

Thomas, John (1797–1881), Wesleyan missionary and Tongan scholar, was born at Lower Clent, near Stourbridge, Worcestershire, on 7 November 1797, the second child and eldest son in the large family of William Thomas, blacksmith, and his wife, Hannah, *née* Hyde. His parents were devout members of the Church of England. Despite severe childhood illness and being taken from school at the age of eleven, Thomas was driven to succeed at his apprenticeship and to better himself educationally. For a time he returned to school while working as a blacksmith, and even when fully employed from six in the morning until eight at night he found time to read the Bible, the Whole Duty of Man, and pious tracts.

A chorister and a flute-player, Thomas was persuaded by a friend to help with the singing at the Methodist services in the village and was soon drawn into their worship. In 1819 he began a private journal dating his 'conversion' to a solitary experience at Hagley, Worcestershire, confirmed by 'outpourings of the Spirit' at successive 'love-feasts' (Luckcock, 17). On becoming a member of the Methodist society he began a prayer meeting, engaged in open-air preaching (opposed by rector and squire), and became an accredited local preacher in September 1820. Exposed for the first time to approved Methodist literature, he became rigid in his adherence to the Wesleyan canon. At the same time *The Life of Henry Martyn*, and other missionary narratives, led him to think of 'sharing the blessing of the Gospel with some dark and Idolatrous people' (Rowe, 6).

After being examined in London in December 1824 Thomas was accepted as a candidate for the ministry and instructed to marry. He already had an understanding with Sarah Hartshorne, who also had missionary ambitions; and they were married at Hagley on 27 January 1825. Sarah was the half-sister of Stephen Rabone (1811–1872), afterwards a missionary in Tonga, who married Thomas's sister Eliza. After a crash course in mission management in London, Thomas was ordained for the Friendly Islands (Tonga) mission. He and Sarah left Gravesend in April 1825, arriving in Van Diemen's Land (Tasmania) in September and Sydney in October. After some difficulties there (the Sydney committee preferring their own candidate, John Hutchinson, as superintendent of the Tongan mission), the missionaries arrived at Tonga in the *Elizabeth* on 28 June 1826 and were received by the chief Ata at Hihifo.

The Wesleyan mission party was not the first mission in Tonga (having been preceded by the London Missionary Society in 1797–1800, the Wesleyan Walter Lawry in 1820–22, and London Missionary Society Tahitian missionaries in Vava'u in 1822 and Tongatapu in 1826), but Thomas has always been regarded by Tongans as the father of the mission and founder of their church. He was the first to learn the language and preach in Tongan, and he and Sarah formed schools soon after their arrival. After a difficult start the situation improved with the arrival of Nathaniel Turner, chairman of the New Zealand and Friendly Islands district. While the Thomases were continually frustrated by Ata at Hihifo, Turner and his colleague William Cross had the full backing of 'Aleamotu'a at Nuku'alofa. 'Aleamotu'a's nephew, Taufahau, king of Ha'apai, fresh from victories in Samoa and Ha'apai, was already convinced that the future of his country lay with Christianity.

Between 1829 and 1831 Thomas oversaw the nominal conversion of Ha'apai and the partial conversion of Vava'u. In December 1829 'Aleamotu'a was installed as Tu'ikanokupolu and a month later was baptized as King Josiah Tupou. Taufahau was baptized as King George (Siaosi) of Ha'apai in 1831 and shortly thereafter Finau of Vava'u was consecrated as King Zephaniah of Vava'u. When Finau died in 1833 Taufahau succeeded him as king of Vava'u. Many converts were made throughout the island group and Thomas imposed strict Methodist discipline. By 1834 the emotional intensity was such that a full-scale religious revival erupted.

The speedy Christianization of the islands alarmed the principal opposition chiefs and a showdown was inevitable. Christianity was largely identified with the Tupou lineage while important rival lineages held to the traditional Tongan religion. In 1837 the recalcitrant chiefs announced their determined opposition and built fortifications. When war broke out in 1837 and again in 1840 the opposition chiefs were speedily crushed and their followers were indiscriminately massacred. There is no doubt that Taufahau's victorious troops felt justified in the light of Old Testament translations

and sermon texts against heathenism, giving credence to one of the charges brought against Thomas by Captain Peter Dillon, that he had incited the war. Dillon's charges led to controversy in missionary circles and Thomas was eventually cleared of blame by his colleagues. Thomas was appalled by the excesses of the Christian party, distanced himself from the missionaries who supported the war, and told the people: 'religion is not to be defended ... by murder, cruelty and wickedness, but by perseverance, patience and faith' (Luckcock, 124). When 'Alcamotu'a died in 1845 Taufa'ahau became Tu'ikanokupolu. Thomas thus had the pleasure of seeing his illustrious pupil crowned as king of the entire Tongan archipelago.

In March 1832 Thomas read *Polynesian Researches*, the seminal work of the London Missionary Society missionary William Ellis, which appeared to legitimize for pious authors the collection of indigenous traditions. Until he left Tonga in 1850 Thomas took detailed notes from his informants, later copying them into notebooks. He had access to the highest chiefs in the land, not only Taufa'ahau, but also the last Tamaha (highest ranking royal person), who became a Christian in 1834. On returning to England in 1850 Thomas began 'to write out my scraps of Tongan history', hoping to provide 'a more full, and correct account of the *Mythology*, Wars, &c. of the Tongan People, than has yet appeared' (journal, 8 Nov 1850, SOAS). By mid-1854 he had completed a history and mythology in four manuscript volumes.

Having re-established his relationship with the mission committee in London, Thomas and his wife returned to Tonga in 1855. Almost immediately he visited Samoa on behalf of the Sydney committee to ascertain whether there was sufficient cause to justify reviving the Wesleyan mission there. A few years later the Thomases retired from the mission altogether, arriving back in England in June 1860.

At Stourbridge Thomas continued to work on his Tongan history, but became increasingly convinced that the work should be more didactic in tone. It was not sufficient to give the history of the people 'when heathens' without showing 'the effects of the Gospel upon them' (Thomas, 'Hints in the history', Mitchell Library). In 1865 he began to revise the manuscript, incorporating a large portion of his journal, and the four volumes became seventeen. A much shortened history was completed in 1879, but Thomas was still working at the revision of his longer manuscript at the time of his death.

Sarah Thomas died at Stourbridge on 9 December 1867. A woman of forceful character, who had been as dedicated a missionary as her husband, she had suffered much, including numerous miscarriages and the death of the Thomases' only child, John, in 1843, aged seven. Thomas subsequently married, on 23 October 1872 at Old Swinford, Stourbridge, Esther Matthews (1839/40–1929), with whom he had a son, John William Thomas, who died from pneumonia in November 1884 aged nine. Thomas himself died at Stourbridge on 29 January 1881. A Wesleyan Methodist chapel at Lower Clent to honour John and Sarah Thomas's missionary service contained a memorial plaque.

Thomas was inflexible in his social attitudes and his adherence to Wesleyan discipline and lacked administrative and interpersonal skills. Privately self-deprecatory and conscious of his own shortcomings, he was intolerant of weakness and inadequacy in others. Despite his lack of training it was his intellectual curiosity and constant application that enabled him to achieve his missionary objects and lay the groundwork for preserving Tongan language, history, and culture. The true pioneer of the Methodist denominations in Tonga, he was a major figure in the Christianization of the islands.

Niel Gunson

Sources

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