

‘Can these dry bones live?’ Religious life and afterlife

Writing from the Swan River Methodist mission in Western Australia, John Smithies told his superiors in the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society in 1843 that his station was undergoing an unusual atmosphere of revival. Of particular note was the experience of an adolescent girl called Nogyle, who lived with the missionaries. One morning, she declared to an emotional audience of missionaries and students that she had found God, after a vivid and Biblical dream of being visited by the devil.

He say me your father, you pray to me. Then me look at him, me think he look so miserable, me saying you not my father. My father great and good father, heaven get down ... devil take me by my arm and lift me up and show me beautiful Garden and said give me all that if me would pray to him. Me then kneel down and God pray ... devil too much wicked.¹

The delighted missionaries, who may have been used to accounts of spiritual dreams and visions within their own Methodist communities, hailed this as a sign of progress to come, and the school was turned into a spontaneous prayer meeting. However, Nogyle’s story would soon take on a tragic, if no less pious, tone in Smithies’ papers, when she died young of a lung disease. Again, she explained her journey partly through powerful dreams, claiming to have been visited by an angel who told her of her impending death. She was baptised with the name Mary and died surrounded by the other children, who sang a hymn:

I am a native child, but Jesus died for me.
And if I love him, I shall reign with him eternally.
Oh what a happy thought that when my body dies,
My saviour will rescue my soul, to dwell above the skies.²

In the records of these early missions, Christian exchange and bereavement were often profoundly entwined.

Philanthropic Aboriginal policy at this time rested on the notion that Christianity was integral to the care and elevation of colonised peoples. While evangelising was obviously central to missionary work, it was also built, however controversially, into the mandates of the protectors, who were urged to

1 John Smithies to General Secretaries, 25 October 1843, Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society, Archive: Australasia 1812–1889 [hereafter *WMMS*], reel 2, Mp2107 (Record ID: 133095), National Library of Australia (NLA).

2 John Smithies to General Secretaries, 25 October 1843, *WMMS*, reel 2, Mp2107, NLA. See also, Hempton 2005: 63, 65.

promote moral instruction, Christian education and observation of the Sabbath (although their enthusiasm clearly varied).³ Such priorities were reflected, too, in philanthropic lobbying in Britain. As Elizabeth Elbourne argues, the Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements) worked from a belief that the British had a duty to use their power for a higher purpose.⁴ This was apparent in the Australian sections of the Committee's report, which included calls for missionary work and pointed to the Crown's 1825 instructions to promote Aboriginal people's Christian instruction. The imperial duty to evangelise was clear in a remark to the Committee by an unnamed clergyman (possibly Cartwright of Black Town), who stressed that colonists owed Christianity to their dispossessed native subjects – 'As through the tender mercy of our God the dayspring from on high has visited us, we are solemnly engaged to impart to them the glorious beams of Gospel truth'.⁵

However, there have been relatively few in-depth discussions of the place of religion on these first missions and protectorate stations. Historical assessments of these projects have tended to downplay religious issues or agree on their spiritual 'failure'. Works by Peter Read, Michael Christie, Jean Critchett, RHW Reece and Michael Cannon on the early colonisation of south-eastern Australia all consider philanthropists' efforts to spread Christianity, but, with their focus on local conflict and resistance, they tend not to debate religion extensively. More recent works by Richard Broome and Henry Reynolds have paid greater attention to the influence of British Evangelical Christianity, but further work remains to be done. Meanwhile, the comparatively small number of works emphasising Indigenous religious participation and cultural change during this period, by historians like Hilary M Carey and Jean Woolmington, have not necessarily focused so much on the wider context of empire.⁶

Certainly, the Australian colonies at this time could not claim widespread evangelical success amongst Indigenous people. Even the Select Committee based their hopes largely on belief in all human beings' capacity for Christian

3 Sir George Arthur to Lord Glenelg, 15 December 1837, Cannon (ed) 1982, *Historical Records of Victoria (HRV): The Aborigines of Port Phillip, 1835–1839*, vol 2A: 33; Lord Glenelg to Sir George Gipps, 31 January 1838, in Cannon (ed) 1983, *HRV: Aborigines and Protectors, 1838–1839*, vol 2B: 375.

4 Elbourne 2003: no page numbers.

5 Extract included in Archdeacon Broughton, evidence, 3 August 1835, *British Parliamentary Papers (BPP): Report from the Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements) together with minutes of evidence, appendix and index*, Anthropology: Aborigines, vol 1, 1836: 15–16; *BPP: Report from the Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements) together with minutes of evidence, appendix and index*, Anthropology: Aborigines, vol 2, 1837: 11, 20.

6 Broome 2005; Cannon 1990; Christie 1979; Carey 2000: 45–61; Carey 1996; Critchett 1990; Read 1988; Reece 1974; Reynolds 1998; Woolmington 1986: 90–98; Woolmington: 283–293; Woolmington 1983: 24–32; Woolmington 1988: 77–92. An exception is Carey and Roberts 2002: 821–869. This considers the Baiaame Waganna rituals as a response to colonialism, but the focus remains local.

enlightenment, rather than on any local achievements to date.⁷ Meanwhile, local protectors and missionaries were acutely aware of their failures compared to colleagues in other parts of the world, and their papers were marked by claims of spiritual desolation. However, I would argue that these disappointments should not shut down discussion of spiritual topics. Religious exchanges between philanthropists and Indigenous Australians were complex and intriguing, shaped by an array of views about gratitude, guilt, individualism and community. This chapter, therefore, does not set out to evaluate missionaries' 'success' (although I will point to some accounts of baptism that have not received much scholarly attention), so much as to consider how Christian regimes shaped station life. Here, several elements are particularly striking. One concerns philanthropists' committed, if paradoxical, efforts to encourage people to understand Christianity in terms of both impartial observation of individual subjects and conversational two-way ties between mentors and pupils. Indigenous people, in turn, engaged creatively with aspects of Christian belief and practice, while not necessarily treating Christianity as a single, unified system. Also striking to the contemporary reader are the potent meanings of sin, destruction and death. Indigenous people were encouraged, for example, to abandon their alleged fear of mortality through Christian conversion, a process that necessitated warnings of doom and hellfire. Meanwhile, emphasis was placed on stories of the pious deaths of young converts, portrayed in terms of simultaneous grief and religious triumph.

'Like the Sun at first rising': private transformation, communal connections

Philanthropists opposed colonial racism through the language of Christianity, asserting that all souls were equally valuable in the eyes of God. As Wellington Valley missionary William Watson commented, to say that Indigenous people were incapable of enlightenment was blasphemous; 'diametrically opposed to the gospel, and derogatory to the honour of the Most High.'⁸ Port Phillip protector William Thomas noted proudly in his diary in 1841 that a European visitor to his station, listening to the children singing 'Praise ye the Lord Hallelujah', remarked 'What would the people of England say to hear this from a race that has been designated as not a link from the brute creation [?]'⁹ Such stories emphasised not only the ignorant cruelty of settlers who denied human

7 Archdeacon Broughton, evidence, 3 August 1835, Dandeson Coates, evidence, 8 June 1836, Rev William Yate, evidence, 13 February 1836, *BPP: Report from the Select Committee on Aborigines (British Settlements)*, vol 1, 1836: 14, 16, 201, 520.

8 William Watson to Colonial Secretary, 3 January 1844, *BPP: Papers Relating to Australia, 1844*, Colonies: Australia, vol 8, 1969: 284.

9 William Thomas, 22 August 1841, William Thomas, Papers, 1834–1868 [hereafter *WTP*], ML MSS 214, reel 2, State Library of NSW.

equality, but also the astonishing power of Christianity to raise Indigenous people from a state which philanthropists themselves considered brutish. Watson, for example, wrote in his journal in 1833 that when he saw Wiradjuri people's illness and degradation he was prompted to ask 'can these dry bones live?' He answered himself 'Thank God we know they can. O that the wind from Heaven might now come and breathe upon these slain that they might rise up an exceedingly great army to praise and glorify God.'¹⁰

As this suggests, philanthropists, although they compiled information about Indigenous beliefs, ceremonies, taboos, magic and spirits, were not generally sympathetic towards them. Instead, they depicted Aboriginal understandings of the universe as 'superstition', alternately dangerous and ridiculous. Port Phillip protector James Dredge, for instance, reported that Daungwurrung people had no idea 'of a Creator, of the existence of the soul as distinct from the body, or of its future destinies.'¹¹ Francis Tuckfield of the Buntingdale mission told the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society in 1839 that Indigenous people's spiritual notions were 'a rude chaos presenting an awfully distressing vacancy of thought.'¹² Similarly, James Günther claimed that Wiradjuri people had no good spirits to console them, only evil ones to keep at bay.¹³ Ideological and linguistic barriers and missionaries' cultural chauvinism stood in the way of greater understanding, as did the guarded and hierarchical nature of Indigenous belief systems, where knowledge was structured and sensitive, and even those who possessed it were not necessarily permitted to share unreservedly. Thus, Joseph Orton, JCS Handt and William Watson all complained they could barely comprehend what they were told about spiritual things and that some people were deliberately vague and reticent.¹⁴ LE Threlkeld's knowledge was probably greatest; he wrote at some length about Awabakal stories and beliefs and claimed to have persuaded a man to show him sacred objects. However, Tricia Henwood still maintains that his access was limited and that he was excluded from initiated men's ceremonies.¹⁵ Whatever partial insights philanthropists developed did nothing to discourage their own religious enthusiasms.

Evangelical aims and moral standards were specific and stringent. Protector ES Parker summarised this in 1850, stating that his sermons focused on 'the fall and

10 William Watson, journal, 30 June 1833, in Carey and Roberts (eds) 2002, *The Wellington Valley Project: Letters and Journals Relating to the Church Missionary Society Mission to Wellington Valley, NSW, 1830–42, A Critical Electronic Edition* [hereafter *WVP*]: <<http://www.newcastle.edu.au>>

11 James Dredge to GA Robinson, 8 November 1839, *WMMS*, reel 1, Mp2107, NLA.

12 Francis Tuckfield to WMMS, 20 February 1839, in Cannon (ed) 1982, *HRV*, vol 2A: 114.

13 James Günther, journal, 13 January 1839, *WVP*.

14 JCS Handt to William Cowper, Annual report of the Church Missionary Society Mission at Moreton Bay for the year 1838, Sir William Dixon, *Documents relating to Aboriginal Australians, 1816–1853*, Dixon Library, ADD 80–82, CY reel 3743, State Library of NSW; Joseph Orton, 29 November 1840, Joseph Orton, Journal 1832–1839 and 1840–1841, ML ref A1714–1715, CY reel 1119, State Library of NSW; Watson, journal, 12 May 1833, 26 October 1834, 19 December 1835, *WVP*.

15 Henwood 1978: 52.

universal corruption of human nature – redemption by the advent and death of our Lord Jesus Christ – the necessity of a change of heart or “new spirit” and of conformity to the will of God.¹⁶ While Evangelical beliefs varied, they were characterised generally by a stress on the accessibility of scripture, the doctrine of atonement (with Christ’s death the only means through which humanity’s sins would be forgiven), the radical, defining experience of conversion, and the need to act on one’s own salvation by spreading the word to others. The soul – the immaterial, immortal core of one’s being – was seen as either dark with sin (an evil predisposition to which all were vulnerable) or pure and enlightened through atonement. Common Evangelical narratives involved childhood religious impressions, a descent into worldliness, an awakening of consciousness, struggles against despair, and repentance and justification in Christ.¹⁷ This was apparent when Methodist missionary Joseph Orton recalled his spiritual experiences. He described to the WMMS his childhood longing to become a preacher, the period of lapse and sin that followed, and his elevation through a ‘clear manifestation of the favour of God through Jesus’, which rekindled a fervent wish to spread the word.¹⁸ Conversion itself was often described as an intense, transformative experience; a sense of being reborn. This was implied by Benjamin Hurst in 1841, when he reported to the WMMS that while his missionary work amongst Indigenous people at Buntingdale was progressing quite well, ‘we are not yet privileged to witness the tears of penitence and the joyful transports of a soul recently transported from the Kingdom of Darkness into the Kingdom of God’s dear son’.¹⁹

Evangelical experiences have also been characterised as personal and introspective, with an emphasis on conscience and self-awareness. (These elements were, of course, in keeping with the growth of inner life, privacy and ‘disciplinary technologies’ during the Victorian period.) William Watson’s papers were particularly notable for their emphasis on interiority, on developing self-consciousness and shame. In 1835, he explained to a Wiradjuri girl ‘that the first thing God does in the conversion of a Sinner is causing light to shine into his mind by which he is led to see how very wicked he is.’ He told her he had felt this way once, and wept over his sins when he was her age.²⁰ The following year, he recorded a similarly stern conversation with a girl who had just bathed in the river.

16 Edward Stone Parker to GA Robinson, 7 January 1850, Public Records Office of Victoria (PROV) VA512 *Chief Protector of Aborigines*, VPRS4410 unit 2, 1850/65 (reel 2).

17 Armstrong 1973: 49; Bebbington 1989: 2–8; Bradley 1976: 19–25, 71–72, 103; Ditchfield 1998: 26–29; Elbourne 2002: 30, 36–37; Gardner 2006: 27; Hempton 2005: 60–62; Hindmarsh 2001: 72–75; Kent 2005: 67, 70; Roberts 2002: 154–155, 200; Twells 1998: 236.

18 Joseph Orton, ‘Answers to Several Questions as to Expertise – Call to Ministry and Theology’, 1830, Joseph Orton, Letterbooks 1822–1842, ML ref A1717–A1720, State Library of NSW.

19 Benjamin Hurst to General Secretaries, 16 June 1841, WMMS, reel 2, Mp2107, NLA.

20 Watson, journal, 6 January 1835, WVP.

I said to her well have you bathed? She replied 'yes.' Then you are clean now. 'Yes' I said outside; but you don't mind about inside being clean [sic]. You have no desire to have a clean heart. She hung down her head, and said 'yes I do.' I told her in what way she was to obtain a new heart.²¹

When the young man Goongeen (Jemmy Buckley) protested that his prayers had not prompted any action from God, Watson replied that he prayed carelessly and did not really wish to change. He also assured Goongeen that the devil lurked in the hearts of wicked people, and that 'God had always lived and knew everything'.²² When a youth identified as JM (probably the same person) told Watson he felt miserable for his wicked heart, Watson replied:

that all good people had been that way at first. That I was miserable once, and that all are born in sin, and that at first the mind was like midnight when there was no moon or stars, all dark, very dark ... but when the spirit of God shone into the mind it was like the Sun at first rising.²³

Such accounts highlight two important, if paradoxical, aspects of philanthropic experience: the stress on Indigenous people as subjects of observation and monitoring, and the importance of discussion and exchange, of missionaries making their own experiences visible and debatable. Moral observation was certainly significant to mission life. In her study of Coranderrk station, operating in Victoria in the second half of the 19th century, Jane Lydon explores how Western visual cultures privileged seeing over other sensory experiences, emphasising the need to master oneself through a sense of being constantly watched. This contrasted with Indigenous systems of knowledge, which tended to conceptualise thought and understanding in terms of hearing, and which regulated people's behaviour more through public shaming and links to kin than through individual self-control.²⁴ Philanthropists' concern with the visual world was one reason for the emphasis (discussed in the previous chapter) on physical displays of morality, despite a belief in religious transformation as an inner experience. William Thomas, for example, was pleased when people dressed correctly for Sunday services on his protectorate station, listened politely to his sermons and joined in the hymns. He commented happily 'it really is a pleasure to behold the savages trying I may say persevering by endeavouring to imitate the white man.'²⁵ Similarly, Günther, who doubted whether Wiradjuri

21 Watson, journal, 18 October 1836, *WVP*.

22 Watson, journal, 5 July 1834, *WVP*.

23 Watson, journal, 16 January 1837, *WVP*.

24 Lydon 2005b: 227.

25 Thomas, 28 March 1841, *WTP*, ML MSS 214, reel 2. See also, Thomas, 1 November 1840, 15 November 1840, 22 November 1840, 31 January 1841, 4 April 1841, 11 April 1841, 2 May 1841, *WTP*, reel 2, also 7 July 1844, 10 April 1846, ML MSS 214, reel 3, State Library of NSW.

people understood his sermons, remarked 'Still it always gives me pleasure, to see a number of them at Church: they may at least get some notion & impression of divine ordinances.'²⁶

The issue of observation went beyond this, however, as philanthropists' stressed God's omniscient power. In 1833, when he discovered that young Wiradjuri girls had been approached by white men, Watson wrote 'I spoke very seriously to the girls on the subject of God's seeing them, and I would hope they seemed ashamed of their conduct.'²⁷ Indigenous responses to such campaigns were mixed, but some young people at Wellington Valley appeared to take on these ideas about observation, perhaps out of curiosity, closeness to missionaries, or for strategic reasons. Watson was pleased when the young woman Warrahbin, who lived at the mission sometimes, rebuffed white men's advances by telling them 'the Great God who sits down in Heaven and all about will see and will be angry'.²⁸ He was also touched when he overheard a group of children talking about how 'Jesus Christ is all over and sees everything'; they named all the places and people they could think of, saying 'and Bathurst too and Sydney too &c &c'.²⁹

More seriously, in Port Phillip, protectors Parker and Thomas described how they responded to reports of violent crimes by exhorting people that the 'Great Father' was watching and would punish them. This was Parker's response, for instance, when he was told that a woman called Boougarrapurmun had killed her newborn baby and was ill herself.³⁰ Perhaps the most dramatic incident occurred in 1840, when Thomas was told that Boonwurrung men from his station had killed other Indigenous people in Twofold Bay, as part of a long-running feud between their societies. A distressed Thomas, after speaking to various witnesses, confronted the men, who had previously insisted on their innocence. They wept and admitted to having speared their enemies and stolen portions of their flesh, after Thomas told them 'My Blackfellows no good, no good, talk me big, big one lie, me know all about my blackfellows, God knows, sees & hears all, me know.' The emphasis here, of course, was not only on God's observation, but also on the protector's.³¹

However, as the intensity of this exchange suggests, European regimes of observation were not being imposed upon Indigenous societies in any simple fashion. Philanthropists' powers were still quite limited, and Indigenous people

26 Günther, journal, 26 November 1837, *WVP*.

27 Watson, journal, 27 February 1833, *WVP*.

28 Watson, journal, 7 October 1833, *WVP*.

29 Watson, journal, 11 March 1834, *WVP*.

30 ES Parker, Quarterly Journal, 1 March – 31 May 1841, PROV VPRS4410, unit 2, 1841/61 (reel 2); Thomas, 8 February 1846, *WTP*, ML MSS 214, reel 3, State Library of NSW.

31 William Thomas to CJ La Trobe, 24 June 1840, PROV VPRS11 unit 7 (reel 1); William Thomas to GA Robinson, 6 June 1840, *WTP*, ML MSS 214, reel 4, State Library of NSW.

retained a certain autonomy and mobility. Moreover, Evangelical philanthropy, while stressing self-control and observation by authority figures, also relied on elements of mutuality and exchange. Catherine Hall has noted how ideas about heathen sin shaped British Evangelicals' own sense of moral worth – 'The heathen within constantly threatened at the door, making the imagined lines between self and other psychically and culturally vital'³² – but a certain crossing of these lines was also a significant, if troubling, experience. For all the importance of watching, speaking was also important; Evangelical life in general involved giving voice to the Word and trying through reasoning and argument to convince people of God's love, and philanthropists' encounters with Aboriginal people commonly centred on conversation and lecturing, to encourage moral development.³³ David Hempton, in his history of Methodism, emphasises the centrality of aural exchange through preaching, exhorting, singing and confessing.³⁴ Similarly, Jean and John Comaroff have identified the relationship between speaker and audience as a fundamental element of missionary work; 'The preacher was the vehicle of Truth as faithful representation, the believer, its sentient recipient.'³⁵ In 1849, when protector Parker described church services on his station, it was their spoken qualities he mentioned: not only the liturgy, sermon, prayer, psalms and scriptural translations, but also his addresses 'on some practical topic', where he tried to engage Indigenous people by putting questions to them, 'with a view to excite interest and elicit inquiry in their minds.'³⁶

Thus, while Christian transformation was imagined as an inward experience bound up with self-awareness, it was fostered through relationships of mentoring. An understanding of religion in terms of heritage and tutelage was implied by Watson in 1835, when he told a Wiradjuri man called Kabbarin that once upon a time everyone had known about God. This knowledge had been lost, he said, when people neglected to teach their children, 'so those children when they became the heads of families not knowing, or regarding the will of God did not teach their children and this was the reason the heathen did not understand anything regarding Him.'³⁷ While religious encounters between philanthropists and Indigenous people could be confused or conflicted, this mentoring relationship was nonetheless an important part of station life. This was suggested in several small incidents involving protector Thomas. On one occasion in 1840, Thomas tried to impress upon people the power of religion, by praying fervently over a sick man, singing hymns and lifting his eyes to the sky. The people watching presumably had little knowledge of Christianity at this

32 Hall 2002: 304–305.

33 Comaroff and Comaroff 1997 vol 2: 66–72.

34 Hempton 2005: 56, 68.

35 Comaroff and Comaroff 1997 vol 2: 66.

36 ES Parker to GA Robinson, 16 January 1849, PROV VPRS4410 unit 2, 1849/64 (reel 2).

37 Watson, journal, 19 December 1835, WVP.

point, but they showed approval at his nurturing behaviour. During another incident, a link between paternalism and Christian knowledge was implied, when one man responded to Thomas's lectures on 'God's seeing & knowing all they did & said', by saying 'no stupid me, my master Mr Dredge tell me long time ago all that'.³⁸ As Fiona Magowan has noted in her study of Yolgnu missions in the 20th century, some missionary behaviour could be assimilated into Indigenous traditions of caring for others and passing on knowledge; sociality and relationality were important to institutional life.³⁹

The personal element of evangelising was expressed overtly at Wellington Valley. On several occasions, young people asked the missionaries and their wives to pray and sing with them, and Watson claimed the children would only say their prayers with his wife, Ann.⁴⁰ One day in August 1838, a man called Fred, who was ill, surprised James Günther by calling out 'Mr Gunther pray for me!' When questioned by Günther, Fred said he believed in Jesus, adding 'I believe all you say & Mrs G say & I believe all Mr W say & Mrs W say.'⁴¹ The personal link was clearest, however, in Watson's accounts of the conversion and baptism of several young women. In June 1834, Ann Watson told a girl called Nanny that she would be baptised, but cautioned her that when this happened she would belong entirely to Jesus. Nanny responded 'I will never leave you Mrs Watson'.⁴² A similar account appeared in Watson's 1843 annual report, which claimed that two women, Sally and Jenny, who had been praying by themselves for some time, brought their children to him to be baptised in church, answering his theological questions satisfactorily, so that 'most of the congregation were deeply moved'. Sally, he said, assented to his warning that she must not take her children 'to live amongst heathens', saying 'I don't want to go away; I shall never leave you till I die'.⁴³ It can be hard to know how to read such stories, at a time when missionaries were struggling to establish their own authority. However, such dynamics can seem plausible in the context of Indigenous efforts to develop satisfying connections with philanthropists, and philanthropists' own wish for a paternalistic bond.

However, while Indigenous and philanthropic needs coincided in some ways, missionaries remained concerned by their failure to effect widespread conversions. Watson complained gloomily that preaching to Wiradjuri people felt sometimes 'like writing on the sand' or 'like beating the mountains with a

38 Thomas, 16 February 1840, *WTP*, ML MSS 214, reel 2, State Library of NSW; William Thomas to GA Robinson, 1 March 1841, PROV VPRS4410 unit 3, 1841/68 (reel 2).

39 Magowan 2005: 162–164.

40 Günther, journal, 2 September 1838, 29 July 1839; Watson, journal, 6 December 1832, 9 October 1833, *WVP*.

41 Günther, journal, 3 August 1838, *WVP*.

42 Watson, journal, 25 June 1834, *WVP*.

43 William Watson to Colonial Secretary, 3 January 1844, *BPP: Papers Relating to Australia, 1844*, vol 8: 285.

rod'.⁴⁴ Whilst acknowledging that evangelising always encountered resistance, philanthropists still felt affronted and hurt when their efforts were rejected. Here, their wish for a dynamic of benevolence and gratitude was relevant again. JCS Handt of Wellington Valley, an anxious and sensitive man, was distressed when some people ignored his religious lectures or said he was lying. He concluded 'their hearts seem to be very hard and insensible ... a great enmity against the word of truth is manifested.' He prayed that God would 'make these poor people sensible of our desire to do them good!'⁴⁵ Günther, similarly, remarked upon 'their indifference towards the means of grace, their idleness, their ingratitude ... and the insolence with which they sometimes speak to us'.⁴⁶ Thus, missionaries' duty to spread Christianity was translated into Indigenous people's duty to accept it. When the young man Cochrane posed the difficult question of why God had not sent the Bible to Australia long ago, Günther agreed that Europeans may have been to blame for delaying this with their sins. But he illustrated this with a reminder of Wiradjuri people's own culpability.

Now just look at yourselves, you have had missionaries [a] long time; but you do not believe, nor grow better. If you had become good men, by this time, and could go further on, to other Natives, and, you, too could be missionaries & go all over the bush & preach.⁴⁷

While the possibility of Indigenous preachers was not discussed often, Evangelical philanthropists did see a vital connection between personal salvation and spreading the word. This points to another creative tension in their work: while setting themselves up as spiritual authorities and observers, their sense of their own moral worth rested in many ways on their connections with Aboriginal people. Evangelical cultures in general drew important links between empire, missionary work and personal religious journeys. The London Missionary Society's 1846 *Juvenile Missionary Magazine*, for instance, reminded its young readers that improving their own moral state meant, amongst other things, praying for the heathen and making clothes for heathen children.⁴⁸ Similarly, the *Church Missionary Juvenile Instructor* told its readers in 1849:

When you think of these little [African] slave girls and their troubles, forget not that you yourselves are by nature the slaves of sin and Satan. And if you have not done so already, make haste to come to Jesus, the blessed Redeemer.⁴⁹

44 Watson, journal, 1 September 1833, 14 February 1834, WVP.

45 JCS Handt to William Jowett, 7 December 1835, WVP. Also, JCS Handt, journal, 28 November 1833, 8 March 1834, 16 December 1834, WVP.

46 Günther, journal, 27 December 1839, WVP.

47 Günther, journal, 15 March 1839, WVP.

48 London Missionary Society (LMS), *Juvenile Missionary Magazine*, vol 3, no 26, July 1846: 161, <<http://www.nla.gov.au/ferg/issn/14606003.html>>, also vol 3, no 20, January 1846: 15.

49 Church Missionary Society (CMS), *Church Missionary Juvenile Instructor*, vol VIII, no 12, December 1849: 358–359.

Thus, sin, redemption and the mission cause became intertwined for both the individual and the empire.

Philanthropists in the Australian colonies related their Indigenous projects to some very personal anxieties. On his way to Wellington Valley in 1832, Watson thanked God for the opportunity to preach to so many people, but worried that:

I was not more in earnest, felt more love to my Saviour, and more pity for perishing souls. Blessed Redeemer how is it that while thy love is so great to me, mine in return should be so weak so faint so cold. My soul cleareth to the dust quicken thou me O God.⁵⁰

Similarly, at the end of his first year at Wellington Valley, Günther thanked God for His mercies, whilst expressing deep regret for 'my many neglects, ingratitude & transgressions' and longing for 'more zeal & energy, knowledge & wisdom, & especially, faith & patience.'⁵¹ One reason why Indigenous people's alleged sins were so distressing was because they were seen as reflecting badly on missionaries' own moral state. At Wellington Valley in 1834, when boys were caught sneaking into the girls' dormitory, Watson reflected that this was a warning to the missionaries not to be proud or assume that they alone could change people's hearts; 'God will have all the glory of His Grace.'⁵² In 1837, he mused again on his failures, concluding that some deficiency on his part must be keeping the Holy Spirit from triumphing amongst the Wiradjuri. He wrote 'We daily pray Search us O God and try us and see if there be any wicked way in us.'⁵³

Such concerns also surfaced in the papers of protectors Dredge and Thomas. James Dredge, an introspective and frequently unhappy man, wrote in his diary on his birthday in 1838 'numerous have been the Lord's mercies, and great my unfaithfulness. O that my spared life may be *more* devoted to God!'⁵⁴ Two years later, he marked another birthday by writing anxiously 'I feel myself to have been an unprofitable servant. May the Lord accept my thanks for his goodness to me – forgive me – and save henceforth!'⁵⁵ An account by Thomas drew a clearer connection between colonial work and personal redemption. One night in 1841, Thomas wrote in his diary that he had dreamed of his own death. '[T]he first thing my Saviour ask'd me was about the Poor Dark Blks if any was bowing to the mighty God.' When Thomas replied that they were not, the response

50 Watson, journal, 3 October 1832, WVP.

51 Günther, journal, 31 December 1837, WVP.

52 Watson, journal, 6 November 1834, WVP. See also, 3 October 1835.

53 Watson, journal, 3 January 1837, WVP.

54 James Dredge, 6 October 1838, James Dredge, Diaries, Notebook and Letterbooks, ?1817–1845 [hereafter JDD], MS11625, MSM534, State Library of Victoria (SLV).

55 James Dredge, 6 October 1840, JDD, MS11625, MSM534, SLV.

was 'did you tell them of the Cross [?] ... then how expect that they can come for there is but one access to God.' Feeling both humbled and revived, Thomas vowed 'methinks the Gates of Hell cannot prevail against me.'⁵⁶

Philanthropists recounted most of these stories in their journals. It is not clear that they shared these anxieties with Indigenous people (although, as noted earlier, some did talk about their earlier lives as sinners seeking redemption). Nor did such expressions of humility and repentance feature much in missionary society publications, which preferred to highlight promising signs of Indigenous conversion. Nonetheless, moral self-interrogation was an important part of Evangelical life, and such passages are suggestive of philanthropists' need to make sense of their work and its relevance to their own selves. Religious soul-searching could also enable the airing of feelings that were otherwise unacceptable. On his birthday in 1838, James Günther described his guilt that his excessive secular duties on the station prevented him from engaging in meditation and prayer, 'to review my past life with the mercies I have experienced, the sins I have committed, the neglects I have become guilty of.' This apparent self-criticism in fact conveyed a double message, as Günther had been urging the Church Missionary Society in vain to send more aid to Wellington Valley.⁵⁷ Thus, when we consider how Christian morality was lived in practice, it was characterised by an interplay of watching, speaking and listening, of individualism and relationality, and of troubled attempts to construct subjects and authorities.

'Black fellows knew a great deal': Christianity received and explored

Philanthropists' anxious appraisals of their shortcomings have no doubt contributed to the general historical assessment of them as failures. However, while they certainly had many weaknesses, this assumption of Christian failure can be challenged. For one thing, some Indigenous conversions were reported, on stations where the missionaries were unusually keen or the circumstances unusually conducive. Wiradjuri country became one site for this, following Watson's split from the Church Missionary Society. While his colleague Günther had rigorously refused to baptise people whose conversions seemed uncertain, Watson was less hesitant. When Governor Gipps visited in 1840, he noted that one child (living with Watson) had been baptised, an eight-year-old boy called William Campbell.⁵⁸ Baptisms subsequently increased. The missionaries had been hopeful about a girl called Jane since one night in 1837, when they found

56 Thomas, journal, 17 August 1841, *WTP*, ML MSS 214, reel 2, State Library of NSW.

57 Günther, journal, 12 May 1838, *WVP*.

58 Memoranda, enclosed in Sir George Gipps to Lord John Russell, 5 April 1841, *BPP: Papers Relating to Australia, 1844*, vol 8: 70.

her sitting up, wanting to pray and feeling distressed about 'her soul, her sin, & her wicked heart'. Jane, who had been molested by white men and had a baby at a young age, became understandably attached to the relative security and affection of mission life. It was probably Jane to whom Watson was referring, when he described in an 1841 report a young woman whose Christian beliefs made her confident to refuse the approaches of white men, answering their taunts about her sexual history by replying 'I did not then know the Bible'. Watson baptised Jane in 1845; with an intriguing mixture of sexism and religious severity, he asked permission of her husband, Jemmy, but would not baptise Jemmy himself because he was not yet saved.⁵⁹ In 1849, Watson informed Governor Fitzroy that he had baptised seven people at Wellington Valley and 25 at his new Apsley station.⁶⁰ It is hard to know what to make of this. Watson, a prickly and obsessive character, no doubt wished to defy his neighbours and colleagues by asserting the success of his lone endeavours. However, his relationships with Wiradjuri people seem to have been fairly enduring, presumably helping some people to remain in their country after the official mission closed.

While Watson's isolated efforts did not receive much public praise, British missionary societies publicised some encouraging reports from John Smithies' Swan River mission in Western Australia in the 1840s. The WMMS reported with delight his account of young Indigenous people 'bathed in tears, broken in heart, and crying "Jesus save me! O Lord save me!"' *Papers Relative to the Wesleyan Missions* (1848) rejoiced at the fact that 18 youths had been baptised at Swan River and 30 or 40 people 'converted'.⁶² These accounts are indicative of Smithies' personal connections to young mission residents, but perhaps also of the impact of his efforts to integrate his pupils into white society as servants. This lifestyle may have made Christianity seem more relevant to these youths; perhaps it also helped them cope with circumstances which could be alienating and exploitative. This was suggested in the religious visions of a young girl called Wobart, who was converted at the same time as Nogyle. Wobart became a Christian after sitting up late one night at the house where she worked, feeling anxious and depressed, minding the baby of her white employers who had gone out to a party. She dreamed of black and white sinners being condemned on Judgement Day, where 'white lady and gentleman go dancing down to hell'.⁶³

59 Günther, journal, 10 September 1837, WVP; William Watson, First Report of the Aboriginal Mission, Murrung gallang, Wellington, c1841, in Sir William Dixon, *Documents relating to Aboriginal Australians*; Woolmington 1985: 286.

60 William Watson to Gov Charles Fitzroy, 31 December 1849, 9th Annual Report of the Apsley Aboriginal Mission, in Sir William Dixon, *Documents relating to Aboriginal Australians*.

61 WMMS, *Report of the WMMS for the year ending April 1845*, April 1846: 30–31; CMS, *Missionary Register*, May 1847: 217.

62 WMMS, *Papers Relative to the Wesleyan Missions, and to the State of Heathen Countries*, no cxi, March 1848.

63 John Smithies to General Secretaries, 25 October 1843, WMMS, reel 2, Mp2107, NLA.

It is curious that missionary historians, who have explored other projects in such depth, have not paid more attention to these accounts. John Harris, for example, does not explore the claims of individual conversions at Wellington Valley and gives only a brief outline of the Swan River 'revival'. William McNair and Hilary Rumley also give an oddly cursory description of Smithies' baptisms of numerous children, while Neville Green's chapter on Swan River omits the subject.⁶⁴ Presumably the early deaths of many of these converts discouraged further examination, although, as I will discuss later, missionaries themselves did not necessarily read such tragedies in terms of meaningless failure at all.

Assumptions of Evangelical failure can also be challenged in other respects. Even the rarity of baptisms deserves closer analysis. Missionaries' exacting standards of conversion meant that even when Indigenous people expressed interest in Christianity, this was often greeted with suspicion and interrogation. Awabakal man Biraban (or John M'Gill), for example, was an important translator, guide and companion to LE Threlkeld for years, but when he helped Threlkeld translate in a court case in 1838, the missionary informed Justice Burton that Biraban had not been baptised; his character, particularly his drinking, was incompatible with Christian life.⁶⁵ Similarly, at Wellington Valley in 1835, Handt reported that while the children's scriptural knowledge was good and they took part readily in Christian discussions, he could not call them converts; 'no real spiritual mindedness has yet manifested'.⁶⁶ Günther, similarly, told Governor Gipps that he would not baptise any children who were still living with their families, and when a man called Fred asked to be baptised (possibly because he wanted to marry one of the mission girls), Günther refused, lecturing him 'that he did not truly believe as yet, that he was too wicked still'.⁶⁷ This must be kept in mind when evaluating these projects. As Paul Landau has warned in his African study, some historians have been too quick to accept the stark divisions missionaries drew between converts and heathens, a distinction which may have had less meaning for native peoples themselves.⁶⁸

On the first Australian missions, there were certainly some supposedly non-Christian people who engaged in articulate, interesting discussions about Christianity. This was the main area – indeed, virtually the only area – where British publications actually recounted Indigenous people's opinions, albeit partially. Stories published from Wellington Valley mentioned religious conversations and arguments, children practising hymns and prayers, and

64 Green 1988: 156–157; Harris 1990: 60, 63, 67, 275–277; McNair and Rumley 1981: 97–102.

65 LE Threlkeld, 'Correspondence and Early Reports Relating to the Aboriginal Mission 1825–1841', in Gunson (ed) 1974 vol 2: 271.

66 JCS Handt, 1835 Report, WVP.

67 Günther, journal, 13 August 1838, WVP; Memoranda, enclosed in Sir George Gipps to Lord John Russell, 5 April 1841, BPP: *Papers Relating to Australia, 1844*, vol 8: 68–70.

68 Landau 1999: 11.

people behaving well in church.⁶⁹ Methodist publications, too, emphasised religious discussions and battles against sin, notably an anecdote from Buntingdale about a senior Indigenous man who rebuked a settler for not going to church, threatening that he would go to hell, and a comment from a young man, Hoymonaneau, who claimed to feel sorry for his sins: 'I have two spirits within me, the good spirit and the bad spirit, and they are talking to me every day'.⁷⁰ It is unsurprising that official publications emphasised such stories, given their 'Christianity first' focus. However, it also draws our attention to the fact that Indigenous views on more systemic colonial issues – notably the loss of land and resources – could be muffled in Evangelical publications, which considered Christianity the justification for empire.

Local records are suggestive of how Indigenous people tried to understand Christian elements within the colonial world. Wiradjuri people watched with interest the baptisms of white children, and missionaries at Wellington Valley and Buntingdale were asked questions about heaven: how large it was, what they would eat, whether there would be trees, cattle and rivers, whether they would have to work like white men, and whether there would be racial distinctions.⁷¹ Some queries took the missionaries by surprise. Günther, for example, was nonplussed when the young man Cochrane, who alternately told the missionaries that he wanted to become a Christian and that he did not have the patience for it, asked 'What the devil say to them when they come to hell?' Günther finally replied that the devil would tell sinners they were foolish for not repenting.⁷²

Here, it is helpful to consider the work of Peggy Brock, who has cautioned historians not to naturalise missionaries' assumption that their faith must oppose and replace native beliefs. In her portrayal of First Nations Tsimshian convert Arthur Wellington Clah, Brock argues that Tsimshian people saw Christianity as providing new elements of knowledge to improve their lives, mingling with local beliefs and dynamics.⁷³ At mission stations in the early Australian colonies, some people participated in aspects of Christian life without abandoning other beliefs. Goongeen (Jemmy Buckley), for instance, whose long conversations about Christianity the Wellington Valley missionaries recorded eagerly, was

69 CMS, *Church Missionary Paper*, London, CMS, no LXXIV, Christmas, 1836. Also, CMS, *Missionary Register*, November 1835: 515–520; CMS, *Missionary Register*, June 1836: 296–301; CMS, *Missionary Register*, September 1836: 427–430; CMS, *Missionary Register*, August 1838: 372–373; CMS, *Missionary Register*, September 1838: 423–425; CMS, *Missionary Register*, August 1839: 387–389.

70 CMS, *Missionary Register*, May 1846: 210; WMMS, *Report of the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society for the year ending April 1840*, 1840: 32; WMMS, *Report of the WMMS for the year ending April 1845*, 1845: 30–31.

71 Günther, journal, 26 November 1837, WVP; JCS Handt, journal, 27 September 1835, WVP; Francis Tuckfield to General Secretaries, 30 October 1841, WMMS, reel 2, Mp2107, NLA.

72 Günther, journal, 5 August 1838, WVP. Also, 27 December 1839.

73 Brock 2000: 78, 90.

nonetheless offended by their lectures against heathen superstition. He told Günther 'Black fellows knew a great deal', and spoke 'with feelings of veneration, & with a great degree of self sufficiency.'⁷⁴ During a conversation with Watson in 1834, Goongeen talked about Christian ideas of heaven, hell and angels, then tried to tell the missionary that shooting stars were portents of death. When Watson scoffed at this, Goongeen replied 'you won't believe Black fellow, Black fellow won't believe you.'⁷⁵ The missionaries were especially baffled by one incident that year, when Goongeen shut himself in the blacksmith's shop and performed a church service, complete with hymns, prayers, Benediction and sermon, before running away when he realised he was being watched. Watson wondered if he was mocking them, but felt that the time and energy Goongeen expended suggested something more. While it is not possible to know exactly what happened here, it seems plausible that some people were interested in exploring Christian knowledge, although not always submitting to missionary authority.⁷⁶

Some particularly intriguing stories emerged of people undergoing Christian dreams and visions. Unlike Nogyle, not all these people were identified as converts, nor did they accept missionary guidance so compliantly. To assume, though, that they were simply less Christian is perhaps to take the missionaries' own assumptions too much for granted. It might be better to read these visions in a context of varied efforts to negotiate social and spiritual change. At Wellington Valley, a young man called Oorimbildwally, who was ill and nearly blind, became rather dependent on the missionaries and attended church enthusiastically for a time. The fascinated missionaries described Oorimbildwally as a doctor, with the power to hunt Buggeen, 'the devil'; he suffered from strange seizures and his relatives told William Watson that he was troubled by ghosts. In 1833, he claimed to have had several dreams about the missionaries' God. In one, he was in a large building full of windows, where he saw God but did not speak to him, and in another he was pulled by a kurrajong cord through the window into God's house, where he saw God and Jesus in long white coats and thousands of people reading books. When he announced that he was sure to go to heaven when he died, however, Watson was uneasy, seeing Oorimbildwally as over-confident and not sufficiently worried about his sins.⁷⁷ Protector Thomas recorded similar scepticism and hope when a Boonwurrung man, Benbow, who was ill, told Thomas that while he was asleep God had touched his chest and told him he would not die. Thomas, although unconvinced, did not wish to discourage this line of thought.⁷⁸ These issues were echoed at Buntingdale in

74 Günther, journal, 9 July 1833, WVP.

75 Watson, journal, 5 July, 1834, WVP.

76 Watson, journal, 21 December 1834, WVP.

77 Watson journal, 19 April 1833, 12 May 1833, 20 May 1833, 21 July 1833, 10 February 1834, WVP.

78 Thomas, 14 March 1847, WTP, ML MSS 214, reel 3, State Library of NSW.

1841, when a man called Wer-e-rup, who was attributed with powers to heal the sick and raise the dead, made a conciliatory gesture towards Christianity, after several unpleasant scenes with Francis Tuckfield, who called him an impostor. Wer-e-rup announced that he had flown to heaven to retrieve the soul of a dead child and spoken to the Great Spirit the missionaries talked about. This baffled Tuckfield, who was unsure how to respond when young men cried out during his sermons 'It is true! "Wer-e-rup" has said so!' He concluded that the doctor's power must be diminishing, making Wer-e-rup want to 'shelter under our wing.'⁷⁹ However, such accounts might suggest efforts by influential men to reinforce their own status and knowledge, as well as engaging more broadly with Christian imagery and beliefs.

Here, it is useful to keep in mind Landau's argument that Africans did not view Christianity initially as a single, coherent phenomenon (as missionaries assumed it to be), but rather experienced it in fragmented, piecemeal ways.⁸⁰ When Indigenous Australians expressed hostility towards Christian ideas, this was in relation to specific topics, which may or may not have affected their religious feelings in other contexts. The greatest problem stemmed from missionaries' insistence on talking about death and the afterlife. When JCS Handt persisted in lecturing a man called Jacky about death, despite his protests, he was crestfallen when Jacky answered his question 'whether he did not love the Saviour of men?' with a blunt 'No.'⁸¹ Mentions of recently deceased people caused particular offence and distress. When a young man called Billy of Ngannima died at Wellington Valley, the missionaries took aside Billy's kinsman, Tommy, seeing this as an opportunity to 'exhort and warn him'. The resulting scene was unpleasant.

When Mr W. pointed out hell fire, Tommy grew angry & called out: 'Don't you talk that way! you were in fire. When that fire come from in your house? [Referring to a recent accidental fire in Watson's study.] ... Godder (God) made it; he badly with you (angry), he make fire.'

Günther, taken aback, reflected 'the Natives understand & know more of what the missionaries tell them than we are sometimes led to suppose.'⁸² Thomas recorded a similar scene in 1846, when an old man died. Thomas addressed the mourners 'upon Death, Sin, Heaven & Hell & shew'd to them that God's Book was our only light ... & Christ would at the resurrection try us by it'. One man retorted that his kinsman had died because he stopped too long by Thomas's Narre Narre Warren school and ceased to visit his country in Melbourne.⁸³ On

79 Francis Tuckfield to General Secretaries, 30 October 1841, *WMMS*, reel 2, Mp2107, NLA.

80 Landau 1999: 11.

81 Handt, journal, 15 June 1835, *WVP*.

82 Günther, journal, 10 July 1838, *WVP*.

83 Thomas, 29 April 1846, *WTP*, ML MSS 214, reel 3, State Library of NSW.

such occasions, even people who had been interested in Christianity in other contexts could take offence. Jemmy Buckley (Goongeen), for instance, became furious when the missionaries interrupted his dancing at a ceremony to warn him about sin. He burst out 'You always come & tell us this! What you always come to the Camp for & tell us we should go to hell [?] ... Don't you go to hell?' Günther noted 'The poor fellow appeared almost ready to beat us.'⁸⁴ Such incidents may have signified inner spiritual struggles (this was presumably the missionaries' view) but it is also possible that Indigenous observers saw this as inappropriate and offensive behaviour, rather than a reflection on a whole spiritual system.

'A brand plucked from the burning?' Triumphs and tragedies

The deaths of Indigenous people sparked some passionate controversies during this period. This was especially so because of the significance of death to Evangelicals, who believed strongly in the judgement to come, when the unsaved would be bound for hellfire. This led to a keen (if perhaps contradictory) approach: philanthropists asserted that Indigenous Australians, being unsaved sinners, were excessively afraid of death, but the way to change this involved stressing to people the dangers of damnation. The shadow of death was assumed to hang particularly heavy in Australia, given Aboriginal depopulation and supposed 'savagery'. Indigenous mourning rituals, especially body paint and self-mutilation, were depicted with horror, partly because missionaries associated them with 'dirt', but also because such elaborate mourning was taken as a sign of despair, of people trapped in the earthly world. In 1842, John Smithies contrasted what he considered a dignified mission funeral, where the children dressed neatly and sang hymns, with Indigenous burial rites, where they 'sorrow, wail, ring the air & lacerate themselves and of course have none of the consolation of religion.'⁸⁵ Günther, likewise, watched relatives of a dead man cutting themselves and crying over his grave, and was moved to shed tears himself, reflecting 'this occasion proved to me so strikingly & affectingly, that they are without God & without hope.'⁸⁶

Indeed, Indigenous people's very reluctance to talk about death was taken as proof of their enslavement to it. When a man called Eramdiul urged Watson to stop warning him about sin and dying, Watson replied that he would not be afraid to die if he knew God and Christ; 'through fear of death they are all their lifetimes subject to bondage.'⁸⁷ However, philanthropists often tried

⁸⁴ Günther, journal, 3 March 1838, WVP.

⁸⁵ John Smithies to General Secretaries, 1 May 1842, WMMS, reel 2, Mp2107, NLA.

⁸⁶ Günther, journal, 26 June 1838, WVP.

⁸⁷ Watson, journal, 16 March 1834, WVP.

to encourage this transformation by speaking at length about the afterlife. As Handt remarked 'Their fear of death is very great, and they are loath to hear anything on the subject; and yet it is difficult to speak on religious matters without touching this point.'⁸⁸ Similarly, in 1845, protector Thomas described how he moved around the camp, 'endeavouring to make them more familiar with Death & to drive away their superstitions'.⁸⁹ Elsewhere, he elaborated on his methods, telling chief protector Robinson that he warned people about 'the awful end and suffering of the wicked White and Black', and 'punishment hereafter to the wicked'.⁹⁰ Thomas regretted that he did not have the language to reiterate constantly to people the threat of sin and judgement after death.⁹¹

However, Evangelical views on death went beyond threats and fears, as they struggled to deal with an issue considered both painful and strangely elating: the fact that their rare Indigenous converts often died young. While the missionaries were saddened and downcast by their pupils' deaths, they did not explain this in terms of failure. Instead, these losses were portrayed according to 19th century understandings of 'good death': slow, dignified, comparatively painless, allowing sufferers to put their lives in order and be reconciled with God. Pat Jalland has stressed the centrality of deathbed scenes to Victorian Evangelical cultures, where a person's manner of dying could provide vital proof of their salvation, as they gave assurance of their nearness to heaven.⁹² Such ideas affected missionaries around the world; Patricia Grimshaw's Hawaiian study and Michael Harkin's examination of missions amongst the Heiltsuk note the importance missionaries attached to joyous 'good deaths', especially of children, whose helplessness epitomised humanity's status in relation to God.⁹³

Such ideas were certainly apparent in the Australian colonies. Watson spoke optimistically of the 1839 death of one of his most promising pupils, the girl called Nanny. She had requested and received baptism and confessed her faith in Jesus, and Watson claimed to have observed 'a real change of heart in her.' (His refusal to invite his colleague Günther to be present at her baptism and death suggests the bitter animosity between the two men, as well as the personal claims missionaries made over such triumphs.)⁹⁴ Of the seven people Watson baptised at Wellington Valley, three passed away early in such a virtuous state, and he mentioned the deaths of several young people 'in the faith of Jesus Christ' as a hopeful sign for the beginning of his Apsley mission.⁹⁵

88 Handt, 1835 Report, WVP.

89 Thomas, 9 November 1845, WTP, ML MSS 214, reel 3, State Library of NSW.

90 William Thomas to GA Robinson, 6 October 1840, PROV VPRS11 unit 7, 1840/335 (reel 1); William Thomas to GA Robinson, 2 March 1844, PROV VPRS4410 unit 3, 1844/79 (reel 2).

91 Thomas, 26 September 1847, WTP, ML MSS 214, reel 3, State Library of NSW.

92 Jalland 1996: 20–23, 33.

93 Grimshaw 1989: 148; Harkin 1993: 8–10.

94 Günther, journal, 26 July 1839, WVP.

95 William Watson, First Report of the Aboriginal Mission, Murrung gallang, Wellington, c1841, in Sir William Dixon, *Documents relating to Aboriginal Australians*; William Watson to Governor Charles Fitzroy, 31

Anecdotes of hope and demise were also recounted in Western Australia. Anglican clergyman Rev George King told the United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in 1846 that he had baptised five Indigenous children. Perhaps strangely, this does not seem to have been discussed widely, perhaps because King added that he could not state for certain whether the children had experienced proper repentance and faith. In the same year, he reported that two of his students had recently died. Their families attended the funerals; one child, who was 'in a probationary state', was permitted an Indigenous burial, while the other, whom he described as a clever, educated girl, was laid to rest in the churchyard. King claimed with some pride that this was the first such event in Australia.⁹⁶

More emphatic stories of both conversion and deathbed piety emerged from the neighbouring Methodist mission, where an epidemic of unspecified 'mesentery' (intestinal) disease, carried away many young people in the mid-1840s. As noted earlier, the 1843 conversions of the young girls Nogyle and Wobart were followed by sorrow when Nogyle died soon afterwards. Wobart, to everyone's surprise, went on to marry the mission's white overseer, John Stokes; they lived happily together and had three children. This was short-lived, however; four years into her marriage, Wobart died of influenza. According to Smithies, all those around her were impressed by her piety, as she farewelled her family, saying 'God loves me'.⁹⁷ Smithies' reports were full of such tales of youthful tragedy. He described the slow, wasting death of a young boy, Birgee, in 1843; 'there was a meekness and patience and hope in the lad that made him lovely in his last days. He was frequently amidst much pain found on his knees praying to God to bless him.'⁹⁸ Two years later, a 10-year-old girl, Caroline Barrett, also died after delighting the missionaries with her devotion. She told them 'If Caroline in bush now too much frightened about death coming soon, but now I love Jesus ... me want to die and be with my dear Saviour ... friends leave me but Jesus never leave me.' Smithies reflected with mournful approval 'Many die as young in our fatherland but not so well.'⁹⁹

There is no reason to doubt the sadness and regret of the missionaries, who had invested high hopes and perhaps real affection in their young residents, only to nurse them through terminal illness. A wish to understand these losses not in terms of failure and destruction, but as bittersweet triumphs, is scarcely

December 1849, 9th Annual Report of the Apsley Aboriginal Mission, Sir William Dixon, *Documents relating to Aboriginal Australians*.

96 George King to Ernest Hawkins, 1 January 1846, Rev George King to Rev E Hawkins, 22 June 1846, Rev George King to the Bishop of Australia, 9 April 1846, United Society for the Propagation of the Gospel, Records, AJCP M1222, SLV.

97 McNair and Rumley 1981: 104–106; John Smithies to General Secretaries, 21 September 1845, *WMMS*, reel 2, Mp2107, NLA.

98 John Smithies to General Secretaries, 10 January 1843, *WMMS*, reel 2, Mp2107, NLA.

99 John Smithies to General Secretaries, 21 September 1845, *WMMS*, reel 2, Mp2107, NLA.

surprising. However, the trope of the good death was also a literary device, popular in missionary society publications. This was apparent in accounts by Watson and the CMS. In 1836, the CMS's *Church Missionary Paper* included an anecdote about the good death of a young boy called Dicky Marshall. Watson had made earlier, optimistic mention of him, partly because of his very willingness to discuss threats of spiritual destruction. Walking in the bush together one evening in 1833, Watson prompted him by asking 'where wicked children would go when they died?' Dicky responded 'to that very bad place'.

I then asked him who were wicked children? He replied, 'those that are disobedient, say naughty words, play or bathe on a Sunday'. He spoke this in so simple and artless a manner as made it very pleasing. Tears often run down his cheeks when we speak to him on religious subjects.¹⁰⁰

Dicky's own pious death was cited as cause for hope by the CMS, who repeated Watson's conclusion '*Is this not a brand plucked from the burning?*'¹⁰¹

When Smithies' accounts appeared in missionary magazines, the relationship between hope and doom was even more confronting. His reports of a revival amongst black and white residents of his district were initially published with great enthusiasm. However, by 1849 the *Missionary Register* was stating that Smithies' main job might be to prepare the ground for later success. They added that it was uplifting to observe the 'ingatherings of a few juvenile Converts to the Lord Jesus, and especially to the heavenly state above, for they early blossomed, early ripened, and as early sickened and died; but they have commenced an early and glorious immortality.'¹⁰² Ironically, at the same time as the mission itself was in decline, the *Wesleyan Juvenile Offering* (1853) keenly recounted tales of Indigenous Christianity. The story of Mary Nogyle was reported with particular enthusiasm, focusing on her conversion and dreams about devils and angels. She was described as gentle, pure and lovely; the journal explained that the missionaries kept her original name because it sounded appropriately like 'no guile'. The author wrote happily 'it seemed necessary to look at the sable colour of her skin, and listen to her broken English, in order to be convinced that she was indeed the child of these poor wandering denizens of the forest.'¹⁰³ The sad early end to Nogyle's life was a key element in this story; juvenile religious magazines frequently told tales of virtuous children meeting their deaths with saintly acceptance.

100 Watson, journal, 5 April 1833, WVP.

101 CMS, *Church Missionary Paper*, no LXXIV, Christmas 1836.

102 CMS, *Missionary Register*, May 1849: 218–219. Also, WMMS, *Report of the WMMS for the year ending April 1845*, 1845: 32–33.

103 WMMS, *Wesleyan Juvenile Offering*, London, Wesleyan Mission House, September 1853: 98–101; also WMMS, *Wesleyan Juvenile Offering*, August 1853: 87.

For Evangelical philanthropists, an intense awareness of death, and its relation to judgement, sin and salvation, was in keeping with their wider religious discourse. Yet, for the contemporary reader, it is hard not to associate it with the growing colonial portrayals of Indigenous Australians as a doomed race, whose depopulation was not the result of dispossession or preventable poverty, but of evolutionary 'progress'. It would be unwise to draw any simplistic correlation here; Evangelical Christianity, with its aim of universal salvation, could challenge colonists' claims that Indigenous people were hopeless. Furthermore, many of the above-mentioned descriptions of faith and death came from philanthropists who continued to hold hopes for the Aboriginal future. Nonetheless, in a setting of Indigenous dispossession and high mortality, some readers might well have begun to naturalise these stories of mission deaths. The relative weakness of Evangelical interest in Indigenous Australia could not have helped here; joyous accounts of deathbed faith might appear almost as the pinnacle of Australian missionary achievement. This was, perhaps, the dark side of a discourse which understood Indigenous welfare in terms of philanthropy, which focused strongly on doom and salvation, and which saw Christian instruction as both compensation for and consolidation of British imperialism. These elements affected philanthropists in complex ways, as they found their rare Christian victories to be temporary, transient and framed by loss.