In the Shadow of the Missionary Captain: Captain James Wilson and the LMS Mission to the Pacific

Kirsteen Murray

In promoting its activities, the London Missionary Society (LMS) openly acknowledged the importance of the late eighteenth-century enthusiasm for the adventures of Captains Cook, Bligh, and Wallis. What has received less attention is the extent to which the mission emulated these great navigators. The influence was so pervasive in the planning and execution of their first mission, to the Pacific, that Captain James Wilson actually dominated decision making, even on issues of doctrine and church government. It was also Wilson, a man who did not settle or even preach in the islands, who was the focus of LMS publicity at home, in particular through his book A missionary voyage to the southern Pacific Ocean. Wilson’s leadership caught the public mood in Britain and engaged the Polynesians; ordinary members of the mission, however, were left struggling to emerge from his shadow and to receive the respect of the society.

In Britain in the 1790s the case for mission itself was new. One argument advanced by the founders of the LMS was that the recent voyages of exploration had providentially opened an entirely new field before them and issued a challenge to Christians who remained comfortably in Europe: “Cook and other navigators have voluntarily exposed their lives in unknown tracts, in fields of ice, and in abodes of savages. Our merchants venture into the burning and frozen regions, and trade with men of every colour and clime, for uncertain riches. And are there not yet among us numbers of ministers and pious youths, who would gladly fly to the ends of the earth, bearing with them the glad tidings of salvation?” William Carey had also made a reference to the new possibilities opened by Providence in his Enquiry into the Obligation of Christians to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathen.

Thomas Haweis and LMS Mission to the Pacific

One man particularly influenced by the publication of the voyages was Thomas Haweis (1734–1820). Haweis was educated at Oxford and in 1764 became rector of Aldwincle, Northamptonshire. In 1774 he accepted a position as personal chaplain to Selina, countess of Huntingdon (1707–91), a strong supporter of George Whitefield and founder of the Countess of Huntingdon’s Connexion, a network of Calvinistic Methodist chapels. Shortly before her death, Haweis persuaded the countess to fund a mission to Tahiti. Two missionaries were to travel with Captain Bligh on his return there to complete the duties that had been interrupted by the mutiny of the crew of the Bounty. Haweis met Bligh in London and persuaded him to carry two young men from the college affiliated with the Connexion, Michael Waugh and Richard Price. The missionaries were given a course of preparation but in 1791 refused to sail without receiving episcopal ordination. It was denied by Bishop Porteous of London, and the project collapsed.

Three years later Haweis was responsible for one of the two pieces printed in the Evangelical Magazine that prompted the foundation of a missionary society in London. In September 1794 David Bogue’s “Address to Evangelical Dissenters who practice infant Baptism” appeared. It was followed in November by Haweis’s review of Melville Horne’s Letters on missions: addressed to the Protestant ministers of the British Churches (Bristol, 1794). As a result, a corresponding committee was formed, which led to the foundation of the society on Monday, September 21, 1795. This event was followed by three days of preaching attended by 200 clergy, including Angliicans, Independents, Methodists, and Presbyterians.

Haweis presented the idea of a mission to the Pacific to the first general meeting of the society in his sermon “A Memoir on the Most Eligible Part to begin a Mission” (1795). An article for the Evangelical Magazine, “The Very Probable success of a proper mission to the South Seas,” also in 1795, made a similar case. Haweis linked the duty to spread the Word of God with what he saw as Cook’s timely and providential discoveries in the Pacific. Haweis saw the South Seas, of all the potential fields, as presenting the least difficulties and greatest chance of success. The advantages he suggested included the climate, the settled life of the people, the simplicity of the language when compared with the languages of India or China, and the absence of any absolutist government that might persecute the missionaries. The people of the South Seas, Haweis believed, would have fewer prejudices than those of China and India, where “civilization hath long obtained.” Those in an uncivilized state would be more struck by the benefits to be derived from the mechanical arts and trades and more easily convinced of European superiority in all things, including religion.

James Wilson, Volunteer Mission Captain

The LMS found its equivalent to Cook in the person of Captain James Wilson (1760–1814). Wilson’s dramatic conversion and life story provided a gripping tale of danger, escapes from death, and redemption. Wilson fought with the British army during the American War of Independence and then served nine years with the East India Company. While in India he was captured by Hyder Ali and, after a daring bid for escape, was imprisoned in the black hole of Seringapatam. After his release he continued service as a captain and, despite illness and further dangerous missions, accumulated sufficient resources to retire. Throughout it all, Wilson remained fast in his irreligious opinions. While living in England with his niece, however, he was converted to an evangelical faith. He felt called to volunteer for missionary service after reading the Evangelical Magazine.

Haweis did not know Wilson before receiving a letter volunteering his services in the Pacific. His skills and newfound devotion seemed perfectly suited to the situation, and Haweis saw him as “God’s Man.” In 1801 Haweis published a history of the Christian church in which he devoted forty pages to a narrative of Wilson’s inspirational life. A serialized account of Wilson’s life based on the same source was published in 1802 by Methodist Magazine. Captain Wilson was a natural figure around whom publicity about the voyage could revolve; such a strategy was well suited to the tastes of the public.

The South Seas were selected as a mission field, and on September 28, 1795, the LMS appointed a committee to inquire
into the best means of conveyance for an unspecified number of missionaries. The possibilities before them were to obtain passage for missionaries in a whaler, to charter a ship, or to buy one. The very same meeting, however, unanimously accepted the offer of service from Captain Wilson, which Hawes had put before the society amid the excitement of the first annual meeting. In December Wilson set a proposal for the purchase of a small ship before the board. It was eventually decided that the society would buy the Duff, a ship of 264 tons.

The outcome of the purchase of a ship was the decision that a substantial number of missionaries should be sent. Joseph Hardcastle argued that a small mission at such a great distance would be too vulnerable to deaths in the party. He hoped that a sizable group, made up principally of artisans, could be self-sufficient in the trades required to support a community and would give a “complete exhibition of a Christian and Civilized community.” The missionaries would settle not only at Tahiti but also, if circumstances proved favorable, at Tonga and the Marquesas.

Expectations of the Mission Work

The composition of the large group was determined in part by those who were prepared to volunteer but also by definite opinions about the best kind of men to send. Hawes, perhaps as a result of his previous experience, did not favor the sending of educated men but preferred missionaries of firm faith who would preach the simple message of Christ crucified. The public appeals for missionary recruits stressed that “serious mechanics,” that is, sober and pious men, were required. Thirty men were selected, five of whom were married. Their occupations were predominantly skilled manual work.

The ministers too had humble origins, and three received ordination only as a result of their participation in the mission. A fourth had been ordained in November 1795 in the Countess of Huntington’s Connexion. The missionaries were all of inferior social status to the ministers and laymen on the Board of Directors. Wilson, in contrast, had been “connected with us in the direction of the affairs of the society” and was “fully appraised of the design and nature of the expedition.”

The background of the missionaries chosen by the LMS was similar to that of the missionaries who had been used successfully by the Moravians. Hawes’s friend Christian Ignatius LaTrobe, secretary of the Moravian Foreign Missions Department, advised that education was not an essential for a missionary and also calmed fears about the sending of wives into the mission field. The Moravians were sent out under strict discipline and were expected to support themselves and to work to pay for their passage.

It seems from the reactions of the LMS directors to later events that they expected a similar degree of obedience and lifelong service from their own agents. Robert Bourne, for example, received a rebuke for retreating to New South Wales because of his wife’s illness. The directors noted that a man of far higher social rank would not expect to have his passage paid when his wife was ill if he was unhindered in carrying on the work. While the missionaries were the social inferiors of the directors, Captain Wilson was considered a gentleman. Hawes’s version of Wilson’s life, for example, underlines the hardship he suffered on the way to Seringapatam, denied the company of his fellow officers and chained to a common soldier.

The instructions for the mission emphasized the role of the captain. There were two sets of instructions to the missionaries: one printed by the LMS in a pamphlet, and another published by Hawes, which in parts agreed word for word with the official document. The former recommended formation of a committee to be elected monthly on board ship and thereafter every six months, or longer if that was better suited to ideas of government in the Pacific. Hawes’s suggestions show a greater emphasis on fixed hierarchy within the mission. He urged that the most aged preside in each location where a mission settled and also recommended a council of four or five elders to include the surgeon and Captain Wilson.

The instructions given to Captain Wilson emphasized that he was responsible for the mission, not only for discipline on board ship in temporal matters, but also “with full and complete authority for the management of its concerns in relation to the voyage; but also to commit to your care and superintendence, during the same period, the more important charge of the mission itself, and especially of those faithful brethren who accompany you therein.” The result of this emphasis upon the person of Wilson and the apparent distrust of the missionaries was that there was never a clearly defined authority over the mission from within the missionary group.

Wilson’s role in decision making went far beyond choice of sites and division of stores. No decision had been made about who was to be a preacher before the Duff departed. On December 31, 1796, Wilson asked each of the men to preach in turn before him so that he could decide how to divide the missionaries. At the same meeting Wilson convened a committee of eight to draw up a code of church government and articles of faith for the use of the missionaries at their destination, again chaired by himself. The decision of the LMS not to favor any one form of church government had precluded any such instructions being given in London.

Theological debate ensued, with the result that Rev. Jefferson and Mr. Cock were accused of Arminianism in January 1797. Wilson was called in and held a series of meetings, at which the men were examined and finally excommunicated on the basis of his assertion that the directors’ theology was Calvinistic. Wilson’s judgment overrode the views of one of the ministers and settled a matter on which the LMS board had refused to rule. He acted as the directors had instructed him and preserved the unity of the missionaries.

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Initial Work in the Islands

The Duff arrived at Tahiti on March 5, 1797. The settlement at Tahiti of twenty of the missionaries, five of them with wives, and two children gives further examples of the role of the missionary captain. A pattern of intercourse had already been established by other voyagers, according to which the captain of a vessel would take the leading role in meetings. It is therefore
not surprising that the focus of the chapter describing the arrival is on meetings between significant island figures and Captain Wilson. For example, Mane Mane, a “high priest” from Mo’orea, sought Wilson as a tayo, or friend, not Jefferson, the president of the missionaries.

Wilson exchanged gifts with the highest-ranking Tahitian chiefs: Tu and his wife Tetua, and Pomare and Iddeah. Pomare was entertained at dinner on board. Wilson received permission for the missionaries to stay and for them to use the “British House,” a building that had been erected for Captain Bligh in the belief he would return. In this type of negotiation the prominence of the captain was clearly useful.

Again, at a ceremony on March 16, 1797, Captain Wilson represented the LMS. Mane Mane made a long oration naming the gods, districts, and chiefs of Tahiti and Mo’orea and also naming for a few days to see whether the mission party would be well treated. The ship then sailed for Tonga and the Marquesas, where the remaining missionaries settled. As planned, the Duff returned to Tahiti in July, and a final leave was taken on August 4. While the missionaries expected to soon receive supplies and further recruits, it was to be four years before they had any further direct contact with the society.

Mission Work Without Captain Wilson

Sailing away in the Duff, Wilson reported on the cordial and apparently deferential relationships he had witnessed. The Duff and the missionaries had been amply supplied with pork and breadfruit during their stay. Work had been carried out on the mission house. Furthermore, it appeared that the missionaries had received not only the house as a gift but also the produce and labor of an entire district. An engraving The missionary house and environs, Matavai Bay 1797, showing a scene of missionaries and Tahitians in tranquil cooperation, was printed in Wilson’s Missionary voyage.

After the departure of the Duff the Tahiti missionaries were forced to adjust their view of the relationship with the islanders and appreciate their dependence upon goodwill. An attack on four members of the mission, who were stripped naked, led to a crisis and the withdrawal of eleven to New South Wales in March 1798. Their letter of explanation claimed that this incident was the culmination of a series of threats from the islanders to seize their wives and property. This was a bitter disappointment to LMS and to Haweis in particular, who found it difficult to reconcile Wilson’s judgment with that of those who had withdrawn.

The division of the mission at this point highlights a further problem that issued from reliance upon Wilson. The committee structures outlined in the instructions and the lead that the captain had taken in the decision making left the mission at Tahiti without an authoritative leader. The members of the mission, who were a great distance from the LMS board and all other sources of advice, were not prepared to defer to one of their own number. In the face of disputes, the group splintered.

In May 1798 the excitement that followed news of the safe arrival of the Duff at Canton led Haweis to hope that one of the directors would go out to the mission. Instead, the LMS relied for its information on interviews with returned missionaries and letters from Samuel Marsden, Anglican chaplain in New South Wales. The missionaries themselves were isolated both by the infrequent contact with London and by the lack of understanding of their situation. It was not until after a wave of conversions in 1815 following the victory of the Christian chief Pomare II at the battle of Fei Pi—when the entire island of Tahiti adopted the Christian faith, destroyed ritual objects, abandoned human sacrifice and infanticide, and showed enthusiasm for learning to read the Bible—that a deputation was sent from London to examine the situation on the ground.

Missionary House and Environs in the Island of Otaheite

Courtesy of Yale University Divinity School Library
The Mission in Its Social Context

The early coverage of the South Sea Mission drew on many of the representations that had already been popularized by the publication of Cook’s voyages and other material about the Pacific. The official account of the first mission appeared in 1799, under the lengthy title *A missionary voyage to the southern Pacific Ocean*, performed in the years 1796, 1797, 1798 in the ship *Duff* commanded by Captain James Wilson, compiled from the journals of the officers and the missionaries; and illustrated with maps, charts, and views drawn by Mr. William Wilson. . . . It was placed firmly within the tradition of the voyages of discovery by an introduction compiled by Samuel Greathed that described previous European contacts with the Islands and an appendix “including details never before published of the natural and civil state of Otaheite.” The main narrative was taken from Wilson’s journal, with additions from his son and a journal kept by the missionaries during the period when the *Duff* was away from Tahiti at Tonga. Wilson dominated the events recorded in the narrative. He is seen to take the principal role in negotiating with chiefs, touring the islands, and settling differences between the missionaries. Wilson’s view of the missionaries is occasionally exposed, for example, in disapproving of their nervousness at remaining at Tahiti or in questioning their assessment of Pōmare’s character.43

The visual images of the islands were very similar to those of the artists who had traveled with Cook. The painting *The Cession of Mataeau* (1799; see front cover of this issue) came to represent the mission to Tahiti.44 It depicted a large crowd of Tahitians with Chief Tu and his wife in the foreground meeting a smaller party of missionaries led by Wilson and his son. The missionaries later appreciated that Tahitian custom did not actually allow for transfer of land in this way, though it took some time for them to convince the directors in London of this point. Comparison of preliminary sketches with the final painting shows that the landscape has been deliberately created to conform to British imagination of the Pacific.45 The Polynesians are classically posed, and the landscape is exotic and romantic. The captain and his son are center stage, not the missionaries. Indeed, it was commissioned by the directors as a gift for Wilson and was to show the captain prominently “attended by some of the missionaries.”46

The timely offer from a pious and heroic captain became fused with a particular reading of voyage literature that came to dominate the planning of the South Sea Mission. The LMS directors viewed Wilson as an equal who could be trusted to supervise their group of socially and educationally inferior missionaries. Resort to a strong captain suited expectations at home and, indeed, in the South Seas. The extent of Wilson’s success in fulfilling the directors’ expectations, however, proved to be a flaw in the longer term. Wilson, a layman, exercised his authority in all aspects of the mission, despite the presence of four ordained ministers and a mission committee. Reliance upon the captain as decision maker and arbiter of disputes undermined the development of internal leadership. The immediate advantages of the focus on the captain in publicizing the mission also had consequences. It proved difficult for directors and public alike to reconcile the narrative of the missionary voyage with the later accounts of the missionaries themselves. Misunderstanding between mission field and London overshadowed the mission at Tahiti until the conversions of 1815 and beyond.

Notes

3. George Burder, “Sermon II. Jonah’s Mission to Nineveh: Preached at Rev. Mr. Seven’s Meeting House, Crown Court, Sept 22, 1795,” in *Sermons Preached in London, at the Formation of the Missionary Society, Sept. 22, 23, 24, 1796: to which are prefixed memorials respecting the establishment and first attempts of that society . . . (London, 1795), p. 35. In same volume, see also sermons by David Bogue (p. xvi) and Thomas Haweis (p. 12).
11. Ibid., p. 170.
12. Ibid., p. 165.
15. The committee members were Thomas Haweis, Josiah Wilson, Joseph Hardcastle, and James Steven.
17. Hardcastle, Plan of disposing the first mission, addressed to the Country Directors, Home Office Extra 1, CWM.
21. The three men ordained were Cover, Eyre, and Jefferson. See John Owen Whitehouse, *A Register of Missionaries and Deputations from 1796 to 1877* (London: Yates & Alexander, 1877).
22. The fourth was Thomas Lewis (see ibid.).
24. Report on November 9, 1795, Board Minutes 1, CWM.
25. Hankey and Orme to Marsden, November 14, 1827, Marsden Papers, vol. 4, ML.
30. Journal of William Henry, South Sea Journals 1, CWM.
31. The committee included three of the four ordained missionaries: Cover, Jefferson, and Lewis.
34. Lovett, *History of the LMS*, p. 49.
35. Two of this group did not stay at Tahiti. Nobbs settled in Tonga, where ten single men were landed, and the surgeon Gilham returned in the Duff. Of two men intended for the Marquesas, only one, Crook, stayed; Harris rejoined the larger party at Tahiti.
37. This exchange happened on June 10, 1797. See Wilson, *Missionary voyage*, 69.
38. Haweis to LMS, August 1798, Home Office Extra 1, CWM
40. Only Jefferson, Eyre, Bicknell, Nott, Lewis, Broomhall, and Harris remained.
41. Haweis Papers, vol. 3, ML.
42. The deputation journal was published as *Journal of voyages and travels by the Rev. Daniel Tyerman and George Bennet, deputed by the London Missionary Society, to visit various stations in the South Sea Islands, China, India, etc., between the years 1821 and 1829*, ed. James Montgomery (London: Fredrick Westley & A. H. Davies, 1831).
43. Wilson, *Missionary voyage*, p. 64.
46. July 23, 1798, Board Minutes 2, CWM.