

"A SELECTION OF FUNDAMENTALS":  
THE INTELLECTUAL BACKGROUND OF THE MELANESIAN MISSION  
OF THE CHURCH OF ENGLAND, 1850-1914

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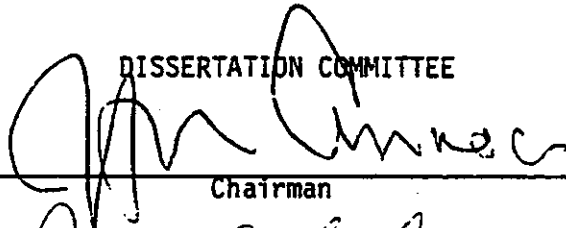
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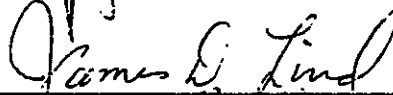
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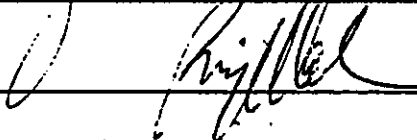
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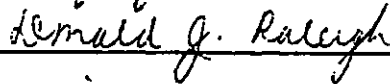
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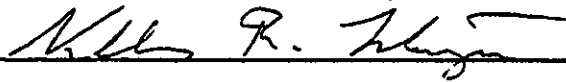
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## ABSTRACT

The Melanesian Mission of the Church of England was created to propagate Christianity in the Melanesian Islands of the southwestern Pacific at the height of the Victorian missionary movement. In its assumption of the universal validity of Christianity and the duty of the Church to place Christianity before all men regardless of their cultural circumstances, it reflected the historical and contemporary values of Christian mission. But in its presentation of the Christian message and its assessment of the indigenous peoples it served, it was distinctive. The Melanesian Mission revealed an unusual sensitivity to the nuances of Melanesian culture and a willingness to accommodate it whenever possible. Its leadership--principally Bishop John Coleridge Patteson and Robert Codrington--sought to separate the fundamental moral and spiritual precepts of the Christian faith from the context of Western civilization and allow the development of a Christianity suited to Melanesian needs. In this effort, the Mission made extensive use of Melanesian languages and attempted to establish a Melanesian clergy and Melanesian teachers as the primary transmitters of the Christian message.

While conditions in the field undoubtedly influenced this policy of accommodation, this dissertation focuses on those elements in the religious and intellectual background of the Mission's leadership that predisposed them to such an approach. The common threads in that background were a university education and at least some affinity for the

High Church variant of the Anglican tradition. But past that, an intellectual definition of this peculiarly flexible mission becomes a matter of "placing" it in the varied, often confusing intellectual life of Victorian England. By examining the correspondence, diaries, and other writings of the mission's leadership with a view to correlating their reading matter with their thinking on the goals of Christian mission, it is possible to discover the broad range of perspectives on "primitive" culture available to those encountering it in the mission field. The Melanesian Mission's willingness to utilize the least ethnocentric of these perspectives suggests the need for a reappraisal of common assumptions about both the relationship between belief and secular knowledge and that between Christian mission and Western civilization.

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## PREFACE

The Melanesian Mission of the Church of England served the Solomon Islands, portions of the New Hebrides, and other smaller Melanesian island chains in the southwest Pacific from the heyday of the "new imperialism" of the nineteenth century until the inauguration of the Church of Melanesia as an autonomous province of the Anglican communion in 1975. For the first sixty years of the Mission's existence it maintained close ties to England despite its relatively greater proximity to the Anglican communities in New Zealand and Australia. Not only did most of its financial backing come from England, but the Mission's leadership consistently expressed a preference for "gentlemen missionaries" of the public school/university mode.

In most survey accounts of the missionary movement in the Pacific in the nineteenth century, the Melanesian Mission merits little attention, a fact that may well be related to its less than spectacular success in the garnering of souls. After forty years of monopoly on mission in the area, the Mission could lay claim to less than five percent of the total population.<sup>1</sup> Such mention as the Mission receives, however, consistently focuses on its uniqueness in the Protestant missionary camp, both in terms of its personnel and its methods. Most such accounts stress the university-educated staff, a "High Church" Anglicanism and episcopal organization, and the emphasis placed on

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<sup>1</sup>David Hilliard, "Colonialism and Christianity: The Melanesian Mission in the Solomon Islands," Journal of Pacific History 9 (1974), p. 101.



boarding schools rather than the more standard practice of stationing missionaries in the indigenous community. Occasionally, too, some note is taken of the linguistic work of the first missionary bishop of Melanesia, John Coleridge Patteson, and his colleague, the Rev. Robert T. Codrington.

Yet in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the Melanesian Mission captured the public imagination to a degree that seems inconsistent with its present "historical footnote" status. In the view of the British (and to a lesser extent the New Zealand and Australian) public, the Mission, almost from its inception, appears to have merited the phrase used to describe it in 1932 by the then Archbishop of Canterbury--"the most romantic of the missionary endeavors of the Church of England."<sup>2</sup> Certainly it contained all the elements basic to a romanticized, idealized vision of the British world role; young men of education and breeding sacrificing wealth, comfort, and occasionally their lives in pursuit of the loftiest ideals of service. And it didn't hurt that this pursuit took place in the remote, dangerous, and exotic South Seas, a favorite haunt of the European imagination since the days of Cook and Bougainville.

On a more erudite level, this Victorian mission has earned the praise of colonial administrators, early field anthropologists, and both contemporary and modern students of the nineteenth-century mission effort for an "enlightened" approach to indigenous peoples that included

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<sup>2</sup>David Hilliard, God's Gentlemen (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1978), p. 293.

the use of Melanesian languages, the development of an indigenous clergy and respect for local tradition and custom. These evaluations suggest that the intellectual/religious climate of Victorian England could produce individuals far more sensitive to indigenous cultures and indigenous peoples than is usually thought to be the case.

The goal of this dissertation is to take the measure of the intellectual experience of a particular group of Victorians--the members, and particularly the leadership, of the Melanesian Mission of the Church of England. The process is primarily that of reconstructing what Keith Baker in his analysis of the ideological origins of the French Revolutions has called the "multiplicity of separate discourses constituting separate domains of meaning."<sup>3</sup> In the second half of the nineteenth century, the leadership of the Melanesian Mission had recourse to several discourses on issues that were of concern to them both as "determined Christians" and as thoughtful, educated men, unwilling, as Bishop Patteson put it, to be merely credulous. These concerns included the nature of man, the proper uses of religious and other forms of knowledge, and the evolution of human society and civilization. The interrelated nature of such issues is obvious. The discourses addressing them in the nineteenth century, moreover, bear out Baker's contention that "changes in one realm of discourse will rebound upon others in unanticipated and unpredictable ways . . .,"<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup>Keith Baker, "Ideological Origins of the French Revolution" in Modern European Intellectual History: Reappraisals and New Perspectives, eds. D. LaCapra and S. L. Kaplan (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 201.

<sup>4</sup>ibid., p. 202.

in that they sometimes reinforced each other and sometimes created new contradictions and tensions. And because the individuals with whom this study is concerned participated in Christian mission, they brought their intellectual experience to bear on their relationship with a culture other than their own. Conversely, their exposure to the exotic, multi-faceted world of the Melanesian islands of the Pacific confirmed and realigned that experience in such a way that meaning itself was affected, both for the members of the Mission itself and for the Victorian scholars who used data collected by these missionaries to formulate their view of human culture.

But in order properly to understand what the interaction of Victorian intellectual discourse meant for missionaries, it is necessary to have some understanding of the general development of Christian mission and a fairly detailed knowledge of the peculiar evolution of the mission movement in England. For if the methodology and philosophy of the Melanesian Mission owed much to the rapidly changing intellectual climate of Victorian England, it was also shaped by the historic problems of Christian mission. Certainly, Bishop Patterson and other influential figures saw the Mission as part of a historical continuum harking back to the missions of the early Church. Not all the Mission's reference points, in other words, were nineteenth-century ones. If Pattersen read the Victorian scholars concerned with the origins of society and the nature of primitive man, he also knew of and revered the work of missionary heroes of the past, notably the seventeenth-century Spanish defender of the New World Indians, Bartolomé de Las Casas, and Augustine of Canterbury and Boniface, both

of whom were associated with the early missionary history of the English Church. A short examination of the historic patterns of mission therefore seems appropriate in order to provide the proper perspective on the Melanesian Mission. Another chapter will attempt to place the Mission properly in the English context by examining the evolution of the English missionary movement and, particularly, the emergence of the dominant Evangelical mission model in the nineteenth century. This will be followed by an analysis of the institutional revitalization of the Church of England that formed the basis of the distinctive High Church Anglican missions and a survey of the actual founding and development of the Melanesian Mission in the field.

In order to avoid a distracting number of quotation marks, the use of such terms as "savages," "heathen," "civilized," and "primitive" requires some clarification. That these are culturally value-laden words is a given. But Victorians used them as much to delineate categories as to denigrate, and this sense of usage as well as simplicity dictates the decision not to bracket them every time they appear.