



John G. Paton (1824-1907)
Missionary of the New Hebrides

No name is so well known concerning missionary work in the Pacific as John G. Paton. Born at Kirkmahoe, near Dumfries in the south of Scotland, he came from a family with strong Christian faith. Leaving school, he worked with his father who was a stocking-maker. His only real time for study was in the meal breaks during the day, but he then spent ten years in city mission work in Glasgow. Studies at Glasgow University and the theological hall of the Reformed Presbyterian Church followed. He was ordained as a minister of that church in 1858, and he and his young wife, Ann Robson, arrived in the New Hebrides (now Vanuatu) later that year.

Other missionaries had already started working on the island of Tanna, and the Patons settled into life at Port Resolution, at the eastern end of the island. On 18 February 1859 their son, Peter, was born, but tragedy struck when Ann Paton died on 3 March. The young baby only lived till 20 March. Paton himself had to keep guard over the graves, and almost lost his mind completely. Two fine Anglican missionary bishops, Selwyn and Paterson, called at the island and tried to bring comfort to him.

The opposition on Tanna was extreme, with the islanders having a religion of fear, and brutality and death being a constant part of their lives. Cannibal feasts were common. In his autobiography, published in 1889, Paton describes how the spirits of departed ancestors were worshipped. Their idols were mainly of stone, and the chiefs exercised enormous influence over the communities. This situation was exacerbated due to the evil influence of traders, some of whom deliberately introduced measles, and blamed it on the missionaries. Paton endured many hardships and dangers. Once he had to stay up in a big chestnut tree all night to escape attempts on his life. Finally, when it was clear that the islanders were determined to kill all the missionaries and destroy anything

connected with the Christian faith, Paton and his colleagues had to flee to the island of Aneityum, to the south of Tanna. His fellow missionaries persuaded him that he had to leave the New Hebrides to obtain good rest.

He undertook promotional work in Australia and Scotland, remarrying in Scotland in 1864. With help from Australian Presbyterians, Paton and his wife Margaret, began work on the island of Aniwa in 1866. While they faced many attacks, the Gospel started to make progress, especially when a chief was the first convert. Idols were given up and the first twelve converts were baptised and partook of communion in October 1869. Paton was busy with Bible translation too, but recurring illness forced them to leave Aniwa in 1881. They lost several children by death in the islands as well as in Melbourne.

Till his death in 1907, John G. Paton was a constant visitor back to the New Hebrides, as well as being a global ambassador for Christian missions.

The name of John G. Paton is kept alive in various ways. The main hospital in the capital of Vanuatu, Vila, is the Paton Memorial Hospital. A Presbyterian church in Melbourne was named in honour of him (Paton Memorial Deepdene [now Uniting]), while the student society at the Presbyterian Theological College, Melbourne, is the John G. Paton Fellowship.

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