Appendix Two: 'Cumeroogunga Mission – Story of Its Early Days, Tribute to Teacher'

TRIBUTE TO TEACHER

Early this year there passed away in the Methodist Hospital a man who for many years was school teacher at the Cumeroogunga Aboriginal Mission—Mr. R. M. James. Little reference to his life and character appeared at the time. The Rev. H. K. Matthews, now living at Payingham, South Australia, however, is desirous that a unique life in the history of the aboriginal race of the Riverina be preserved, and he has forwarded a personal tribute.

More than 60 years ago Mr. Matthews was one of his earliest scholars. Mr. Matthews subsequently had experiences in education in Melbourne, Adelaide, London and Canada where he was ordained to the ministry of the Canadian church. With gratitude he pays a tribute to his "earliest teacher, who laid the truest foundation" and speaks of him as "a teacher unsurpassed anywhere," and he continues: "There was nothing to regret in those early lessons imparted in the public school" on what was then known as the Mologa Mission and which had been founded by Mr. Matthews' parents in 1871. Although nearly all the children were aboriginal, the standard of instruction was equal to or above that of the average NSW school, and Mr. Matthews says was due to the character and ability of Mr. James.

The late Thomas, Shadrack James was born in Mauritius in 1859. His father was of Indian birth and spoke the Talmud language, Tidew, however, with the aid of an English dictionary and the story of "Robinson Crusoe" learnt English. As a young man he left home and landed in Tasmania, where he became a teacher. Later he went to Melbourne and interested himself in the movement and who, when Mr. Matthews visited Melbourne and conducted a holiday camp for 25 aborigines at Brighton Beach, brought Mr. James into contact with him. The result was that Mr. James offered to assist in the mission work with remuneration. At the mission station in 1881 he became a great helper to the Sunday School. He formed the first aboriginal cricket club and

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CUMEROOGUNGA MISSION

Story of Its Early Days

...ignes, which land, in a private property, of cottages and schools to this land and the mission was given to it by a independent appointed by the Aboriginal Protection Association in Sydney.

Mr. James continued as teacher of the school and it is noteworthy that of all the Mission workers who have been engaged from time to time Mr. James had the longest unbroken line of service—from 1881 until he retired in the superannuation fund of the Education Department.

The following letter to Mr. D. Matthews in December 1886 indicates the interest felt by Mr. James in preparation of a Christmas camp at the seaside, "I shall be in Melbourne in the 14th with about 50 or 100 of our people. We shall camp at Brighton, the never-to-be-forgotten spot where you first introduced me into this glorious work. I am pleased to find from your own letter, as well as from other sources, that the Lord is wonderfully blessing your work and that the work will be placed on a systematic basis for the welfare of our much neglected Aboriginals. Do come and see us at Brighton. With Christian love etc., Thos. S. James."

Memories

Years have passed, the Rev. J. K. Matthews writes. After a lapse of over 20 years I had the pleasure of meeting Mr. and Mrs. James again in Payingham, Melbourne where they were living after his retirement from the school at Cumeroogunga. He wrote me a beautiful letter later. In November 1943 I had occasion to visit Canberra War Cemetery where my second son, Sjt. D. K. Matthews, was buried, having lost his life in an aircraft accident in NSW, and, on my return journey I visited Echuca and the scenes of my childhood. Through the kindness of Mr. Payne I was able to go to Cumeroogunga and in a meeting spoke to the people in the old school house in which I was born and in which Mr. and Mrs. James were married, the first Mission home. The following day we motored to Kempston and in the home of his daughter, Mrs. Murray, Mr. James and I—teacher and scholar of 60 years past—had our last, long talk—memories of the old times, rich and rare. I have now by me, one of the last treasures in my book-sHELVES, a poem I received from him when 126 years of age in which is written in his beautiful hand writing "John Kerr Matthews, Maga Public School and I."
the Tamil language. Thomas, however, with the aid of an English dictionary and the story of "Robinson Crusoe" learnt English. As a young man he left home and landed in Tasmania, where he became a teacher. Later he went to Melbourne and aroused the interest of a merchant, Mr. Crosby, who was interested in the mission station and who, when Mr. Matthews visited Melbourne and conducted a holiday camp for 25 aborigines at Brighton Beach, brought Mr. James into contact with him. The result was that Mr. James offered to assist in the mission work without remuneration. At the mission station in 1881 he became a great helper in the Sunday School. He formed the first aboriginal cricket club and also preached. Later in the year the mission school became a public school under the New South Wales Education Department with Mr. James as teacher at £15 per annum. In a spiritual revival, which began in 1884 and continued for several years, he and several of the natives conducted evangelistic services in the neighborhood.

The following notes are from the diary of the Rev. J. K. Matthews' father upon which the following interesting items are also based:

_Tribute to Aboriginal Children and Their Teacher_

A lady from England who visited Maloga writes to a religious journal in London about the school. "Although I have been well acquainted with shadow's Orphan Houses in Bristol and the Homes of Dr. Barnardo, I must say I have never seen a school better conducted, or children under more thorough control than these juvenile aborigines under the judicious management of Mr. James. It is a pleasure to me to visit this school again and again where the Topsey and Andy of "Uncle Tom's Cabin" are represented and to see how these volatile minds can be brought to concentrate themselves on real hard study, making achievements therein which would well compare with those of their more favored brothers and sisters in England. Their success in mental arithmetic was startling."

_A Red Letter Day_

On May 7th, 1885, it was recorded that 16 new cottages were being built for the aborigines and a teacher's house for Mr. James; and on May 14th—"This is a red letter day for Maloga. Two marriages took place. A minister (Rev. Mr. Johnstone) came from Echuca to officiate. Great preparations were made. Visitors and our people were all smiles. One of the most important unions that ever took place at the Mission was to be celebrated.Visited Echuca and the home scenes of my childhood. Through the kindness of Mr. Payne I was able to go to Cumerongunja and in a meeting spoke to the people in the old school house in which I was born and in which Mr. and Mrs. James were married, the first Mission house. The following day we motored to Shepparton and in the home of his daughter, Mrs. Murray, Mr. James and I—teacher and scholar of 60 years past—had our last long talk—memories of the old times, rich and rare. I have now by me, one of the best treasures in my bookshelves, a prize I received from him when 12 years of age in which is written in his beautiful hand writing "John Kerr Matthews, Maloga Public School, 2nd Jan. 1885. T. S. J." It is entitled: 'England, Hero and Christian Soldier; the life of General Gordon' whose tragic end sixty years ago is now being remembered. The book looks as beautiful as when I received it. Four years ago Mrs. James died about four years ago. She and Mr. James had a family of five daughters and three sons, two of whom died in infancy. The last years of his life Mr. James lived with his daughter (Mrs. Murray) at Shepparton. His body was laid to rest in the cemetery at Cumerongunja, the funeral service being conducted by his nephew, Pastor Eddie Atkinson. We, who knew him, deeply mourn his loss, but we look forward to the glorious reunion with our Savior and the redeemed."

_R.S.L. AND COMMUNISTS_

_Discussion at Deniliquin_

At a meeting of the Deniliquin branch of the R.S.L., Mr. L. G. Donovan on behalf of a member, questioned the President regarding the recent decision of the R.S.L. conference in Melbourne, asking for the resignation of Communist members. He said, "As the Federal Government had not declared the Communist Party an illegal organisation, any man, be he Liberal, Country Party, Labor, or Communist was entitled to vote that way at the ballot box simply because this was a democracy." He asked the chairman if the member concerned was named, would he withdraw his badge? The chairman said the R.S.L. conference in Victoria was only a State affair and he would not commit himself until after the general conference of all States in September.

Mr. J. Bass then moved that the discussion cease immediately as it
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pleasure to me to visit this school again and again where the Topsy and Andy’s of “Uncle Tom’s Cabin” are represented and to see how these volatile minds can be brought to concentrate themselves on real, hard study, making achievements therein which would well compare with those of their more favored brothers and sisters in England. Their success in mental arithmetic was startling."

Red Letter Day

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Mr James had provided a real bride cake, and everything else was most becoming, and attractive to the taste. Everyone acknowledged it was most enjoyable, and some went so far as to say we ought to have it oftener!

Bishop of Riverina’s Testimony

Many fine testimonies of visitors were written in a “Visitor’s Book.” The Bishop of Riverina wrote:—“Heard some of the elder scholars read, parse, and do mental arithmetic and was much pleased at the intelligence shown, and the thoroughness of the teaching.”

New Property Acquired

In 1888 a great change took place in the Mission Station. Mr Matthews acquired from the NSW Government a reserve of 1800 acres for the abor-

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The chairman said the RSL conference in Victoria was only a State affair and he would not commit himself until after the general conference of all States in September.

Mr J. Bass then moved that the discussion cease immediately as it was against the league rules to discuss politics at a meeting. If the discussion continued, he for one, would walk out immediately.

When Mr Donovan questioned Mr Bass, “Was the discussion at the conference in Melbourne out of order?” Mr Bass replied very emphatically in the affirmative and said he still upheld his earlier motion.

The motion was placed before the meeting and carried unanimously.

Mechanics’ Library. —

Following are additions to the Mechanics’ Institute Library: First Love, Last Love, Mary Burchell; Put Off Thy Shoes, E. L. Voonich; The Ten Commandments, (a short novel of Hitler’s war against the moral code); Plantation Guns, William Macleod Raine; The Cat Jumps, Miles Burton; Kid Cyclone, Lester Gregory; Of Many Men, James Aldridge; The Golden Hills, Dane Lancaster; Brides of Doom, Mary Richmond; Murdler at Benfleet, George Bottsmy; A Bunch of Crooks, Roland Daniel; Plowing the Arctic, G. J. Tranter; Red in the Morning, Dornford Yates; Romantic Fugitive, Sheila Burns; London Belongs to Me, Norman Collins; Can I Go There?, Anne Hepple.

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Source: Echuca Historical Society.