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XII.

*JOHN WILLIAMS.*

The martyr missionary of Polynesia.

BORN JUNE 27, 1796. DIED NOV. 20, 1839.



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THE story of the life and ministry of John Williams will ever occupy a prominent place in the history of missions; for to the intense devotion and zeal which he brought to his work was added an originality of method which has benefited all who came after him.

In early life there were no marked indications of the part he was to take in the great work of the world's evangelization.

He was suddenly brought to a decision, and his life instantly changed from one of aimless indifference to that of enthusiastic activity, with a distinct and determined purpose in view, to the accomplishment of which he brought to bear all of his genius and attractive personality.

He was born June 27, 1796, in the same

year, and within a few weeks of the time, that the London Missionary Society sent out the first missionary to the South Sea Islands. This band of thirty missionaries sailed in the *Duff*, Aug. 10, 1796.

In the little village of Tottenham, England, six miles north of London, he was born, and lived until fourteen years of age, when it was thought by his parents time for him to begin his business training; and he was apprenticed to an ironmonger in London for seven years. From this contract he was released at the end of six years to take up his great work in the South Seas.

Life in a great city then, as now, was a severe test of the Christian character of a young lad; and after four years of its diversions and temptations, we find him at eighteen drifting with the multitude.

He was standing one Sunday evening on a street corner, waiting for some companions who were to meet him there, and go with him to the Highbury Tea-Gardens, when a lady, the wife of his em-

ployer, on her way to church, passed ; recognizing him, she turned back and asked him to go to church. He refused, but she felt constrained to urge ; her persistence, and the failure of his chums to appear, decided him, and with reluctance he accompanied her to the old Whitefield Tabernacle. The sermon from the text, "What shall it profit a man if he gain the whole world and lose his own soul?" proved to be the word in season ; for he went out from the house a new creature, immediately forsaking his worldly companions and sinful ways.

He became a teacher in the Sunday-school, and at once entered upon a new and higher life, availing himself of every means for self-improvement which would better fit him for usefulness in his Christian life.

To his success in this direction very much credit is due the Rev. Matthew Wilks, then pastor of the Tabernacle. Mr. Wilks was an eloquent preacher, full of missionary zeal, a faithful pastor, with a keen

discernment of character, which led him to see in John Williams capabilities for great usefulness, and to invite him to join a class of young men whom he then had under instruction for the ministry. These studies were continued for two years, until his appointment by the London Missionary Society.

It was customary in this church, which stood foremost in missionary enthusiasm of any in London, to have quarterly missionary meetings; and it was at one of these meetings that John Williams felt his first call to the work. Soon after he sent his application, with these words: "If this, and the account which the Rev. Matthew Wilks can give of me, should not meet with your approval, I hope and pray that you will on no account for the sake of my soul offer me the least encouragement."

He, with eight others, one of whom was the noted Robert Moffat, were ordained and set apart to the missionary ministry, in Surrey Chapel, London, on the 30th of September, 1816.

It was at first intended that John Williams and Robert Moffat should go out together, but objection was made on account of the extreme youthfulness of both. In the words of the Rev. Dr. Waugh: "Tha twa callants were ower young ta gang t'gether." But Mr. Williams found a companion before going. He was married to Miss Mary Chauner, a young lady in the same church, of devoted Christian character, who had long cherished the desire to be a missionary; and she was to him, through all of his varied and hazardous experiences, a strong support.

The young husband, with his pretty, girlish-looking bride, sailed with other missionaries for the South Seas on the 17th of November, 1816; and exactly twelve months from that date landed at Eimeo, one of the Society group.

His active mind and ready hands were never at a loss for something to do; and he proceeded to build a boat, which he saw was greatly needed by both missionaries and natives. This was the first of five

boats built by him during his nineteen years of ministry on these islands. In ten months he had, by a method of his own, mastered the difficult language, which usually took three years, and was ready to preach to the natives.

At this time there came to the mission a call from the neighboring island of Huahine for teachers; and Mr. Williams, with two other missionaries and their wives, responded to the call, and started a new mission there.

It was not long, however, before a call came to this mission from the island of Raiatea. Tamatao, the king, who came with the message, had been converted to Christianity while on a visit to Tahiti, and on returning had induced some of his subjects to join him; but they had been sorely persecuted on account of their faith, and when they came to the missionaries for help, it was decided that Mr. Williams should go with King Tamatao to his beautiful island. Here dates the beginning of his remarkably successful career of mis-



sionary labors, extending to so large a number of those benighted peoples. With Raiatea of the Society group as his first centre or base of operations, Raratonga of the Hervey group as his second, and Upolu of the Samoan group as his third, he was able to spread the gospel to most of the islands in each of these groups.

He was planning a similar work among the New Hebrides, and had gone there intending to start a fourth mission centre on the island of Erromango at the time of his sudden and tragic death.

It is said that after eighteen years the gospel had through his instrumentality been given to a population of about three hundred thousand, while many more had felt the uplifting benefits of civilization which he had so skilfully introduced among them.

Raiatea was considered a very important point, being both a religious and political centre. The work here was, as at other points, wonderfully successful, by reason of his personal power in drawing the natives

to himself, and his wisdom and tactful management of them.

His teaching was comprehensive; and they were not only instructed in spiritual things, but to an unusual extent were trained in the arts of civilization. Captains of ships visiting the islands were unanimous in their praise of the character of his work.

His first step here was to draw the natives together from their isolated homes, where they were living in hostility, into a settlement, giving them an object-lesson in the building of his own house. The plastered walls, decorated with coloring obtained from the coral, and the sofas, chairs, and tables of his own manufacture, all greatly interested them. The king and others were induced to follow his example, until very soon there was a little town of one thousand, extending two miles along the coast.

Aiming always to keep them busy, he stimulated them to activity by various means. He built another boat, ingen-

iously tying the planks together with native cord, then offering fifty nails to the one who would make one like it,

He also erected a sugar-mill for the use of the natives, and encouraged the culture of the native cane. They soon had many plantations under cultivation, and various products for transportation.

When the increasing number of Christians made it necessary to build a new chapel, they were also prepared to take another step in civilization.

This new church building was a unique structure, in that it had an apartment for a court-room, in which, the day after the dedication, when twenty-four hundred persons were present, the people again convened and adopted a code of laws which he had prepared for them. The vote for adoption was unanimous, and the brother of Tamatao was appointed chief justice.

Their language was reduced to writing, and schools established, into which were gathered hundreds of children.

Mr. Williams gave special attention to

the training of natives as teachers and leaders, sending them out to do pioneer work on other islands, under his direction. Mr. Williams had rare qualities for this supervisory work, and also the ability to select those who were capable of doing the work.

His son calls attention to the fact that "he was the first of our modern missionaries so to use native agents." This method has been extensively adopted by the missionaries who followed him, and their success proves the wisdom of it.

His heart was continually going out to those beyond him. He could not content himself within the narrow limits of one little reef, and he made frequent visits to neighboring islands.

He said, "Had I a ship at my command, not an island in the Pacific but should, God permitting, be visited, and teachers sent to direct the wandering feet of the heathen to happiness and to heaven."

At one time, being obliged to go to

Sydney for medical treatment, he, with permission of the Missionary Societies' agent, bought a ship, which he loaded with food, clothing, and useful articles for the islanders, also some sheep, cows, and a present from the governor to the island chiefs. He also engaged a man to go with him to teach the natives agriculture. In this vessel, which he named the Endeavor, he returned to Raiatea with great joy. By using it as a trading-vessel, he would be able to keep away other ships which brought nothing but evil. He called them "the very arks of Satan," and considered the Endeavor a profitable investment, if only to keep these away. By it also he would get beyond his one little reef, and begin on his cherished project of planting a mission on every island of the Pacific.

He made one tour on the Endeavor, taking six native teachers, who were left on different islands, and discovered Rarotonga, which later became his home for a time. In his journal at this time we read: "I hope for great things, pray for

great things, and confidently expect great things."

But much to his disappointment and sorrow, and contrary to his judgment, the directors of the London Missionary Society decided that a ship was not a necessary part of a missionary's outfit, and the Endeavor was sold.

They did not understand then as they did later the breadth and scope of the work he had in mind.

When the mission at Raiatea was well established, he transferred his home and labors to Raratonga, of the Hervey group.

Here, as elsewhere, he won all hearts by his strong personality, and by the stimulating example of his ceaseless activity was able to do for them all that had been accomplished at Raiatea; so that the mission at Raratonga became a stronghold, sending out its trained workers to all of the adjacent islands.

The natives of the Samoan Islands had long been considered the most savage of any in the South Seas; and John Williams,

for this reason, no doubt, had had for several years a great desire to carry the gospel to them. When, therefore, the enterprise at Raratonga was in turn sufficiently established, he felt the renewed call to go to Samoa so strongly that he could no longer resist; and with what seems to us an inspiration from above, he went to work to build a ship large enough to carry him on this long journey of two thousand miles. This feat has been looked upon as bordering on the miraculous, from the fact that he had neither machinery nor materials to work with.

He named this vessel the *Messenger of Peace*; and in it, after visiting all the islands where he had succeeded in starting the work, he proceeded on his way to Samoa.

We cannot in this condensed sketch go into the details of this interesting voyage. Suffice it to say, that the same methods were followed that had been employed on previous smaller tours; viz., teachers were left wherever it was thought to be safe; and where the savage condition of the

natives rendered this impossible, efforts were made to induce a few of them to come on board the ship, to go to some neighboring island, where every means would be used to instruct them in the truth, so that when he returned to his home again, a little seed might be sown, and later it might be possible to place a teacher with them.

— The way seemed to open before him; and in less than two years from this first visit to Samoa, a complete change had taken place in the savage Samoans,—chapels were built, and schools were established everywhere.

Having now spent seventeen years in this arduous work, and feeling the need of change, he, with his family, consisting of his wife and two sons, returned to England, where he spent four years, which were considered by many quite as fruitful of good as any spent in the South Sea. During this time he wrote two books, had the Raratongan New Testament printed, spoke to many large audiences, and raised



£4,000 for the purchase of a missionary ship, and for the establishment of a college at Tahiti for the education of native teachers.

In 1838 he and his wife again embarked for the South Seas, taking ten other missionaries in the *Camden* (the ship which had been purchased for him in London), landing at Upolu, which place he then considered his home. He spent a few months here, and then made a tour of all the stations where he had established missions on the Society and Hervey Islands, being gone over four months. After a few months of rest and preparation at Upolu, he started on what he called his "great voyage" to the New Hebrides. For some reason he seemed to be unusually impressed in the anticipations of this undertaking, and looked upon it as more important than anything he had yet accomplished. At his farewell sermon the day before starting, Nov. 3, 1839, all were deeply affected. On the sixteenth, when within sixty miles of the New Hebrides, he

wrote in a letter to a friend, "We shall be there early to-morrow morning. This evening we are to have a special prayer-meeting. Oh, how much depends upon the efforts of to-morrow! *Will the savages receive us or not?* Perhaps at this moment you or some other kind friend may be wrestling with God for us. I am all anxiety. . . . I brought twelve missionaries with me; two have settled at a beautiful island of Rotuma; the ten are for the New Hebrides and New Caledonia. The approaching week is to me the most important of my life."

They stopped at two islands, but did not land, and endeavored to create such friendly feeling that in the near future they might be able to land and leave teachers. Landing at Port Resolution, they had, in Mr. Williams's words, "one of the most interesting visits we have yet been privileged to have with the heathen in their barbarous and savage state." Thence on to fatal Erromanga, dark Erromanga. So intense was his anxiety in re-

gard to future developments, that he slept very little the night previous, and on this night made the last entry in his diary as follows:—

MONDAY, A. M., 18TH. — This is a memorable day . . . and the records of the events will exist after those who have taken an active part in them have retired into the shades of oblivion; and *the results of this day will be*— These were the last words he ever wrote.

Landing at Dillon's Bay, Captain Morgan thus described the island: "The shore looked most inviting, placid stillness swept along the romantic rocks, and the mountains in the distance presented a most enchanting scene."

Encouraged by their previous friendly reception, they ventured to go out among the natives who were gathering in groups on the shore, Mr. Williams and Mr. Harris going some distance, carrying presents and making friendly advances. Suddenly there was a terrible yell, and Mr. Harris was seen running, the savages after him. Cap-

tain Morgan and Mr. Cunningham, who were near the boat, barely escaped, but the others were stricken down.

Mr. Williams succeeded in reaching the beach, and the waters of the bay were colored with the blood from his wounds; and here would that we could say that the bereaved ones on the ship had the Christian privilege of tenderly caring for the bodies of their dead comrades, giving that little comfort to the breaking heart of her who now all unconscious of the terrible fate was patiently awaiting the coming of her loved one; but this dark picture has no such relief, for the Erromangas were cannibals.

On a tablet in Apia in Samoa is this inscription: "Sacred to the memory of the Rev. John Williams, Father of the Samoan and other missions, aged 43 years and 5 months, who was killed by the cruel natives of Erromanga, on November 20, 1839, while endeavoring to plant the Gospel of Peace on their shores."