

# John Williams



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During the late eighteenth century there was a great spiritual awakening in Great Britain. During the same period, the English, Spanish, French and Dutch governments had become interested in the Pacific Ocean and its numerous island groups. As early as the 16th century Magellan, and later de Quiros, serving the King of Spain, explored the area. Drake, the Englishman, crossed the Pacific during his circumnavigation of the world. In the 17th century, Tasman (from Holland), and Dampier (from England), extended European interest in the Pacific. Captain Cook in the 18th century opened up the area even more. There were many other explorers less well known, but each contributed to this time of empire building. These European nations were trying to out-do each other in claiming the island groups, their produce and their people for themselves.

As the treasures of the islands were revealed, (sandal wood, pearl shell, sea cucumber, spices and spar timber), trading ships appeared carrying ruthless men whose aim was to plunder the produce of the islands, grabbing all they could and treating the islanders cruelly.

But Christian men and women in Britain, stirred to action through the move of God's Holy Spirit on them, saw these same islands in another light, as places where people lived in spiritual darkness, with no knowledge of the Creator God and His Son, Jesus Christ. They read in Isaiah's prophecy, "and the isles shall wait for His law" (Isaiah 42:4.) and saw this as God's call to them to go to the Pacific Islanders with the Christian message.

But the missionaries from Great Britain were not alone in reaching out to the islanders with God's love. There were many more indigenous pastors and teachers who went to other Pacific island groups from their own homes. They had discovered the difference it made to a community when the people became Christians and they wanted other island groups to live in peace as they did. There were hundreds of new islander Christians who went out with the white missionaries and supported them in pioneering new missions.

A small group of white missionaries stood on the shore of a village settlement at Eimeo, on the island of Tahiti, gazing out to sea as they watched the sails of a large ship loom ever closer to them. This was the year 1817 and these were the pioneers on Tahiti of the London Missionary Society's work in the Pacific. They had been there since the final years of the 18th century. The arrival of a ship in the harbour was a rare sight not to be missed.

"I wonder if there will be any new missionaries to join our team here," one of the watchers commented.

"I do hope so," replied another, "there are so many people here who live in darkness, worshipping idols. We need many helpers to reach them all."

“There are sure to be letters from home for us. We haven’t heard from anyone for nearly a year. It will be good to hear news from the family.”

There was a long wait while the ship anchored out in the harbour, the small boats were lowered and people climbed down the rope ladder to be rowed ashore. The ship’s captain stepped out on to the sand, followed by a tall man who helped his wife to step out of the boat on to the beach.

“This is John Williams and his wife Mary,” said the captain as he introduced the new couple to the missionaries on the shore. “They have come out from England to join you good people here on Eimeo.”

“You are most welcome.”

“How good it is to have more people here to share the work.”

“We trust you’ve had a comfortable journey out here.”

The missionaries were so pleased to have new colleagues join them in the task of evangelism. The ship’s crew was unloading all of Williams’s possessions into the small boats and many willing hands were there to carry everything up to the house where they were to stay.

There were so many new experiences to adjust to, different food, different houses, the hot climate, learning the language of the local people. One new experience John Williams had was to prove invaluable to him a few years later. One of the missionaries was repairing a small boat belonging to the mission. He called on John Williams to help him, even though he had never had any experience with boats before. Being a practical man he used his God-given common sense as he worked to repair the boat with the other missionary and stored away what he had learned in the back of his mind.

There was another incident which occurred two years before they arrived at Eimeo that was to have significance in John Williams’s life. A small vessel with a missionary, Mr Wilson, Chief Pomare and 19 Tahitians on board was anchored in Eimeo harbour one night when a violent gale struck the ship with all the mission party still on board. The ship broke away from its anchorage and was driven out to sea by the gale force winds, finally arriving at a distant island called Raiatea.

The Raiateans welcomed them, “Come ashore,” they said, “we’ll find you fresh food and houses to stay in while you repair your ship.”

“Thank you for helping us,” Chief Pomare said. “Could we tell you about the new God we worship? He is the Creator God who made everything in our world.”

The Raiateans listened with great interest, always wanting to know more, so the mission team repaired their ship, and those not busy with the ship met with the Raiateans to tell them more of God the Creator and His Son Jesus.

A number of them responded to the gospel and became Christians. “Please tell us more,” they would plead. Among the new believers were several chiefs, one of

whom was Tamatoa. When he began to understand the gospel message he declared, "I want to live this new way. I don't need the witch doctor and his tricks. I want to trust God."

After three months on Raiatea the missionaries and crew had made their vessel seaworthy again after its damage in the gale. They sailed back to Eimeo, but they left behind a group of Raiateans who wanted to worship the God they had just begun to learn about.

Chief Tamatoa called together a few other chiefs. "Now we are worshipping the one true God we need to put up a building where we can meet together to worship and continue learning about the Christian way."

The chiefs agreed and together with the village men they built their first place of worship.

Some months later Tamatoa visited Huahine, where the missionary headquarters was.

"Please will you send teachers to our island, Raiatea?" pleaded Tamatoa. "We heard about the true God when your people arrived on our island after the big storm. We would like to have teachers come and live with us to teach us more about God and His Son, Jesus."

The missionaries were pleased to have such an open invitation to tell the gospel story and they prepared a team to go to Raiatea to establish a mission station. John Williams was one of that team.

The missionaries learned the language of Raiatea with the help of the local people, and eventually the Gospel of Luke was translated. They printed it on the printing press Mr. Ellis had brought out from England and set up on Huahine. Elementary reading books followed. Everybody, young and old, went to school on Raiatea. Grandfathers and their grand-children sat side by side learning the simple alphabet sounds, and progressing eventually to reading Luke's Gospel.

The people of Raiatea responded gladly to the gospel and developed quickly into a largely Christian community.

"These people live together in peace now," he thought. "The Christian way of life has brought peace to them and their community. How wonderful it would be to go to these other islands and teach them the gospel of peace, too." His heart longed for them to come into the Kingdom of God. But how would they hear without a preacher?

"If only the mission had a ship big enough to sail on the open seas," he would think, "we could reach so many more people on the distant islands. As it is we have to depend on the trading ships and they aren't reliable."

One island John Williams had heard good reports about was Rarotonga. There was a small group of Rarotongans at Raiatea who were learning the Christian way. They wanted teachers to go to Rarotonga to share the Gospel with their friends and families. But no-one from the London Missionary Society staff had actually located Rarotonga, knowing only that it was somewhere to the south of the Tahitian Islands where they were then stationed.

In 1823 Williams set out from Raiatea in a trading vessel to try to locate Rarotonga. He also had with him a number of teachers and their wives, including some Rarotongans, whom he had trained at Raiatea. On this trip he was seeking islands where he could place the teachers. His policy was to first meet with the village chiefs of an island.

“I have trained teachers here who are willing to stay in your village and teach your people about the Creator God and Jesus His Son,” he would say. “Would you supply them with food until they can produce enough from their own gardens, and provide a house where they can live, until they build their own?”

If the chiefs were willing, then the teacher and his wife would be left there to become part of the island community and teach them about God and His Son, Jesus. John Williams promised he would visit once or twice a year to see how they were getting on and give them some encouragement.

One teacher who was with John Williams on this trip was Papeiha, a fine Christian and a good teacher. He and his friend Vahapata had worked together on the island of Aitutaki and the people had responded well to the Gospel message. When the ship reached the island of Mangaia they sailed around it, searching for an entrance through the reef.

“I can’t see any gap in the reef where the ship could get through,” said the captain, “we may have to by-pass this island.”

Papeiha came forward. “I’m a strong swimmer. I could swim ashore and see if the people are friendly.” he offered.

John Williams agreed and Papeiha dived in to the sea, swam through the uncertain waters over the reef and in towards the shore. When he was within a few metres of the beach he noticed that all the men on shore were carrying spears.

“I come in peace,” he called to them, “I mean no harm to any of you. Tie up your spears in bundles. That will tell me you don’t intend to hurt me.”

Papeiha waited until all the spears were tied up, then he waded ashore. Addressing the village chiefs, he explained that there were two teachers and their wives on the ship, who were willing to stay and live with them. They would like to teach them, if they wished to learn, about God the Creator and Jesus His Son.

The chiefs and their villagers appeared to be in agreement and all seemed to be proceeding peacefully. Papeiha swam back to the ship and reported to John Williams, "The chiefs and the village people are happy for us to bring the two teachers and their wives to settle amongst them and teach them the Christian Gospel."

"Very well," said John, "Papeiha, at high tide, you go with the two teachers and their wives in the small boat to introduce them to the chiefs. We'll send some trade goods with you as gifts for the chiefs. Gather all your things together and be ready for high tide."

The mission team landed in the small boat which came in to shore on the incoming tide. Their possessions had just been landed when the villagers caught sight of the trade goods. The temptation was too great. Suddenly they attacked the mission party and grabbed all their possessions, and the trade goods. They were taken by such surprise that they barely escaped with their lives.

Papeiha and the teachers made a hasty retreat in the small boat back to the ship. "It seems we are not welcome in Mangaia at the moment. We will have to come back to them at a later date," John Williams decided.

The ship next visited the island of Atiu, where Chief Roma came on board. The teachers from Raiatea spoke to him about the Christian message. "We would like to tell you about the Creator God and His Son, Jesus," they said. "Would you like to hear about Him? "

Chief Roma was very interested and listened keenly to what the teachers told him.

"Please tell me more," he would say. "I want to know all about your God." When he became a worshipper of God he asked the missionaries, "What about the idols I've served all these years? I don't worship them or serve them any more."

"If they're no use to you, you could throw them away," responded the missionaries, knowing that this was a decision Roma had to make for himself. He thought about it for only a short time before he agreed to throw them away and serve only the true God.

John Williams was talking with Roma one day. "Do you see those two small islands across the water over there?" said Roma, pointing to two islands on the horizon, "I'm the chief of those islands as well as Atiu."

"If you're their chief, you could go and tell the people there about the true God," suggested John Williams. Roma agreed and became a missionary to his own people, telling them what he had learned from the teachers on the ship. He did this so successfully that the people of both islands embraced the Christian faith.

“We would like to leave teachers with you here at Atiu to continue the Christian teaching,” John Williams said, when they were preparing to leave on the next stage of their journey, “but there are none available from the people we have on the ship. We will send a teacher to you after we return to Raiatea.”

Chief Roma and his people were disappointed, but God had His own way of providing teaching for these new believers. A canoe, with Christians on board, was returning from Tahiti to Raiatea when it was blown off course by a severe storm. They were driven about the ocean for six weeks, during which time they suffered badly from hunger and thirst. Eventually they sighted land and came ashore on Atiu, where Chief Roma took care of them.

“A ship called here not long ago,” Roma told the weary travellers, “There were people on board who taught us to worship the Creator God and His Son, Jesus. We’ve thrown away the idols we used to serve.”

Weary as they were from being carried about on the ocean for six weeks, the Raiateans were excited to learn that they had been washed up on an island where the people wanted to learn more about the Christian way of life. As soon as they had recovered enough from their ordeal they began to share their Christian teaching with the new Christians on Atiu. Day by day the Raiateans helped these villagers to understand more of what it meant to be a Christian.

There were some villagers who had not been wholehearted in their change away from idols to the Christian way, but these people observed the loving way the Raiatean Christians lived among them and they said, “Now we know this religion is true; these people have not come here to deceive us. They really love us and love each other. They were driven by the waves of the ocean. They have their books with them, and the God to whom they prayed has preserved them. The Christian God is the true God. We will serve Him with all our hearts His way is a way of peace.”

Before John Williams left Atiu with the remainder of his team of teachers, Roma gave him correct directions to find Rarotonga: south-west by west, as it proved to be, and “a day and a night’s sail”. But for several days they were blown about by contrary winds. Their food supply was seriously short, and the ship’s captain came to John Williams early one morning to say, “We must give up the search for Rarotonga and turn back to Raiatea, or we’ll all be starved.”

John replied, “Could we continue the search until eight o’clock? If we don’t see the island by then we’ll turn for home.”

Four times in the next few hours Williams sent a crew member up the mast to scan the horizon for sight of land, but there was only ocean to be seen. Time was slipping by, everyone was anxious. It was just half an hour before the agreed time to give up the search when, for the fifth time, the boy ascended the mast.

But this time there was the cry, "There's the land we've been looking for! There's Rarotonga!" Suddenly the gloom turned to joy and thankfulness to God for bringing them safely to the island they had been seeking.

A canoe with Papeiha and a Rarotongan, who had been brought back on the ship from Aitutaki, went ashore and received a good welcome. The family of the returned Rarotongan was pleased to welcome him home. An island chief went on board ship and found his own cousin among the group who had returned to Rarotonga.

Papeiha spoke to the chief. "We have come from Raiatea where we learned about the Christian way of life. Would you give us permission to leave some teachers here with you? They would teach you the Christian way of worshipping God. Your brothers who came back to you with us will tell you about it."

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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*Memoirs of The Life of Rev. John Williams*, Ebenezer Prout, John Snow, Paternoster Row, London. 1843