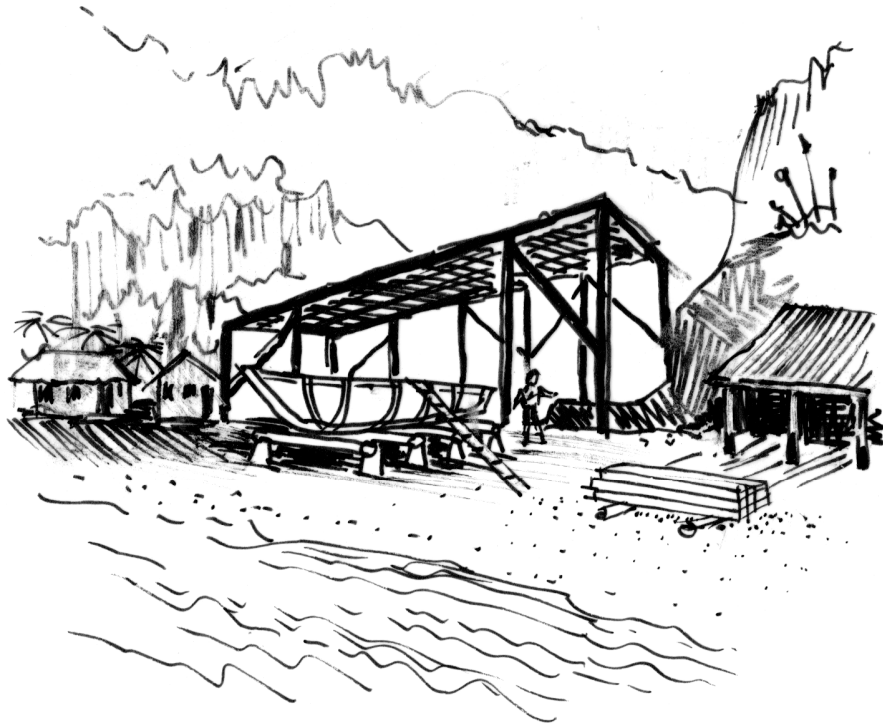


John Williams

Part 2



John Williams Part 2

The chief and villagers discussed the matter among themselves for a while, then the chief said, “We agree to your teachers living with us to teach us the Christian way.”

All seemed to be very promising as the teachers spent the night on the ship preparing their things ready to disembark in the morning. However, in the morning a more powerful chief arrived just as they were coming ashore. He looked at the party of teachers and their wives and pointed out one of the women. “I want her for myself. She will be my wife. Give her to me!”

Once again trouble broke out as the chief and the mission team argued over the unfortunate woman. “I’m afraid we’ll have to give up the plan to land teachers here at present,” said John Williams, “we can’t leave them here when there is a risk to their lives.”

They were about to return to the ship in the small boat when once again Papeiha courageously stepped forward.

“I’m willing to stay here and teach the Rarotongans about the Christian way,” he offered. “Maybe they will kill me, maybe they will let me live, but I will land among them. Jehovah God is my shield. I am in His hands.”

The chiefs agreed to this arrangement, so Papeiha stayed alone. His only request was that they send him a helper from Raiatea, his friend Tiberio. Papeiha was not entirely friendless there, as the six Rarotongans who had returned from Aitutaki on the ship were all Christian believers. They promised to help him. Tiberio arrived in due course and within a year the whole population of the island had renounced the worship of their idols and begun to learn about God the Creator and Jesus His Son.

More than four years had passed since John Williams left Papeiha and Tiberio on Rarotonga and now, in 1827, he and another missionary with six Tahitian teachers were on board a trading vessel bound for Rarotonga. The intention was for the missionary and the six Tahitian teachers to stay at Rarotonga to establish a teaching institution there. John Williams's wife and two little boys accompanied them. "We will stay at Rarotonga long enough to help establish the training institution," John Williams told his wife, "then we will return to Raiatea on the first trading vessel that comes this way."

Weeks passed, the new missionaries had settled in well, the Bible school was under way and John Williams was searching the horizon every day for any sign of a ship coming in to their harbour, for he was now anxious to return to Raiatea. But time passed with not a vessel to be seen that would transport

them. Rarotonga was not on the main routes of the trading vessels, so ships were infrequent.

“I can’t stay here for ever,” thought John Williams, “What can I do?”

Being very practical as well as very creative, John Williams began to do the impossible. He set to work to build a ship. Here he was on a remote island in the Pacific, with only the minimum of tools, a little experience in boat building, from his time at Eimeo when he first arrived in Tahiti. There were no materials at hand except the trees in the forest and no plans on paper for the design of the ship. What he did have was a great vision and determination to have his own vessel to enable him to evangelise these other islands he constantly thought about. He also had the labouring help of the village people whom he paid with the usual trade goods.

First he had a large open shed built of bush materials, making the roof higher than normal to avoid sparks getting into the highly flammable coconut leaf thatch. His anvil was a huge block of volcanic rock. The bellows were a fantastic invention using air in the same way as water is drawn up and thrown out in a pump. Two long, heavy pieces of iron-wood worked the bellows that blew the air to keep the fire burning steadily. It took thirty men to work the bellows continuously, half of them working and half resting.

He used pick-axes, an adze, old hoops of iron and a hoe to make anchors and a rudder. He made some nails on the forge from scrap iron, but as there wasn't enough metal he also made wooden pegs to hold the vessel together.

The young men climbed the coconut trees for coconuts, then split them and tore out the fibre which was used to caulk up the gaps between the wooden planks. The women were set to work to weave pandanus sails. First they gathered the long pandanus leaves from the bush, boiled them in a large pot, and laid them out on mats to dry in the sun. When the leaves were ready the women gathered in a group to weave them into large sails.

The village men cut down suitable trees in the forest to be split into lengths for the hull of the ship. Williams constructed a lathe to shape the timbers, and a machine to spin the ropes and cords from plant fibres. In four months they had achieved the impossible and completed the "Messenger of Peace", a vessel of about sixty tons, and were ready to take the ship on a trial run. There was great rejoicing and praise to God who had enabled them to complete the ship under such impossible conditions.

Now John Williams was considering his next step. "It's a long way to Raiatea. If I take the ship there first there may be trouble. I need to take it a shorter distance for a trial run somewhere closer."

After discussing it with the chiefs who knew the islands of the area, they set out for Aitutaki, about 150 miles away. The trial voyage proved most satisfactory. The weather fortunately was kind to them and the ship performed well in the water.

On his return to Rarotonga Williams spoke to the crew, "This ship is good enough to take the trip back to Raiatea. Get everything ready and we'll leave as soon as possible."

John Williams went to his home. "My dear," he said to his wife, "our days of waiting are over. We can pack up our things and go back to Raiatea on the Messenger of Peace."

Mrs. Williams was as relieved as her husband that they could return to Raiatea and they were able to leave with their two little boys in a couple of days. Fortunately the weather was favourable so that they had a fair trip. Even so, by the time they arrived at Raiatea the Messenger of Peace looked much the worse for wear. John Williams looked at the long strips of coconut fibre caulking that had come adrift from between the planks and were now hanging like festoons down the sides of the ship.

"What a blessing that the Lord of the wind and the waves was watching over us on our voyage" he thought. "Had He sent rough weather, all the caulking would have dropped out of the timbers. Then the

rough seas would have broken up the hull completely and we would all have been lost. Thank you Lord for Your protection.”

John Williams was able to purchase canvas to make more durable sails and proper oakum for caulking, so that the vessel was more sea-worthy for later trips. Nevertheless the construction of the Messenger of Peace on Rarotonga was a miracle of creativity and determination.

John Williams was excited at having his own ship. Now it was possible for him to plan visits to the other island groups in the vicinity without having to depend on the arrival of trading vessels. He visited the Leeward and Windward Islands, the Hervey group and others further west.

Wherever he travelled he followed the same method. He prepared and trained a team of Tahitians to be evangelists and teachers who joined him on the ship. Then he would speak to the chief of the island he had chosen to visit, asking him, “Do you want to have teachers in your island who will teach you about the Creator God and His Son, Jesus Christ?” If the chief said, “Yes.” the next question was, “Are you willing to receive them with their wives into your village, provide them with a house to live in, land for their food garden, and food from your gardens, until such time as they can harvest their own crops?” Provided the chief agreed to this, two of the Tahitian teachers with

their wives would be left there to begin their task of evangelism and teaching. Williams also used his ship to make visits back to the teachers from time to time, to help and encourage them.

As the people took on the Christian faith their way of life changed. Peace came where there had been inter-tribal war; cleanliness and better health where there had been dirt and sickness; the heathen idols were burned as the people began to worship God the Creator Spirit. Truly John Williams had been prophetic in naming his ship the "*Messenger of Peace*."

During the next several years his eyes and his mind were on other groups of islands further to the west. First he visited Samoa, leaving teachers at several points to continue sharing the Gospel. From Samoa he visited Tonga. The people he had trained worked in Tonga and Fiji.

John Williams still had the vision to extend into the islands further west.

"I believe the islands of the New Hebrides would be the best place to establish a mission. From there we could reach out into New Guinea, New Caledonia and other island groups in the vicinity," he thought to himself. He was forever planning ways to reach out westwards to those unreached islands.

In 1837 John Williams and his family sailed to England where he told the church people about the

“Messenger of Peace”, why he built it and how he built it. The story aroused so much interest that people gave enough money to purchase a new, larger boat to replace the *“Messenger of Peace”*.

The new ship, the *“the Camden”*, would make it possible to venture further west than they had been before. On their return voyage from England to Raiatea John Williams spent much time thinking and planning missionary trips to the western Pacific Islands. He was refreshed and ready to set out on this extension of the mission’s work.

By 1839 he had a number of Tahitians trained as teachers ready to venture into unknown islands with the Christian message. With two other white missionaries on board they set sail in the Camden, heading west from Tahiti. Their aim was to reach the New Hebrides where they would investigate the possibility of establishing a mission station which would be a spring-board for working in New Guinea and New Caledonia.

On the way they called at Samoa, meeting the teachers and pastors they had trained at Raiatea. The Christian community in Samoa was growing in numbers as well as in understanding of the Christian way of life. They spent a few days with the Christians there, worshipping, teaching and feasting, enjoying wonderful fellowship together. After a brief stop at

Rotuma, north of Fiji, they set out westwards for the New Hebrides.

As *the Camden* was approaching Tanna, at the southern point of the New Hebrides group, they wondered how the islanders would receive them. Would they be friendly, or not? Next morning a group went ashore in a small boat to visit the people and ascertain what kind of welcome they could expect. To their great relief they were welcomed gladly and showered with gifts of yams, pigs and coconuts. Plans were made for two of the Tahitian teachers to be left there in the future.

They sailed on later the same day and stood off the island of Erromanga, ready to land early the next morning. Encouraged by the happy reception at Tanna, Williams was keen to go ashore and test the attitude of the people of Erromanga. A group of Erromangan men in a canoe approached the ship but stayed at a distance, too timid to come any closer. The missionary party in the ship's small boat rowed further along the shore, some villagers following them on land. One member of the party, Mr. Harris, ventured on shore to look around, without any adverse reaction from the villagers. Thinking it was safe, John Williams followed.

Mr. Harris had been exploring a small stream when suddenly he burst out of the bushes yelling, "Run!" He was followed and struck down by a group of

villagers who clubbed him to death. John Williams ran for the sea, but stumbled on the stony beach, giving the men time to catch him, club and spear him to death also. The others of the missionary party left in the small boat escaped to the ship. The ship's captain and the team left on the ship had watched in horror as they saw John Williams and Harris so suddenly and unexpectedly taken from them.

They saw the villagers drag the bodies into the bushes. Next day a small group from the ship went back to the shore in the small boat hoping to find the remains of their friends to return to Raiatea, but they found only the remains of a cannibal feast.

What a sudden and tragic end to the life of such a great man of God! But "the blood of the martyrs is the seed of the church" and when the tragic news of Williams's death reached England it stirred up another wave of active interest in the cause of missions to the Pacific.

It was some years later that missionaries were told the reason why John Williams and Harris were killed. Not long before *the Camden* visited Tanna and Erromanga a trading vessel had called in there. The sandal-wood trader on board had ruthlessly killed the son of a chief of Erromanga, and the killing of John Williams and Harris was a 'pay-back' for that. For these villagers all white men were 'the enemy' and must be killed.

Although the London missionary society made seven more attempts to establish teaching centres on Tanna, twenty years were to pass before a successful Christian work was established in the New Hebrides (Vanuatu). John Paton from Scotland was the courageous missionary that God used to turn the people of Tanna to Himself.

Adapted from:

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