

Was the Friendly Mission to the Aboriginal people of Van Dieman's Land in the 1830s an Evangelical Enterprise?

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The 'Friendly Mission' of the 1830s was the successful but ill-fated attempt to relocate, without physical coercion, the indigenous tribes of Van Diemen's Land to Flinders Island. It came as the culmination of a complex and volatile series of events, and precipitated the tragic death of almost all aboriginal Tasmanians within 50 years. After giving an outline of the events of the Friendly Mission, this essay will explore the issue of its connection to evangelicalism. Using both a genealogical and a theological definition of 'evangelical', it will be found that the main actors involved in the Mission, most notably its leader George Augustus Robinson, were, or at least presented themselves as, motivated by evangelical concerns. However, when placed in its broader historical context, it will be argued that the Mission cannot be seen as evangelical in a fundamental sense. In the light of the domestic socio-political events out of which the Mission emerged, including the ongoing conflict between the settlers and indigenous peoples and the role played by the government in establishing and funding the Mission, it is apparent that political concerns were the real motivator. This is reinforced by a comparison of the Friendly Mission with international evangelical activist movements, specifically abolitionism. Despite Robinson's characterisation of the Mission as an extension of evangelical abolitionism, he failed to account for key differences. These differences meant that, while evangelicalism certainly played an important part in the discourse surrounding the Mission, it was not the Mission's primary concern. The Mission ultimately served, not the cause of the Christian gospel, but the cause of (British) social cohesion and stability in a new and volatile colonial outpost.

Historical Antecedents of the Friendly Mission

The story of European contact with the indigenous peoples of Van Diemen's Land began with the contact of Dutch navigator Abel Tasman in 1642. While Tasman in his brief visit did not come into direct contact with any Aboriginal people, he heard 'the sound of people on the shore', and 'observed smoke in several places'.¹ There continued to be sporadic contact with European navigators, the first direct interaction occurring on a French expedition in 1772. However, the early explorers 'were fugitive visitors who remained only long enough for the replenishment of their ships' supplies of water and, perhaps, to make some natural observations'.² The key moment for our purposes, which eventually led to the Friendly Mission, was the establishment of a settlement in Van Diemen's Land by the British government in 1803.

Faced with large numbers of convicts being sent to mainland Australia in the fifteen years following the arrival of the First Fleet in 1788, 'it became apparent to the authorities that an extension of the settlement to Van Diemen's Land was desirable'.³ Also driven by the 'fear of being forestalled by the French in the planting of a colony', the British established a penal settlement on the banks of the Derwent River on 12 September 1803.⁴

From the beginning of the British settlement, relations with the indigenous population involved conflict. The Captain leading the new settlement was given specific instructions by Lord Hobart, Secretary for the Colonies, to 'endeavour, by every means in your power, to open an intercourse with the Natives, and to conciliate their good-will, enjoining all parties under your government to live in amity and kindness with them'.⁵ It did not take long,

¹ From Tasman's journals; cited in James Bonwick, *The Last of the Tasmanians; or, The Black War of Van Diemen's Land* (Facsim. ed.; (Australiana facsimile editions; Adelaide: Libraries Board of South Australia, 1969 [1870]), 2.

² Clive Turnbull, *Black War: the Extermination of the Tasmanian Aborigines* (Melbourne: F.W.Cheshire, 1948), 5.

³ Turnbull, *Black War*, 16.

⁴ Turnbull, *Black War*, 17.

⁵ Bonwick, *Last of the Tasmanians*, 30–31.

however, for these instructions to be forgotten. Early in 1804, 'the unfortunate event took place that ushers in the sad story of the "Black War"'.⁶ This 'unfortunate event' was the first serious conflict between British settlers and a group of about 300 Aboriginal people, in which '[t]he kindest that can be said is that Moore', the Lieutenant in charge, 'frightened by the numbers, ordered his soldiers to open fire on a peaceful band of Aborigines, which included women and children as well as men'.⁷

It was not until the 1820s, however, with 'the inflow of capital, free immigrants and convicts', that the conflict escalated rapidly, reaching its peak in 1830 and becoming known as the 'Black War'. As the British population and resources increased, so did their use and possession of the land, 'resulting in the loss of Aboriginal hunting grounds and thus their means of living'.⁸ This encroachment onto Aboriginal land was accompanied by violence towards Aboriginal people. Writing in 1819, before the escalation of violence but prefiguring it, Lieutenant-Governor Sorrel issued a proclamation in which he addressed the settler-indigenous conflict. While many settlers considered 'the Natives as a Hostile People', Sorrel highlighted the injuries done to them 'by the White People', that 'in many former Instances, cruelties have been perpetrated to Humanity and disgraceful to the British character, while few attempts can be traced on the Part of the Colonists to conciliate the Native People'. He went on to talk of the 'Outrages of Miscreants' who 'wantonly fire at and kill the Men and [...] pursue the Women'.⁹ The violence of the 1820s was, therefore, not a new phenomenon but rather a continuation and exacerbation of a volatile relationship already in place since the formation of the colony. As Plomley states, the 'barbarity of the convict servants, of the shepherds and stockkeepers, of the police and the military, [...] was always in the

⁶ Bonwick, *Last of the Tasmanians*, 32.

⁷ N. J. B. (Norman James Brian) Plomley, ed., *Friendly Mission: the Tasmanian Journals and Papers of George Augustus Robinson, 1829-1834* (Hobart: Tasmanian Historical Research Association, 1966), 22.

⁸ Henry Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People* (New ed.; Camberwell, Vic.: Penguin, 2004), 4.

⁹ Cited in Turnbull, *Black War*, 57.

background'.¹⁰

George Arthur, Lieutenant-Governor of the colony from 1824-1837, made several attempts to establish peace in Van Diemen's Land. In his first proclamation regarding the Aborigines dated June 23 1824, Arthur declared that it was both his duty and disposition 'to support and encourage all measures which may tend to conciliate and civilize the Natives of the island, and to forbid and prevent, and, when perpetrated, to punish, any ill-treatment towards them'.¹¹

The attacks from both sides continued, however, with Aboriginal retaliation attacks increasing in severity. Arthur's concern now shifted towards the protection of settler lives, and he responded to Aboriginal attacks by organising civilian 'roving parties', usually consisting of 'a constable and some trusted convicts' to capture Aboriginal 'transgressors' and stop the violence.¹² The parties failed, however, and Arthur put in place perhaps his most infamous policy, the 'Black Line', in 1830. Roving parties combined to form a single line to sweep across the whole island, forcing the Aboriginal tribes onto the Forestier Peninsula where they could be easily contained. It was a 'ludicrous' operation in which 'one man and a boy were captured',¹³ an 'expensive failure' that saw 175 Europeans and probably many more Aborigines killed in the conflict.¹⁴

The failure of force to establish peace made Arthur, and the settler population he was trying to manage, look for other means, and paved the way for the surprisingly effective contribution of George Augustus Robinson. Arthur, apparently still desiring a peaceful solution even while sending out the roving parties, issued a notice in the *Hobart Town Gazette* on 7 March 1829, advertising for 'a steady person of good character' who would

¹⁰ Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 26.

¹¹ Turnbull, *Black War*, 65.

¹² Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 30.

¹³ Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 31.

¹⁴ Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, 4.

‘[effect] an intercourse with this unfortunate race and reside upon Brune Island’.¹⁵ Robinson, a builder by trade who had emigrated to Hobart in 1824, applied for the position and was appointed on 21 March.

The Friendly Mission

Over the next five years Robinson devoted himself to what he called his ‘Friendly Mission’. He stayed on Bruny Island throughout 1829, learning the indigenous language, administering the provisions sent by Arthur for the Aborigines’ use, and ordering life on the Island around non-violent, but decidedly European, principles. The four years after that were spent travelling around mainland Tasmania with a group of Aborigines from the Bruny settlement, in an effort to ‘conciliate’ the native tribes. In 1831 the ‘Aborigines Committee’ reported on Robinson’s work, stating that he achieved great success in his objectives, ‘viz., the opening of an amicable intercourse and friendly communication with the whole of the black population of this island’. They also reported Robinson’s claim that ‘several of the most hostile class have put themselves under his protection’, with the result that he felt ‘confident of the possibility of effecting the voluntary removal of the entire black population, [...] holding out the protection of the government’.¹⁶ The Islands of Bass Strait were deemed a suitable place for the relocation, with Flinders Island eventually being decided on.

Whether through his determination, coincidence, the Aborigines’ exhaustion following the Black War, or a confluence of these and other factors, Robinson’s optimism turned out to be accurate. Within four years he had made contact with each tribe on the Island, and convinced the all those Aborigines not yet killed in the Black War to come ‘under his protection’ at the camp ‘Wybalenna’ on Flinders Island. Despite this apparently positive outcome, demographic

¹⁵ Turnbull, *Black War*, 100.

¹⁶ Turnbull, *Black War*, 126.

data tells a darker tale. There is evidence of 'a decline from perhaps 1500 indigenous Tasmanians at the beginning of the Black War in 1824, to about 350 in 1831'.¹⁷ This decline was not stopped once on Flinders Island either. Decimated by disease, isolated from their homeland, and forced to adopt a way of life foreign to their cultural outlook, the Aborigines on Flinders Island dwindled in numbers until the station was closed in 1847, followed by the death of Trugernanner in 1876, 'regarded at the time as 'the last of her race'.¹⁸

From its inception, Robinson's Friendly Mission was couched in Christian rhetoric, and linked with evangelical activist concerns. This raises the question of the relationship between evangelicalism and the Mission: was it an evangelical movement? Before examining Robinson's own answer to that question, we will outline a brief definitional framework to use as a point of comparison.

Evangelicalism: Historical Connections, Theological Distinctives

The first measure we will use to analyse the relationship between evangelicalism and the Friendly Mission is that of historical connection. Can we locate the main protagonists of the Mission in the historical stream of evangelicalism, beginning with the British revivals of the 1730s and American Great Awakenings of the 1740s and led by characters such as John Wesley, George Whitfield and Jonathan Edwards?

The second, and more decisive, measure will be a theological one. Did the Mission have theological motivations that aligned with distinctively evangelical concerns? Bebbington's work in identifying evangelicalism's theological distinctives has been widely followed, and will be used here; not as an exhaustive list but a useful analytical tool. In his book

¹⁷ Henry Reynolds, *An Indelible Stain? : the Question of Genocide in Australia's History* (Ringwood, Vic.: Viking, 2001), 71.

¹⁸ Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, 5. This claim has since been overturned – while Trugernanner (also known as Truganini) was the last 'full blood' indigenous Tasmanian, a 'community of Aboriginal women and renegade Europeans' had established itself in the Bass Strait islands, their descendants continuing through to today (Reynolds, *Fate of a Free People*, 4).

Evangelicalism in Modern Britain, Bebbington argues that

there are four qualities that have been the special marks of Evangelical religion: *conversionism*, the belief that lives need to be changed; *activism*, the expression of the gospel in effort; *Biblicism*, a particular regard for the Bible; and what may be called *crucicentrism*, a stress on the sacrifice of Christ on the cross.¹⁹

These four theological convictions will be used to assess the connection between evangelicalism and the Friendly Mission. Before proceeding, though, it is necessary to expand on the second conviction, activism. For Bebbington, evangelical theology leads to activity, and this activity is in the first instance directed towards the proclamation of the gospel. However, 'activism often spilled over' into other work, as seen in Lord Shaftesbury's efforts to improve public health, Wilberforce's campaign against the slave trade, and a 'host of voluntary societies' that 'embodied the philanthropic urge'.²⁰ The significance of this qualification becomes apparent when turning to the work of George Augustus Robinson. Robinson demonstrably had a 'philanthropic urge'; but was it grounded in these other distinctively evangelical theological commitments?

The Friendly Mission and Evangelicalism: G. A. Robinson

The issue of the connection between evangelicalism and the Friendly Mission is a common feature of the historical commentary. Most discussion centres around the evangelical motivations and character of Robinson, the Mission's central figure, and not on the Mission as an entity in itself. Writing in 1832, the naturalist and Quaker missionary James Backhouse described Robinson as 'a benevolent individual, professing to be actuated by a sense of religious duty', describing the Mission as Robinson's 'mission of mercy'.²¹

Modern scholarship has on the whole been more ambiguous. Keith Windschuttle, following

¹⁹ D. W. (David William) Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain: a History from the 1730s to the 1980s* (London: Unwin Hyman, 1989), 2–3.

²⁰ Bebbington, *Evangelicalism in Modern Britain*, 12.

²¹ James Backhouse, *A Narrative of a Visit to the Australian Colonies* (New York: Johnson Reprint Corporation, 1967), 80.

Vivienne Ray-Ellis,²² characterises Robinson as a cheat and liar who founded 'a long tradition of those who have made a lot of money out of the Aboriginal predicament while watching their charges die before their eyes'.²³ On the opposite end of the spectrum, Lyndall Ryan sees Robinson as 'a man ahead of his time, a champion of the Aborigines and one of the most significant figures in nineteenth-century colonial history'.²⁴ Henry Reynolds, acknowledging the complexity and changeable nature of Robinson's character, gives a sympathetic but ultimately critical account. While Robinson began his work with the genuine evangelical concern that 'all human beings were [...] 'of one blood', made in the image of God and all alike capable of salvation', as the Friendly Mission proceeded 'the immigrant overcame the missionary, and prosperity became more enticing than piety'.²⁵

This lack of historical consensus regarding Robinson's character and motivations indicates something of the complexity involved in historical reconstruction of a character at the centre of one of the most controversial and tragic period in Australian history. This confusion is largely due to a conflict between Robinson's self-confessed evangelical humanitarian motivations and the terrible end point of his Mission, the dispossession and death of almost all Tasmanian aborigines – a decidedly non-humanitarian outcome. It is hard to hold these two together; and so opinion tends either towards a denial of the former, such that Robinson's motivations are seen as tainted, or else towards a view of Robinson as a tragic figure, well intentioned but ultimately too naive or too foolish to achieve his evangelical goals.

We will approach Robinson's journals with this ambiguity in mind. However, granted the speculative nature of inferring internal motivations to Robinson, this essay will seek to analyse his journals for what he wanted to communicate about his intentions. This may or

²² Vivienne Rae-Ellis, *Black Robinson : Protector of Aborigines* (Carlton, Vic.: Melbourne Univ. Press, 1988), 82.

²³ Keith Windschuttle, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History* (Sydney: Macleay, 2002), 201.

²⁴ Lyndall Ryan, 'Historians, Friendly Mission and the Contest for Robinson and Trukanini', in *Reading Robinson : Companion Essays to Friendly Mission* (ed. Anna Johnston and Mitchell Rolls; Hobart: Quintus Publishing, 2008), 159.

²⁵ Reynolds, 'George Augustus Robinson in Van Diemen's Land: Race, Status and Religion', 163, 168.

may not be an accurate indication of his actual motivations; but it is an attainable and less speculative goal. Did Robinson seek to communicate a connection to evangelicalism in connection to the Friendly Mission? Did he understand, or at least did he want others to believe he understood, the Mission as an evangelical movement?

Before looking at Robinson's journals for his own views, we will briefly outline his historical connection to evangelicalism. Little is known about Robinson's early life. Born in 1788, probably in London, he was the youngest son of a 'lower-middle-class home' and as such few definite records of his family exist.²⁶ What is apparent is that in England he became a builder, his father's trade. The earliest mention of Christian activity is found in some notes from the period soon after his marriage to Maria Amelia Evens in 1814, which contain 'some vague references to religious activities'.²⁷ In 1823-4 Robinson emigrated to Tasmania, 'hoping to secure a more comfortable social niche for himself and his large family'.²⁸ Journals from his voyage show him as a 'serious-minded and religious' man who 'liked thoughtful conversation but took part with pleasure in quiet conviviality'.²⁹

Records for Robinson's religious activities are more numerous for the period after his arrival in Hobart on 20 January 1824. They reveal him as an active Methodist, who on arrival 'became a prominent member of many Christian and charitable bodies including the Bethel Union and the Bible Society'.³⁰ He was also involved in visiting prisoners in the jail to give religious counsel.³¹ Through this brief overview, it is apparent that Robinson's personal history had a clear genealogical connection to evangelicalism, both through the Methodist movement and evangelical para-church organisations such as the Bethel Union, a mission to

²⁶ Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 12.

²⁷ Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 12.

²⁸ Cassandra Pybus, 'A Self-Made Man', in *Reading Robinson: Companion Essays to Friendly Mission* (ed. Anna Johnston and Mitchell Rolls; Hobart: Quintus Publishing, 2008), 102.

²⁹ Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 13.

³⁰ John Harris, 'Robinson, George Augustus', ed. Brian Dickey, *The Australian Dictionary of Evangelical Biography* (Sydney: Evangelical History Association, 1994), 324.

³¹ Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 14.

sea-farers. Given Methodism's focus on holiness and itinerant ministry and its tendency toward non-conformity,³² it may be that Robinson's early involvement gave him both the moral vision and the self-confidence to undertake his Mission despite a broader indifference and even opposition to the indigenous Tasmanians.

The question of Robinson's theological connection to evangelicalism is more complex, but more decisive for our purposes. So long as a merely genealogical link is established there remains the possibility that Robinson was acting not out of theological conviction but according to the conventions of his Methodist cultural background.

What, then can we learn of Robinson's theological outlook from his journals, and how tightly can we draw a connection between it and evangelical theology? Using Bebbington's four distinctives, we will see that at each point Robinson does align with evangelicalism. His theology is unsophisticated, and he is stronger on some points than others. However, Robinson was not theologically trained, nor was he ever an official 'missionary'. He was a lay person with historical attachment to evangelicalism who presented himself as driven by evangelical concerns, albeit with a naïve apprehension of what those concerns were and an often unconscious, and as we will see unfortunate, commingling of them with social and political agendas.

Conversionism

At first glance conversion does not seem to have been a prominent feature of Robinson's agenda. In a letter to Lieutenant-Governor Arthur, 15 April 1829, Robinson outlined the plan for his Friendly Mission. His object was 'the amelioration of the aborigines of Van Diemen's Land', to be achieved by two means: civilisation and instruction in the principles of

³² While Methodism originally existed alongside the Church of England, by 1795 it had 'for most purposes become a new Dissenting denomination'. Mark A. Noll, *The Rise of Evangelicalism: the Age of Edwards Whitefield and the Wesleys* ((A history of evangelicalism); Nottingham: Inter-Varsity, 2004), 193.

Christianity. This instruction was to be undertaken '1st by public worship' and '2nd by public schools'.³³ From the outset of the Mission, then, a potential weakness regarding its evangelicalism becomes apparent. Rather than a proclamation of the gospel and a call to enter into its reality, Robinson sought 'instruction in Christian principles'. This focus on education rather than conversion is a legitimate concern. However, the situation needs to be more carefully nuanced.

As we read Robinson's journals, a clear desire for conversion is apparent. While on his second expedition, Robinson wrote that the Aborigines 'are my brethren by creation [...] and would to God I could call them brethren by redemption'.³⁴

On Bruny Island Robinson reflected on the advice he was given by one of 'the host of advisors at the commencement of [his] labours'. This person advised that if Robinson had to think of Christianity, it should be 'one pound of Christianity to three pounds of civilisation'. Robinson replied, 'I would ask this theorist where is the opportunity of dealing out the prescribed quantity as within the short space of ten weeks, four immortal souls have been launched into eternity from this establishment'.³⁵ At this early point in Robinson's Mission, the need for conversion, given the immediacy of death, outweighed the need for civilisation.

However, despite this priority, Robinson could never conceive of conversion entirely loosed from 'civilisation'. Just over a month later he wrote of his hope in Aboriginal human nature 'now beginning to emerge from that torpid state of ignorance and barbarism in which it has so long slumbered', and 'becoming susceptible of those civilized qualities which all tribes and nations must attain to, even to their very acme'.³⁶ Robinson's conception of conversion was inextricably tied up with a modernist eschatology of progress that saw the 'acme' of all

³³ Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 57.

³⁴ Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 310.

³⁵ Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 65.

³⁶ Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 72.

cultures, not as gathered around the throne of the Lamb in all their cultural diversity,³⁷ but as attaining to 'civilised qualities'. As such, while he desired conversion he saw this as only possible through 'civilisation', or at least as going hand in hand with it.

This is indicated by a journal entry from 8 August 1829 in which he speaks of 'the improvement which a life spent in social intercourse with rational creatures' (i.e. the British population of Hobart) 'has accomplished on the rough image of a poor aborigine'. Robinson hoped 'by a course of proper discipline' to teach the aborigines 'to imbibe those impressions which through the assistance of Almighty God will ultimately lead to their general conversion'.³⁸

Again in a later entry Robinson writes 'neither count I my life dear could I but win the souls of these aborigines to God'. However, a few sentences later he expresses this hope in terms of 'the savage tribes of this colony' experiencing 'the blessings of civilization', after which they may 'be finally instructed in the will and precepts of their divine Creator'.³⁹

Robinson's journals then indicate that he was not unconcerned with conversion, but rather that he saw education and civilisation as necessary correlates, and even preconditions, of conversion. His conception of the change conversion brings was of a cognitive assent to Christian propositions, rather than a more fully-orbed cognitive-existential change signaling a radical life reorientation. As we will expand on later, it is probable that this reduced scope of the nature of conversion was a function of the Mission's political goal of social order, and meant Robinson's concern was to 'europeanise' first, and to (hopefully) convert later. Setting up churches and schools to 'educate' the indigenous Tasmanians was a tangible and quantifiable measure, and contributed to the ideal of British social harmony. Calling the

³⁷ C.f. Revelation 7:9

³⁸ Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 75–6.

³⁹ Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 98–99.

indigenous tribes to find their true identity in Christ through faith in him, giving them space to work out how that will impact their own culture, is a much less measurable goal, and less useful in terms of colonial stability. However, despite these concerns, it is apparent that, while wrongly ordered behind cultural assimilation and Westernised education, Robinson did in fact communicate a desire that the Friendly Mission would lead to conversion. In this he demonstrates he understood his Mission as an evangelical one.

Activism

As we have seen, Robinson's theological commitments led him to a desire for conversion amongst the Aboriginal people. However, in line with the second evangelical distinctive, activism, this desire found expression in action. His journals record him constantly seeking to convince his indigenous guides to adopt Christianity, both through many informal camp-fire conversations and through formal church-service sermons. These sermons, more prevalent in the early period of the Mission when Robinson was in the fixed location of Bruny Island, include efforts of cultural accommodation, such as one attempt to preach in the Aboriginal language.⁴⁰

His informal conversations are more prominent, as would be expected, during his expeditions. These conversations often centred around the issue of creation, as for example in Robinson's entry on 12 July 1831: 'Tonight I explained to the natives the Creation – of God, of the Flood, &c – which I had frequently done when an opportunity afforded'.⁴¹ Again in a later discussion with the Aboriginal chief Mannalargenna and others, Robinson records 'I explained to them the being of a God, how man was created, the fall, Christ coming to save man; and if they believe not they will not be saved. [...] I told them one God made black and

⁴⁰ 31 May 1839. Cited in Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 63.

⁴¹ Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 409.

white man.’⁴² Robinson, then, both held a conversionist theology and put that into practice in his evangelistic activism.

However, the mention of one God making black and white in the last paragraph leads to the primary feature of Robinson's activism. As we saw earlier, evangelical activism ‘often spilled over’ to include a broader scope than verbal evangelism. For Robinson, his activism principally took shape in the form of advocacy for the physical wellbeing of the indigenous Tasmanians. This advocacy was driven by the conflict between this belief in the equality of all people under God and the cruel treatment given to the Aborigines by the settlers. Reynolds has noted that ‘Robinson probably had more first-hand experience of the impact of settler violence than any other European’.⁴³ Robinson himself, in a draft of an unpublished memoir written at the end of his life, reflected that his ‘mind had become early and deeply impressed with the deplorable state and condition of the aboriginal inhabitants’, and that he was anxious to know ‘whether anything could be done for their moral, religious and material improvement’. While public opinion saw the Aborigines as ‘a bare remove from the brutes’, Robinson asserted that ‘even brutes were accessible to kindness; how much more man, made after the express image of God’.⁴⁴

Even on the most cynical reading of his journals, the facts of the case – including his confessed belief in equality against the vast sway of public opinion, his willingness to give up social comfort and journey through harsh terrain away from his family for the best part of four years, and his desire (even if misguided) to do something to abate the extermination of the indigenous people in the Black War – set Robinson apart from his culture as a humanitarian activist. If he was only concerned with riches and fame, ‘he could have achieved them more quickly and in far greater safety and security by continuing to practice

⁴² Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 436.

⁴³ Henry Reynolds, *This Whispering in Our Hearts* (St. Leonards, N.S.W.: Allen & Unwin, 1998), 31.

⁴⁴ Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 52.

his trade as a builder in the rapidly developing town of Hobart'.⁴⁵ Robinson, then, displayed both a belief in the necessity of conversion, and an activism expressed in both evangelism and advocacy.

Biblicism

The third evangelical distinctive – Biblicism – is also apparent in Robinson's journals. He speaks of the 'bright and infallible doctrines of scripture',⁴⁶ and although not explicitly referenced very often, biblical language, imagery and concepts occur throughout his journals. The biblical concept of the equality of humanity by virtue of their creation in God's image is a direct reference to Genesis 1-2 and as we have seen was a touchstone of Robinson's Mission. He also at key points uses biblical allusions to explain his mission, for example writing of the need 'to put our talents to interest so that when we are called upon to give an account of their appropriation we may be found good and faithful servants', alluding to the parable of the talents in Matthew 25.

Another prominent biblical concept that has expression throughout the journals is the sovereignty of God. Faced with the Aboriginal death rate on Bruny Island, Robinson writes 'my mind is uplifted to that Omnipotent Being who directs and governs all things here below'. He finds comfort in the thought that 'what is just and that all things work together for the common good', alluding to Romans 8:28.⁴⁷ Later in his expeditions this same passage becomes a source of comfort to Robinson when he is told by his aboriginal guides that he would be speared by the particular tribe they were searching for, writing 'my trust is in God who worketh all things for good'.⁴⁸

⁴⁵ Ryan, 'Historians, Friendly Mission and the Contest for Robinson and Trukanini', 148.

⁴⁶ Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 104.

⁴⁷ Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 85.

⁴⁸ Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 319.

Linked to this conception of God's sovereignty, Robinson's journals also record his prayers to God for help, often couched in biblical phrases. For example, quoting 1 Cor 15:58 he writes, 'I pray to a triune Jehovah that I may continue steadfast, immovable in the work of the Lord, for as much as we know that our labour is not in vain in the Lord'.⁴⁹ The Bible, then, formed a core element of Robinson's self-understanding and the discourse surrounding his Friendly Mission.

Crucicentrism

It is the fourth evangelical distinctive, crucicentrism, that is the least evident in Robinson's understanding of his mission. It is, however, discernible. Reflecting on the death of 'Joe', an indigenous resident of Bruny Island, Robinson writes, 'Would to God he had died in the faith of Jesus Christ'. Later in the same entry he refers to Jesus as 'the Lamb of God that taketh away the sins of the world'.⁵⁰ Robinson speaks several times of Christ as 'the great redeemer of the world',⁵¹ claiming that 'nothing but regeneration itself and the all saving grace of Emmanuel applied to the Holy Spirit can effectually redeem'.⁵² As we have already seen in his attempts to preach to the Aboriginal people, he spoke of 'Christ coming to save man'.⁵³

Of interest in this connection is that talk of Christ and redemption is heavily weighted towards the start of his journals, disappearing altogether from the time of his third expedition to the North-Western tribes in 1832. From this point, his Christian discourse revolves much more around his hope in God's providence and thankfulness for what he saw as God's intervention when things went well for him: his statement, 'providence is good to me. Grant I

⁴⁹ Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 99.

⁵⁰ Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 64.

⁵¹ Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 90. C.f. pp. 104, 113.

⁵² Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 104.

⁵³ Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 436.

may be successful!' is representative.⁵⁴ This loss of focus on the cross may correlate with what has been noted as Robinson's 'moral decline'.⁵⁵ However, it is nevertheless possible to assert that at least in the beginning of his work Robinson saw the atoning work of Christ as an important part of his message and therefore of the Friendly Mission.

From his journals, it is clear therefore that George Augustus Robinson, the key character involved in the Friendly Mission, wanted to communicate that his Mission was an evangelical one. He confessed a belief in the necessity for conversion. His Mission was for him the embodiment of his evangelical activism, surrounded by biblical discourse and including, at least at the beginning, a stress on the redeeming work of Christ.

The question remains, however, as to the accuracy of Robinson's presentation of his Mission as evangelical. To help us assess this we will need to look more closely at the connections between the Friendly Mission and its contexts, both locally and internationally.

The Friendly Mission in context

We have already outlined the historical context of the Mission in terms of the Tasmanian Black War, and in this no further comment needs to be made. What is crucial is the connection between the two.

As outlined, Robinson's Mission came not as a purely humanitarian movement but as a government initiative, occasioned by the increasingly violent and socially disruptive conflict between settlers and indigenous Tasmanians. As James Boyce argues, it 'has largely been overlooked that Robinson was an employee of the colonial government, reporting directly to the Lieutenant Governor, and that the monumental decision taken [...] to remove every

⁵⁴ Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 774.

⁵⁵ Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 619.

Tasmanian Aborigine, [...] was ultimately a political and a local one'. The removal of an entire indigenous people, even from remote and unsettled areas 'was hardly standard evangelical [...] fare'.⁵⁶

Despite Robinson's presentation of the Mission as evangelical, this crucial factor – that the Mission was fundamentally a solution to a socio-political crisis rather than positively motivated by evangelical activism – meant that from its inception it served a political goal; and no amount of evangelical rhetoric could change that. Robinson's arguably sincere evangelicalism may have served to endear his Mission to Governor Arthur, himself a 'committed and pious Christian' and 'sympathetic to humanitarian causes'. However, Arthur himself was 'progressively trapped between implacably contradictory objectives'. On the one hand he faced the 'overriding imperative of colonial governance', running the colony such that the increasing numbers of settlers were able to be financially prosperous and physically secure 'on lands wrested from Aboriginal people'. On the other hand, his humanitarianism meant he was committed to protect the Aboriginal people from the forced dispossession of their land by the settlers and the violence that dispossession brought. Arthur, then, 'grasped at Robinson's Friendly Mission as a middle way'.⁵⁷ Robinson's Mission was for Arthur a way to both satisfy his conscience and keep the settlers happy.

Seen in this light, the Friendly Mission, as a government-backed and funded venture viewed by Arthur as the answer to his 'contradictory objectives', fundamentally served a political end despite Robinson's presentation of it as evangelical.

This assessment is confirmed by a comparison of the Mission with the international evangelical abolitionist movement. Commenting on the treatment of Aborigines by sealers in

⁵⁶ James Boyce, 'Robinson's Journals', *History Australia* 7/1 (December 21, 2010): 21.1.

⁵⁷ All quotes in this paragraph from Alan Lester, 'George Augustus Robinson and Imperial Networks', in *Reading Robinson: Companion Essays to Friendly Mission* (ed. Anna Johnston and Mitchell Rolls; Hobart: Quintus Publishing, 2008), 32–33.

the Bass Straits, Robinson famously wrote ‘Surely this is the African slave trade in miniature, and the voice of reason as well as humanity calls for its abolition’.⁵⁸ Robinson not only saw his Mission as evangelical, but specifically as an extension of the evangelical abolitionist movement of the late 18th and early 19th Centuries. However, read in the light of the historical context we have outlined, key differences emerge that make this connection untenable.

The British evangelical abolitionist movement, personified in Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect, engaged in a long-term and costly conflict against slavery in the British Empire. Like Robinson, although arguably with greater apprehension, Wilberforce and the Clapham Sect held to a biblically shaped, crucicentric, conversionist and socially activist evangelicalism.⁵⁹ However, a critical distinction was that, whereas Robinson’s Mission served the colonial government’s agenda of social order, Wilberforce’s abolitionism was the cause of significant inconvenience to the government and ruling elite. Wilberforce was dealing with a long established practice that was a source of considerable income for the Empire, and many thought to abolish it was ‘risking the nation’s economy’.⁶⁰ He faced opposition from the ruling elite, including those with plantation interests who used fear of French encroachment to argue against abolition: ‘any regulation of the British slave trade would only put British-owned slaves – and money – into the hands of French slavers’.⁶¹ Wilberforce’s abolitionism, driven by his evangelical activism, put him in stark opposition to vast and powerful sections of the British political and economic leadership.

As we have seen, however, Robinson’s Mission in contrast *served* the agendas of the political and economic leadership. It brought an end to the hostilities that were causing economic and human loss for the settlers. It separated the warring parties without needing to come to a

⁵⁸ Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 91.

⁵⁹ See Stephen Tomkins, *The Clapham Sect : How Wilberforce's Circle Transformed Britain* (Oxford: Lion, 2010), 46–7.

⁶⁰ Eric Metaxas, *Amazing Grace : William Wilberforce and the Heroic Campaign to End Slavery* (New York, NY: HarperSanFrancisco, 2007), 119.

⁶¹ Metaxas, *Amazing Grace*, 125.

mediated agreement, and as such did not inconvenience the settlers but rather was a great boon for them. As shown in his protracted efforts to receive compensation after his final expedition in 1835, it was thought by the Colonial Secretary that the value of Robinson's work was in proportion to the relief he brought to 'the ruinous effects produced upon the lives and property of the settlers by the aboriginal natives'.⁶²

It is not accurate, then, to view the Friendly Mission as an extension of evangelical abolitionism. Its close ties to governmental agendas meant that, instead of calling the government and the powerful settler population to uphold the human dignity of the aboriginal people regardless of the cost to their wallets, their property or their convenience, it rather enabled them to profit financially, keep their property, and not have the inconvenience of negotiating their claims on the land with its first inhabitants.

Concluding Reflections

George Augustus Robinson is a character 'about whom historians will forever argue. Was he a hero or a villain, the saviour of the Aboriginal remnant or their betrayer?'⁶³ Regardless of his internal motivations, this essay has argued that he presented his Friendly Mission as an evangelical 'mission of mercy'. However, there does not seem to be a necessary reason to adopt a hermeneutic of suspicion regarding the correspondence between his confessed and actual motives. Robinson himself arguably understood the Mission, at least at its inception, to be motivated by a biblically based, crucicentric activism that sought both the conversion and the physical wellbeing of Tasmania's indigenous population.

The relationship between socio-political forces and the Mission, as outlined above, meant that

⁶² Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 962.

⁶³ John Harris, *One Blood : 200 Years of Aboriginal Encounter with Christianity : a Story of Hope* (2nd ed.; Sydney: Albatross Books, 1994), 95.

while Robinson believed the Mission to be evangelical, it was in fact political. Robinson embodies an evangelical activism assured in its own divine approval. He stated his firm belief that the Mission was from God, that 'God is with me, and that the cause is his'.⁶⁴ This certainty that what he was doing was God's work gave Robinson a confidence bordering on arrogance, exemplified in his claim that 'Providence had certainly crowned my labours with abundant success' such that 'with me the motto *veni, vidi, vici* was applicable'.⁶⁵ Robinson's uncritical attributing of his Mission to God's will blinded him from seeing the more fundamental, non-evangelical forces driving the Mission, and therefore inhibited his capacity to, like Wilberforce, confront the dominant culture with the claims of the gospel. Instead, Robinson's Mission helped to maintain the dominant culture's status quo, with the added 'benefit' that humanitarian consciences were assuaged.

This raises the broader issue of evangelicalism and the capacity for self-deception, an issue as urgent today as in the 1830s. The story of the Friendly Mission highlights the way in which it is possible to engage in activities that are genuinely motivated by evangelical concerns and yet form part of a larger non-evangelical agenda. In terms of indigenous relations in Australia,

'humanitarian evangelical networks [have] justified assimilation or integration on white terms, embodied ethnocentric assumptions of cultural superiority and, in their twentieth-century afterlife, underpinned traumatic 'welfare' interventions such as the forced fostering of Aboriginal and 'mixed race' children'.⁶⁶

This capacity to participate in and legitimate non-evangelical agendas under sincere evangelical motives serves as a warning to evangelicals in all spheres, not just in relation to indigenous history. The Friendly Mission highlights the danger of the highly motivated, well intentioned evangelical who considers their work the work of God but who has failed to reckon with the broader cultural and political agendas they may unconsciously be advancing.

⁶⁴ Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 414.

⁶⁵ Plomley, *Friendly Mission*, 805.

⁶⁶ Lester, 'George Augustus Robinson and Imperial Networks', 42.

However, that warning should also encourage a more thorough and critical evangelical engagement with cultural power structures; and in doing so encourage an embodiment of the subversive gospel call to love regardless of cost and in spite of opposition. It is through this kind of politically engaged and culturally critical pursuit of Christ-like love that today's evangelicals, in contrast to Robinson, may recapture something of Wilberforce's vision and transformative evangelical activism.

The Friendly Mission to the indigenous peoples of Van Diemen's Land was surrounded by evangelical rhetoric, and was communicated as an evangelical mission by its key protagonist George Augustus Robinson. Robinson's evangelical Methodist heritage, and the theological framework indicated throughout his journals, suggest that this outward communication had an inward correspondence, such that he genuinely believed himself doing an evangelical work, although it is unlikely we will ever be certain of his internal motivations. However, despite Robinson's evangelical outlook, the social and political context of the Mission, principally the tension created by the Black War and the consequent crisis for Lieutenant-Governor Arthur, meant that Robinson's Mission ultimately served a political end. In contrast to the evangelical abolitionism which Robinson located himself within, the Mission's advocacy for the wellbeing of the indigenous Tasmanians did not take the form of political and cultural critique but rather of a 'middle way' which ended up confirming and stabilizing the pre-existing social order. It is therefore apparent that the Friendly Mission was not in any fundamental sense an evangelical Mission.

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