

Diane Langmore, *Missionary Lives: Papua, 1874–1914*. Pacific Islands Monograph Series, no. 6. Honolulu: Center for Pacific Islands Studies and University of Hawaii Press, 1989. Pp. xxiv, 408, illustrated, index. US\$35.00 cloth.

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Twenty years ago the academic study of mission history in Oceania was in its infancy. Today, due to the writings of such authors as Laracy and Hilliard, Whiteman and Garrett, among many others, the missionary epoch in the South Pacific is far better understood. Diane Langmore's study deals with the period starting just before the coming of international rivalry in Africa and Oceania in the 1880s, when the Evangelical missionary movement was already on the wane. Between 1871 and 1914 some 327 Europeans entered British New Guinea or Papua as agents of the London Missionary Society (LMS) and the Sacred Heart, Methodist, and Anglican missions. In particular, support for English Evangelical missions was ebbing from its mid-nineteenth-century summit, and mission resources had to be stretched to keep pace with the ever-widening British expansion abroad.

Langmore has used the "slice of history" approach familiar to readers

of the 1988 Australian bicentennial volumes. For her Ph.D. thesis and subsequent book, she has selected the “pioneering” slice, from first contact until World War I, a phase she calls the “golden age” of Christian missions in Papua. A reader would not turn to this book to learn much about the Papuans, for its scope is other than the interaction between Melanesian and missionary, the adoption of Christianity, spread of cult movements, and so on. Rather, Langmore’s concern is with the European missionaries themselves, “their objectives and aspirations, their ideals, convictions, and opinions, their actions and responses” (p. xiv).

In the first of the book’s ten chapters Langmore discusses the nationality and social background of the missionaries. It is interesting to know that no less than 45 percent of the group were from the countries of continental Europe, the homelands of the Sacred Heart missionaries (France alone provided 25 percent of all Papuan mission volunteers). Another 19 percent were from the British Isles and 30 percent were from the Australian colonies, the largest single “national” group. The social backgrounds represented ranged from artisan class to professional; as Langmore shows, few were “powerful or highly born.” Nor, considered from their academic achievements, were they of the first rank. The intellectually gifted LMS volunteers went to China and India, and it was once said that Africa and the Pacific were usually assigned to the physically fit—those “with an A1 life at Lloyd’s.”

Chapter 2 is a discussion of the religious diversity of the individuals accepted for Papuan service, in an age when results seemed less likely to be glorious than earlier. Most younger candidates for the LMS and Methodist missions were giving a reduced emphasis to the Atonement than did many Evangelical pioneers of the LMS mission and a higher place to the social consequences of the Incarnation of Christ, working among orphans, building up industrial missions, staffing hospitals, and so forth. A dramatic contrast between older and younger evangelists appears on p. 41, where Langmore cites the oft-quoted retort of the venerable Presbyterian John G. Paton in 1903 to the young Methodist J. W. Burton: “Young man,” he almost roared, “do you think I would have risked my life amongst the savages and cannibals of the New Hebrides if I had not believed that every man, woman and child I met was going to hell?” But such apocalyptic expectations arising from this teaching were usually absent (or present only in muted form) in the sacramental practice of Anglican and Sacred Heart missions.

Langmore’s previous writing on mission women in the *Journal of Pacific History* foreshadows her chapter on “The Gracious Influence of Wise and Thoughtful Womanhood.” Not only were women missionaries

significant in Papuan mission homes, schools, and hospitals, but male missionaries often owed much to the childhood influence of their mothers, an influence that Langmore says appears to have been counterbalanced in some cases either by the “negative influence” of the father or by the father’s absence altogether through death during his son’s formative years.

Generally, however, it may be said that this is a disappointing book. There are two reasons for this. Langmore’s research leaves the impression that she has had only the most fleeting acquaintance with the missions she describes. The writing seems to have begun and ended in a metropolitan archive. Certainly, up to fairly recent times, historical materials were usually equated with archival documents. But today—and especially in the South Pacific—the documentation used in recording history encompasses a much wider variety of sources, and personal experience of the field is essential. Especially is this so in such a land as Papua New Guinea, where geography as well as climate left such a strong personal mark on the Europeans who went there. Bronislaw Malinowski’s injunction to his anthropological students—that they would need to spend at least a year in the field to become familiar with local language and culture—might well have been heeded here. Or, if an anthropologist’s advice is gratuitous, Langmore might have listened to the dictum of the Australian historian Sir Keith Hancock, who said that the historian’s first requirement was “a stout pair of boots.”

The second reason for disappointment with *Missionary Lives* is its lack of consciousness of styles of worship, an activity that sharply distinguished the missionaries from the secular Europeans in Papua. “To know these people,” wrote an observer of Papuans in a mission village, “you must see them in church,”<sup>1</sup> a statement equally applicable to the missionaries themselves. A good deal of missionary time was spent in building churches and worshiping in them; these aspects were an indispensable part of the missionary life. The way missionaries constructed their shrines tells us much about themselves, whether the shrines were plain chapels of coral or wood containing preaching rostrums, or ornate gothic Roman Catholic and Anglican churches designed for the celebration of the Mass, conducted amid clouds of incense and streams of holy water. Why is this facet of missionary lives altogether neglected? To write about missionaries without worship may be compared to writing a biography of Babe Ruth without once mentioning the baseball field.

This book, then, plays down the missionaries’ religious lives. To do so is to sell its subjects short. For, in any mission settlement, the inhabitants lived in a strictly disciplined manner in which every waking hour

was devoted to a routine of work and worship. Attendance at the daily service of the Holy Communion was—and is—an important part of life on a Roman Catholic or Anglican station. “Summoned by bells” might have been a good chapter title, so frequent was the clanging of iron pipes and bells to call mission staff and converts to church. And, once inside the church (if the liturgy was elaborate) Papuans taught by missionaries displayed a knowledge of the finer points of ritual that struck European visitors as extraordinary.<sup>2</sup> However, the historian of *Missionary Lives* manages to skirt around the subject of church building and church behavior altogether, apart from a sole reference or two to the word “prayer.” Religious activity, which is so evident to any visitor and well documented in archives, is suppressed in this study. The result is a book that does not mention the visible focus of the missionaries’ Christian religion at all!

Langmore’s use of the term “golden age” to describe this missionary epoch seems wide of the mark. It is certainly justified for the Nonconformist or LMS mission, but such a grandiose term is inappropriate for the Anglicans. Anyone who compared the paltry achievements of pre-1914 Anglican missionaries, as embodied in their tumbledown bush churches, with the huge concrete cathedral completed by missionaries at Dogura in 1939 would smile at the idea of the pre-1914 phase being a “golden age.” In terms of growth the “boom” period for European missionaries in the Anglican church took place after 1950, during the later years of Bishop Philip Strong’s episcopate, and thus is of comparatively recent origin. Langmore’s golden age seems judged entirely from a Nonconformist perspective.

Nonetheless, *Missionary Lives* is a well-written work, characterized by a judicious use of language and a certain chasteness of style; it is backed by a very long biographical register, page notes, appendixes, and bibliography. Her vignettes seem to contain not a word too many nor too few. The balance and modesty of her conclusions are among the more attractive features of this book. It is well illustrated and the maps are particularly good.

Alan Ward of Newcastle University, New South Wales, has commented on the overempirical emphasis in some Pacific history written by Australians,<sup>3</sup> and this book is a good example of this defect. As a result of separating library research in Canberra and elsewhere from real experience in the field, Langmore’s work contains an undue emphasis on factual, “archive proved” details. She does not take any risks. Of course, history is “scientific” in the sense of being analysis, the stripping of documents, and statistical inquiry. But it should be more

than that. There is too little in this book about the emotional, religious, or artistic response of missionaries to Papua and the Papuans, and virtually nothing of the way in which missionary perceptions may have changed as a result of experience. Apart from a bare arrangement of three pages on scenery and the outlines of mission homesteads (pp. 65–66), the book conveys little, if any, sense of what it actually felt like to be in New Guinea during the pioneering period. Unlike Malinowski's New Guinea publications, whose success lay in his marvelous ability to "manage the imagination" by deft strokes of the pen, this book becomes a mere retrieval system of empirical facts, a directory of names and details, all rearranged and lumped together in chapters. A book merely providing facts concerning "everything-you-ever-wanted-to-know-about-Papuan-missionaries" tends to reduce its subjects to husks that lack living substance. As indicated above, had Langmore taken the trouble to participate even briefly in life within a community of missionaries (for example, by observing their worship and writing a little about it), her subjects might have been given an added dimension.

It would be difficult to fault the content of this book within its limits. To obtain it, Langmore must have digested nearly every scrap of information sent to mission headquarters from the beginning of the period she chose to study. The book's text is followed by a vast compilation of details spanning an additional 140 pages. One can only speculate on the amount of labor the assembling of such data must have involved.

Was such an exhaustive display of information necessary? The basic problem, as the political scientist Sean Regan observed six years ago in an article about historical research in Australia, is the outbreak of the malaise of "doctoratitis"—the assumption that scholarly worth is to be measured by mere diligence. This, as Regan observed, is all wrong. Genius, or even talent, is not an "appetite for indigestible and trivial details" but by definition a capacity to jump the whole process of taking infinite pains.<sup>4</sup> Indeed, the Ph.D. thesis that is reproduced in this book seems to have delivered its author into a kind of intellectual bondage to her own diligence.

Unhappily, too, Langmore seems inclined to ignore the contributions of previous scholars and what she has derived from them. Readers closely familiar with books about Christian missions in Papua New Guinea during the past fifteen years will realize the extent to which she shows a readiness to adopt as her own without documentation lines of argument that have already been committed to print<sup>5</sup> (which earlier reviewers of Langmore's book did not recognize, for example, *The Journal of Pacific History* 24, no. 2 [1989]). Even when she came indepen-

dently to some of the concepts and ideas as a result of her own work, references confirming and acknowledging the findings of previous work would have been appropriate. It is striking, indeed, to compare the generosity of Garrett's acknowledgments to previous scholars in his recent missionary study *To Live among the Stars* (Geneva, 1982) with the discourtesy of Langmore's omissions. For further information on the transference of unacknowledged ideas in Langmore's book, the reader is referred to a review published in *Pacific Islands Monthly* in which the writer, a Pacific archivist, comments on Langmore's use of materials in chapter 5 without acknowledgement.<sup>6</sup>

*Missionary Lives*, then, is a disappointing book. It adds very little indeed to our knowledge of the way in which missionaries' beliefs and attitudes over a forty-year period may have been affected by their interaction with Melanesians. And it tells us next to nothing about the wide variety in expression of the activity which all missionaries regarded as central to their lives: the styles of worship that they offered daily in the churches they raised wherever they went in Papua.

#### NOTES

1. Anglican Diocese of New Guinea, *Occasional Paper* no. 54 (London, 1917), 7.
2. A point not lost on many anthropologists seeking to explain how Christian belief could be accommodated without displacing the materialistic assumptions within traditional Melanesian magic. See, for example, Peter Lawrence *Road Belong Cargo: A Study of the Cargo Movement in the Southern Madang District, New Guinea* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1964).
3. *Historical Studies* 18, no. 73 (October 1979): 650; see also Greg Denning's review of Hugh Laracy's *Marists and Melanesians*, *New Zealand Journal of History* 12, no. 1: 81-82.
4. "The Scholar as Slave," *Australian* (Sydney), 4-5 February 1984.
5. For one example, in Langmore's book it is stated that the New Guinea Anglicans under Bishop M. Stone-Wigg, first bishop of New Guinea (1898-1908), were influenced by the cultural attitudes of the Universities Mission to Central Africa (UMCA) "as exemplified by Bishop Tozer" (pp. 123, 197), a claim made in my book and in no other source before or since (see David Wetherell, *Reluctant Mission: The Anglican Church in Papua New Guinea 1891-1942* [St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1977], 128-129). Other instances are on pp. 110, 112, 113, and 115, which may be compared to pp. 127-128, 130, 127, and 108 of *Reluctant Mission*.

It may be worth adding that I now believe Bishop Stone-Wigg was more familiar with his contemporary, Bishop Smythies of the UMCA, than with Tozer. I created a connection with Tozer in my book because he was insistent about the need to preserve African customs within Christian communities.

## 6. As that reviewer says:

. . . It is necessary to note an unfortunate tendency that this reviewer has noticed in some recent Pacific histories: selective referencing that fails to acknowledge fellow scholars' work on the same subjects and sources.

Readers of PNG history may be surprised to find no acknowledgement, in ch. 5, of Dr David Wetherell's writings, specifically in discussion of Anglicans' cultural attitudes . . . (pp 112–113) . . . full referencing is essential to respect the interest of readers. (Fabian Hutchinson, correction to review of *Missionary Lives*, *Pacific Islands Monthly* [Suva], March 1991, 5)