The Legacy of Francis Thomas McDougall

David A. Edwards

Although only a minor prophet in the record of Anglican mission history, Francis Thomas McDougall (1817–86) deserves more than honorable mention in the continuing assessment of nineteenth-century European missionary attitudes. Destined by birth and upbringing to an active and adventurous life, with a combative nature that rendered dialogue irksome, an intolerant streak that made him a difficult colleague, and a melancholic hypochondria that resulted in his being galvanized more by physical danger than by theological challenge, McDougall could never have become the stereotypical Victorian missionary. Yet in his life he mirrored many of the contradictions inherent in the nineteenth-century missionary movement, although—unlike his brother-in-law, John W. Colenso—he could never decisively or satisfactorily resolve the challenges his missionary experiences posed to his theology.

Early Influences

McDougall was born into a military family at Sydenham, London, in 1817. Both his father and his grandfather were army officers, and an uncle and a great-uncle served in the Royal Navy. The various travels of his father’s regiment, particularly around the Mediterranean between 1825 and 1834, meant that McDougall enjoyed an independent and practical boyhood, but at the same time they deprived him of a more regular and systematic academic education that might have encouraged a thirst for study and scholarship in later life.

More by accident than design, McDougall developed an interest in medicine during a few years quartered on Malta, and he returned to London in 1835 to train for a surgical career at Kings College. A post as a private physician took him to Oxford with his patron in 1841, and after two years at Magdalen Hall (later Hertford College) he “passed the examination for the ordinary B.A. degree in 1842, proceeding to his M.A. in 1845.”1 McDougall’s mother was an evangelical in the Clapham sect sense, marked by piety and strict morality, who brought her son up in the same tradition. At Oxford he came under the influence of John Henry Newman and Edward Pusey, whose books were included in the library he took with him to Sarawak.2

McDougall’s marriage to Harriette Bunyon in 1843 brought him into a family that included the influential Bickersteth dynasty, pillars of traditional orthodoxy, as well as the more heterodox John Colenso. The latter, who officiated at the marriage, married Harriette’s elder sister Frances in 1846. Both young women had been much influenced by the ideas of Samuel Taylor Coleridge and by a friendship with F. D. Maurice (as Colenso had also been while at Cambridge), in marked contrast to McDougall’s espousal of some of the enthusiasms of the Oxford Movement.3

Having reputedly vowed to marry only a clergyman, Harriette propelled her new husband into ordination. Although this vocation may not have been his first choice, the way was opened for his selection as the first Anglican missionary for the new state of Sarawak on the island of Borneo in 1847. Had it not been for financial problems, the Colensos might have accompanied the McDougalls to Southeast Asia. If they had done so, the course of subsequent Anglican history would surely have been different.

---

David A. Edwards, Student Christian Movement secretary at the University of Liverpool, 1954–58, spent most of his ministry in English Anglican parishes. He served as chaplain and later warden of the House of the Epiphany Theological College in Kuching, Sarawak, East Malaysia, 1988–92.
Foundation of a Mission

McDougall and his party arrived at Kuching on the Sarawak River in June 1848 and found themselves in a small independent country that had already experienced seven years of paternalistic rule under James Brooke, the Indian-born English rajah. It was clear from the beginning that the missionaries saw themselves as allies of the rajah, their task being to introduce “a good leaven of Christianity and the arts of civilization” so that what they called “the dark heathenism of the Dyak,” the indigenous people of Borneo, might be “enlightened.” The great religions of Islam and Buddhism, the faiths of the minority Malay and Chinese population, were to be opposed and eventually replaced by “the light of Christ.” These sentiments, expressed in a sermon delivered in Singapore on the journey eastward and fairly typical of popular thinking back in England, were destined to be modified by closer experience with the peoples among whom the missionaries settled and worked.

As an expression of his early hopes, McDougall built a church and mission house in Kuching, both of which are still standing, and established a school for Malays, a day school mainly for educating the children of prominent people in useful arts, and another more church-based school or home school that attracted small numbers of Dayak and Chinese pupils. The home school was residential and avowedly Christian with children as students who were given to him by relatives and immediately baptized and educated in the Christian faith and church principles. He also utilized his medical skills both to express Christian compassion and to attract his patients to the Gospel. The work began in an atmosphere of great enthusiasm, but within a few years McDougall had become disillusioned by lack of success among the Malays, disappointed at the poor response to his teaching, and depressed by the paucity of recruits from England. The Malay school collapsed, but he persevered with the Christian home school and in time came to visualize it as the nucleus for training an indigenous ministry. This school, which has educated the leaders of Sarawak society over the past 150 years, was to become probably his most enduring legacy.

The Educatve Power of Experience

The story thus far includes nothing exceptional, as it merely repeats the pattern of a great deal of missionary expansion from Great Britain in the mid-nineteenth century. Colenso began in similar fashion when in 1855 he went to Natal, in South Africa. But in one respect McDougall demonstrated a movement in ideas that was unusual in his generation and that brought him closer to Colenso’s emerging vision than McDougall would have cared to admit.

During his first three years in Sarawak and on the island of Labuan, a few miles off the coast of Brunei, McDougall spent most of his time in and around Kuching, but he also paid a few visits to Dayak longhouses in more remote areas. His encounters with the indigenous people in their home surroundings appear to have made a deep impression on his conservative, but by no means closed, mind. Early prejudices held in common with his contemporaries, such as the conviction that the Dayaks and similar peoples had no religion of their own worthy of the name, were soon shaken. It was easy to dismiss those aspects of culture he considered superstitious and to be skeptical of the Dayaks’ belief in the guidance of spirits mediated through birds and omens. To his surprise, however, McDougall discovered that the people he met possessed a strong awareness of a supreme creative power who revealed his will and formed the object of their worship. In their family and community relationships he was forced to recognize “moral perceptions” and “kindly feelings,” and their general outlook on life appeared to him to give evidence of some feelings held in common with Christians. These included the voice of conscience, a desire for the removal of guilt, the longing for better things, forebodings of a life beyond the grave, and dim notions of a future state of reward and punishment. Whence could such feelings arise if not from our common Father?

Although couched in traditional language about “the dark clouds of superstition” that overshadowed the Dayaks, McDougall’s first report in 1849 to the Borneo Church Mission Institution reveals how significantly his early impressions were affecting his attitudes. He relates that he had spoken to the long-house dwellers on religious matters and had tried to show them “how Dewata, whom they worship, was the God of all power and might whom we worshipped too, that he was our Father.” It was quite evident to him that “their unknown God has not left Himself without a witness; they all acknowledge a Supreme power who made all things.” This report reveals the first step along the road that led within three years (via sympathetic and courteous attendance at primal religious ceremonies) to a remarkable sermon in which McDougall conceives the prior activity and beneficent presence of God among the peoples whose conversion he had come to effect.

Proofs of a Religious Nature

McDougall preached the sermon in his church at Kuching on September 7, 1851, on the occasion of the commissioning of the first missionary sent to live and work among the Dayaks. The inspiration, as with so many British missionaries during the nineteenth century, was the evangelistic work of Paul as portrayed in the Acts of the Apostles, understood in a rather literalistic fashion.

Paul’s appeals to the inhabitants of Lycaonia, to the Roman Felix and Hebrew Agrippa, and above all to the philosophers of Athens who gathered on Mars Hill showed to McDougall how much the apostle discerned in all people “proofs of a religious nature which had never been effaced.” By making himself all things to all persons, “touching the chords that would best vibrate in men’s hearts,” Paul discovered and released inner stirrings present in every person to be renewed in God’s likeness, to which he appealed in his preaching. His great object was to lay hold of the seeds of goodness that he saw struggling for life in the hearts of his listeners and to quicken them into healthy growth. Even in the midst of the idolatrous worship that surrounded him, Paul could discern attempts to render homage to the true author of the being of the devotees.

For McDougall the conclusion was clear. Since the Dayak cultures appeared to contain elements of goodness and truth, signs that God’s image was stamped on the people, the task of the Christian missionary was to accept and build on that foundation, not to belittle or destroy it. With Paul as a model, the missionary assigned to a station in 1851 must neither ignore the truths that lie at the bottom of the flawed systems that he will encounter nor set at naught whatever is good and true in the religions that those whom he meets have grown up in and cherish. Acting in this way also accords well with the example of Jesus, who drew people to him with gentle words and kind deeds.

Christianity must therefore be proclaimed as a faith that
can be all things to all people by “adapting itself to their various tempers, customs and habits” without lapsing into syncretism. As a start, having noticed how the Dayaks accompanied most of the important undertakings of their daily lives with some religious act, McDougall recommended that missionaries invest occasions such as sowing and reaping of the rice crop, building of homes, and birth and death with a kind of “sacramental halo.” Any system of religion, if it was to keep a hold on Dayak converts, needed to enter into almost every action of their daily lives.

McDougall was not unique among his generation in reacting so positively to the faith and culture of the peoples among whom he worked. But he did show a breadth and tolerance unusual among his contemporaries and rare for such a cautious and traditional churchman.

McDougall sent a copy of his sermon to England for possible publication. Not surprisingly, the home committee of the mission was alarmed on reading it and refused to print it for circulation among supporters. The committee considered his ideas “not a clear preaching of Christ” and likely to offend members of the mission and the public at large. The sermon was condemned as the work of a theorist who had made only a few sorties into Dayak territory. Perhaps worst of all, they feared that publication would jeopardize moves in January 1852 to make McDougall the bishop of Labuan.10

In a fascinating development, the committee agreed to McDougall’s request that the sermon be read to John Colenso. It appears that Colenso approved the sermon’s sentiments as being in accord with his own emerging ideas. He was approaching his final year as vicar of Forncett, Norfolk, before being appointed bishop of Natal. In lectures to the local theological society Colenso still talked of “the benighted far off heathen,” but he also insisted that they had “tokens around and voices within which are speaking to them of a Father in Heaven.”11 At that point it would surely have been more accurate to describe Colenso as the theorist, since McDougall had at least encountered the cultures on which he was passing judgment.

Mission Moves Men in Different Directions

Colenso was consecrated as bishop of Natal on St. Andrew’s Day, 1853, and McDougall as bishop of Labuan on St. Luke’s Day, 1855. McDougall was consecrated in the cathedral at Calcutta, which made him the first bishop of the Church of England to receive his orders overseas. It may not be too fanciful to detect a prophetic hint in the days chosen for their consecrations, for it could be argued that Colenso would turn out to be the better missionary, McDougall excelling at, and in the main remembered for, his medical work.

Upon appointment to the episcopate, the two men found that their influence moved in opposite directions, for their contrasting views on mission could now affect the wider church instead of being confined to their own personal judgments. There is no need in this article to outline Colenso’s evolution into a critical and divisive theologian, as the controversy he provoked in the Anglican Church during the 1860s and beyond has been well documented. McDougall, wounded perhaps by the rejection of his earlier ideas, retreated into the safety of a more conventional episcopate, enlivened by opportunities to contend with Chinese rebels and Filipino pirates and tussle with an increasingly unsympathetic rajah.

McDougall contented himself with overseeing the creation of a few church centers in the expanding Sarawak work and negotiating for the transfer of his diocesan headquarters to the more tranquil Singapore, converting the home school into a more definite college for ministry, translating the Bible and Prayer Book into Malay and the indigenous languages, and continuing his much-appreciated ministry of healing. He later received recognition as having been the first medical missionary from the Church of England.12 These were no doubt modest achievements and, compared with Colenso’s more extraordinary contributions to church and South African history, hardly epoch-making in their importance, but they did prove of lasting value in the planting and growth of a vibrant Anglican Church in Southeast Asia.
As the storm clouds gathered around Colenso’s head in 1864 and as conditions in Sarawak were settling down before McDougall’s return to England in 1867, McDougall reflected on the movement of the two brothers-in-law in such different directions. He wrote to the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts (SPG), “How strange it seems that John’s missionary work should, as he says, have brought out his own doubts and disbelief. I feel that such has the contrary effect on me.”

But was it so strange? In Sarawak McDougall appears not to have been provoked to questions by a character similar to the Zulu William Ngidi, who could ask Colenso whether the story of Noah’s ark was true or not. McDougall’s main provocation came from skeptical Europeans who mocked his orthodoxy and thereby caused him to avoid debate over controversial and, for him, sacred issues. Modesty over his own theological abilities would counsel caution in reacting to the new scientific theories of A. R. Wallace, who was in Sarawak in the 1850s, gathering material for the publication of evolutionary theories strikingly similar to Darwin’s at the end of the decade. It is significant that, although both McDougall and Colenso drew their missionary inspiration from the apostle Paul, the former was encouraged by the journeys in Acts, while the latter was influenced by the theology of Romans. Fundamental differences in character, intellect, and outlook inevitably led to contrasting interpretations of the missionary challenge.

Although not immediately obvious, a change took place after McDougall’s return to parish work in England in 1867. Freed from the obligation to maintain the loyal front he felt was expected of him as a diocesan bishop, he revealed toward the end of his life a more inquiring and adventurous spirit. This spirit might have been triggered by his refusal to support Colenso’s critics at the first Lambeth Conference in 1867, or it could be seen as a logical progression from his earlier views. It was, however, a long time in coming. Not until 1884, two years before his death, did he allow himself—in a sermon to SPG supporters—to reveal in public a more daring line of thinking.

Moving from Acts to John’s Gospel, McDougall emphasized that “God so loved the world,” not just the church; that Christ is “the Savior of all men,” not just of Christians; and that he gave himself “a ransom for all,” not just for some. Although Christians are called into a special covenant of grace, yet “in some way or other we may well believe that all peoples are sharing even now, though in a different manner, in the benefits of the coming of Christ.” God is no respecter of persons, but in every nation he that fears God and worships righteousness, McDougall’s phrase, is accepted by him. “There is one looking upon us all, Christian and Heathen alike, who is the life and light of men and who lightened every man that cometh into the world.” The perceptive missionary would therefore notice that there are movements and thoughts within “the poor heathen’s heart” that can arise from no other source than “the gracious working of the Spirit of Christ.”

McDougall therefore believed that the message of the missionary should be dominated not by words of terror about hell and damnation but by a gentle whisper “of Him who has been with them all along,” whose voice they have heard already, though they knew it not. Besides hearing the voice of God’s power in storm and thunder, “the heathen have heard another and softer voice in the inner movements of their being, in every thought which stirred them to brave and manly and righteous deeds, in fulfilling the duties of family affection and acts of compassion and tenderness for the sick and suffering, the stranger and the orphan.”

To Meet the Heathen Halfway

It is clear that in the thirty years or more since his 1851 sermon and the hostile reception it had provoked in England, McDougall had reflected on his experiences and was prepared to draw some conclusions that were more sympathetic to Colenso’s. Although he did not admit it at the time, he felt that the rejection of his 1851 views by the home committee had suggested an ignorance...
in the church about the true meaning of mission, a refusal to acknowledge “the latent germs of truth struggling for expression” in indigenous cultures, a mistaken desire to “uproot entirely” the primal faiths, and an unthinking derision for the superstitions that had for generations represented the guidance of the beings who inhabited the spiritual world.13

By the 1880s, perhaps inspired in part by Colenso’s insights, McDougall optimistically detected a hopeful shift in missionary thinking. Missionaries were learning “to meet the heathen to whom they go halfway as it were upon the ground of our common humanity—for we are all redeemed . . . in Christ the Second Adam.”14 Here are unmistakable echoes of Colenso. But there is no evidence that the bishop of Natal ever read this 1884 sermon as he had studied McDougall’s address of 1851 before going to South Africa.

With only tentative allusions to the prologue of the Fourth Gospel, one cannot suggest that Francis McDougall was seriously exploring any kind of Logos Christology. Despite hints provided by some of the early Fathers of the church, development of that initiative would have to wait until the twentieth century. But McDougall in his hesitant way clearly anticipated future trends. Traditional he might have been in most respects, and clinging to the safety of orthodoxy, but in missiology he was able to rise above the limits of Anglican thought in his day and point the way to a future where inclusivism would be respectable. We can be thankful that there were some Western missionaries in the nineteenth century—maybe more than we think—who did not believe with Reginald Heber, later to become bishop of Calcutta, that “the heathen in his blindness bows down to wood and stone.”15

Notes
2. For details of McDougall’s life, see Bunyon, Memoirs, the only full biography. For fuller examination of the issues discussed in this article, see David A. Edwards, “A Study in Paradox: Some Contradictions in Anglican Attitudes to Mission in the Mid-nineteenth Century as Embodied in the Life of T. McDougall and His Work in the Borneo Mission” (Ph.D. diss., Univ. of Edinburgh, 1998).
4. The indigenous people of Borneo were referred to as Dyak—the usual nineteenth-century spelling, now spelled “Dayak.” These peoples are now listed under their more specific tribal groups, for example, the Iban and Bidayuh.
5. Sermon 24, Trinity Sunday, 1848, from twenty-six of McDougall’s sermons, uncataloged, Rhodes House Library, Oxford. (All subsequent manuscript materials are found in Rhodes House Library.)
6. Sermon 2, September 7, 1851, Trinity 12, St. Thomas, Kuching, McDougall’s sermons.
14. Sermon 14, McDougall’s sermons. Written for the Church Missionary Society (CMS), May 25, 1884, but not preached; adapted for Winchester Cathedral, Trinity 2, 1884, and for SPG at Milford on Sea, Hants, Trinity 12, 1884.
15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.

Selected Bibliography
Works by Francis Thomas McDougall
The main manuscript sources for McDougall’s life and mission may be found in Rhodes House Library (an offshoot of the Bodleian Library) at Oxford under the labels CLR72, CLR73, and CLS54 (USPG letters). Other family letters are in the Turner Papers, Mss. Ind. Ocns S. 292; the official Rajah Brooke papers are under heading Mss. Pac.s.90. Twenty-six of McDougall’s original hand-written sermons are also at Rhodes House (not cataloged).

Works About Francis Thomas McDougall
school of
intercultural
studies
B I O L A  U N I V E R S I T Y

We are God’s instruments.
We have a story to tell.
And the world is listening.

With God’s grace, we’ll take His Story and tell it on the mountain, overseas, here at home, and across the world. Since 1908, Biola has been training students to take God’s story to the ends of the earth.

We offer M.A. programs in intercultural studies, TESOL, and applied linguistics, a doctorate in missiology, and a Ph.D. in intercultural education.

Contact Biola’s School of Intercultural Studies today.

BIOLA UNIVERSITY
School of Intercultural Studies

www.biola.edu
1.800.652.4652