

“Planting Little Colonies in the South Seas”: The Making of a Missionary Empire

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We would like to begin by thanking both David Goodman for his initial support of faculty/student research and the Provost, Jim Lakso, for his continued assistance. Because of this support, Moira and I were able to visit a number of archives in London this summer to complete my research on evangelical missionaries in the London Missionary Society. The opportunity to conduct this type of collaborative faculty-undergraduate student research in the field of history is exceedingly rare. We were successful in finding the material I needed, and I intend, with the help of a sabbatical, to move forward on writing my book called *Faith in Empire*. I also wish to express my appreciation to Moira for all her help in the archives.¹



George Baxter, *Reception of Rev. J. Williams at Tahna, in the South Seas, the day before he was massacred*, wood engraving and etching printed in color, 1841, 8 1/4" x 12 1/2". Worth B. Stottlemeyer Collection, Juniata College Museum of Art.

Reproduced here is a print made by George Baxter in the middle of the nineteenth century. He was an English artist and printer who trained as a lithographer and an engraver. He developed a new process to produce color prints from blocks and plates using oil-based ink. His aim was to provide good, inexpensive prints for popular sale. He produced a great variety of prints which were very popular with evangelicals. This portrays the arrival of the missionary John Williams to an island in the Pacific. Baxter had never been there, so he used his imagination and information from missionaries who had worked in the region.

I am very excited about this print for a number of reasons related to my research, but also because we have this print in our Juniata College Museum. Recently, students chose it to go on permanent exhibition, beginning November 15. I would like to thank Dr. Jennifer Streb for her assistance in scanning this and other Baxter prints that are also holdings in our museum.

This presentation will be divided into three parts: first, I will introduce the topic and explain why it piqued my interest; then Moira and I will share our experience in London; and finally, Moira will talk about her own research.

I tell my students that history is at heart about telling stories, so I will begin with a story: In 1795, Thomas Haweis, a principal founder of the London Missionary Society (LMS), gave a sermon to over two hundred ministers in London to mark the formation of the Society. Haweis told his audience that a new world had opened up to Europeans in the Pacific region. He described the South Seas in fantastical terms, a place where food grew on trees, the weather was always perfect, and the people welcoming. He then went on to argue that the region was the perfect place for the missionary society to begin evangelizing overseas. He assured his audience that they were not to imagine he was “painting a fairy land,” but rather all that he told them was true.²

How did he know this? He had never been there and didn’t have a map of the region, but he had read books written by explorers, notably Captain James Cook’s *Journals*. He also had met and talked to William Bligh, the captain of *Mutiny on the Bounty* fame, on a number of occasions. Most importantly, Haweis personally knew Joseph Banks. In 1768, Banks had gone with Cook on his first voyage to the Pacific. By 1795, Banks was a highly respected and very well known naturalist. He was the President of the Royal Society and an advisor to the government on matters concerning Botany Bay, the penal colony established in 1788 in what is now Australia, where the British government was sending the “unwashed and unwanted.” Banks had a well-developed network of contacts across political, scientific, and commercial worlds, and he was a strong supporter of the new missionary society. At the time, the British government knew very little about the Pacific region, but there was some concern about growing French interest in the area.

What happened next? The Society sent a party of about seventeen missionaries and their wives to Tahiti. Most of them were skilled artisans in crafts such as weaving, carpentry, and shoemaking—not ordained ministers. The directors believed that viewing Christians leading useful and productive lives would serve as a religious inspiration to potential converts. Despite high expectations, this first attempt to establish an evangelical mission in the South Pacific was not a success. In part, this was because the directors of the Society, including Haweis, had no idea of the circumstances that missionaries would actually meet when they arrived. The group was very cut off from the outside world and quickly became short of food and supplies. In 1798, under pressure when four men in the mission were attacked and stripped naked by islanders, eleven withdrew to New South Wales. Several were eaten.

After this, for a while evangelizing in the South Seas went off the missionary map. By 1816, however, with thriving missions in southern Africa and Madagascar, the directors were ready to try again in the South Pacific. Learning from previous mistakes, the directors decided to reshape their approach. Instead of sending a diverse group of artisans to recreate an imagined English village life, the Society sent highly-motivated ordained missionaries, with instructions to identify and convert leaders who could help support the conversion of their people to Christianity. It was with these instructions that John Williams and his new wife set sail for Tahiti in 1816.³

Williams came from a working-class background, and he had worked as an ironmonger before he entered the ministry. He remained in the South Pacific for over twenty years. During that time, he became convinced that the best way for the Society to develop its mission was to also develop commerce across the islands and with the new penal colony in New South Wales. With his skill as an ironmonger, he built ships and eventually bought a schooner at Sydney. Moira and I discovered in the archives that he was often at odds with the directors in London, who were not totally comfortable with his commercial enterprises.

In 1834, Williams returned to London for a four-year furlough. He spent most of his time at home talking about his experiences in the South Pacific on an exhaustive schedule of public lectures and sermons organized by the directors. While it was common practice for the Society to raise funds this way, Williams became one of the missionary stars on the circuit, working so hard he complained that he was “almost worn out.” In 1837, he published his only book, *A Narrative of Missionary Enterprises in the South Sea Islands*. In his book, Williams provided his readers with extensive details about his trading ventures, his building of ships, and his work in the development of crops such as tobacco, sugar, hemp, and cotton. He then returned to the South Pacific, having become a well-known figure at home in Britain.

The following year, when visiting Erromango⁴—a small island in present-day Vanuatu—Williams was clubbed to death, along with another missionary, Harris. The islanders then ritualistically ate them both. This is how Baxter portrayed the attack.



George Baxter, *Massacre of the Lamented Missionary the Rev. J. Williams, and Mr. Harris*, wood engraving and etching printed in color, 1841, 8 1/2" x 12 1/2". Worth B. Stottlemeyer Collection, Juniata College Museum of Art

I hope that this story begins to explain why I am now so interested in missionaries. Historians are often weirdly passionate about what they do, but I never imagined when I went to graduate school that I would work for years on missionaries. Nevertheless, I have come to believe that missionaries were very important to the development of the British Empire, which is my primary interest. My first encounter with missionaries was not with this story, so what and where was it? It happened unexpectedly in the archives!

The first time I went into the archives, I knew I was interested in the British Empire, but everything else was still very amorphous. The boxes of material in the archive I was visiting were not properly organized or catalogued. As I was looking through a box, an image fell out—a very early photograph. There was very little information about it, except that it had been taken in Madagascar by a missionary—William Ellis—in the early 1850s. I was intrigued and began researching. What I discovered was that, in very early stages of expeditionary photography, the camera was used by Ellis in Madagascar to impress the rulers with western technology with the aim of persuading the Malagasy king to allow his subjects to convert. Ellis took the photographic images home and used them as the basis for illustrations

in his book called *Three Visits to Madagascar*. He argued in the book that if the people of Madagascar were Christianized, they would make excellent trading partners.

I continued to be interested and went sleuthing. I found in the archives of the book publishers several letters written by Ellis to the illustrator instructing him on how to copy the photographs for the book. Specifically, Ellis requested that the illustrator make the Malagasy look whiter. In fact, Ellis later complained they did not look white enough in the published text. I argued that this was because Ellis feared his arguments that the Malagasy would be excellent trading partners would be less credible to his readers if they looked black.

Sitting in the archives, reading the correspondence, I felt that Ellis was consciously re-fashioning knowledge about possible areas of empire for domestic consumption of a British audience. Importantly, his decisions were shaped by his desire to raise interest in and knowledge of the region and people.

Where did I go from here? To cut a long story short, my eventual manuscript argued that missionaries were important for creating an imperial culture in Britain in the early nineteenth century.⁵ This was at a time when even the British government had no clear idea what developing the empire in Africa and the Pacific could mean for British political and mercantile interests. Missionary activities spread knowledge and gave moral imperative to the idea of empire, helping to lay the foundation for the rapid growth of empire toward the end of the nineteenth century.

The British Empire is often imagined as monolithic. In fact, there were a number of periods of crisis. For my purposes, the most important crisis followed that disrespect for tea that happened over here—and the loss of the American colonies! This was followed in Britain by intense debates about the value of empire, and there was great concern over the cost and deep ambivalence towards empire in Britain, both among the general public and at the governmental level. The questions at the time were: Why have empire? What was the value of empire?

My argument is that the missionaries at the end of the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries helped supply the answers to these questions. And to do so, they reached out to two important constituencies in Britain: first, the commercial interests, important as trade, that had been central to the empire since the sixteenth century; and second, humanitarian concerns that at the time were largely being expressed through the abolition movement—a highly organized movement. However, the question remains: Why were missionaries credible at the time?

They were seen as credible because they presented themselves as valuable resources who could provide useful information to policy makers. They had lived overseas for many years, so they were more than just passing eyewitnesses. Remember, this is before organizations like the Royal Geographic Society were formed (1830), so in this period there was no organized exploration. Despite frequent disclaimers from missionaries that it was antithetical to their religion to actively engage in politics—that it was

treading on “unhallowed ground”—my research highlights that they took advantage of any access that they had to the corridors of power at Westminster.

Why did I need to go to London? My earlier research had looked at the mission fields of southern Africa and Madagascar, and a reviewer had advised me to also look at missionaries working in the Pacific region. I was somewhat daunted by the idea—a lot of water and I don’t swim. I also needed to study a whole new historiography, the scholarly literature, but I soon became convinced it would help me corroborate my argument. I spent my free time during the last few years doing any research I could on this side of the pond, and then, with the help of the Goodman, Moira and I went to London.

We arrived at the same time the country was celebrating the Queen’s Jubilee. This meant the archives were closed, and then Prime Minister David Cameron declared an extra day of holiday, meaning the archives were closed for four days. However, the museums were open, and since Moira’s Program of Emphasis is Museum Studies, we had always intended to visit a number of museums together. We stayed at Goodenough College, which is a post-graduate residence situated in central London, by Russell Square. The food was reasonable; the showers were dreadful.

Moira Mackay: There were Union Jacks all over the city; it was extremely festive. I think it skewed my vision of London while we were there. I don’t think they’re really that into “being British” all the time.

Alison Fletcher: We walked all over London, and we visited a number of museums.

Mackay: Yes, we did. And, since the jubilee was going on and Alison was doing a lot of work, I went around and enjoyed the festivities that they had for the jubilee and experienced the excitement, which included the ship flotilla down the river Thames. We stood for four hours in the rain to see the Royal Family coming out of St. Paul’s Cathedral, and there were lots of international food markets.

Fletcher: The first archive we visited was the British Library. The library moved to a new building in 1997. When it was being built, Prince Charles referred to it as a “monstrous carbuncle on the face of a much loved and elegant friend.”

Mackay: And that’s the first thing you said to me as we walked up to it!

Fletcher: My earlier research had also been in the British Library when it was still situated in the British Museum. I loved working there because there was a real sense of history in the old British Library—everybody knew, for instance, where Karl Marx had sat—although it didn’t have good climate control, so in the summer you sweated along with the precious books you were trying to read. The new library is actually a good place to research. However, there were challenges with working together in the archives.

Mackay: When you arrived, you put your belongings in lockers. You aren’t allowed to bring food, beverage, pens, or even bags into the archives. We had to use clear plastic bags so they could see if

you were stealing things. In the morning, when the library opened there was always a mad gallop to get to the lockers, with all these well-dressed and supposedly well-behaved scholars trying to shove their way in to get the best seats. You would see bags and coffee cups strewn everywhere, and by the end of the day you'd have everything in unorganized piles, with people trying to get out. It was pretty funny to watch, actually.

Fletcher: At the time, Moira said they were behaving like children!

Mackay: When we first got to the reading rooms, it was really unlike anything I had ever done. The library has a computerized system, and Alison was very patient with my learning process of trying to figure out the computer system, ordering books, then picking them up. The staff was helpful if you had questions. Sometimes, the orders wouldn't go through, and we would have to spend a long process talking to the archivists. But after you got the hang of it, it was pretty easy to get into the swing of things. It was a good mix of people—you had everything from students and scholars to just regular people. The food enforcement was a little odd. It's weird not being able to have coffee in a library.

Fletcher: No pens, no photographs. I think one of the things we found hardest was how to communicate. Since you're not allowed to talk, it was quite difficult at times to know what you should be transcribing, what was important, and what wasn't. We took to passing notes back and forth on Moira's pad—do you still have it?

Mackay: Yes, yes I do.

Fletcher: When I go to into the archives, I'm driven and very focused. With Moira with me, I needed to slow down and think about the steps I was taking. I had to be a teacher as well as a researcher. In fact, that was really very valuable for me, because it made me consider more deeply what I was thinking, doing, and trying to find in the library. We spent quite a bit of time in the British Library, but we went to different kinds of archives, because my material was held in a number of places and also because I wanted Moira to experience how archives work in a range of ways—they're all very different. So then we went to the School of Oriental and African Studies, which was seven minutes from where we were staying. It is usually called SOAS.

Mackay: I really liked this archive. It is much smaller, only one room—maybe smaller than Neff Lecture Hall. It was very personable, so by the second day, we had gotten to know the archivist. It worked pretty much the same way, but without the computer system. You would write what you needed, hand them the slip, and they would get you the materials. It was an extremely comfortable working environment.

Fletcher: Much of the material we were accessing were letters, which had been written around 1815 by missionaries who were very far from home. One of the things they'd do when they ran out of paper was they would crosshatch—that is, they would turn the paper around and write the other way. It

becomes very difficult to read.

Mackay: The archivists at SOAS were pretty well-organized. They had lists of everything that was in a box, and as long as they had not been moved out of order, the system was easy to understand. Handwriting was a challenge—it was the first time I had worked with anything like this. Sometimes, it was hard to tell who the author was, and dates at the top were often missing or even ripped off, so they were difficult to read and understand. The writer that I had the hardest time with was Joseph Banks. He had really impossible handwriting. I'd write out a sentence and think it was all right, and then Alison would look it over and completely rewrite it. I still don't understand how she could read certain words.

Fletcher: We spent a large part of one morning transcribing one of his letters, only to discover that he was declining a dinner invitation because his wife has already accepted another one. This highlights one of the frustrations of working in the archives. The letter was very difficult to decipher, and once we had worked out what Banks meant, it was clear that it was of no use to my particular research. If I were writing about Joseph Banks as his biographer, it would tell me something about his relationship with his wife, but since I wasn't, it was of no direct use to my work. After working at SOAS, we went to the National Archives.

Mackay: I really disliked working in this archive. The archivists felt more like guards; it had a heightened security detail and was very impersonal. They would put the material you wanted in a box cubby and you would take it from there, so there was no human interaction whatsoever.

Fletcher: This is where the Colonial Office and the Admiralty records are held, so of course, I loved being there! Not that I am disagreeing with Moira—it isn't a relaxing or pleasant place to do research in, but I found some amazing material. I'm just going to show you some short quotes. This is from Joseph Banks to John Sullivan, Secretary of State in 1802:

Letter from Joseph Banks to John Sullivan, Secretary of State, Downing Street. July 24, 1802.

I wish much to have had some conversation with you on the subject of the wishes of my eclectic friends who wish to send person [sic] out to all parts of the globe in order to preach the Christian religion & who will in my opinion with a very little assistance from Government plant little colonies in all places in the South Seas where British ships may wish to touch of men who will teach the natives the rudiments of civilization and serve as council to British Captains when they wish to purchase provisions and in all likelihood discover sources of commercial enterprise of which we have no idea.⁶

You can see why I was excited to find this letter, and of course my title, “Plant Little Colonies,” comes from this source.

I also went through other records and discovered that when John Williams was in Britain on furlough, he had written letters to every possible person in government he could, including a very long letter to Lord Melbourne, who was Prime Minister at the time. I will just share with you a few quotes:

“Having been nearly Twenty Years engaged in imparting the benefits of Christian knowledge and civilization to the untutored tribes in that part of the world, I would beg permission to point out to your Lordship the National benefits that have arisen to our own country from my labours.” He goes on to give details of three specific advantages:

First, to the Commerce of our Country. A few years ago the inhabitants of the islands were naked savages and knew neither us or our commerce and now, at the lowest computation upwards of a hundred thousand of these very persons are wearing and using articles of British manufacture. And these new channels have been opened up for the streams of British commerce to flow in and these are widening and deepening every year.

Secondly, to the geographical knowledge of our country. In addition to the correct knowledge already obtained respecting places previously known, by which navigation in those parts has become far less dangerous, I have the honour to inform your Lordship, that I have myself discovered three islands previously unknown to Europeans and know of the existence of two other groups that have not yet been visited by British shipping.

Thirdly, to the shipping interests of our Country. One fact, my Lord, shall suffice. At the island of Rarotonga 21.20 S. L. 160 M. L [I think these are correct] discovered by myself no less than Twenty seven sail of shipping touched last year and altogether upwards of one hundred sail visit annually one or other of our missionary stations. The commodious harbours, to which a few years ago the ferocity of the inhabitants presented a barrier, can now be entered with perfect security: exhausted crews can recruit their strength by roaming at pleasure on the shores, provisions can be obtained and vessels refitted just as in the ports of our own country.⁷

As you can see, Williams is presenting himself as a knowledgeable and valuable resource who is providing useful information to the British government about commercial and imperial interests.

Mackay: The final archive we visited together was the newspaper archive. This is part of the British Library and I enjoyed working there. They had giant portfolios of newspapers that contained special tables you could flip through. It was the first time I had worked with microfiche, which is a challenge, but interesting. It was a good experience.

Fletcher: After working with me on missionaries, Moira was ready to research on her own, as a historian.

Mackay: Alison gave me a lot of time for my own research when we were in the British Public Library. When I arrived in London, I still had no idea on what topic I wanted to do my senior research. I had a vague sort of idea that I wanted to research a topic on Britain in the nineteenth century—a rather broad topic! We spent a lot of evenings talking it over, and then I would go into the library and read some primary sources on various topics. Alison would point me in the direction of secondary sources and help me narrow my focus. I was looking through Chartism and the British abolition of the slave trade, and I kept stumbling upon one name—Anne Knight. She just kept popping up in anecdotes. As time went on, I finally decided to start looking into Knight. I found out that there are barely any secondary sources on her, but I did find that the majority of the primary sources were located right next to the British Public Library at Friends House. Anne Knight was a Quaker and there are only two known photographs of her. One was taken very late in her life, with her holding a sign that reads: “By tortured millions / By the Divine

Redeemer / Enfranchise Humanity / Bid the Outraged World / BE FREE.” Knight was an avid and rather ferocious supporter of abolition, Chartism, the enfranchisement of the working class, and later on, women’s rights. She was also a fierce advocate of utopian societies, which made her a bit different from other reformers.

Working at Friend’s House was really nice; it was extremely small—smaller than SOAS. When I arrived, I was not even sure if I was supposed to be there, but the archivist was very helpful: she got me a card, got me started. They are barely computerized; it was all card catalogues, boxes and binders. The archivists had no idea what kind of letters they had, so I just dived into a box. I found a letter to Anne Knight from her sister—only one of her five sisters was married, the rest were spinsters, and the entire family was active in abolition and other reform causes. There was a letter to a friend in France. At the end of her life, Knight moved to live in France where she continued supporting women’s rights and utopian societies. This means the great majority of her letters and almost all of her political journal were in French. I was lucky to have spent the last year in France studying French, so I was able to translate some of it.

I think the Goodman grant provided me with an amazing opportunity. It helped me learn to appreciate what being a historian could be and is, as well as the process of research. I learned about how to narrow down a topic and eventually track down primary and secondary sources. Overall, it helped me understand what career goals I was pursuing. Without this experience and without Alison’s guidance, I’m not sure how my senior thesis would have worked out. Instead, I felt better prepared to come back for senior year and write my thesis.

Fletcher: I want to return for a few minutes to John Williams. His death gave him the status of a martyr in Britain. It increased rather than discouraged missionary efforts in the South Pacific. From the earliest days of Christianity, martyrdom has been seen as a transfiguring event that inspired believers and gained converts. In practice, this meant that Williams’s death authorized the Society to celebrate the South Seas as a place of hope and success, rather than of failure. Although it sounds paradoxical, this is what happened. Furthermore, his arguments that trade would only prosper once Christianity had spread across the Pacific gained credibility because his death had been at the hands of non-believers. His martyrdom added considerably to his book sales. The directors commissioned Baxter to produce a series of prints depicting his death, which became very popular.

In 1844, after John Williams’s death, British Sunday school children raised the money to purchase a ship called the *John Williams* for missionary work in the Pacific. It was the first of seven ships to bear his name; the last was only decommissioned in 1968.

After Williams’s death, it was many years before European missionaries returned to Vanuatu, although they eventually did. Today, over 80% of the population is Christian. The memory of what

happened to Williams lived on in Britain, but interestingly, his death also lived on in cultural memory in the islands. A few years ago, at the request of islanders living on Erromango, there was a reconciliation ceremony. One hundred and seventy years after Williams died, his descendants were invited to take part in this reconciliation, and about eighteen made the journey. During a day of ceremonies, the community re-enacted the killings, and the descendants of those responsible for the death of Williams asked the family for forgiveness. In return, the Williams family agreed to be responsible for the education of a seven-year-old girl, who was ceremonially handed over to them in exchange for the loss of John Williams.

As a final act of contrition, the islanders announced that the bay where he was killed, then known as Dillons Bay, would be renamed Williams Bay as a mark of respect and reconciliation.

NOTES

1. This material was first presented as an informal talk to highlight the possibilities and challenges of working with a student in the archives. This published article retains that informal character.
2. Thomas Haweis, "The Very Probable Success of a Proper Mission to the South Sea Islands." *Evangelical Magazine*, (1795): 261-270.
3. There is an extensive scholarship on evangelical missionaries in the Pacific. See for example Neil Gunson, *Messengers of Grace: Evangelical Missionaries in the South Seas 1797-1860* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978).
4. The missionaries at the time called the island Erromanga.
5. Alison Fletcher, "With my Precious Salvation and My Umbrella": the London Missionary Society and the Making of Empire in early Victorian Britain, (PhD thesis, The Johns Hopkins University, 2003).
6. CO 201/24: 39. Letter from Joseph Banks to John Sullivan, July 24, 1802.
7. CO 201/268. Letter from John Williams to Lord Melbourne, August 4, 1837.