JUDY INGLIS MEMORIAL PRIZE ESSAY 1978

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The closing date for entries in the 1979 competition is 15 December 1979. A prize of \$50 is awarded for the essay judged to be the best, and publication in a suitable professional journal is anticipated. The competition is restricted to registered students at tertiary institutions in Australia. Essays must be of publishable quality, no more than 5,000 words, and written during 1979. Two copies, clearly typed on one side of the paper only, should be sent to: The Convenor, Judy Inglis Memorial Prize Committee, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, P.O. Box 553, Canberra City, A.C.T. 2601.

The 1978 competition attracted 35 entries from tertiary institutions throughout Australia. The judges were pleased to find entries from students training in anthropology, education, history, politics and sociology, and were impressed with the high standards of research and writing.

The Editorial Board of Aboriginal History has great pleasure in accepting for publication the winning essay for 1978.

THE FAILURE OF THE NEW SOUTH WALES MISSIONS TO THE ABORIGINES BEFORE 1845

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It was over thirty years after the first settlement of New South Wales that the English missionary societies began specific attempts to evangelise the Australian Aborigines. These endeavours were part of a post-Napoleonic missionary fervour¹ and coincided with the indifference to the religious needs of emigrants and colonists which had been a characteristic of the antipodean settlement during the war period². One feature of the early missionary efforts in New South Wales was that they were jointly funded by the missionary societies and the colonial government. The missionary societies no doubt hoped to repeat the 'success' of the L.M.S. in Tahiti a few years earlier, but they never channelled the money and resources into New South Wales that they did into the South Seas islands, even though they believed the Aboriginal population to be about three million.³ J.D. Bollen concludes that the missionary societies were not

¹ Bollen 1977a: 361.

² Bollen 1977a: 361-362.

³ Bollen 1977b: 268 note 24.

altogether indifferent to the Aborigines but no deep set hope of wondrous tale pointed to Australia as a land of the Cross.⁴ There were other visions and other priorities. Cook and Banks had carried home an arcadian vision of the South Seas islands, and Rev. Thomas Haweis acknowledged the influence of their journals in his decision to organise a mission to Tahiti.⁵ Marsden, an agent of the Church Missionary Society and the London Missionary Society, displayed a 'selective commitment to the indigenous races of the region' manifested by his preference for the claims of the Maoris over the Aborigines.⁶ The Church Missionary Society, under the influence of John Grant and other Clapham Sect members, was interested in evangelising the heathen of the great sub-continent of India⁷ and in the 1840s mysterious China would enthuse the missionaries of the various societies.⁸ No great vision of an extended kingdom of God shimmered over the forgotten Australian continent. In a sermon in 1795 Thomas Haweis curtly dismissed New Holland as a 'receptacle of our outcasts of society', and went on to describe the mystique of the neighbouring South Seas islands — lands like the 'fabled Gardens of the Hesperides' wherein lived exotic savages awaiting the word of God.⁹

The priorities of missionary societies with limited funds at their command reflect the influence of the secular mystiques that surrounded places like Africa, India, China and the South Seas. Under such influences, their commitment to the Australian Aborigines was half hearted at best. It has been estimated that the expenditure of £52,000 from colonial revenues between 1821 and 1842 was about ten times greater than the combined net expenditure of the C.M.S., L.M.S. and W.M.S.¹⁰

The British and colonial governments were motivated by a mixture of humanitarianism and pragmatism in their support of Australian missions. The British government was often the prime mover in forming contracts with the missionary societies to evangelise the Aborigines.¹¹ James Stephen at the Colonial Office represented the Christian humanitarianism of his age¹² and successive governments during the 1830s found that men with similar ideals formed a powerful lobby in this high water mark of humanitarian concern in colonial affairs.¹³ On a more pragmatic level

⁴ Bollen 1977b:290-291.

⁵ Smith 1969:106.

⁶ Yarwood 1977:16.

⁷ Howse 1971:14, 77.

⁸ Bollen 1977b:287.

⁹ Quoted by Smith 1969:106-107.

¹⁰ Bollen 1977b:288.

¹¹ Bollen 1977b:288.

¹² Knaplund 1953:17.

¹³ Furley 1969:41.

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the British government was motivated by an expectation of concrete results in the form of improved race relations. In writing to Governor Bourke in 1831 on the agreement reached with the Church Missionary Society to form a mission at Wellington Valley, Viscount Goderich anticipated 'much advantage to the Natives themselves, as well as to the European Settlers who at present are exposed to the mischievous consequences of the predatory lives and habits of their neighbours'.¹⁴ The local branch of the Aborigines Protection Society in 1838 perceived the same results from the raising of 'the Moral and Civil Condition of the Aborigines'.¹⁵ If expectations were high in the 1830s, they were soon to be dashed.

By the early 1840s the governments in Britain and Australia concluded that the missions had failed to achieve the expectations held out for them. Lord Stanley wrote to Gipps in 1842 of his 'great doubts as to the wisdom or propriety of continuing the Missions any longer'.¹⁶ Stanley's conclusions had been based on the missionaries' own reports which were anything but encouraging. Gipps was similarly sceptical, and a thirteen fold reduction in Crown Land revenues in 1842¹⁷ prompted the withdrawal of government subsidies to the missions at Wellington Valley, Geelong and Moreton Bay. Even the primary aim of converting the Aborigines to Christianity was not realised. By 1848 the Lake Macquarie, Wellington Valley, Nundah, Buntingdale, Dunwich and Langhorne missions had all spluttered to an end. Only the Apsley Mission struggled on but it too was soon to fade away. By any yardstick, the first missions to the Aborigines were failures.

In determining reasons for this failure, one must take into account the fact that missionaries in other parts of the world were successful although many of their 'successes', such as that in Tahiti, were motivated in the initial stage by political considerations rather than genuine conversion.¹⁸ Missionary methods in Australia were basically similar to those in other parts of the world, and the missionaries themselves were drawn from much the same social background. The attitudes which missionaries held towards the Aborigines were no worse than those held by missionaries in the South Seas. Hugh Thomas could describe the Fijians as 'the very dregs of Mankind or Human Nature'¹⁹ and the Rev. Richard Armstrong could write of the Marquesans that 'the blackest ink

¹⁴ Goderich to Bourke, 20 December 1831, *H.R.A.* 1, XVI:477.

¹⁵ *Colonist*, 19 October 1838.

¹⁶ Stanley to Gipps, 20 December 1842, *H.R.A.* 1, XXII:437.

¹⁷ 'Return of revenue arising from the sale of Crown lands . . .', Gipps to Stanley, 17 December 1843, *H.R.A.* 1, XXII:417.

¹⁸ Gunson 1978:283.

¹⁹ Extract of a letter, 18 June 1818, quoted by Gunson 1978:197.

that ever stained paper is none too dark to describe them'.²⁰ In this context the derogatory remarks of Australian missionaries such as John Harper, who saw the Aborigines 'degraded . . . almost on a level with the brute'²¹ are not extraordinary. It is not sufficient to account for the failure of the Australian missionaries by chronicling their negative attitudes to the Aborigines, by referring to their bickering and personal weaknesses or by showing how insensitive they were to native culture and values. In these regards they were little different from contemporaries in other mission fields.

The cultural chauvinism and personal weaknesses of the Australian missionaries meant that any success would be long in coming. To this extent, the half-hearted backing of the missionary societies meant that the persistence shown in the South Seas islands would not be evident in Australia. The government's withdrawal of funds in 1842 ensured that further missionary endeavours would not be funded from that source. However this only explains why the missionary ventures were not persisted with and why new endeavours were not made in the 1840s. It does not explain why the early missions failed. To answer this question one must look at the unique nature of Aboriginal society and the unique nature of European settlement in Australia.

In the South Seas and in other mission fields, missionaries were addressing themselves to people who were accustomed to reasonably sedentary life styles. From their mission bases, missionaries in such areas could reasonably expect to communicate with significant numbers of natives. Furthermore the permanent missionary presence amongst a sedentary people offered greater opportunities for a sustained presentation of the message. In Australia, however, the bountiful food supplies so typical of Polynesia were absent, and the Aborigines were consequently disposed to a nomadic existence in search of food. The very establishment of a mission as a fixed focus of activity implied that the Aborigines should forego their nomadic life styles and lead a sedentary life on the stations. The Aborigines resisted this implicit injunction and all the missions had difficulties in keeping the Aborigines on the stations.²² J.C.S. Handt complained of the fitful impact of his message: 'The progress they have made has been but small hitherto, as the Children, like the Adults do not Stay for any length of time together, and forget in the bush part of what they have learned'.²³

²⁰ *Hawaiian Spectator* (Honolulu, 1838), quoted by Gunson 1978:198.

²¹ Extract from his Journal, in Woolmington 1973:18.

²² Woolmington 1974:4.

²³ 'Report of transactions relative to the condition of the Aborigines in the District of Moreton Bay for the year 1841', (sub enclosure), Gipps to Stanley, 11 March 1842, *H.R.A.* 1, XXI:739.

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One response to this situation was an attempt to keep the children on the mission stations. When Crown Land Commissioner Allman wrote in 1841 of his belief in the benefits of 'separating the Children of the present Generation from their parents and placing them under competent tuition',²⁴ he was echoing a sentiment that could be traced back to the Revs. Samuel Marsden and Richard Johnson in the early years of the Colony. The Rev. William Watson of Wellington Valley was so enthusiastic in his pursuit of this policy that his colleague James Gunther reported that Aboriginal women hid their children upon the approach of the missionaries.²⁵ But even the extreme measures of Watson did not meet with great success. The Aboriginal children were ultimately attracted to their own people where a secure and known life-style, and the prospect of marriage after puberty, acted as a far greater lure than the alien life style of the mission. It seems to have been a 'well known fact' among missionaries and settlers that 'Aboriginal Males, however useful and steady they may have been among Europeans when Boys, as soon as they grow up to manhood, they fall back into their wandering unsettled habits'.²⁶

Attempts were made by various missionaries to wander with the Aborigines. The German missionaries at Moreton Bay saw the need to itinerate with the Aborigines as an 'imperative duty'²⁷ and duly attempted to do so but only for brief periods since missionary labour was always needed for the growing of food at the station. This approach was also tried by the Buntingdale missionaries but only for periods of three or four weeks²⁸ and in later years the Rev. William Watson estimated that he covered 'thousands of miles' in evangelising Aborigines.²⁹ However the thought of moving permanently with the Aborigines was never seriously entertained by the missionaries. When George Langhorne suggested in a letter to the Colonial Secretary that part of his time be spent itinerating with the Aborigines, an immediate reply ridiculed the idea as detracting from the 'grand design' of forming a village.³⁰ At best itinerating was seen as a temporary measure which would ultimately become unnecessary when the Aborigines 'settled down'. At worst itinerating was seen as counter-productive because it cut across the grain of those civilising habits the missionaries were trying to establish.

²⁴ Allman to Colonial Secretary, 9 November 1841, (enclosure D1), Gipps to Stanley, 11 March 1842, *H.R.A.* 1, XXI:743.

²⁵ 'Annual report of the mission to the Aborigines at Wellington Valley, New Holland for the year 1841', (enclosure A), Gipps to Stanley, 11 March 1842, *H.R.A.* 1, XXI:736.

²⁶ *H.R.A.* 1, XXI:736.

²⁷ Eipper 1841:14.

²⁸ Nelson 1965:61.

²⁹ 'A brief account of the origin and present state of the Apsley Aboriginal Mission, Wellington, New South Wales', (enclosure No. 12), Fitzroy to Grey, 17 May 1847, *H.R.A.* 1, XXVI:574.

³⁰ 'Additional memorandum by way of instructions to Mr George Langhorne . . .', 9 December 1836, Gurner Manuscripts, pp. 44-45.

By establishing mission stations in specific localities, the missionaries reduced the potential number of Aborigines with whom they could come in contact. Threlkeld's station at Lake Macquarie was situated within the boundaries of the Awabakal people, but Threlkeld failed to realise that the Awabakal were only a horde or sub-group of a tribe that extended right along the central coast from Tuggerah to Cape Hawke, and up the Hunter Valley.³¹ On one occasion Threlkeld did realise that the language of the Awabakal was understood by Aborigines with whom he came in contact at Maitland,³² but he made no attempt to extend his ministry to the people of the Hunter River valley. Indeed to have done so he would have had to adopt an itinerating ministry since none of the other hordes related by language to the Awabakal people would have settled on a mission station sited within Awabakal territory. As it was, Threlkeld's efforts remained directed at the people of Lake Macquarie whose numbers were probably never great.

Although the Wellington Valley mission was situated within the boundaries of the extensive Wiradjuri tribe, the missionaries would have nonetheless established regular contact with but a small horde of that tribe. It was not until 1840 that the Rev. James Gunther attempted to establish the extent of the Wiradjuri language³³ and it is probable that the missionaries never realised that the majority of the Wiradjuri people lived on the plains and in river valleys south and west of Wellington.³⁴ The missionary efforts were directed at a small number of Wiradjuri people on the northern extremity of tribal lands.

The Buntingdale mission straddled the boundary of two tribes. It might be thought, then, that the missionaries there would have been able to evangelise a greater number of Aborigines. However the siting of this mission produced difficulties of a sort not experienced at other missions. The mission itself was a buffer zone between two hostile tribes. One observer noted the consequent problems when he wrote that the site had been chosen 'in ignorance of the political relations of the different tribes'.³⁵

By the very siting of the missions and the nature of tribal Aboriginal society the number of Aborigines contacted by missionaries remained small. Even so, those Aborigines contacted resisted the Christian message. Part of the reason for this can be found in the fact that the missionaries could offer the Aborigines no tangible non-spiritual benefits from the adoption of Christianity. In places where the missionaries were successful such as Tonga, Hawaii, Tahiti and Fiji, the native chiefs were aware of substantial political benefits that would accrue from an adoption of

³¹ See Gunson 1974, 1:30 note 14.

³² See Threlkeld's annual report, 1837, in Gunson 1974, 1:135.

³³ *Colonist*, 8 August 1840.

³⁴ See Tindale 1974.

³⁵ Nelson 1965:63.

Christianity. Even in parts of Melanesia where society was not chief-dominated, material advantages attracted people towards Christianity.³⁶ But the missionaries in Australia could offer no such incentives. The accumulation of political power, which was probably never pronounced in traditional Aboriginal society, became the more irrelevant in a situation where Aboriginal society was disintegrating under the impact of European settlement. The few benefits the Aborigines could obtain from contact with the Europeans were more readily obtainable in the settlements and farms than on the mission stations. Threlkeld complained that one of his erstwhile students was displaying 'his knowledge at Newcastle town, where drink has attractions far more strong than my study possesses at the Lake'.³⁷ All the missionaries could offer was the occasional handout of food and even this was done reluctantly since in many instances the missionaries had difficulty feeding themselves.

The alternative life-style that the missionaries held forth as worthy of emulation would have seemed strange indeed to a nomadic people who hunted and gathered as an immediate response to the need for food. The virtues which John Locke wove around the tilling of the soil were not attended by tangible rewards on the mission stations. Crops failed year after year. As Gunther lamented:

Could we succeed with the cultivation of wheat and gardens, it would prove, I am certain, a great stimulus for exertion and improvement for several young men. But when almost every year the prospects of their labour are frustrated they become naturally quite disheartened. Our wheat has again entirely failed and our gardens are a scene of desolation and barrenness.³⁸

There was nothing attractive in the life style that the missionaries held to be so evidently worthy.

But it was not only the Christian life-style that the Aborigines ignored, but the basic Christian message. All the missionaries bemoaned the lack of converts after years of effort. Glimpses of an Aboriginal perspective on European ways can be gleaned from missionary journals and may in part explain the resistance of the Aborigines to the 'white man's religion. Many Europeans reported that the Aborigines believed them to be spirits of dead tribesmen. William Buckley had experienced that belief in his contact with the Port Phillip tribes.³⁹ Escaped convicts in the Moreton Bay area such as John Baker, Thomas Pamphlett, Samuel Derrington and James Davis were all 'recognised' as reincarnated tribesmen by the people with whom they fell in and afforded the full rights of the

³⁶ Allen 1968:38.

³⁷ See Threlkeld's annual report, 1836, in Gunson 1974, 1:133.

³⁸ 'Annual report of the mission to the Aborigines at Wellington Valley, New Holland, for the year 1841', (enclosure A), Gipps to Stanley, 11 March 1842, *H.R.A.* 1, XXI:736.

³⁹ Morgan 1967:21.

initiated, even to the extent of the scarification being 'redone'.⁴⁰ The white men were also attributed certain magical powers. George Clark, the escaped convict, reported that he was treated as a 'superior being' by the people of the Kamilaroi tribe with whom he wandered for five years.⁴¹ Magical qualities seem also to have been attributed to the white man's cattle. The *Sydney Morning Herald* reported in October 1842 that the Aborigines in the north west of New South Wales were spearing cattle for their 'tongues and the kidney fat only'.⁴² The correspondent informed the Herald's readers that the Aborigines were holding a bora ceremony in the district, and that 'they danced with fat upon their heads and beef upon their spears'.⁴³ This accords with the findings of recent anthropology where it is reported that the Aborigines frequently used kidney fat from certain native animals in sacred ceremonies and magic rituals.⁴⁴ All this suggests that in the initial contact period the Aborigines believed that their world had been peopled by the reincarnations of dead men who brought with them from the world of the dead animals with magic qualities. Missionaries, too, came across this same belief. As late as 1864 the Rev. William Ridley reported that the Kamilaroi word for white person was 'wunda' meaning 'ghost'.⁴⁵ (Interestingly the word is still used by Aboriginal people in north western New South Wales to this day). An extension of this belief was that the Aboriginal would come back as a European after he died. This belief was widespread. Rev. Christopher Eipper wrote that 'they seem to hold that after death they will be like whites, and that all white men have been black fellows before'.⁴⁶ At Lake Macquarie Threlkeld was told by a mourner at an Aboriginal funeral that the dead woman was now in England.⁴⁷ At Wellington Valley the Rev. William Watson recorded how this belief could undermine the Christian message. An Aboriginal in this area held that there was no point to becoming like a European in this life since he would return as a European in the next.⁴⁸

⁴⁰ Cilento and Lack 1959:75-82..

⁴¹ *Sydney Gazette*, 8 December 1831.

⁴² *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 October 1842, (editorial).

⁴³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 October 1842, (leader entitled 'Namoi River').

⁴⁴ Elkin 1977: 42.

⁴⁵ Ridley 1864:11.

⁴⁶ Eipper 1841:10.

⁴⁷ 'London Missionary Society, Mission to the Aborigines New South Wales' (circular), 8 October 1828, in Gunson 1974, 1:99.

⁴⁸ I am indebted to Mrs Jean Woolmington of the University of New England for this reference (from the C.M.S. microfilms of the journals of Rev. William Watson in her possession), and for the implication to be derived from it.

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It would have been meaningless for the missionaries to stress the imperative of Christianity in an area where the above belief was persistent.

The emphasis which Christianity placed on death and the after life horrified the Aborigines who invariably asked the missionaries to desist when the subject was mentioned.⁴⁹ However the entire Christian message with its complex concepts of sin, repentance, redemption, resurrection, grace etc. relied on a contemplation of one's own death and the consequences. Something akin to a tabu was associated with death in Aboriginal society and certainly the name of a dead person was never mentioned.⁵⁰ There may well have been a cultural and psychological resistance to the reflections on death which the missionaries were continually attempting to encourage. While ever Aboriginal religious beliefs remained intact the task of the missionary would have been virtually impossible.

The missionaries in Australia were singularly unsuccessful in overthrowing Aboriginal religion. In Polynesia the religion was usually associated with idols, vengeful Gods and tabus. In true Biblical style the missionaries there were able to desecrate the idols and break the tabus and, by suffering no ill consequences, prove the impotence of the old gods.⁵¹ In Hawaii the overthrow of the old tabu system pre-dated the missionaries and was the result of the breaking of tabus unwittingly by early traders who suffered no ill consequences.⁵² In Australia however the Aboriginal religion was not susceptible to such attacks. Like the Christians, the Aborigines believed in a spirit world unseen yet ever present. The missionaries could not challenge the power of the spirits. Europeans, being spirits reincarnated might be expected to break 'tabus' which to the Aborigine were inviolable. By accommodating the European presence to their religion, the Aborigines were able to resist, even ignore, the attack on their beliefs made by the missionaries. The Aboriginal religion persisted despite the efforts of the missionaries. As late as the 1890s initiation ceremonies, the most sacred of all Aboriginal ceremonies, were still being practised in north west New South Wales.⁵³ While ever Aboriginal tribal identity and the totemic system remained reasonably intact, the old religion would persist, not to be undermined until Aborigines themselves violated their own tabus, especially those associated with marriage. In some instances the tribal marriage laws persisted in New South Wales until well into this century.⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Woolmington 1974: 4.

⁵⁰ Eipper 1841:10.

⁵¹ Gunson 1978:209.

⁵² Dodge 1965:117-119.

⁵³ Mathews 1895:411.

⁵⁴ Reay 1945:309-312.

So far I have examined the failure of the Australian missionaries in terms of the limitations of their outreach both in numbers of Aborigines evangelised and the lack of relevance of their message. However there is another dimension to the failure of the Australian missionaries. The presentation of the gospel to the Aborigines occurred within the context of a rapidly expanding European settlement. This fact distinguished the mission work in Australia from that in the South Seas and must go a long way towards explaining why the successes enjoyed by missionaries in other parts of the world were not experienced in Australia. It has already been shown that the missionaries could reach only small numbers of Aborigines for irregular periods due to the very nature and siting of mission stations. Under the impact of European settlement the numbers of Aborigines in contact with the missions dwindled annually. This was a feature of all the missions for none was established very far from European settlement. Threlkeld's mission at Lake Macquarie was abandoned in 1840 because there were no Aborigines left in the district to evangelise.⁵⁵ By 1848 the Wesleyan mission at Buntingdale was admitted to be a failure and it was further implied that it was difficult to get any native children to attend the school.⁵⁶ As early as 1839 a secular opinion maintained that there were only twelve Aborigines permanently resident at Wellington Valley.⁵⁷ By 1842 Gunther himself admitted that 'the Number of Natives staying with us has for a long time been very small indeed'.⁵⁸ In his 1837 report Threlkeld outlined the reasons, he believed, for the decline in Aboriginal numbers. Threlkeld listed drunkenness; diseases such as influenza, measles and whooping cough; and 'the swelling tide of Emigration which has universally swallowed up the petty streams of Barbarism'.⁵⁹ His analysis might well have been applied to all other missions.

The European settlements, far from acting in concert with the missions, provided those evils the missionaries most abhorred. The German missionaries complained that Aboriginal women were becoming prostitutes in the nearby penal settlement of Brisbane and that diseases were spreading disastrously, especially 'that shocking malady which Divine Providence has ordained as the due reward for profligacy'.⁶⁰ At Wellington Valley, William Watson complained that there was 'scarcely a hut . . . where there is not a native female living in adulterous connexion with

⁵⁵ See Threlkeld's final report, 1841, in Gunson 1974, 1:169.

⁵⁶ Superintendent of Port Phillip, Evidence before the Select Committee on Aborigines and Protectorate, 18 November 1848, reprinted in Woolmington 1973:100.

⁵⁷ Testimony of Henry Fische Gisbourne Esq. before the Executive Council of New South Wales, (enclosure A2 to Minute No. 12 of 1839), Gipps to Russell, 7 May 1840, *H.R.A.* 1, XX:618.

⁵⁸ James Gunther, letter 25 June 1842, in Woolmington 1973:98.

⁵⁹ See Threlkeld's annual report, 1837, in Gunson 1974, 1:135.

⁶⁰ Eipper 1841:10.

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the European inmates'.⁶¹ Watson even instanced an example of a stockman living with a girl of eight or nine years.⁶² In such a context it is hardly surprising that the missionaries' injunctions against sexual licence had minimal impact.

The obvious differences between the Christian ideal and the behaviour of the European settlers was certainly not lost on those Aborigines who were in a position to make the comparison. Rev. William Ridley reported in 1855:

One poor fellow on the Moonie addressed me in a long and pathetic harangue on the wrongs which his people have suffered at the hands of the white man, and urged upon me, as I had been telling the blacks not to do evil, to go round and tell the white men not to wrong the blacks, especially not to take away their wives'.⁶³

For a people for whom religious and social laws were one and the same, the behaviour of the Europeans, must have seemed strange indeed. One group of white men put forward the laws of a supposed omnipotent god while another group disobeyed those laws with impunity.

The settler impact must be taken very much into account when determining the failure of the missionaries. So too must the missionary techniques of establishing missions and expecting the Aborigines to quickly adopt the 'civilising virtues' of a sedentary life. However one must be careful not to view the Aboriginal as a passive prop on a European dominated stage. Events did not simply happen to the Aboriginal. He reacted to the situation that confronted him. He probably understood far more of the Christian message than the missionaries believed to be the case. In rejecting Christianity the Aboriginal was making an implicit statement that his own religion was sufficient. Historians can concentrate too much on the 'fatal impact' – the diseases, the massacres, the brutalisation – and ignore the resilience of Aboriginal attitudes, values and beliefs. Perhaps Aboriginal people in New South Wales today owe more to their tribal heritage than they do to the influence of the white man's system of values and beliefs.

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⁶¹ Watson to Jowitt, 17 January 1837, in Woolmington 1973:66.

⁶² Watson to Church Missionary Society, 4 February 1833, in Woolmington 1973:65.

⁶³ *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 December 1855.

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