MISSIONARY LIVES: PAPUA, 1874-1914

David Routledge*


This splendidly produced volume has as its subject the group of missionaries constituted by the 374 individuals who were part of the Christian mission to Papua between 1874, when missionary contact began, and 1914, when the nature of things was radically changed by the First World War. The period was one in which the missionaries, whether or not they were great in themselves, were touched by history at a moment of significance, "when traditional Papuan societies were experiencing for the first time, a sustained and powerful onslaught from an alien culture and an alien religion", which gave to the missionaries a crucial role in the colonial history of Papua (xii). It is thus a study that is island-centred, according to the prescription of J.W. Davidson, first professor of the department in which the thesis upon which the book stands was undertaken, but not islander-oriented, in the sense in which students at this university are most interested. Dr Langmore, however, is explicit in insisting that she does not subscribe to the "heresy" that Europeans were the actors and Papuans merely the passive reactors in historical processes: She hopes that her work will be seen as complementary to the "arguably more important" study presently being undertaken by Papua New Guineans into the other side of the contact process (viii). And, as Robert Kiste, general editor of the Pacific Islands Monograph series of which the book is part, remarked in his preliminary note, the work provides valuable insights into the general history of the period.

In form, the study as defined by the author is a group biography. It is important to bear in mind what she means by this when attempting to estimate the value of the book, and her success. Dr Langmore states that the central methodological problem for the writing of a group biography is how to strike a balance between the group

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and the individual. It is possible to lean in the direction of the former, producing a prosopographical study in which the individual appears as no more than a statistical unit, or to emphasize the individual as subject of a biography, but a biography placed within the context of a group that is carefully defined in general terms. Dr Langmore, from inclination as well as necessity - by her own admission - is more sympathetic to the latter, but seeks to bridge the gap between the two approaches. She includes what "modest" statistics are available, and defines "ideal types" along Weberian lines as she delineates the general characteristics of the group. The study is loosely chronological, focussing on individuals in all their diversity, but seeking at the same time to identify the socio-psychological ties that bound them together (xix-xxi).

The group portrait, then, comprising a judicious mixture of biographical details juxtaposed with general statements based on statistical compilations (or on the biographical details considered as accumulations), is comprehensive indeed. Chapters are titled in such a way that their meaning becomes clear only after they have been read. Who, for example, are the sinister trio of chapter 9? The book begins by giving a broad outline of family and social background, and ends with the conclusion that few missionaries were "powerful or highly born". This section is followed by chapters dealing with the process by which men and women became missionaries, the domestic circumstances of life on mission stations, and the larger aspects of missionary life (dress, diet, health, recreation). It notes that the strong positive influence of the mother appears to have been a counter-balance to the exceptionally negative influence of the father (through death, absence, or failure of sympathy) in influencing individuals to become missionaries, but then states that maternal dominance should not be overemphasized (23). This, on-the-one-hand, on-the-other approach is characteristic of the author's analysis.

Next come two chapters exploring missionary attitudes towards the people of the land ("the native boys waited on the table very cleverly" - 66-7), and conversion and education, considered as separate missionary objectives. These are the only parts of the book in which the "other side" of the contact process is considered in any detail. It is a section which suggests at many points where further research might profitably be carried out. Why, for example, were Anglicans more sympathetic than either Protestants or Roman Catholics to indigenous culture (110)? Dr Langmore notes that as cultural evolutionism gained a hold in the intellectual baggage of the missionaries, vague metaphors
of darkness and degradation gave way to confident, pseudo-scientific statements (116). The place of ideology in the formulation of colonial policy, and European activity in general, is a subject which merits extensive treatment.

Chapter 7 looks particularly at the role of women - beginning with statements to the effect that the literature gives little indication that one third of all missionaries were women. This is to be explained in part by the self-effacement that was appropriate to their contemporary image as "help-meets" of their men, but much more by the taken-as-read attitude of male authors of the subject (an attitude which conditioned their approach to all matters involving missionary women). Dr Langmore notes that most male missionaries, "in need" of wives, went in search of them in the Australasian colonies, and that many of those who permitted themselves to be found actually bore the heavier burden of their married existence. They lacked status and were sometimes without the whole-hearted missionary commitment of their husbands. At many points, Dr Langmore's book suggests comparisons with another distinguished study of European women in Pacific history, Claudia Knapman's perceptive White Women in Fiji, (Allen & Unwin, 1986).

Chapter 8 looks at institutional differences between the several missionary endeavours, particularly at the consequences of the LMS and Methodist missions' being controlled by mission societies, in contrast to Anglican and Roman Catholic mission being no more than an aspect of the manifold activities of their respective churches. Chapter 9 looks at the relations between missionaries, government officials, and traders (the "sinister trio" of Marxist critics of imperialist political exploitation), and the last chapter brings together a number of loose ends - public and private crises, length of service and death in the field - and concludes with a final discussion of "ideal types" and missionaries as a social group.

Among the appendices are a list of LMS and Methodist missionary wives, and a most useful biographical register, containing short entries on each of the 327 members of the group. On the matter of individual, as opposed to group biography, the study might have benefitted from the inclusion of a few biographical sketches. Dr Langmore includes many biographical details in the process of building up the group picture, but few even of its most important members emerge in any individual fashion (the domineering and exceedingly unpleasant
Bromilow perhaps expected). She discusses ideal types, but might advantageously have included one or two biographical sketches - more extended than even the most complete register entries - chosen according to how close they accord with the ideal types.

The study, valuable in itself, will prove a most useful resource tool for the historian of the missionary process in Papua. It is eminently fit to follow David Hanlon’s superb history of Pohnpei in the distinguished University of Hawaii Pacific Islands Monograph series, begun with Francis Hezel’s splendid history of the Caroline and Marshall Islands in 1983.