

# The Bible and the Sword

## John Thomas and the Tongan Civil War of 1837

*Martin Daly*

Tonga was regarded by the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society as one of its great successes. After an unsuccessful attempt by the London Missionary Society to establish Christianity in 1796, and a short-lived mission by William Lawry in 1822, John Thomas and John Hutchinson arrived in 1826 and established a presence which survived early setbacks. Within a generation Wesleyan Methodism had been firmly established in Tonga. As the authors of the history of the WMMS put it, ‘The very limitations of the field, the simplicity of the problem it presented, and the relative completeness with which its conquest was effected and heathenism within its bounds displaced by Christianity in the course of a single generation, make the story exemplary.’<sup>1</sup> Many Tongans were initially hostile, and firmly opposed what the missionaries were trying to do.<sup>2</sup> However this paper considers concerns by Europeans that the methods and conduct of the missionaries were not always appropriate, that in alliance with some of the chiefs and particularly Taufu’ahau, later to become the Christian king of a united Tonga as King George Tupou I, violence and force had been used to establish the church, and that the missionaries had encouraged his forces to behave with improper cruelty. Both observers then and historians of our own age have disagreed over the encouragement by the missionaries of military power and their involvement in a civil war to further their aims

It was the clear view of the WMMS that missionaries should not involve themselves in the politics of the countries in which they ministered. Among the ‘Standing Instructions of the Committee to all who are sent to act as Missionaries, relative to their conduct on Foreign Stations,’ printed at the beginning of the *Report of the Wesleyan-Methodist Missionary Society* for each year, is the following stern injunction, ‘We cannot omit, without neglecting our duty, to warn you against meddling with political parties, or secular disputes. You are teachers of Religion, and that alone should be kept in view. It is, however, a part of your duty, as Ministers, to enforce by precept and example, a cheerful obedience to lawful authority. You know that the venerable Wesley was always distinguished by his love of his country, by his conscientious loyalty, and by his attachment to that illustrious family, which has so long filled the throne of Great Britain. . . We have confidence in you, that you will preserve the same character of religious regard to good order and submission to the powers that be, in which we glory. Our motto is “Fear God and honour the King.”’ But when a Christian king was engaged in a civil war with his heathen opponents, how easy was it for the missionary to honour this injunction? This case study, perhaps a cautionary tale, from Tonga of the missionary John Thomas and King George suggests that religion and politics could not be kept wholly separate, but that involvement in politics risked deliberate misrepresentation by opponents of the mission.

In 1865 Julius Brenchley visited some of the islands of the South Seas, taking the opportunity while in Sydney of the offer of a berth on *HMS Curaçoa*, which was to display the British flag in the islands of the Western Pacific. He was a British naturalist, interested in collecting utensils and weapons but also birds, ferns, shells and other objects of interest, for museums at home. Between 1849 and 1867 he travelled widely in North and South America, Australasia and Europe. But he was also interested in, and often critical of, the work of the missionaries who had so successfully evangelized the islands, but whose energies, he felt, had so often been expended in an unprofitable way. In Tonga he found the tomb of Captain Croker, the English commander of H.M.S. *Favourite*,

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<sup>1</sup> G. G. Findlay and W. W. Holdsworth, *The History of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society*, Volume III (London: Epworth Press, 1921), 259.

<sup>2</sup> Sione Lātūkefu, ‘The opposition to the influence of Wesleyan Methodist missionaries in Tonga,’ *Historical Studies*, 12.46 (1966), 248-64.

killed in the attack on the heathen fortress of Bea in 1840. He had advanced, Brenchley recounted, 'with a sword in one hand and a Bible in the other; for the attack was a crusade against idolaters, not improbably suggested by King George and the Missionaries.' He adds in a footnote, 'This fanatical conjunction between the Bible and the Sword, so familiar to us in the history of Europe . . . "all for the glory of God", seems still more strangely revolting when exhibited in these remote and comparatively peaceful regions.'<sup>3</sup> Even thirty years later, in 1893, Basil Thomson, sent to Tonga as Prime Minister to bring order to administrative chaos into which Tonga had fallen, was retelling the same story. 'It was a missionary war - a war in which the club and the Bible were linked against the powers of darkness; and no knight-errant ever went against the Crescent with greater zest than the new converts showed in their quarrel with their heathen countrymen.'<sup>4</sup>

In fact the internal relations between the three main island groups which now constitute the Kingdom of Tonga had for many years been far from peaceful, and Captain Cook's naming of Tonga as the Friendly Islands<sup>5</sup> was not wholly deserved, although he himself received much kindness. But the final civil war which began in 1837 was by all accounts particularly brutal, and there were vehement accusations that John Thomas, the leader of the Methodist Mission, had played an improper and disgraceful part in encouraging and supporting the Christian King George in his final suppression of his heathen enemies as he attempted to unite Tonga as a Christian kingdom. Sarah Farmer wrote in 1855 on the basis of information provided by John Thomas, 'The heathen party set themselves to the task of uprooting Christianity. They engaged in war for the express purpose of destroying their King, whom they hated on account of his religion, and of slaughtering Christian subjects. They were an army of rebels, fighting against their earthly and their heavenly sovereign.'<sup>6</sup> The first biographer of John Thomas, G. Stringer Rowe, described how, on the main island of Tongatapu, 'the old heathenism had maintained its resolute and defiant opposition to the new religion and frequent outrages had been, from time to time, committed upon the Christians who were still far outnumbered by the heathen party.' The Christians were 'forced into active self-defence.' It was a fight for survival, but the missionaries played no active part. 'While the missionaries were compelled to acknowledge this stern necessity they saw with great pain the injury which such a state of things must needs inflict on their work.' John Thomas was in Vava'u, the northern group of islands. 'Although Mr. Thomas was at the point furthest removed from the seat of war, he had thus to endure the suffering which hurt him most.'<sup>7</sup>

But to others it was very different. This was not the way in which Peter Dillon had seen the war, and it is likely that Brenchley and Thomson both knew of his diatribe against Thomas and his part in the war. As will be shown later, historians of our own time, especially Cummins and Luckcock, continue to disagree over the motives and conduct of the missionaries.

Peter Dillon was an Irish adventurer and seaman who had come to know the South Pacific well.<sup>8</sup> He had visited many of its islands, spoke some of their languages, and generally seems to have got on well with their inhabitants. He met John Thomas in the course of his voyage to discover the fate of the vanished French explorer La Pérouse which was to make him famous. He had been to Tonga first in 1824 but now, in 1827, sailing on the ship *Research*, he found Wesleyan missionaries there,

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<sup>3</sup> Julius L. Brenchley, *Jottings during the Cruise of H.M.S. Curaçoa among the South Sea Islands in 1865* (London: Longmans, Green, 1873), 113.

<sup>4</sup> Basil Thomson, *The Diversions of a Prime Minister* (Edinburgh and London: William Blackwood, 1894), 350.

<sup>5</sup> J.C. Beaglehole (ed.), *The Journals of Captain James Cook on his Voyages of Discovery*, Volume II, *The Voyage of the Resolution and Adventure, 1772-1775* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press for the Hakluyt Society, 1961), 449.

<sup>6</sup> Sarah Farmer, *Tonga and the Friendly Islands; with a Sketch of their Mission History* (London: Hamilton, Adams, 1855), 297.

<sup>7</sup> G. Stringer Rowe, *A Pioneer. A Memoir of the Rev. John Thomas, Missionary to the Friendly Islands* (London: T. Woolmer, 1885), 93.

<sup>8</sup> For the life of Dillon see J. W. Davidson, *Peter Dillon of Vanikoro: Chevalier of the South Seas* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1975).

and the encounter was not a happy one. Dillon records, 'I received a letter today from two gentlemen belonging to the Wesleyan mission stationed at a remote part of the island, wishing to be informed of the name of the ship that had anchored in the road the preceding day, which I willingly communicated.' Four days later 'a boat approached the ship, in which was a Mr. Thomas, a Wesleyan missionary . . . From him I learnt that the mission there was rather precariously situated, in consequence of the hostility of the chief of that part to the tenets of Christianity.'<sup>9</sup> Dillon says no more, but John Thomas in his journal records the encounter in different terms. His first entry records a letter from Dillon 'expressing his concern at our critical situation, and a desire to serve us with everything that he has - also assuring us that he will do nothing to render our situation any more trying.' But Dillon and Thomas were very different in temperament, Dillon experienced and easy-going, and in particular relaxed about sexual encounters between European seamen and native women, and Thomas, the stern and serious evangelical. Dillon only stayed in Tonga one week. On his departure Thomas recorded, 'The conduct of the Captain and others on board the *Research* is very bad. They buy the native women for their beastly purposes.' He felt threatened. The chief Ata, under whose reluctant protection he was living, was offended because he had not taken him to see the ship, and at the end of its first year the mission was not going well. 'We are still in the fire, the Lord help me.'<sup>10</sup> Such had been the opposition of Ata that, in May, he had planned to abandon the mission. This was only thwarted when, rather than sending a ship to rescue them as he requested, the society sent three new missionaries. Yet from time to time he continued to confide to his private journal thoughts about giving up and returning home. 'I think if I were to visit England and be with God's people for a few months, I should derive much profit, but this cannot be. I must endure the privations . . . I greatly long after souls, but oh how few are brought to God. . . Oh may I be animated to labour, by the certainty of receiving a crown of life, if I faint not. Lord help me.' (25 May 1833) While his official journal constituted his public account for the WMMS, in his private journal he recorded his personal feelings, among which were sometimes insecurity and doubt.

But at heart he knew why he was in Tonga, what his mission was, and one aspect of it was to try to bring peace to a country where there had been intermittent civil war for thirty years. Shortly after the arrival of the mission party he wrote that he told the Tongans that they had been 'sent by the good people of England to teach them to know the true God, that we have left our friends and country and come to them not to join in their wars, as ministers of religion did not fight. We had come to try to be friends of all, and to do them good.' (Official Journal, 27 June 1826) The roots of the Tongan civil wars lay in rivalries between chiefs of the three main island groups, which were only united under King George Tupou I in 1845: Vava'u in the north, Ha'apai in the middle and Tongatapu to the south, the main island containing the capital, Nuku'alofa. However, before unification, the missionaries used Tonga to refer to Tongatapu alone and not the three groups together.

By 1837 Vava'u and Ha'apai had become largely Christian,<sup>11</sup> after a great revival in 1834. Schools had been established, a printing press had been set up in 1831 and, now transferred to Vava'u, was

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<sup>9</sup> P. Dillon, *Narrative and Successful Result of a Voyage to the South Seas . . . to Ascertain the Actual Fate of La Pérouse's Expedition* (London: Hurst, Chance, 1829), I, 275, 283.

<sup>10</sup> The Official Journal of John Thomas for 17, 24 and 25 August 1827. The Private and Official Journals of John Thomas are among the archives of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, in the library of the School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London.

<sup>11</sup> Progress can be followed in successive years of *The Report of the Wesleyan-Methodist Missionary Society*. For general accounts see S. Lātūkefu, 'The Wesleyan Mission' in Rutherford (ed.), *Friendly Islands: a history of Tonga* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1977), 114-35, John Garrett, *To Live among the Stars: Christian origins in Oceania* (Geneva and Suva: World Council of Churches and Institute of Pacific Studies, 1982), 70-81 and A. Harold Wood, *Overseas Missions of the Australian Methodist Church, Vol. 1, Tonga and Samoa* (Melbourne: Aldersgate Press, 1975).

busily producing Bible portions, catechisms and materials for teaching literacy.<sup>12</sup> But in Tongatapu Christians were still a threatened minority. The revival in Ha'apai and Vava'u had provoked a hostile response in Tongatapu: chapels were burnt and Christians persecuted. A temporary truce in 1835, under which religious liberty was to be enjoyed on both sides, was quickly broken by the rebels, who continued to attack Christians. In Vava'u John Thomas recorded in his official journal ominous signs of impending war. On 20 December 1836 he wrote, 'The king arrived again this evening for the purpose of consultation . . . on the state of Tonga, which appears on the eve of war. . . The heathen have for a long time and in various ways shown their hatred towards God and the true religion, and have done things which formerly would have led to a war, but the Christians have been urged not to go to war, and especially they must not think of making the heathens into Christians by force or by war . . . The Christians have endured much and endured long from the cruel and persecuting spirit of some heathen chiefs.' Two days later he wrote, 'The state of things at Tonga is viewed as serious, and it is feared that war will break out, although the Christians have no wish for anything but peace, but it is difficult to say to what extremes their blindness and infatuation may lead the heathen.' By 26 December war seemed inevitable. 'Many of the chiefs and people are expecting to leave for Tonga to attend upon the King there, our earnest wish and prayer is, that if it be the will of God, there may be no war.' Reviewing the events of 1836 in its annual report for 1837 the Society expressed the hope that its friends would not fail to sympathize with those who 'were living in constant dread and apprehension of war, and are in jeopardy every hour,' and will join them in prayer 'that the Gospel may subdue all the savage warriors of Tongataboo, and make them, in very deed, as well as in name, friendly islanders.'<sup>13</sup>

But that was not to be. News from Tongatapu was of war. King George had arrived there with his forces and on 6 January 1837 John Thomas recorded, 'The opposing heathen party are said to have viewed this as hostile and forthwith sent orders to their chiefs to attack Nuku'alofa.' On 12 January a canoe arrived in Vava'u 'to say that war had actually been begun by the heathen, having fired upon the Christians.' On 16 January Thomas observed, 'It must be viewed I think as a war of persecution against God and religion and shows itself in rebellion against and wanton opposition to the King their rightful sovereign and Supreme Ruler.' It was, he lamented 'a solemn and awful beginning.' If we are to take John Thomas at his word, this was hardly the view of a warmonger.

Nevertheless, and with obvious regret, he felt that the war had to be supported. The next day he wrote, 'We are deeply affected by these sad tidings which we have from Tonga - the loss of life we fear will be great if this war goes on.' But able-bodied men should go to Tonga to fight, and he approves of a chief who 'gave a most spirited address showing how laudable an object this was to come to the help of the Lord against the mighty.' He himself preached at the morning service on 22 January on Joshua 5.13-15, the story of Joshua meeting the mysterious figure of the man with a drawn sword. When Joshua asked him, 'Are you for us or for our enemies?', he replied that he was for neither but that he was the commander of the army of the Lord. Through him Jericho would be taken. The message must have been clear, that the Lord was on the side of the king's army. 'The time was solemn and profitable,' he records, with a meeting for prayer 'that it will please the Lord to preserve his people and bring the war to a speedy close,' but presumably with a Christian victory, as did happen. On 6 February 'this day was appointed as a thanksgiving day to almighty God for his great goodness in granting us his peace and for preserving his people . . from the dangers of war and the heathen.'

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<sup>12</sup> For the introduction of printing to Tonga and its role in the work of the mission see Martin Daly, "'Another Agency in this Great Work': the Beginnings of Missionary Printing in Tonga", *The Journal of Pacific History*, 43.3 (2008), 367-74.

<sup>13</sup> *The Report of the Wesleyan-Methodist Missionary Society for the year ending April, 1837*, 23.

But the peace and preservation of the Christians of Tongatapu, and the victory of King George and his forces, had come at a great price, with two particularly bloody incidents.<sup>14</sup> The first was at the rebel fort at Ngele'ia. The defenders heaped curses on King George as he sailed past. He had sent a message to the chiefs of Tongatapu that he did not want to go to war with them, but this insult to a chief was insufferable. He called his army to prayer 'and told them that he had not sought to be engaged in this war, but the Lord had evidently led him to it in defence of his cause.' All inside the fort were then slaughtered, perhaps around 40, including women and children, and the heads of some of those killed were then sent to the rebel chief Aleamotu'a, as was the pagan custom. One of the missionaries, John Hobbs, noted that the king had been exasperated by previous incidents when he had spared those who opposed him. Enough was enough for those who cursed him and blasphemed the name of the Most High.

The second event was at the rebel fort of Hule, whose chief, Tu'ivakano, had become a Christian, then recanted, then became a Christian again, at which his people had driven him out. It was a centre of opposition. Again, as recorded by Hobbs, before the attack, 'George told his men that they had not come from Ha'apai and Vava'u to possess Tonga but because the cause of Christianity was being persecuted.' Surrender was called for, with a pardon for all in the fort. When that was refused all 300 in the fort were killed, men, women and children. Yet, another of the missionaries, Stephen Rabone, saw justice in this massacre. 'Most awful news . . . It does appear that the Tongan heathen are given up to a reprobate mind and are bent upon their own destruction for they have positively refused to lotu [worship] and madly preferred dying in their sin.' Hule, he said, had been 'an awfully wicked fortress but judgement has overtaken them.' As Wood drily comments, 'Such statements are incomprehensible to us today.'<sup>15</sup> So too must be the verdict of John Thomas, who saw this as God's work. Reporting to the Committee in London he wrote, 'The heathen have been made to know that they are but bad men and that the Lord reigneth. A few hundred have fallen amongst the heathen and a number of our people have been killed but they have died in a good cause. We shall now, I judge, gain access to the whole of Tonga. King George is conqueror but he gives all the praise to the Lord.' The war was not yet over. There was to be further bloodshed in Tongatapu. But in 1845 George became the Christian king of all Tonga.

So, were John Thomas and his colleagues warmongers, or simply opportunistic or naïve? Peter Dillon certainly thought that they were warmongers. He had written in strong terms to John Thomas in 1837, and this letter formed the basis of his pamphlet issued in London in 1841, *Letter to Richard More O'Farrell, Esq., M.P., Secretary to the Admiralty, Whitehall, London, from the Chevalier Dillon, late French Consul for the Islands in the South Seas, on the defeat of Her Majesty's Ship, Favorite, and death of Her commander, Captain Croker, at Tongataboo, one of the Friendly Islands, where he volunteered his services to the Wesleyan Missionaries to massacre the innocent and unoffending natives, whose only crime was, that they would not embrace a religion that had already caused more bloodshed and cruelty than any other event on record connected with the Friendly Islands.*<sup>16</sup> There had been a renewed outbreak of war in 1840. Captain Croker had been asked by the missionaries for help in moving their families to a place of safety, and then attempted to mediate between the parties, without success, and had only then rashly assisted King George in an assault on the pagan fortress of Bea, where he was killed. It was, reported the WMMS, 'a melancholy affair.'<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> The following account is largely based on Wood, *Overseas Missions*, 64-69.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 66.

<sup>16</sup> In his paper on David Cargill, 'An Aberdeen Graduate as Pioneer in Fiji,' (*Aberdeen University Review*, June 1921) J. Malcolm Bulloch writes, 'It is not in the British Museum and I have not seen it.' A copy is in the British Library, which I have consulted.

<sup>17</sup> The whole episode is recounted, as the missionaries saw it, in *The Report of the Wesleyan-Methodist Missionary Society for the year ending April, 1842*, 66-7.

In twelve pages of unrelieved hostility, Dillon set out his charges against the missionaries and the king. Only a full reading can convey the full effect, but in brief summary his charges centered on three areas. The first was that King George was a usurper. He had no legitimate claim to rule even in Vava'u, let alone in Tongatapu, but was supported and encouraged by the missionaries as a Christian, under whose rule they could complete the evangelization of Tongatapu. To John Thomas, he wrote, was due the credit of 'placing an individual at the head of government, who had no more claim to it than I had, and whose only recommendation to office is that he was an humble instrument of torture, death and destruction in your hands, by whose means and bloody assistance you undertook to propagate the mild doctrines of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ at Tonga.' The missionaries had supported 'this monster, for whom you cast balls and bulls, which he fires, a complete despot.' The second was the way in which the missionaries did this, focusing their teaching and their preaching on Old Testament passages concerning God being on the side of his people and supporting them in war against the heathen. King George's army could be assured that, however violent the battle, they were fighting in God's cause. Thomas 'assured the monster that the true God marched in his ranks with the bloodthirsty banditti.' Then, more generally the missionaries imposed inappropriate behaviour on their people, with brutal punishments for offences. 'You introduced through him [the king] tortures and punishments before unknown and unheard of in these once happy isles.' His central charge is to denounce the behaviour of King George's army. 'On the arrival of these monsters at Tonga, they slaughtered both man, woman and child; ripping open the bellies of unoffending females tore from the womb their bleeding offspring, mutilated the limbs of children and thrust them into the bowels of the innocent bleeding murdered victims of that unhappy day. Should this be the case of which I have no doubt may I beseech the vengeance of Almighty God to pour down on the head of the satannic [sic] monster who caused it.' There is more in the same vein.

He concluded with a biting exhortation to his readers. 'What will the charitable British people think, who contribute their mite to your Society and on whose bounty you live in luxury in these Islands when they learn that you are propagating the sacred Scriptures by destroying man, woman and child on Tonga as above described. What will the English Nation think of the caricatures in the print shops of a Wesleyan Minister propagating his doctrine by causing the assassination of innocent females - the ripping open of their bowels - the mutilating of their tender offspring, &c. &c. . . Mr. Thomas, it is my duty, as a British subject and a gentleman to bring these barbarous outrages before the British Government and the House of Commons and to give them publicity in every part of the globe.' And then there was a final threat, 'Mr. Thomas, pray bear in mind that there is a God and such places as the Old Bailey and Execution Dock.'

His charges produced two reactions. The WMMS had been concerned, even before Dillon's pamphlet had been issued in 1841. Although John Thomas had dismissed Dillon's letter of 1837 as 'a most infamous letter . . . of a most false and abominable nature,' a copy of it must have reached the Society. Its *Report* for 1838 attempted to calm its supporters, observing, 'The Committee cannot regard this war with other than very painful feelings,' but hoped that good may come from it. 'It appears probable that the Missionaries will now be able to carry the Gospel to every part of Tonga.'<sup>18</sup> In private the Society sent a note of severe reproof to Thomas. 'The style of your communications about the war resembled too much that of the Sacred historian who narrates the destruction of the Canaanitish nations in pursuance of the direct command of God . . . like our Missionaries in one of our African Districts.' It directed one of its missionaries in Australia, Joseph Orton, to investigate the whole matter so as to 'elicit such a refutation as will enable us to meet the traducer before the bar of British opinion and defend our Missionary character from his serious imputations.' However Orton did not visit Thomas in Tonga as requested but sent a questionnaire to one of the other missionaries, John Hobbs, who had been in Tonga at the time and was now in

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<sup>18</sup> *The Report of the Wesleyan-Methodist Missionary Society for the year ending April, 1838*, 38.

Australia. This vindicated Thomas, but did support some of the charges of cruelty against King George in the war, admitting that he had been ‘greatly aggravated.’ The missionaries had told him of the impropriety of his actions ‘and advised him to avoid anything of the kind in future.’ At the Tonga District Meeting of 1841 the whole matter was again thoroughly discussed and it was concluded that ‘a more villanous and unfounded attack had never been made on the character of a Christian Minister.’ And the Society’s annual report for 1841 endorsed this conclusion. ‘It appears to be satisfactorily ascertained already, that the Heathen Chiefs were the aggressors in the late unhappy conflicts at Tonga, . . . that great and repeated efforts were made by the former [Christians] to obtain a pacific settlement of the disputes, . . . that Christianity, if it have not already imparted the blessings of peace, has materially mitigated, in the conduct of those who embrace it, the horrors of warfare. . . The Missionaries at Tonga have conducted themselves, in their most trying and critical circumstances, as Christians and Missionaries ought to do.’ Attempts to traduce the character of John Thomas were not to be wondered at, reported the Rev. John Waterhouse, ‘when I see such real patrons of virtue frowning on those lawless libertines who visit their coasts.’<sup>19</sup>

And then in 1842 David Cargill, who had himself been a missionary in Tonga but was now in Fiji, issued his own pamphlet.<sup>20</sup> It is more verbose than Dillon’s pithy allegations. However he does answer many of Dillon’s charges, and questions his reliability. He was ‘either utterly ignorant of the cause of the “bloodshed and cruelty” which he mentions, or lamentably indifferent about it, or strangely disposed to forget it; and that, in any case, he was unqualified to describe it.’ He asserts the legitimacy of the claim of King George to the rule of all Tonga. ‘He is acknowledged by all, whether Christians or Heathens, whether chiefs or people, to be the legitimate sovereign of Tongatabu.’ He had the right to come to the assistance of the persecuted Christians of Tongatapu, though war, whatever its cause, is evil. ‘I am not attempting to apologize for the war, but explain its cause.’ The rebels were regicides, and King George became a Christian not with political motives but from a conviction of its truth. Dillon had written that King George, arriving in Tongatapu, would invite chiefs to a friendly feast where they would be attacked with concealed butchers’ knives by men from Vava’u. Cargill counters with a story of Dillon distributing knives to heathen chiefs to be concealed for an attack on King George and the Christians. One story must be wrong, he says, but he knows the king to be ‘too careful of his moral and religious character to countenance in any way an artifice so cowardly, so mean and execrable.’ He defends the personal character of the missionaries, and especially John Thomas for his zeal and dedication, ‘One of the best and most efficient friends the islanders of Tonga ever welcomed to their shores.’ Dillon had claimed that he could fill a quarto volume with stories of the evils of the missionaries. This, Cargill writes, ‘is the product of a fanatic imagination and a biassed judgement.’ Some of the harsh punishments which Dillon said that the missionaries had imposed he had never heard of or were much exaggerated, and he can find no account of the barbarities of war which Dillon describes, while ‘the pathetic but menacing and abusive language in other parts of the letter to Mr. Thomas is unworthy of notice.’ In that same year, 1842, the WMMS reported that circumstances for the missionaries were encouraging. ‘The Missionaries are no longer disturbed in their benevolent work by the sounds of war; peace and tranquility have been restored in Tongatabu.’<sup>21</sup>

King George’s claim to be ruler of Vava’u was, as stated by the missionary John Hobbs in reply to the enquiries of the WMMS, at the request of the previous ruler, Finau, who died in 1833, and by the ‘unanimous concurrence of the people . . . confirmed according to custom by the chiefs.’<sup>22</sup> He certainly had no claim to the title of Tu’i Tonga, the sacred king, whose line went back to the tenth century. The Tu’i Tonga at the time, Laufilitonga, resisted the Methodist missionaries and

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<sup>19</sup> *The Report of the Wesleyan-Methodist Missionary Society for the year ending April, 1841*, 53, 56.

<sup>20</sup> David Cargill, *A refutation of Chevalier Dillon’s slanderous attacks on the Wesleyan missionaries in the Friendly Islands. In a letter to the General Secretaries of the Wesleyan Missionary Society* (London: James Nichols, 1842).

<sup>21</sup> *The Report of the Wesleyan-Methodist Missionary Society for the year ending April, 1843*, 58.

<sup>22</sup> Quoted in Wood, *Overseas Missions*, 71.

eventually was baptised into the Roman Catholic Church by Marist missionaries in 1851. Only on his death in 1865 was that title absorbed by King George. He did, however, have a claim to the title of Tu'i Kanokupolu, who had become the secular ruler in the seventeenth century, when the Tu'i Tonga had relinquished his secular duties, retaining only his spiritual authority. To this title King George was finally confirmed on the death of the current holder, his uncle Aleamotu'a, in 1845, when he became ruler of a united Tonga.<sup>23</sup>

Dillon's attack on the role of missionaries in secular matters, and Cargill's refutation were not unique. There had been a similar confrontation in Tahiti a few years before, and there was to be one relating to Fiji a few years later. In 1824 the Russian explorer Otto von Kotzebue visited Tahiti and formed a very unfavourable view of the work of the London Missionary Society. Arriving on the Sabbath he was struck by what he called 'the stillness of death' which prevailed, 'on which account they did not leave their houses, where they lay on their bellies reading the Bible and howling aloud in prayer.'<sup>24</sup> He claimed that opponents of the mission had been massacred in large numbers. 'With the zeal for making proselytes, the rage of tigers took possession of a people once so gentle. Streams of blood followed - whole races were exterminated; many resolutely met the death they preferred to the renunciation of their ancient faith.'<sup>25</sup> He continued, 'The religion brought by the Missionaries is not true Christianity.' It had done some good. 'It has restrained the vices of theft and incontinence,' but it had given birth to bigotry, hypocrisy and hatred.<sup>26</sup>

The response came from William Ellis, former missionary there, author of *Polynesian Researches*, who was now in London. In his 1831 work *A Vindication of the South Sea Missions from the Misrepresentations of Otto von Kotzebue* he identified errors and what he sees as deliberate misrepresentations, and refuted his charges.<sup>27</sup> It was, he wrote, 'one of the most virulent and malicious, as well as unfounded, attacks upon the introduction and influence of Christianity in these islands, which it has yet had to endure.'<sup>28</sup> We might wonder whether David Cargill, writing eleven years later for a similar purpose, knew of Ellis's pamphlet. Nicholas Thomas, in his new book on Europeans and Pacific islanders, in which he attempts to view the relationship from the point of view of the islanders, draws the same conclusion from this episode that we might draw from the confrontation between Dillon and Cargill over the work of the WMMS in Tonga. He sees von Kotzebue's charges as 'a reminder that even during the ascendancy the missionary effort was ambivalently regarded, and sometimes vigorously castigated.'<sup>29</sup>

A decade later there was a similar attack on the Wesleyan missionaries in Fiji, in a letter published in the *New York Herald* of 9 November 1856, by David Stuart. The refutation came in a pamphlet by T.C. Dunn,<sup>30</sup> who it seems was not himself a missionary but a sympathetic trader. In the official collection of American papers, giving their view of the episode, there is reference to 'a *beche le*

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<sup>23</sup> The lists of holders of the two titles of Tu'i Tonga and Tu'i Kanokupolu are given in E. G. Gifford, *Tongan Society* (Honolulu: Bernice P. Bishop Museum, 1929), 50 and 86-7.

<sup>24</sup> Otto von Kotzebue, *A New Voyage around the World in the years 1823, 24, 25 and 26* (London: H. Colburn and R. Bentley, 1830), I, 150.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 159

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, I, 168.

<sup>27</sup> The SOAS library copy of von Kotzebue has pencil annotations in the margins of the section on Tahiti which seem to have been made by Ellis in preparing his reply. Unfortunately the margins have been trimmed in modern rebinding and parts of the comments are lost.

<sup>28</sup> William Ellis, *A Vindication of the South Sea Missions from the Misrepresentations of Otto von Kotzebue* (London: F. Westley and A.H. Davis, 1831), 10.

<sup>29</sup> Nicholas Thomas, *Islanders: the Pacific in the age of Empire* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2010), 106-7.

<sup>30</sup> T.C. Dunn, *A Refutation of the Charges against the Wesleyan Missionaries in the Feejee islands* (London: James Nichols, 1856).

mer house, belonging to Captain Thomas C. Dunn.’<sup>31</sup> He claims that David Stuart is a pseudonym. The dispute related to reparations claimed by American traders in Fiji for loss of life and property allegedly caused by Fijians, when the commander of the US warship *John Adams* forced the Tui Viti, Thakombau, to agree a huge penalty. The Wesleyan missionaries in Fiji had attempted to establish the truth of the claims and to mediate. Dunn referred to the original accusatory letter as ‘giving a long list of massacres and crimes committed by the natives against the whites residing there; and also charging the English Wesleyan missionaries with being accessory to, and instigating many of, the atrocities so minutely detailed.’ Dunn continued, ‘I take this, the earliest opportunity afforded me, of replying to it, and of vindicating the character of a body of noble-minded and self-denying men.’ The missionaries ‘have been held up as monsters of iniquity, as men stained by crimes of the blackest dye, instigators of the most atrocious crimes, from pecuniary motives - and all under the garb of sanctity and religion.’ He had no wish to palliate any of the atrocities committed by the natives. ‘But no commander of a national ship should receive as truth such wholesale charges against the natives, and also against a body of men so respectable as the Wesleyan Missionaries . . . without candid and cautious investigation into their truth.’

The annual report of the WMMS for 1856 briefly noted the American demand but with no mention of their accusations. The fullest contemporary account, written by two of the missionaries and published only two years later,<sup>32</sup> makes no mention of the episode. Clearly, once the charges were refuted, silence was thought the best policy.

Here, then, is a pattern of accusation and refutation. The problem, both for those who read these pamphlets at the time and for us now is that, with no first-hand knowledge of the situation, one man’s word has to be set against another’s. Both men were interested and involved parties, with their own agendas. It must be noted, if the views of Brenchley and Thomson quoted at the beginning of this paper were typical of their period later in the nineteenth century, that Dillon’s accusations seem to have made a greater impact than Cargill’s refutation, though to Methodist historians such as Wood this was little more than a brief, if unfortunate episode in the ultimate triumph of Christianity in Tonga. But Dillon’s general hostility to the Methodist missionaries, combined with his own position as the envoy of the King of France to the South Seas working for Roman Catholic evangelization, is clear. In 1829 he had urged that a Catholic mission be established, with the help of French naval ships, as ‘people are the prey of ignorant Methodists.’<sup>33</sup> In 1837 Bishop Pompallier of the Marist Order visited Vava’u and asked for permission to leave priests there. On the advice of Thomas, King George refused permission. According to John Thomas’ report to the Society it had been a guarded but not unfriendly encounter. The bishop said that it was not his intention ‘to interfere with us in instructing the people of this group.’ He just wanted to leave two or three people there to learn the language. Thomas gave them copies of some of the works in Tongan which the Methodist missionaries had printed. ‘Upon the whole,’ he wrote, ‘we felt rather sorry for the men, for the Bishop stated that they had met with nothing but opposition.’<sup>34</sup>

This must have exacerbated the differences between Thomas and Dillon, which had at first showed themselves particularly over sexual relations with Tongan women, as already noted, but developed into a general dislike of and prejudice towards what he saw as the arrogant, intolerant, ignorant and puritanical behaviour of the Methodist missionaries. He had seen Catholic priests at work in Peru. ‘Now contrast the conduct of these enlightened professors of the reformed doctrines of christianity with the really christian conduct of the benighted ministers of the catholic religion at Lima,’ who

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<sup>31</sup> *Message from the President of the United States, concerning the report of Captain Boutwell, relative to the operations of the sloop of war “John Adams” at the Feejee islands* (Washington: House of Representatives, 1856), 43.

<sup>32</sup> Thomas Williams and James Calvert, *Fiji and the Fijians* (London: Alexander Heylin, 1858).

<sup>33</sup> Quoted in Wood, *Overseas Missions*, 102.

<sup>34</sup> *Report of the Wesleyan-Methodist Missionary Society for the year ending April, 1838*, 47-8.

visit the sick, comfort the dying and ask for no remuneration.<sup>35</sup> He also, with a note of snobbishness, accused the missionaries of hypocrisy. 'The mission sends out mechanics to instruct the natives in handicrafts; but at present the persons sent out for this purpose assume the title of the *Reverend Mr. So and So*, . . . Thus is the public imposed on by these sanctified mechanics, whom it intended not to act as clergy, but to use their hands as St. Paul did before them.'<sup>36</sup> This may have been the case with the first missionaries sent out to Tahiti and Tonga by the London Missionary Society in 1796, but Thomas and his colleagues in Tonga were ordained Methodist ministers. Quite apart from his personal dislike of Thomas, dating back to their first hostile encounter in 1827, Dillon clearly disliked the whole ethos of the Methodist mission in Tonga.

And there the matter might have rested, a rather worrying footnote in the history of the establishment of Methodist Christianity in Tonga. But in 1975 it was brought to the surface again with the publication of a review article by H. G. Cummins of Sione Lātūkefu's *Church and State in Tonga*,<sup>37</sup> followed by a paper in 1977, in which he largely supported the charges made by Dillon.<sup>38</sup> In the review article he writes, 'The missionaries' teaching on the kingship theme was also based on the Old Testament rather than on British history and tradition. Although they were loyal to their British sovereign, it was to the Old Testament that they turned when wishing to instruct the Tongans in kingship,' and he cites John Thomas in 1830 likening the future King George to a latter day King Saul. He claims that around 1832 the emphasis of the teaching of the missionaries, in their sermons and in the school books which they printed, turned from the New Testament to the Old. In a booklet of extracts from I Samuel Tongans would read, 'Behold, the Lord hath set a king over you . . . If ye will not obey the voice of the Lord, but rebel against the commandment of the Lord, then shall the hand of the Lord be against you.'<sup>39</sup> Methodists were no revolutionaries. As Lātūkefu notes, 'The missionaries who went to Tonga inherited the political views of Wesleyan Methodism in England at that time. Loyalty to monarchy, country and constitution was unquestioned.'<sup>40</sup>

We have noted that John Thomas preached from the book of Joshua just before the 1837 war. In his 1977 paper Cummins develops the theme, with more examples of the missionaries' use of Old Testament texts, for instance Psalm 2, 'Why do the heathen rage, and the people imagine a vain thing?' He sums up, 'The part played by the missionaries seems clear enough. They had not created civil war. . . . They had, however, in establishing the new order that was emerging with the widespread acceptance of Christianity, provided a model which allowed the Tongans to fight out their differences, albeit with additional and somewhat changed motives.'<sup>41</sup>

But Janet Luckcock, in her 1990 biography of John Thomas,<sup>42</sup> would have none of this. Her clearly-stated purpose is to rehabilitate the reputation of Thomas, who she believes has been unjustly ignored and criticised by historians of our own time. 'Such omissions, neglect and lack of enthusiasm indicate that a reassessment of this particular Missionary is now both proper and necessary.'<sup>43</sup> She cites Lātūkefu, Gunson and Wood. However they simply pointed out the limited education of Thomas and his colleagues, and their narrow attitudes towards secular culture which were common among evangelicals at that time. She devotes a whole appendix<sup>44</sup> to a refutation of

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<sup>35</sup> Dillon, *Narrative*, II, 330.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.

<sup>37</sup> H. G. Cummins, 'Missionary Politicians,' *The Journal of Pacific History*, 10.2 (1975), 105-112.

<sup>38</sup> H. G. Cummins, 'Holy War: Peter Dillon and the 1837 Massacres in Tonga,' *The Journal of Pacific History*, 12.1 (1977), 25-39.

<sup>39</sup> I Samuel, 12. 13-15.

<sup>40</sup> S. Lātūkefu, *Church and State in Tonga*, (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1974), 83

<sup>41</sup> Cummins, 'Holy War,' 34

<sup>42</sup> Janet Luckcock, *Thomas of Tonga, 1797-1881: the Unlikely Pioneer* (Peterborough: Methodist Publishing House, 1990).

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 7

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, 160-71.

Dillon's charges, some of which Cummins suggests were 'close to the truth.' She seeks to demonstrate that even these are also totally false. She sees Dillon's motive in making his charges as his involvement in the religious aspirations of the Roman Catholic church linked with the political ambitions of the French Government. She notes that the words of accusation in the letter which the WMMS in London sent to John Thomas, part of which was quoted above, were only a few sentences in a long letter which also congratulates him on his disapproval of the King's action and remarks on 'the satisfaction with which your faithful and persevering labours are regarded at the Mission House.' She notes too the verdict of David Cargill that he was 'the mildest of men.' Dillon had also charged that 'Mr. Thomas takes good care that the Society shall remain in ignorance of his foul proceedings.' She rightly comments that missionaries were required to keep journals and send home regular accounts of their work. The journals and letters of John Thomas are so voluminous that one wonders how he found time to write them among all his other duties. She challenges Cummins' assertion of a change in missionary policy to give more emphasis to teaching from the Old Testament. In all mission fields teaching from the New Testament had come first, and the Old Testament later. The portions of I Samuel, Isaiah and the Psalms which they printed spoke equally, if not more, of the sins of kingship and of avoiding violence. And Thomas himself, as has been seen, hardly encouraged war but deeply regretted its approach. She sums up Dillon's accusations 'almost totally as propaganda lies. It is time Thomas was vindicated and seen to be so.'<sup>45</sup>

The difficulty for us is that there are no disinterested witnesses. Dillon and Cargill both spoke with their own convictions, as did von Kotzebue and Ellis, David Stuart and T. C. Dunn. It is clear that Dillon's charges were in most cases grossly overstated and in some cases demonstrably false. Thomas was no saint, but he was not a warmonger, not the satanic figure created by Dillon. With his Methodist views on the legitimacy of the authority of a Christian king he may have been unwise, perhaps naïve, not to realise that his choice of Old Testament passages could be misinterpreted. And he may have overstepped the limits of his instructions from the Society to avoid involvement in politics. But he was faced with the political realities of Tonga at that time, and responded as best he knew. The interface between religion and politics, the sacred and the secular, is often messy and unclear.

This is perhaps the final question. Why, if Dillon's accusations were largely disparaged, did the memory of them survive so long, as shown by Brenchley in 1865 and Thomson in 1894?<sup>46</sup> Was there a general lack of sympathy, outside Methodist circles, with the Methodist style of evangelism and church life? Is bad news and scandal always more attractive than good, and more readily remembered?

#### NOTE

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., 171

<sup>46</sup> See fn. 3 and 4 above.