

**ON THE EDGES OF CHRISTIAN HISTORY  
IN THE PACIFIC  
a personal journey**

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I have been fortunate to write about people of the Pacific and in particular the development and influence of Christianity in the Pacific region. I say ‘fortunate’ because the hard reality remains that I am an outsider to the Pacific; an outsider by race, culture and language. What unworthy qualifications to begin a journey in the islands! Why did I not disqualify myself immediately? I can’t answer that question adequately. Rather it is with deep gratitude that I acknowledge the openness of the Pacific people, especially those of Fiji, who have encouraged me to travel on this journey.

I first became aware of people from the Pacific islands as a New Zealand schoolboy in the 1950s. The Wellington primary school I attended at Clyde Quay, near Courtenay Place, was as multicultural as could be imagined and in contrast to the overwhelmingly Anglo-Saxon complexion of most other Wellington primary schools. In addition to Maori children, there were Pacific islanders, probably Samoans, Niueans and Cook Islanders. At that age, I had no inclination or occasion to distinguish between various Polynesian groupings, yet here in my early experience was the diversity of an immigrant society. There is no better learning climate than a primary school playground to develop camaraderie with youngsters of other backgrounds. Even when I went to South Wellington Intermediate School—where the proportion of Maori and Islander students was lower, although still high by Wellington standards—I had no reason to be aware that this was out of the ordinary.<sup>1</sup>

The Pacific islanders whose community life I first identified as something different from 'New Zealanders' were the Samoans whom I met as part of the Methodist community. My father was the minister at the Taranaki Street Church and our parsonage saw many visitors pass through, one of whom I learnt only many years later was the Tongan Sione Latukefu, who was gathering research for his doctorate (see Latukefu 1992:14–31). Our family included two Indonesian boarders, studying under the Colombo Plan, and I know that I was able to differentiate Asian countries from the Pacific. A more pronounced world outlook in the New Zealand Geography curriculum in schools would have helped in making these distinctions clearer.

Growing up in New Zealand in the 1950s and early 1960s, before the Vietnam War, was in many respects an idyllic experience. Shaped by both background and curiosity I, like many New Zealanders, later sought to travel. I had no independent means, and so I approached the New Zealand Volunteer Service Abroad programme, nominated a place as far away as imaginable and ended up on the shores of the South China Sea, at a place called Mukah in Sarawak. That was 1966.

The following year I enrolled at the University of Auckland, my family having shifted to that city, to do a degree that majored in History. I must admit that I was pretty raw, having left secondary school in Wellington with scarcely any New Zealand history, certainly no Pacific history, but knowing a lot about Napoleon and particularly the relevant pages of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, which we copied with great diligence for our assessment requirements! My Latin studies had taught me a smattering of Roman Empire history as well.

My years of doing history study at Auckland University opened my eyes to the vast expanse of historical inquiry. There was a gifted team of scholars in that Department. I benefited from most of them in the New Zealand history course when each lectured on their area of speciality: Judith Binney, Keith Sorrenson, Keith Sinclair and Russell Stone on the nineteenth century followed by Robert Chapman (from Political Studies), Michael Stenson and Michael Bassett on the twentieth century. But I lacked the useful ability of being able to separate myself from my studies and ask: what exactly is this form and character of learning that I am engaged on? Consequently I regret now that I did not do Keith Sinclair's course on historiography as one of my MA Papers; I wish I had been compelled to do it. It appeared to be difficult

so I avoided it and that was my loss because I struggled long and hard to match theory with the considerable information I was reading.

During my BA studies—I cannot remember at what point—Judith Binney, who had written the outstanding portrayal of the Anglican missionary Henry Kendall (Binney 1968), encouraged me to pursue some original research on early New Zealand history. Through my Methodist connections I gained entry to the Trinity Theological College Library and was permitted to read the diary of the Methodist missionary William White, who lived among the Maoris of the Hokianga district in the 1830s. I used his writings and other secondary sources to apply the social dislocation theories of Harrison Wright (1958) to the work of the Methodists at Mangungu in Hokianga. My findings were rather forced and, reading them now, not well constructed; but I remember being excited by this venture and experiencing an indescribable but privileged feeling when I read words on a page first penned almost 150 years earlier.

It was at this stage that I comprehended the link between New Zealand and Pacific Methodism, notably through the missionary work of the printer John Hobbs, who was sent to New Zealand as an associate of White before going on to Tonga. A little later, in 1970, I studied Pacific history under Hugh Laracy as part of my MA papers. Then by sheer coincidence an opportunity arose to go to the Pacific Islands, to Fiji. Again it was under the auspices of New Zealand Volunteer Service Abroad. They had been asked by the Fiji Government Archivist, Ian Diamond, to find someone, hopefully with archival experience, to bring some order to the large mass of Fiji Methodist Church papers, which had been handed over to the Archives following the church's independence in 1964. I volunteered and together with my wife, Carolyn—who was to teach at the newly opened Raiwaqa Methodist Primary School—spent 1971 in Fiji.

My archival training was limited to two months at the Turnbull Library in Wellington at the end of 1970 when I was assigned to draw up a preliminary description of a huge collection of Tongan Government papers extending from 1900 to 1939. These papers had somehow made their way to Wellington—perhaps for secure storage during the war years. They were stored in the underground basements of Broadcasting House opposite the original Turnbull building. I struggled with the task, feeling totally inadequate. I can't recall whether I finished the job satisfactorily and I don't know if the papers are still there; however, I picked up the rudiments of inventory work.

In 1971, the National Archives of Fiji was located in Government House grounds, Suva, together with the Western Pacific High Commission Archives and the Alport Barker Library. Ian Diamond introduced me to my work and then left for Hong Kong, handing over his responsibility to Setareki Tuinaceva, the 'pioneering' Fijian archivist, who had recently returned from training. Setareki was softly spoken and understanding, giving me considerable freedom in my work and allocating many hours of various staff members' time to my assistance in matters such as the repair of old documents and the typing of the inventory and the separate cards for the hundreds of different items in the collection.

The feelings I had first experienced in working with archival material were now given their full expression. Among the early items in the collection were the diaries of Thomas Jaggar, missionary at Rewa from 1839 to 1844, and the first trade account books of William Cross and David Cargill at Lakeba for 1835. There was a huge collection of marriage and baptismal records from the very beginnings of Christian work, including Joseph Waterhouse's memorable tour through the islands of Lomaiviti in 1855–56 when, in the wake of Cakobau's decision to *lotu*, hundreds of people were baptised in a matter of weeks.

The history of Wesleyan Christianity among the Fijians was a tempting project but at that stage, with the inventory my priority, I decided to choose a more manageable topic for my Master's thesis and settled on the early years of Methodist work among the Indian settlers of Fiji. So by day I worked my way through the Methodist collection and in the evenings I took notes for my thesis. Working at the Archives, I can recall being conscious of the wish to develop my academic interests at some future time. When the end of the year came I had completed both my job and my first thesis. The *New Zealand Journal of History* offered to publish my findings if I condensed my thesis into article form, which I did (Thornley 1974).

From 1972 to 1975 I concentrated on securing teaching qualifications and, with Carolyn, spent time with our young family of three boys while working at a secondary school north of Auckland. The Pacific slipped out of my mind. But again I was tempted to resume studies after the quietly supportive Hugh Laracy encouraged me to apply for a PhD scholarship in the Department of Pacific History at the Australian National University (ANU). This was mid-1974; the reply from Canberra was initially in the negative but six weeks later came news of acceptance. I had committed

myself to a further year of teaching in 1975, so not till the end of that year did Australia become our new home. It has remained that way. My good fortune in being accepted into the ANU at the tailend of the heady Whitlam years was very soon apparent. His political demise preceded my arrival by only a few weeks and from then on scholarships to Canberra were never quite so plentiful.

My welcome at the ANU was not particularly encouraging. Was a New Zealander wanting to do Pacific church history really valued in the Department? On my first day, one of the staff suggested off-handedly that my project was less than important if not pretty much a waste of time. That did not help my confidence. The outward focus in the Department was politics, commerce, labour and other influences of a secular nature. To study missions in the Pacific in the context of the history of Christianity was not even a possibility. Rather the approach was to see missions as a study in culture contact or islander responses to western ideologies. This period of orientation was uncomfortable but perhaps intended as some kind of 'test' that had to be passed in order to establish my suitability for further study.

Four impulses kept me going: first, a creative, sustaining family environment; second, a personal determination not to fail (this being a questionable component of my Protestant heritage); third, the desire to explore once again the world of original sources that I had already experienced at Trinity, Turnbull and Fiji; and finally, the sure guidance of my supervisor, Niel Gunson. It is well known that a generation of Pacific historians have passed through ANU with Niel as their mentor. The extent of his achievements and influence has yet to be appreciated. I should also mention the continuing support of the Head of Department, Gavan Daws, whom I felt nervous about approaching though I should have done so more frequently.

Very early on I decided to focus my studies on Methodism among the Fijians. In the 1970s I was not interested in the initial years of missionary work—the years of Cargill, Cross, Hunt, Hazelwood and Lyth. As I write these reflections I can now say that my interest in this group of remarkable men and their families has been roused. But in 1976 I wanted to look at the emergence of the indigenous, or what I called the national church, the period from 1874 to 1945 when Fiji was a British colony. To some extent this was part of the direction of Pacific historiography in those days, allowing Pacific islanders a large measure of agency in their encounters with the West.

I struggled to place my studies within a theoretical framework. Missiological theories relating to church growth—the work of Donald MacGavran (1970) and Alan Tippett (1954, 1967, 1970, 1971, 1973), himself a missionary in Fiji from 1940 to 1960—remained a blind spot, as too did theories on the church and colonialism.<sup>2</sup> For this theoretical deficiency I blame only myself in not fully searching bibliographies or journal literature. There was no difficulty in producing an original piece of research that provided additional substance to historical knowledge on Fiji. Indeed the primary sources were overwhelming in their quantity so I had plenty to write about. However, my shortcomings on theory led to some speculative conclusions, which await revision.

I completed my doctorate at the end of 1978. Academic opportunities in Pacific history were now limited and my priority was to support a young family. So we moved to Sydney and lived in the inner West, a multiethnic and multicultural area. I took up the position of Head of History at Newington College, a Uniting Church school for boys in Sydney, and remained there for 15 years, long enough to see my three sons through the school. As a historian I was able to extend my reading and knowledge in many areas of world history—mainly European, North American, Asian and of course Australian. I was appointed a Housemaster from 1985 and this helped develop my pastoral skills. The Principal of Newington, Tony Rae, was supportive in many ways, not the least in allowing me to spend six years working on the New South Wales Aboriginal Studies Syllabus Committee, where two courses were prepared for teaching Aboriginal Studies in secondary schools. I conversed with many Aboriginal educationalists and became aware of the history of violence, oppression and paternalism that characterised contact between European migrants and people of the first nation.

Once again Pacific history receded from view. I barely managed to keep in touch, and produced only three papers in 15 years: one on Methodist–Roman Catholic relations in Fiji for the *Journal of Religious History*; a second on Fijian ministers—this the result of Hank Nelson’s invitation to me to contribute to an ANU seminar on Melanesia; the third an article on religious interaction in the Pacific, written at the invitation of my good friend Max Quanchi, whose frequent visits to our family in Sydney helped me to maintain an interest in Pacific happenings (Thornley 1979, 1982, 1993).

In Western culture these days, you are considered almost over the hill as you approach your 50th year. But I think of Ignatius Loyola who founded the Jesuits at the age of 50; his life received purpose from then, though no doubt there had been a long period of prior preparation. Both Carolyn and I experienced sudden changes of direction in our lives in 1993. Carolyn received a call to the Uniting Church ministry while I took up a Lectureship in Church History at the Pacific Theological College (PTC) in Suva. Temporarily our lives were to take different paths in very different places. However, we could not turn our back on these challenges, especially as our sons were now old enough to manage their own lives.

When the position at PTC became available I said I would not compete against a Pacific islander. I felt very strongly, and still do, that academic positions in the Pacific need to be localised at least to the point where Pacific islanders constitute a good majority of teaching staff. In fact there was no suitably qualified Pacific islander and so in 1994, at the age of 46, and assisted by the resources of the Uniting Church in Australia, I began a three year contract at PTC. I was able to specialise in church history, including the wider story of Christianity and more particularly the churches in the Pacific. Fifteen years was a long absence from my chosen area; during that time, however, I had changed as a person and when I was finally able to spend some years teaching church history, my time of school teaching and other experiences were to be of immense benefit in taking up the responsibility.

I discovered for the first time—in a meaningful sense—the world of Christian history, in particular its scope, its profundity and its legitimacy. I realised, in a liberating way, that writing Christian history was not only a valid exercise but an activity steeped in tradition and graced by many fine historians. Among a range of many exponents, I was swept up into the world of Kenneth Latourette and his majestic multivolume history of Christianity (1937–45) and its one-volume distillation (1964); the beautiful histories of the early church and Christian missions written respectively by Henry Chadwick (1967) and Stephen Niell (1964); David Bebbington's concise analysis of history from a Christian perspective (1990); Herbert Butterfield's deliberations on God in history (Butterfield 1949; McIntire 1977) and the Niebuhr brothers' classic works, Reinhold's *Faith and History* (1949) and Richard's *Christ and Culture* (1951).

I experienced a new burst of energy, which found a number of outlets: writing Fiji church history in a popular style for the *Fiji Times*; editing an

issue of the *Journal of Pacific Theology* (Series 2, no. 14, 1995) to commemorate the bicentennial of the London Missionary Society; co-writing with my teaching colleague, John Broadbent, a history of Christianity for PTC's Extension Programme, and co-editing with Doug Munro of the University of the South Pacific a collection of essays on islander missionaries in the Pacific, entitled *The Covenant Makers* (Munro and Thornley 1996).

My major involvement outside of lecturing at PTC has been with developments in the recording of Methodist history in Fiji. In the 160 years since its beginnings, the Fiji Methodist church has had its share of notable historians. The nineteenth century missionary duo of James Calvert and Thomas Williams were the first. They were followed in the twentieth century by the aforementioned Alan Tippett, missionary and missiologist, whose published works ranged widely, including a study of the conversion period in Fiji (Tippett 1954; see also Thornley 1995). Most of Tippett's works on Fiji remained unpublished but well preserved within his important collection of papers in the St Mark's Institute Library, Canberra. The most complete published history of the Methodist Church in Fiji is that of Harold Wood, whose sympathetic account is well regarded and in need of reprinting (1978). Charles Forman (1982) and John Garrett (1982:102–15, 279–88; 1992:155–85, 390–99), in their respective general church histories of the Pacific, have given well-researched and knowledgeable analytical attention to Fiji. Among writers native to Fiji, Epeli Rokowaqa, a Fijian minister in the 1920s and 1930s, was considered an authority on custom and its relationship to the *lotu*. Unfortunately, very little of his wisdom has been recorded for posterity.<sup>3</sup> More recently, Jione Langi<sup>4</sup> has written on Rotuman church history (1992, 1996); the late Paula Niukula<sup>5</sup> on the three 'pillars' of church, government and land, among other things (1994, 1996); and Daniel Mastapha,<sup>6</sup> now living in Australia, has contributed an unpublished thesis on the Fiji-Indian church (condensed as Mastapha 1996).

My most satisfying activity has involved working with Fijian Methodists in their own explorations and discovery of church history. Sevati Tuwere, currently President of the Methodist Church in Fiji, was Lecturer in Theology at PTC when I arrived there. He has a passionate interest in history and delivered a paper on Methodist Church history in Fiji to the New Zealand Wesleyan Historical Society (1987). In his desire to reflect further on Methodism in Fiji, Dr Tuwere suggested in May 1994 that a History Committee be formed under the umbrella of the Methodist Conference; the



aim of the Committee was to focus on encouragement of historical study within the Methodist church community of Fiji.

Our major project to date as a Committee was assisted by a grant from the Overseas Ministries Study Centre in the United States. (The editor of the *Pacific Journal of Theology*, Carrie Walker-Jones, had alerted me to this source of funding.) The Methodist History Committee decided to use this grant for a conference to commemorate the 160th year of Methodist work in Fiji. This took place at Davuilevu Theological College in October 1995. The majority of contributors to this conference were Fijians and much of the proceedings were in the Fijian language. Apart from commissioned papers, representatives from many of the church divisions throughout Fiji presented oral traditions related to the coming of Christianity to their area. I would surmise that many of these stories had not been heard outside of their district of origin and certainly had not been recorded. The proceedings of this conference have been published in a book entitled *Mai Kea Ki Vei: stories of Methodism in Fiji and Rotuma* (Thornley and Vulaono 1996). I was given invaluable help in transcribing the Fijian accounts by Tauga Vulaono.<sup>7</sup>

Motivating my own participation in this event was the conviction that it was time for Fijians to claim ownership of their church history. Tuwere, Niukula and Langi together with Tomasi Kanailagi<sup>8</sup> (1966) and Jovili Meo<sup>9</sup> (1996) have been the more senior pioneers in this field but younger historians such as Vitori Buatava<sup>10</sup> (1996), Tevita Baleiwaqa<sup>11</sup> (1996), Peni Cabenalevu<sup>12</sup> (1996) and Marama Sovaki<sup>13</sup> (1996) are establishing a strong foundation for church history bearing an interpretation that reflects the impact of culture, language and custom, while not necessarily laying claim to exclusivity in their interpretation. This development is long overdue and is essential to provide a well-balanced understanding of Methodist history in Fiji.

I mentioned earlier the sponsorship I received from the United States. I should acknowledge as well the Australian Government who, through their current ambassador, Greg Urwin, have been generous in their support of the National Archives of Fiji. Through their assistance I was able to arrange the purchase of more than 30 reels of microfilm from the Mitchell Library in Sydney. These records contain the correspondence and diaries of the earliest Methodist missionaries in Fiji: Cargill, Cross, Hunt, Lyth, Calvert, Hazelwood and Williams. Previously this material was available only to researchers able to visit the Mitchell, which effectively precluded most Fijians from studying the contact period. Now copies of the records are in Suva. On the day they

were handed over, there was immense interest among the Fijians present at the Archives as they read Cross's first letter from Lakeba, dated 20 October 1835, dispatched to his superiors in London. They read with considerable amusement Cross's description of their forefathers as not unlike the New Zealand Maoris encountered by the missionary, except for the tattooing on the face.

My three-year contract at PTC will finish at the end of 1996. My intention is to return to New South Wales and assist my wife in ministry. I will catch up with my three sons. And I am now keen to write more about Christian encounters in Fiji as witnessed by the first missionaries. But my experience in Fiji has made me realise that it is only fair for my writing to be available in the Fijian language as well. The market for the vernacular will grow as a result of pride in the language and increasing educational opportunities. My place at PTC will be taken by Kambati Uriam from Kiribati and a year later the second church history position will be filled by Featuna'i Liua'ana from Western Samoa. Both these scholars will be graduates of my old Pacific History Department at the Australian National University. The paths may appear similar but in many ways a fresh journey will commence.

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## Notes

1. An editorial intrusion seems in order. Andrew Thornley and I are almost the same age and we grew up in the same town. But we went to different schools and only got to know each other as postgraduate students in Australia. In the Wellington primary schools that I attended (Karori and Hataitai) there were very few Polynesians and the only Maori or islander to visit my parents' home before 1966 was the boyfriend of one of my mother's violin pupils (he later became a professor at Massey University). At Karori School there was sometimes a Chinese and on one occasion an Indian student in a classroom—always the son or daughter of a 'greengrocer'—but that was about the extent of it. This ethnic homogeneity was typical of most urban primary schools—certainly in Wellington and probably in New Zealand generally, so Andrew Thornley had a distinctly unusual primary school experience. I mention this for historical interest given how much the New Zealand situation has changed since the 1950s. [Ed.]
2. The 'theology' of the Canberra-school was inimical to any such line of inquiry. In his manifesto, Jim Davidson asserted that: 'The humble participants in trade and navigation, in settlement and missionary work

become, in the lofty flights of the imperial historians' imaginations, the exponents of a theory of empire rather than what they actually were, men who went about their various tasks unconcerned, in the main, with any grandiose political conceptions' (1966:8). Niel Gunson subscribed to this view (1965, 1969).

3. Despite his legendary reputation among the present generation of Methodist ministers in Fiji, I have unfortunately been unable to locate any written records of Rokowaqa's knowledge.
  4. Minister of the Methodist Church of Fiji and Rotuma, currently serving in Fiji.
  5. Minister of the Methodist Church of Fiji and Rotuma, 1966–96; and President, 1984–86.
  6. President of the Methodist Church of Fiji and Rotuma, 1978–80.
  7. Consultant for Women's Organisations; former President of the National Council for Women in Fiji.
  8. General Secretary, Methodist Church in Fiji and Rotuma.
  9. Principal, Pacific Theological College.
  10. Former Lecturer in Church History and Rector, Pacific Regional Seminary.
  11. Lecturer in Church History, Davuilevu Theological College.
  12. Lecturer in Church History, Davuilevu Theological College.
  13. From Bureta, Ovalau.
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