Mission and the Margins

A margin is the blank border of a printed page. To be marginal is to be of the edge, neither central nor significant. Some 150 million human beings officially qualified as “migrants,” of which an estimated 20 million were refugees, according to United Nations figures for 2002. Such ciphers mask the angst of social dislocation—with its attendant miseries, humiliations, and dangers—endured by specific individuals, each with a name, a story, and modest hopes. Refugees are on the margins of the marginalized, significant only to the extent that they constitute an inconvenience or a security threat to their comfortably incumbent host populations.

In his lead article, Jehu Hanciles explores the impact of migration on church and mission, arguing that the Christian faith depends for its survival upon cross-cultural diffusion—one of the inevitable side effects of population dislocation. Lalsangkima Pachuau’s wonderfully informative study takes a close look at some of the most vital churches in the world, whose combined membership represents nearly a quarter of India’s Christian population. Inhabiting the disdained edges of mainstream Hindu society, the peoples of Northeast India have affirmed and grounded their indigenous identities by embracing an extraordinarily missional Christianity.

In Great Britain, as elsewhere in Christendom’s traditional heartlands, a once confident establishment church, having atrophied into a spiritually enfeebled, demographically decimated, and missiologically tentative vestige of its former self, now struggles to survive. Although it has paid scant official attention to its missionary fringes in the past, its renewal—if there is renewal—may spring from these now vital margins, according to Kenneth Ross in his article “Blessed Reflex.”

The essays in this issue remind us that the universe is not like a two-dimensional sheet of paper. Seeing merely the surface of things, we humans necessarily invent and employ terms that reflect this limitation. But the mysterious verity embedded in our moral universe is that those on the outer edges of human cognitive maps are at the center of God’s modus operandi. God’s multidimensional perspective places human margins—even religious ones, as Jacques Dupuis suggests—at the center of divine significance. The One whose memory “Christianity” evokes was himself profoundly dispossessed. Born into the ethnic fringes of a powerful empire, he found himself on its margins. He annoyed, provoked, and was finally dispatched by custodians of the status quo. His coterie comprised mostly people with neither pedigree nor the capacity to make a mark on human history. The humble, his mother had sung, would be exalted; the meek, he had claimed, would inherit the earth.

And truly, it was and is such men and women who, acutely conscious that “here we have no lasting city,” have turned the world upside down. This issue of the IBMR reflects that reality.

On Page

146 Mission and Migration: Some Implications for the Twenty-first-Century Church
Jehu J. Hanciles

154 Church-Mission Dynamics in Northeast India
Lalsangkima Pachuau

162 “Blessed Reflex”: Mission as God’s Spiral of Renewal
Kenneth R. Ross

164 Noteworthy

168 My Pilgrimage in Mission
Jacques Dupuis, S.J.

171 The Legacy of Henry Robert Codrington
Allan K. Davidson

177 Book Reviews

187 Dissertation Notices

188 Index, 2003

192 Book Notes

of Missionary Research
engage in it seriously who had not been exposed at length to the concrete reality of the other religious traditions and of the religious life of their followers.

The danger is often expressed that the practice of interreligious dialogue and, even more, the new theology of religions that is in the making is detrimental to Christian faith and risks leading to doctrinal relativism and indifferentism. Some want to reaffirm the “Christian identity” against such imminent dangers. The objection comes from people who have never been in serious contact with the reality of other religions or even met persons who practice them sincerely and profoundly. Those who, on the contrary, have made the effort at a true and sincere encounter with others have had their faith strengthened in the process and deepened by the experience. I would count myself among this number, in more than one way. To begin with, the shock of the encounter forces us to rethink various prejudices and exclusivist positions, as though God had revealed himself and was present only in the Judeo-Christian tradition. A purification of the faith is necessary to divest it from preconceived ideas. There can also ensue a simplification and an enrichment of the faith, which will reach fuller maturity. Enrichment, I say: Through the experience and testimony of the others, Christians will be able to discover at greater depth certain aspects, certain dimensions, of the divine Mystery that they had perceived less clearly and that have been communicated less clearly by Christian tradition. Purification, at the same time: The shock of the encounter will often raise questions, force Christians to revise gratuitous assumptions and to destroy deep-rooted prejudices or overthrow certain overly narrow conceptions and outlooks. I may testify that my own faith has been purified and deepened through the process of dialogue and familiarity with the religions and their members.

It is in this perspective that my books find their place. The challenge consists in asking whether and how Christian faith in Jesus Christ the universal Savior is compatible with the affirmation of a positive role of the other religions for the salvation of their members, in accordance with the one salvific plan designed by God for the whole of humankind. I, among others, give a positive answer to the question and build my argument on data from both the revealed Word of God and the Christian tradition. Not all theologians, however, are disposed to agree with such a positive assessment of the religions of the world. Nor has the church’s central doctrinal authority welcomed the thesis without expressing strong reservations, as illustrated by the discussions and the controversy generated by my 1997 book Toward a Christian Theology of Religious Pluralism. Yet I remain persuaded that the thesis of this book is important to the church for the exercise of its mission to the world, and to the world itself, in this age of universal dialogue among peoples, cultures, and religions. The church is duty bound to recognize in a spirit of gratitude to God the divine endowments enshrined in the other religious traditions, even as it is bound to proclaim to the world what God has done in a decisive manner for humankind in Jesus Christ.

The Legacy of Robert Henry Codrington

Allan K. Davidson

In the preface to his book The Melanesians: Studies in their Anthropology and Folk-Lore (1891), Robert Codrington wrote, “One of the first duties of a missionary is to try to understand the people among whom he works.” He himself reflected a deep commitment to this value. Over his many years with the Melanesian people, he gained a deep knowledge of their society, languages, and customs through a close association with them. Codrington was careful, however, in making claims about his understanding, quoting with approval the words of the Methodist missionary Lorimer Fison: “When a European has been living for two or three years among savages he is sure to be fully convinced that he knows all about them; when he has been ten years or so amongst them, if he be an observant man, he finds that he knows very little about them, and so begins to learn.”

Codrington and the Melanesian Mission

Codrington was born in 1830 in Wroughton, Wiltshire, England; both his father and his paternal grandfather were Anglican clergymen. Codrington attended Charterhouse from 1845 to 1848 and then Wadham College, Oxford, graduating with a B.A. in 1852 and an M.A. in 1856. He was elected to a fellowship at Wadham, which he held from 1855 to 1893. Ordained a deacon in 1855 and priest in 1857, he served as a curate to Edmund Hobhouse in Oxford. Hobhouse became the first bishop of Nelson (New Zealand), and Codrington followed him out to New Zealand, serving at Collingwood for eighteen months from 1860 to 1861 and then at Waimea. Codrington was a moderate High Churchman. He was not impressed with colonial society and found himself very much at home working in the Melanesian Mission. Codrington was not an ambitious man, declining both the post of bishop of Dunedin and the missionary bishopric of Melanesia after Patteson’s death.

The Melanesian Mission, inaugurated in 1849 by the Anglican bishop of New Zealand, George Augustus Selwyn, was unique in its missionary approach. The mission “was a mixture of pragmatism, given . . . [Selwyn’s] inadequate financial and human resources, and romantic idealism associated with his vision,” which was “to make my diocese the great missionary center of the Southern Ocean.” Working in the Solomon Islands and the northern islands of what is now known as Vanuatu, Selwyn recruited young men and later young women to come back to New Zealand for training, with the hope that when they returned home, they would become evangelists among their own people. From the outset the mission took a positive approach to Melanesians and their society. Selwyn rejected the evangelical language and attitude of his age, which condemned people as “vile,” “poor heathen,” or “perishing savages.” John Coleridge Patteson, who was consecrated as the first missionary bishop of Melanesia in 1861, built on this approach, writing that “every single man, because he is a man, is a partaker of that

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While the Melanesian Mission represented a creative and innovative approach to mission, it had its limitations. Faced with the huge diversity of languages in Melanesia, it opted to use Mota, a language used in the Banks Group, as a common language. For many Melanesian students, Christianity was thus conveyed through the medium of a second language. The use of the Book of Common Prayer and the adoption of Anglican patterns of ministry brought their own impositions. The model of schooling adopted, first in Auckland, and then from 1867 at Norfolk Island, introduced Melanesians to a formal approach to education, which contrasted with their own informal methods.7 Codrington served as headmaster of the Melanesian Mission school on Norfolk Island from 1867 to 1887.

The transfer of the mission headquarters to Norfolk Island in 1867 was undertaken in order to reduce the distance between the Melanesian islands and the mission base, as well as to escape the colder Auckland climate. Initially Codrington thought of his removal as going into exile, reporting, “I feel that this place is uncomfortably remote from the world.”8 He likened the community at Norfolk to “those ancient monasteries in the N. of England or in Germany you may read of where there is a good deal of quietness,” with Sunday being “kept without work.” But Codrington concluded, with a touch of gentle humor, that “the most wonderful thing about heathen savages is that they are so quiet while,” although it might be “nominally so in a very short time.”

Codrington took his fair share in the running of the institution. “Somehow,” he wrote in 1869, “I never have time for anything now being chief cook, having 23 pupils, and a pupil teacher to coach up, and the younger clergy also twice a week.” He frequently complained of not being able to find time to read.

Codrington’s letters helped fuel public outrage over the labor traffic.

Although he had been offered a parish in England in 1869, he had no desire to leave Norfolk Island, as “one certainly gets attached to the people[,] a little to the place but not much.” On top of his teaching responsibilities Codrington designed the dining hall, which seated 140, acquainted himself with printing, taught some students to play the harmonium, and made wedding rings for the Melanesian brides and plum puddings for the community wedding breakfasts! In addition he experimented with photography, sketched when he could, and enjoyed gardening.

When Bishop Patteson was killed in 1871, Codrington became head of the mission, a post he held until J. R. Selwyn was consecrated in 1877. This position added considerably to Codrington’s administrative responsibilities. In one letter he mentioned having received seventy letters and written thirty-five in reply, along with a report.14 Another burden was the oversight of the building of St. Barnabas’s Chapel, which well-wishers in England saw as a fitting memorial to Bishop Patteson. Codrington entered into a lengthy correspondence over the inappropriateness of the first plans sent from England and the problems with hiring stonemasons and carpenters on Norfolk Island. With no one available to carve the caps and bases for the marble shafts, Codrington set about the task himself, writing, “I never tried to carve stone & am afraid. Besides I have so little time.” He was not impressed that Patteson’s cousin and biographer, the novelist Charlotte Yonge, decided to donate a pipe organ for the chapel, “which we don’t want & which will ruin us to get here & make a place for it, and after all will be but seldom used at the best, and probably never really used up to its capabilities.”

There are few reflections in Codrington’s letters about the underlying purpose of the mission, apart from vague references to people being “Christianized.” Conversion for Codrington was seen in terms of changes in people’s way of life. After two weeks’ residence at Mota, where George Sarawia, the first Melanesian deacon, worked, Codrington reflected that “the great fact is that there is now a native missionary among his own countrymen, who can well be trusted to teach them sensibly and according to native ideas.” He did not expect the island to “be Christian yet awhile,” although it might be “nominally so in a very short time.” Christianity was understood on Mota in terms of “peace & quietness,” with Sunday being “kept without work.” But Codrington concluded, with a touch of gentle humor, that “the most wonderful thing about heathen savages is that they are so quiet while”...
necessary to do any more translation into Mota,” preferring to begin work in one of the Solomon Island languages.23 In 1898, while he was translating the Prophecies, he complained, “I am not altogether in favor of translating obscure passages & parts of the scripture until a fair number of natives can make something out of them. . . . In a mission with a great number of tongues, I shd think it better to get the New Test. complete in ten of them, before getting the Old Test. complete in one."24

While Mota was the common language, students were grouped with missionaries, who were encouraged to learn languages from different areas in Melanesia. Codrington endorsed Patteson’s approach, believing that Melanesians “must teach their countrymen in their own tongue, and by their own tongue they must be taught.” In the same way the layperson “must be preached to in his own language, and in his own language he ought to pray.”25

Patteson gained a reputation as a prodigious linguist and shared some of his early work on Melanesian languages with Friedrich Max Müller, the noted Oxford Sanskrit scholar and linguist. In 1865 Müller encouraged Patteson to make a systematic study of Melanesian languages, arguing that “savage languages alone can show how far languages can change.” He sent to Patteson, via Codrington, who was visiting England, Edward Tylor’s recently published Researches into the early history of mankind and the development of civilization (1865), along with his own review of it. Müller suggested, “It will show you how valuable accurate, trustworthy observations of the habits of savages are for many important inquiries.”26

Patteson, who was too preoccupied with the demands of overseeing the mission to undertake detailed philological studies, encouraged Codrington to engage in linguistic work. Conversion for Codrington could be seen in changes in people’s way of life.

Codrington’s researches culminated in The Melanesian Languages, published in 1885. In the same year he was awarded an honorary D.D. from Oxford. Codrington included in his book a comparative examination of seventy words in forty Melanesian languages and the study of the grammar of thirty-five different languages. Most of his research was carried out among the students at Norfolk Island “by the medium generally of the Mota language” and reflected the contacts they provided him with the central Melanesia societies.27 It was a notable achievement, given the heavy demands placed on him.

Codrington was faced with trying to understand both the bewildering multiplicity of languages in Melanesia and the physical and cultural diversity among the peoples. In a lengthy letter in 1874 to the German anthropologist Georg Gerland, he identified what he called “possibly [a] modern Polynesian element” or “pure Polynesians” living at places like Bellona, Tikopia, and Nukapu within the Melanesian area. He noted considerable difference between “the Banks’ islanders and New Hebrides people” when compared with those living in the Solomon Islands. In distinguishing people, he referred to practices prevalent in some areas such as head-hunting and “native art and industry.” Codrington distinguished between Melanesians in the Solomon and Santa Cruz’s groups who chewed betel nut and those to the east who drank kava. He identified two major language groups, the Melanesian tongues, which were marked by considerable differentiation but with “a general unity of language at bottom,” and the Polynesian languages, which were “characterized by unchangeableness” or similarity.28 The recognition of two major language families in Melanesia—what are now called the Austronesian (the Polynesian languages) and the non-Austronesian (or the older Melanesian languages)—fits in well with later philological understanding.29

George W. Stocking has indicated that although Codrington was in touch with “evolutionary anthropology” through his contacts with Edward Tylor, whose lectures he attended in Oxford in 1883, Codrington “never really became a convert to evolutionism.”30 Codrington was no armchair theorist like Müller, Tylor, and Gerland, with whom he corresponded. Before field-based anthropology and its development as a professional academic discipline, missionaries were among the best informants regarding other peoples, their cultures, and their languages. Missionaries’ long-term residence and their commitment to learning people’s languages made them participant-observers in societies and cultures that they were seeking to modify. Codrington was among the most accomplished of the nineteenth-century missionary scholars who contributed significantly to the early growth of anthropology through their ethnographic and philological researches.31

Pioneering Anthropological Insights

In The Melanesians, which was his major contribution to anthropology, Codrington indicated that his approach was “as far as possible to give the natives’ account of themselves by giving what I took down from their lips and translating what they wrote themselves.”32 The adoption of an evolutionary framework and use of social Darwinism by anthropologists led them to see gradations among people from savagery to civilization, with inherently racist overtones. Codrington avoided these conclusions, retaining a positive approach to Melanesians. Referring to a book by Edward Tylor, Codrington noted that he “gives credit most deservedly as most people don’t, to savages for having plenty of brains. He quite confirms what I always have said that savages are wonderfully like other people.”33 Following his reading of John Lubbock’s Origin of Civilization and the Primitive Condition of Man (1870), Codrington concluded that “the savages of the scientific man receed [sic] farther and farther from my experience, and my belief is that if you could get the evidence of people who really know and live with those savages who are considered the lowest[,] you would find that the savages of the very low type does not exist in the world.”34

Codrington was critical of the armchair theorists, complaining that “scientific men fit their evidence to preconceived ideas of what savages ought to be.”35 While he thought Julius Brenchley’s “general views are good” in his travelogue about the Pacific, Codrington described it as “one other example . . . of what I find everywhere that a traveller puts his own notions into the actions or work of savages and then the philosophers at home quote him as an authority.”36 Codrington was open to acknowledging his own biases and was conscious of the difficulties an outsider had in trying to understand a society and people different from himself, describing how “every one, missionary and visitor, carries with him some preconceived ideas; he expects to see idols, and he sees them. . . . It is extremely difficult for any one to begin enquiries without some prepossessions, which, even if he can communicate with the natives in their own language, affect his conception of the meaning of the answers he receives. The
questions he puts guide the native to the answer he thinks he
ought to give.”37

The Melanesians was a considerable achievement of scholar-
ship. Codrington describes in great detail, with multiple ex-
amples from the different areas familiar to him, Melanesian
social regulations and behavior, religious and spiritual dimen-
sions, the stages of life and rites of passage, material aspects,
dances, music, and games. The significance of Codrington’s
work lay both in his descriptions and in his development of his
own theoretical framework.

The most influential contribution Codrington made to an-
thropology was in his identifying “the belief in a supernatural
power or influence, called almost universally mana.” In a foot-
note Codrington refers to a quotation that Müller makes in his
1878 Hibbert Lectures drawn from one of Codrington’s letters, in
which Codrington described mana: “There is a belief in a force
altogether distinct from physical power, which acts in all kinds
of ways for good and evil, and which it is of the greatest
advantage to possess or control. This is Mana.”38 Mana for
Codrington was “that invisible power which is believed by the
natives to cause all such effects as transcend their conception of
the regular course of nature, and to reside in spiritual beings.”
This power could be used negatively or positively, making “rain
or sunshine, wind or calm, to cause sickness or remove it, to know
what is far off in time and space, to bring good luck and prosper-
ity, or to blast and curse.” Mana is something a person has; it
can be gained, increased, or lost.39 The effect of mana, Codrington
wrote, lay in people’s belief in the efficacy of the prayers, offer-
ings, charms, and rituals used to convey and acquire it, shrewdly
observing that “it is not only in Melanesian islands that whatever
confirms a belief is accepted and whatever makes against it is not
weighed.”40

What Codrington does not explore is how far Christianity
was seen as offering access to a new form of mana. Certainly the
confusion between the Christian Gospel (i.e., the message) and
the cultures brought by the missionaries (the medium, particu-
larly their material possessions) created considerable confusion
as Melanesians sought the mana of the new teaching in order to
acquire the mana of the material goods that would give them
increased status in their own society. Melanesian cargo cults
must be understood within the conceptual framework of the
Melanesian world, which Codrington began in his work to
reveal. Darrell Whiteman, making a “crude paraphrase” of
Codrington, indicated that “‘without mana there is no salvation;’
salvation, of course, being an abundance and success in all the
possibilities of human life.”41

The lasting value of Codrington’s work was in drawing from
firsthand informants and from his own experience in the islands
insights into Melanesian life and customs and placing them in a
coherent interpretative framework. As Whiteman observed,
however, “Western scholars, including Codrington, have made
far more of it [mana] philosophically and intellectually than
would Melanesians,” to whom “mana is related to results ob-
tained, and not to an abstract concept upon which is hung a
philosophical argument.”42

The Missionary Approach to Melanesia

Building on the foundations of Selwyn and Patteson, Codrington
developed an approach to Melanesian society and missionary
work that others were to extend. Walter Ivens and Charles Fox
stood in the Codrington missionary/scholar tradition. Fox wrote
of Codrington that he had “a great reputation as a philologist and
anthropologist far beyond Melanesia…. In deep insight, sound
judgment and at the same time originality of ideas he stands very
high.”43 The Selwyn-Patteson-Codrington approach encouraged
a form of “inculturation” of Christianity in the Melanesian
Mission before the word was coined, although that inculturation
had distinctive Anglican characteristics.44 The missionary strat-
egy of bringing young people to Norfolk Island, however, did
not result in the rapid evangelization of their home islands.45

Sara Sohmer has identified the intellectual background and
missionary approach of the Melanesian Mission that contrib-
uted to its nonjudgmental approach to Melanesian society in the
nineteenth century.46 Codrington can be identified as sharing
these factors. He was not only open to the “new developments in
philology, ethnology and comparative mythology” but en-
gaged in the “careful examination of sources,” was willing “to
utilize different types of evidence,” and had “an enlarged sense of
historical time and a strong preference for the comparative.”
For Codrington, “the universality of Christianity formed both its
greatest innovation and the theological basis of mission.”47

In 1887 Codrington retired from the mission, returning for a
brief period in 1892, when he worked with John Palmer in
producing a Mota dictionary. He was a vicar of Wadhurst in the
Diocese of Chichester from 1887 to 1893, a prebendary of Chichester
Cathedral from 1888 to 1895, and served for twenty-five years as a lecturer at Chichester Theological College.48 In
1902 he delivered the Wittering Lectures at the cathedral on the
presentation of Christianity to “savage” peoples. His last major
publication was his entry “Melanesians” in Hastings’s
Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics.49

Codrington was reluctant to write about his own life and
work. He was “rather horrified” to find that a journal of an island
voyage he had sent to his brother was published.50 He objected
to the idea of writing an autobiography on the grounds that he
had no wish to obtrude himself on the public, that he would “say
so much about other people,” including Melanesians, who could
not read what he said, and because “it would be always doubtful
whether what I was writing was true.” He regarded his transla-
tion work as “decent” but was aware “that there are not ten
people in the world who know whether it is good or bad, not 100
white men who know that it has been done. This knowledge
does not puff one up much.”51

Codrington died on September 11, 1922, a few days short of
his ninety-second birthday. The Times in its obituary said of him
“his name will be remembered as the Apostle of the Pacific,
soundest of scholars, kindliest of teachers, most practical of
friends. There was among us no better theologian, no profounder
philologist. A truly wonderful personality, a great man, a saint
and a gentleman. . . . Never was master more loved, venerated,
and obeyed. Sons of chiefs thronged his school, and he was like
the venerable Bede in his power of teaching and learning.”52

An anonymous manuscript containing a tribute to
Codrington says of him that “it was his personality which made
him wonderful, far more than his mastery of theology and every
other branch of knowledge. . . . He was one of that great and
inspiring community the Society of great people[,] adopting
from choice an active career, as a missionary, a universal scholar
and a philanthropist, he was distinguished for his place among
these unselfish apostles of civilization and Christianity. . . . He
was the most remarkable man I ever saw.”53

In his description of Robert Henry Codrington, missionary
scholar Fox said, “If Patteson was the Apostle of Melanesia,
Codrington was its Teacher. Saint and Doctor are titles that
rightly belong to him.”54

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Notes


8. Codrington to his aunt, Norfolk Island (NI), May 9, 1867, Univ. of Oxford, Rhodes House, Codrington Papers (hereafter RHCP), MSS Pac. s. 4, fol. 5.

9. Ibid., August 1867, RHCP, fol. 12.

10. Ibid., December 1, 1869, RHCP, fol. 42, 43.

11. Ibid., NI, February 12, 1875, RHCP, fol. 145.


13. Codrington to his aunt, November 29, 1870, RHCP, fol. 57; January 17, 1873, fol. 107.


15. Codrington to T. Codrington, NI, May 8, 1878, MMP, l. 82.

16. Codrington to his aunt, November 29, 1870, RHCP, fol. 160.

17. Codrington to his aunt, at sea, October 27, 1870, RHCP, fol. 53.

18. Ibid.

19. Codrington to T. Codrington, NI, August 7, 1871, MMP, l. 31.

20. Ibid., NI, November 8, 1871, MMP, l. 33.


22. Codrington to his aunt, at sea, October 27, 1870, RHCP, fol. 52.

23. Ibid., fol. 166.

24. Codrington to ?, November 27, 1898, RHCP, MSS. Pac. s. 28, fol. 10.

25. Codrington to C. H. Brooke, Chichester, October 12, 1917, RHCP, MSS Pac. s. 28, fol. 65, 66.

26. Max Müller to J. C. Patteson, Oxford, April 16, 1865, RHCP, MSS Pac. s. 29, fol. 3.


28. Codrington to Dr. Gerland, NI, December 31, 1874, RHCP, fol. 134–44.


34. Codrington to T. Codrington, off Torres Islands, August 20, 1873, MMP, l. 48. See John Lubbock, The origin of civilisation and the primitive condition of man: Mental and social conditions of savages, 2d ed. (London: Longman, Green, 1870).

35. Codrington to T. Codrington, off Torres Islands, August 20, 1873, MMP, l. 48.

36. Ibid., “Southern Cross,” October 21, 1874, MMP, l. 56. See Julius L. Brenchley, Jottings during the cruise of HMS “Curacoa” among the South Sea Islands in 1865 (London: Longmans, Green, 1873).

37. Codrington, Melanesians, p. 118.

38. Ibid., pp. 118–19.

39. Ibid., p. 191.

40. Ibid., p. 193.


42. Ibid.


44. See the discussion in Whiteman, Melanesians and Missionaries, pp. 171–451.

45. See Hilliard, God’s Gentlemen, pp. 79–120.


50. Codrington to T. Codrington, NI, August 7, 1871, MMP, l. 31.

51. Codrington to Appleton, Chichester, June 18, 1903, RHCP, MSS Pac. s. 28, fol. 30.


53. Anonymous manuscript, RHCP, MSS. Pac. s. 7.

54. Fox, Lord of the Southern Isles, p. 220.

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Works by Robert Henry Codrington


