Feb 14	Dunedin	<i>Research on the Milne Papers at the Knox Theological College Archive. Visit to the Hocken Library for more research. Meet Huia and Ngaire Ockwell, friends who show us round the Dunedin Museum.</i>
Feb 15	Dunedin	<i>Research at the Hocken library – read the thesis of Elizabeth M Sinclair (1982) on “John Williams the Apostle of Polynesia” Visit Knox Presbyterian Church.</i>
Feb 16-20	Take scenic inland route to Queenstown, Arrowtown, Mt. Cook, Fairlie and on to Christchurch	<i>Sightseeing</i>
Feb 20-21	Return to London via LA	
Feb 22-Mar 10	Work at home	<i>Prepare John Williams Life Chart for Pilots; Set up Powerpoint Presentation for Pilots on the life of John Williams Start work on the structure and content of the final write up and theological reflections</i>
Mar 11	Visit to SOAS and “Pilots” desk	<i>Final Research & deliver items to URC</i>
Mar 12-18	Penrith	<i>Write up dissertation. Finalise.</i>

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