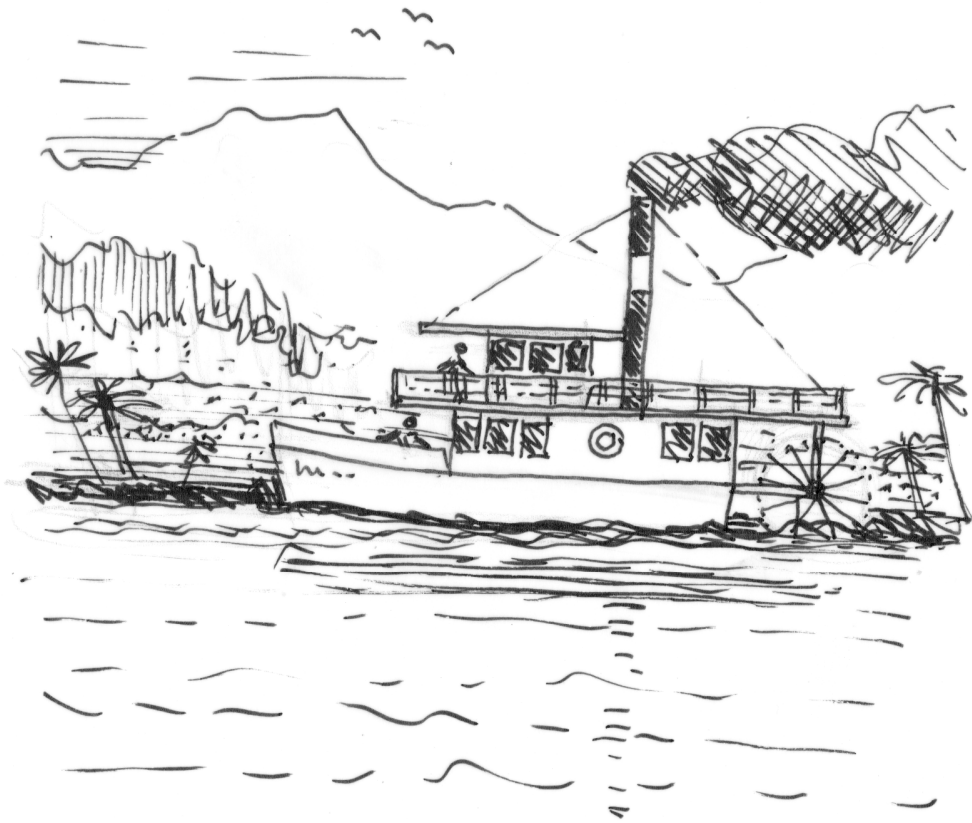


James Chalmers



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In 1817, British missionary John Williams and his wife Mary set sail for the Pacific Islands. They were the first Christian missionaries to visit Samoa. They also visited Tahiti, Cook Islands, Rarotonga, and many people became Christians.

John William and Mary learned the local languages and worked on translating the Bible. In 1834 they decided to take a trip back to England to tell people about the work they had been doing. The Christians in England wanted to help John and Mary in their work, so they raised enough money to buy them a ship called *the Camden*. One day John and his friend were exploring the southern islands of the New Hebrides (Vanuatu), in *the Camden*, when they were killed by cannibals.

The Camden was taken back to England and sold. But the children in the Sunday schools in England wanted to raise money for a new missionary ship. This one was called *John Williams*, which sailed around the Pacific islands for 20 years, until one day it was wrecked on a reef.

So once again the children in the English Sunday schools raised money for a new missionary ship. This one was called *John Williams 2*. In 1866, missionary James Chalmers and his wife Jane, set sail on *John Williams 2*, with four other couples, bound for Rarotonga.

The ship stopped for a time in Australia before setting sail for the islands. They passed south of Fiji and sailed on to Niue. They unloaded some of the goods the ship carried for Niue, but the captain gave the order to leave the remainder of the unloading until the following day. However, during the night gale force winds blew the ship on to the reef causing the loss of both ship and all the cargo.

“How are we ever going to get to Rarotonga?” James Chalmers said to Jane. The missionaries now had to travel on whatever trade ships were available, going to whatever islands the ship was bound for.

On one leg of the journey the ship they were traveling on turned out to be a pirate ship, captained by a notorious man who went by the name of Bully Hayes. Yet, despite his name, Hayes turned out to be kindly towards the missionaries, treating them with the utmost respect. It was a great relief when they finally arrived at Rarotonga, fifteen months after they left England.

James and Jane settled in Rarotonga, and enjoyed their work there. But one day James said to Jane, “I like it here, but this place has been Christian for a whole generation now. There are other islands still not even touched by the Christian message. In my heart of hearts I really want to go to those islands to the west.”

But it was not God's time for him to go just yet. The mission society asked him to stay on for another ten years, to train islanders to go and be missionaries in other islands to the west.

As well as training missionaries, James spent time learning the Rarotongan language, then translating and printing some books of the Bible. His work was so valued by the Christians of Rarotonga that nobody wanted him to leave, but in 1877 the time came when they were asked by the mission society to go to British New Guinea, now called Papua New Guinea

They sailed north along the east coast of Australia to the northern tip of Cape York. Then on to Port Moresby where they gladly stepped out on to solid ground again.

Mr. Lawes was the missionary in charge in Port Moresby. "Welcome to British New Guinea," he greeted the Chalmers and their team of teachers from Rarotonga, "We're very pleased to have more people to teach the islanders about God. There's such a lot to do."

"You should stay here with us for a few weeks, to learn something of the culture, then you can take your teachers and explore the coast-line for a suitable site," said Mr. Lawes

Finally the mission team set sail from Port Moresby. Sailing close to the coast they searched for a suitable site and eventually found it at Suau.

"This place has a good harbour for the coming and going of boats," said James. The Rarotongan teachers, who were experienced in matters of sailing, agreed.

Rowing ashore in the small boat, James took the Rarotongan men with him and went in search of the village chief. They managed to communicate to him about setting up a place to stay, and were given permission.

James called together the chief and some of the village men and showed them the knives and tomahawks he had brought as trade goods. "We want timber from the bush to build our house," he said. "I'll pay you with these goods if you will help cut it for me." The men were keen to have the tomahawks and knives, so they willingly agreed to work for the missionaries. James explained the type of timber he wanted and what length it needed to be and they set to work. In the meantime James and Jane lived in the chief's house until their home was built.

The Rarotongan team members were kept busy getting timber from the bush to build their own homes, helping each other in true Polynesian fashion. At last the houses were completed and the members of the missionary team were ready to begin teaching the village people.

The Rarotongan teachers were quick to learn from the villagers. James appreciated them for this, as they could pass on their knowledge of language and culture to him. This helped him with translating the scriptures and preparing other books of teaching materials that the teachers would use.

Occasionally the missionaries were threatened by some of the villagers.

“We don’t want you here,” they would say, “One day our warriors will kill you all.”

But the missionaries ignored the threats and faithfully continued with their work. Many years later, when the Christian message had taken root in the lives of many of them, a village chief told Chalmers this story:

“One time the men in the village chose a group of warriors to kill the whole lot of you missionaries. I was in that group. One dark night we took our spears and clubs and crept up to the fence surrounding your house. It was a low fence, as you know, and we could easily have jumped over it. We had our weapons ready and were all set to attack you. Our warrior chief gave the word to go forward, but we couldn’t move. Something stopped us from coming any nearer. It was a force we couldn’t see, but it was very powerful. We tried again several more times in the following weeks, but that unseen power prevented us ever getting past that low fence. It must have been your God protecting you, because we knew you had no weapons to protect yourselves.”

James and Jane were ever grateful for God’s care and protection. James was always looking for new places for taking the Gospel.

“I’m afraid I’ll have to leave you, my dear,” he told Jane one day. “I must search along the rest of the coast for places where we can set up other mission stations. But the Rarotongan wives will be here to keep you company.”

“I’ll miss you, James,” she replied, “but I know that you must go.”

But while James was away, Jane suffered poor health. She came down with a fever and became very weak. The Rarotongan teachers’ wives did all they could to relieve her fever, but her health continued to fail.

When James returned he decided that he would take Jane with him on his next trip, but she only became weaker. Finally they decided that Jane must go by ship to Sydney, Australia, to stay with friends. But she failed to recover and four months later she died. When James heard of Jane’s death he was grief stricken. Although lonely, he continued his work in New Guinea.

Besides introducing Papua to the gospel, James Chalmers accomplished the seemingly impossible goal of promoting peace among the tribes all along the

coast. According to those who accompanied him on his visits to native villages, James had a remarkable influence over people. A fellow missionary wrote:

The local people called James 'Tamate'. One of the local people said of James: "Tamate said, 'You must give up man-eating': and we did."

During a typical first-time encounter with a savage tribe, James and a helper missionary would wait on board their boat until the local people on the shore had had a chance to notice the strange vessel and absorb the shock of seeing a white man for the first time.

Usually, an armed party of men would climb into canoes and approach the missionary boat. James would then make signs of peace, distribute presents, and say a few words, stating that he had come to make friends and planned to return for a longer visit in order to tell them of a great Being unknown to them. After a successful first visit, he would return for a longer visit.

In 1888 James married a widow, Lizzie Harrison, who had been a longtime friend of Jane Chalmers. The second Mrs. Chalmers provided the friendship and support that James had longed for since his first wife's death. She too, proved herself to be a brave and self-denying missionary. However, after 12 years, she also died.

In the last years of missionary service, James visited existing mission stations. But a visit to the Aird River Delta became his last mission trip. The people in that region were reputed to be fierce and unapproachable, even by Papuan standards. No white man had ever seen them. For a long time, James had wanted to make the dangerous trip there in order to win them for Christ. On April 4, 1901, the mission steamer sailed to Risk Point, off the shore of the village of Dopima. Immediately the ship was surrounded by the village people.

The ship was quickly over-run by village men who came out to the ship in canoes filled with bows and arrows, clubs, knives and spears. They clambered all over the decks, and refused to leave. James thought that if he went ashore it might persuade the intruders to leave the ship. Tomkins decided he would join James, so the two men got into the whale boat with some of the mission boys and set out for the shore. Half the village men returned to the shore, the rest stayed on the ship, looting all the goods they could find, and then they too went ashore.

The captain of the ship waited all day and night but Chalmers and Tomkins did not return. Next morning they searched along the coast without seeing a trace of the men. They sent a message to the government station on Thursday Island and three days later a steamer arrived with a government officer and ten men.

The investigation found that James Chalmers and Tomkins were attacked from behind. They were clubbed to death and died instantly. Their bodies were eaten.

The news of the murders made headlines all over the world. Those who had worked closely with James Chalmers were shocked and grieved at the news of his death, but felt strongly that he would have wished to die as he did — engaged in service to the people of New Guinea.

Adapted from: *James Chalmers, His Autobiography and Letters*, Richard Lovett, The Religious Tract Society, London, 1903

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