

STUDY 3

ARRIVAL OF THE FIRST FLEET

THE FIRST FLEET, BOTANY BAY AND THE COLONY OF NSW

The first thing people normally think of when you mention the first fleet is convicts. And to a degree they're right because the colony of NSW was formed by convict settlement to provide an answer to Britain's over crowded prisons. However, other citizens came with the convicts; officers, administrators, marines, surgeons, tradesman and sometimes they came with wives and children¹. And of course with such a large community it was seen fit to send a clergyman. These were no religious misfits selected by lottery; they were carefully chosen by evangelical leaders of England for their love of the Gospel and missionary zeal.

While the government was preparing the ships of the first fleet William Wilberforce and John Newton of the ECLECTIC SOCIETY convinced the Prime Minister, William Pitt (the younger) of the need of a chaplaincy for the convict colony, they proposed Richard Johnson who, in October 1784, was appointed chaplain of the Settlement of New South Wales and consequently also became the chaplain on the first fleet². Before the fleet sailed Wilberforce introduced Johnson to the "SOCIETIES FOR THE PROPAGATION OF THE GOSPEL" and the "SOCIETY FOR PROMOTING CHRISTIAN KNOWLEDGE". These organizations supplied Johnson with 4,200 Christian books for the new colony to assist him in his new ministry.

The first fleet arrived in Botany Bay on the 17th January 1788 and on the 3rd February that same year Richard Johnson arrived.

RICHARD JOHNSON presided over the first divine service on Australian soil 'under some trees' (or 'a great tree'). He preached from the text '*What shall I render unto the Lord for all His benefits toward me*' (Ps 116:12). On 17 February he celebrated Holy Communion in a marine officer's 'marquee'. This officer was so conscious of the significance of the occasion that he wrote in his diary (now housed in the Mitchell Library in Canberra) "*I resolve to keep this table as long as I live, for it is the first Table that ever the Lord's Supper was eat of in this country*'.

For the duration of his tenure it was said that Johnson was one of the hardest working members of the new colony. In the first five years he almost singlehandedly carried out all the clerical duties of the colony. He held worship services, either in the open air or in a store-house, at Sydney and Parramatta, he officiated in 226 baptisms, 220 marriages, and 851 funerals as well as serve at executions and minister to the convicts. One of the convicts wrote home in 1790 that '*few of the sick would recover if it was not for the kindness of the Rev. Mr Johnson, whose assistance out of his own stores makes him the physician both of soul and body*'. In 1793 he built and paid for his own church. He had general supervision over the increasing number of schools, and in August 1800 when the Governor set up a committee to open and manage an institution for orphans Richard Johnson was appointed as its treasurer. We are given an even greater insight into the heart of the man when, upon the arrival of the second fleet, he ignored John Newton's advice that '*it will be madness in you to risk your health, by going down into the hold of a ship, where the air must be always putrid from the breath of a crowd of passengers in chains*'. The passengers of the second fleet were in the most shocking state and yet Johnson disregarded the risk to his own

¹ Don Chapman, 1788, The People of the First Fleet, 1986.

² The Eclectic Society was a politically and socially influential evangelical group within the Anglican Church during the 18th and 19th centuries that focused on missions and prison reform and both William Wilberforce and John Newton among its leaders.

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health and wet into the hold of the ship to care for the sick and dying³. Such was his concern for the souls of individuals. He believed strongly in personal salvation and so it was important to minister to Aboriginal people and convicts alike. He befriended Aboriginal people even to the point of taking an Aboriginal girl into his family. At one instance he gave himself as a hostage so that Bennelong could feel safe while visiting the Governor.

It should not surprise us that, with the pressure Johnson was under from political oversight, his own conscience and expectations and his strong desire to minister the Gospel and see fruit to his labour, that he struggled through-out his ministry to reconcile the three foci of his calling; ministrations of the church, the guardian of public morality; and evangelism. His life and ministry became an example of the tension that plagued ministry to Aboriginal people throughout the history of missions within Australia.

SAMUEL MARSDEN also gained the interest of an Evangelical group within the Church of England, but in his case it was the ELLAND SOCIETY. This group sponsored young men from poorer families for ministry training. When he was 24 years old he met members of the Clapham sect, including William Wilberforce. Wilberforce, went on to have a major impact on the rest of Marsden's life just as he had with Johnson before him. He recommended Marsden to the position of Assistant to the Chaplain of NSW which he accepted and subsequently arrived in Sydney Cove March 1794. On his first Sunday in the colony he wrote:

*"I preached the gospel of deliverance from the captivity of sin ... As I was returning home a young man followed me into the wood and told me how he was distressed for the salvation of his soul. I hope the Lord will have many souls in this place"*⁴.

By 1810 Governor Macquarie founded the 'NATIVE INSTITUTION' for the expressed purpose of removing Aboriginal children from their parents, However, ministering to Aboriginal people was not as rewarding for Marsden as ministering to European settlers because of an experience he had had with an Aboriginal child named Tristram who lived in his home for many years. When Tristram reached puberty he walked out of Marsden's life and Marsden interpreted this as rejecting him and the faith. *"Humanly speaking, nothing could be done"*, he said, *"to bring Aboriginal people to a knowledge of God"*. As far as Marsden was concerned, because Aboriginal people rejected outright material civilization, they were also rejecting the necessary first steps towards conversion. He wrote, *'The natives have no Reflection—they have no attachments, and they have no wants'*⁵ Marsden's work was not a complete failure as he feared. He was also instrumental in establishing a CMS auxiliary in Sydney in 1825. An organization that would prove to be very significant in the 20th century in Aboriginal ministry in the Northern Territory, Queensland and Western Australia⁶.

Like Johnson, Marsden also believed strongly in the importance of personal conversion and that material advance was a proof of the genuineness of one's personal sense of salvation. This helps us understand why, for a large part of his ministry, he believed that the Aboriginal people had to be civilized before they could be evangelized. However, he later changed his mind on this point and declared: *"Civilization is not necessary before Christianity. You will find civilization follows*

³ At last the transports are here DIABOLICAL CONDITION OF THE CONVICTS THEREON 278 died on the fearsome journey to Sydney Cove. The landing of those who remained alive despite their misuse upon the recent voyage, could not fail to horrify those who watched. As they came on shore, these wretched people were hardly able to move hand or foot. Such as could not carry themselves upon their legs, crawled upon all fours. Those, who, through their afflictions, were not able to move, were thrown over the side of the ships; as sacks of flour would be thrown, into the small boats. Some expired in the boats; others as they reached the shore. Some fainted and were carried by those who fared better. More had not the opportunity even to leave their ocean prisons for as they came upon the decks, the fresh air only hastened their demise. A sight most outrageous to our eyes were the marks of leg irons upon the convicts, some so deep that one could nigh on see the bones. Sydney Daily Mirror on Monday 3 March 1969.

⁴ Giants of the Missionary Trail: Samuel Marsden; Bearer of Good Tidings in New Zealand and New South Wales, by Eugene Myers Harrison. Online.

⁵ Australian Dictionary of Biography, Online edition.

⁶ Noel Loos, White Christ; Black Cross, Aboriginal Studies Press, 2007. 44-45.

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Christianity more easily than Christianity follows civilization." This is the position advocated by the CHURCH MISSIONARY SOCIETY which specifically instructed its missionaries:

Do not mistake civilization for conversion. While you rejoice in communicating every other good, think little or nothing done till you see those dead in trespasses and sins quickened together with Christ.

However, in the latter part of his life, his evangelical zeal waned and therefore he has been somewhat overshadowed by some of his subordinates.⁷

Despite all their weakness, contradictions and conflicts Johnson and Marsden were men of faith. They had a love of God and a desire to see his Gospel proclaimed and received in the new colony by both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal alike.

OTHER MISSIONARIES IN THE FIRST PERIOD OF COLONISATION

Other Christian workers who expressed their concern for the spiritual welfare of the Aborigines were, Rev. Robert Cartwright (Angl, 1810), Rev. Samuel Leigh (Meth, c1815), Rev William Walker (Meth, 1821). The Weslyans were the first to appoint an official missionary to Aborigines; Rev William Walker (c1821). The CMS followed in 1822 with George and Martha Clark. These were the only missionaries appointed for the Sydney area. By 1824 the Anglican Church of Sydney appointed Archdeacons Thomas Scott and William Broughton to minister to the Wiradjuri in the Wellington Valley. William and Ann Watson and Johann Handt joined this work in 1832⁸ and Rev. James and Lydia Gunther 1837. C. Eipper was a German Presbyterian missionary at Moreton Bay in NSW. In 1837 the Catholic Church began its ministry to Aboriginal children. The first period of Lutheran mission work began in SA October 13th 1838.

Within 20 years after Marsden's ministry 104 Clergymen received financial support from the New South Wales Government⁹ but none of these second generation pastors focused on Aboriginal ministry. The situation changed somewhat by 1944 when there were 317 missionaries serving among an estimated 76,000 Aboriginal people across Australia.¹⁰

CONCLUSION

It seems that there was a first flush of missionary activity fueled by the close ties that the colonisers had with the leading Christian lights of England. However, it seems that three related forces came to bear upon their efforts that caused them to feel defeated and then to give up.

- 1) a lack of appreciation of the part their own culture played in their understanding of the Gospel.
- 2) a lack of appreciation of the significance and complexities of the Aboriginal culture.
- 3) And last but not least a lack of understanding of the depth of cultural trauma caused by the colonising process and even by the very presence of the missionaries themselves.

⁷ Australian Dictionary of Biography; Online Edition.

⁸ John Harris, One Blood, 1990, 60ff.

⁹ Church of England: 53, Catholic: 24, Presbyterian: 20, Wesleyan: 7

¹⁰ A. E Gerard, History of UAM, ?1944. Records 83 with UAM, 74 with the Catholics and 6 with AIM