

Project Canterbury

Twenty-One Years in Papua
A History of the English Church Mission in New Guinea (1891-1912)

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Priest of the New Guinea Mission

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"There is a trite observation that natives are better left alone. I will not argue that phase of the subject, but content myself with the retort that they have not been left alone. We have brought ourselves into political relation with the people of New Guinea, and we have shown them the imperfect side of our character. We have sent them a judge, magistrates, police, a gaol, and other ornaments of our civilization. We have also sent them diggers and traders. We are in duty bound to send them knowledge of the other side of our civilization--the hospital, the school, and the Church. We have made laws to punish them for theft and murder, but we have not taught them why such acts are crimes."---Bishop Stone-Wigg (in Sydney, March 24, 1898).

Chapter V. The Mamba River (1899)

MR. King was with the Governor in 1893, when he discovered the mouth of the Mamba, very near to German New Guinea, two hundred and fifty miles from Dogura.

Sir William MacGregor explored the river in the following year: and some gold prospectors went up in 1895, but their leader was killed by natives, and the others hurried back to the coast.

When other parties of diggers followed, the Government established a station for the protection both of the white men and of the natives. This was on Tamata Greek, forty miles or so from the sea, and the first magistrate who took charge, with eight of his natives, was attacked and killed while busy with some building. About the same time five diggers were killed on the river and the other white men in the neighbourhood left in a panic. A strong Government party went up and re-established possession of the district, but for some time there was war between the whites and the natives, and no man on either side was safe from attack, and it was long before the natives settled down again. Meanwhile the Governor had more than once invited the mission to begin work there; but, with the small force at his disposal, Mr. King had been unable to attempt it.

Writing from Samarai, a few days after his arrival, Bishop Stone-Wigg said, "There has been bad news from the Mamba. The Governor has had more trouble with the natives there than anywhere. They will make no terms and keep no peace with him. If he establishes friendly relations with a tribe and hopes thereby to get a foothold in the district, the other tribes will raid those men, and wipe them out. If he carries off prisoners from the irreconcilables, and brings them to Samarai and civilizes them, it is not safe to return them to their tribe, for they will be murdered for coming to terms with their white foes."

Speaking of the Mamba especially, Sir William MacGregor once said to the Bishop, "I have been compelled to shed blood in New Guinea, to my great sorrow. I shall not rest content till I can make such reparation as is possible. I want to plant a Christian teacher wherever such blood has been shed under my authority."

At the beginning of 1897, Mr. King had issued a statement about the Mamba River district, which included

the following two reasons for beginning work there:--

(a) "The Roman Catholic Mission of the Sacred Heart, already at work on the southern coast of New Guinea, are making inquiries about the possibility of establishing themselves on the Mamba River.

(b) "The Governor informs us that he is unable to reserve the land in the Mamba district for us if we are unable to occupy it within reasonable time."

Such occupation was not made till nearly three years afterwards: and even then the Bishop, for his own part, would have preferred to advance step by step along the coast, instead of leaving a gap of nearly a hundred and fifty miles untouched between Collingwood Bay and the boundary; but he decided to go forward at once, for several reasons.

In addition to Sir William MacGregor's appeal, made just as he was leaving New Guinea, there was the fact that the Mamba natives were now settling down peacefully, building villages and making gardens. There were many white men on and within reach of the river; and a resident magistrate and police camp had been re-established at Tamata. Communication was becoming less haphazard, and a small steamer now ran between Samarai and the Mamba mouth, while oil launches of various sorts plied up and down, so that there would be no need for the Mission schooner to go up frequently with stores. Seventeen miles beyond the Government station, and to be reached, if the track was good, in five or six hours, were the goldfields on the Gira River, and two or three hundred white men were already there.

A beginning was made before the end of 1899, when the Rev. E. W. M. Hines, with a layman and seven natives, two of whom were Christian, opened a mission station, afterwards known as S. Andrew's. Mr. Hines had come from Australia, volunteering especially for work among these diggers; but his health broke down completely before he had lived on the Mamba much more than a month, and when the Governor, Mr. (afterwards Sir George) Le Hunte, called at the new station, he found him "very nearly done for," and brought him down to Dogura in the *Merrie England*; and though he was able to help for a short time at Taupota he was soon afterwards obliged to leave the country.

The Annual Mission Report, in recording Mr. Hines' departure, said that "it was his enterprise which enabled the Mission to establish itself on the Mamba, so that his nine months in New Guinea and his ill health were not for naught."

The Bishop was in Australia at the time, and Mr. King, who was acting as Vicar-General, decided to take temporary charge of the new district. Early in February he went, hoping to remain there long enough to finish his work upon the Acts of the Apostles in Wedauan, which he took with him for final revision. That was twelve years ago, and Mr. King has more or less stayed there ever since, and he is to-day the one living white man who has competent knowledge of the Binandere speech of those parts.

A layman who once made a whale-boat journey up the Mamba with Bishop Stone-Wigg wrote the following account of his experience.

"We reached the mouth of the river at about six o'clock one evening. It had been our intention to start at two o'clock the next morning; but, as it rained all night, we waited till daylight, and then began our trip. Handicapped by the fact that our crew was a small and feeble one, and still more by the fact that the boat was so heavily laden as seriously to hinder rowing, we entered the mouth and began our tussle with a four-knot current.

"I was steering. We had about a ton and a half of cargo, the Bishop, another layman and myself, a South Sea Islander, and seven boys. On the upward trip one had no time to pay attention to the beauties around. We crept along the most sheltered bank of the river, and then would follow a rapid dash across the stream, during which we lost, perhaps, some few yards of headway before we escaped from the current and gained

the shelter of the opposite bank.

"We would warn the boys two minutes before their twenty minutes spell came to an end; and, all being ready, on the word 'change!' their substitutes would slip into their places, and perhaps not more than two strokes would be lost. As we were short-handed, M. and I took alternate spells with the crew, and so were able to 'gauge the boys' burden. At sunset we got out on the bank, and formed a camp. The Bishop had his mattress under a fly; and some of the boys sheltered there too when the night rains came on. M. and I preferred the boat; and, despite a few mosquitoes, quiet soon settled on our little camp, as we were all very tired.

"Our experiences of the next day were very similar, but our camp next night was a ghastly business. We saw a lime-tree near a deserted clearing which seemed very suitable for a camp, and we decided to disembark. Hardly had we landed than a cloud of mosquitoes flew to greet us, and with an affection born of long fasting they embraced us.

"Uneducated to the last degree, they let us smash them by sevens and tens on all exposed parts of our bodies. The poor boys endured agonies, and before they could begin to light a fire and pitch the fly, we had to lend them such spare shirts, pyjamas, and coats as our scanty wardrobes afforded.

"Evening prayers were almost farcical, as no one could endure the agony of hundreds of sharp pricks without scratching and slapping furiously.

"M. camped in the boat, as being less mosquito-haunted; the Bishop and I slung our nets under the fly, and killed the score or so of mosquitoes which, settling on our bodies as we entered, had managed to get in.

"At eleven o'clock the rain began, and imagine my horror on finding that it was coming through my mosquito-net, which protruded beyond the edge of the fly. I dared not get out of the net, as the rain had brought thousands more mosquitoes.

"A cry from the boat half an hour later showed that things were not in a happy condition there. Rain from the bank poured into the boat and she was sinking fast. M. was wet to the skin, his blankets and swag were saturated; and while the boys, hastily moving some of the boxes out, began baling water from the boat with a bucket, he ran up to us.

"By this time I was sitting at the innermost corner of my mosquito-net, with the remainder a mere pool of water. M. tried to get in, but when he lifted the net, several hundreds of the pests entered, and drove us out. We tried to cover ourselves with the wet blankets, having only our noses exposed to breathe; but the mosquitoes got into our nostrils, crawling over the blankets, and our position was one of excruciating misery. Never had I found a night so long; and we hurried away at the first break of dawn, despite the pouring rain; and after perhaps half a mile of rowing got rid of our persistent enemies.

"It turned out that the clearing had once been a goods depot and village, but the mosquitoes increased, making existence an impossibility, and the village was moved away. Imagine some score of beehives overturned, and the bees infuriated, and you will have some idea of what it was like that night at Uji.

"Next day we got up to Manatu, and there camped in the Government rest house, in dry-ness and comparative freedom from mosquitoes.

"Eight miles next morning brought us to Siu, and here we left the boat and went overland to S. Andrew's. As a rule this is a good track, but the river was in flood and the jungle all under water, and for two miles of the way the water was well up to our thighs.

"Arrived at the station, we changed, and were gladdened at 7 p.m. by the arrival of the boat, which had to

go round long bends of the river to reach us. We spent altogether a fortnight on the Mamba, and had two services at Tamata, the mining store township, one on Palm Sunday and another on Easter Day, besides a lantern service on Good Friday.

"The run down the river only took eight hours, as against four days going up. From Mamba to Tun, on Cape Nelson, where I am writing, the schooner has taken seven days, as we are beating up against the south-east trade wind."

The present writer went up the Mamba by whale-boat some little time ago, and he can vouch for the dreadful accuracy of Mr. Giblin's description. It is still raining on the river; the mosquitoes still haunt the banks in great battalions; sleep is still impossible; and the water still knows how to find its way precisely to the spot where your blankets are spread. It is not only missionaries, of course, who have to put up with these things! Magistrates going quietly about their work: traders and miners toiling hard for a not very opulent reward: it is the same for all of them--and if the missionaries sometimes have to struggle through with smaller equipment than other and richer men, they at least possess the compensating advantages of a sustaining enthusiasm to which the Government officers do not as a rule pretend, and of an unselfish motive to which the straightforward money-seeking white man in Papua makes no claim.

Mr. King soon got to know the district and the people. A couple of months after he got up there, Ascension Day and Queen's birthday fell together, and almost everybody from the Government settlement--magistrates, native police, cook-boys, prisoners, and a few visiting diggers--spent the day on the Mission station, which was two or three miles further down the river. Natives came in from villages round about, and the sports--running, swimming, obstacle races, jumping, greasy poles, and so on--went on all day, with an interval during which Mr. King and the resident magistrate made orations to the people, explanatory of the missionaries' presence there, and of the part the natives were expected to play in the new order of things. Later in the day a child of the native police sergeant, whose wife was a Port Moresby convert, was baptized, the two Government officers standing sponsors; and before they went away the magistrates borrowed two of the Mission boys to show the police how to build a proper house for "Government."

"People would expect one to feel lonely," wrote Mr. King, "but if this is loneliness I rather enjoy it. I have better health than any of the boys, and I like pegging away at this language which no one has been able to do anything with as yet. Though we have not begun services in native yet, we doctor the people in their sickness, and I think they are beginning to trust and understand us. I keep up some of my work for Dogura, too. I have nearly finished the translation of the greater part of Genesis, and am working at a revision of the dictionary. Of course all our station services are in Wedauan, but I am able to use a good deal of English in conversation with the boys."

The Bishop came up a month afterwards, bringing Mr. Ramsay, who stayed there three years, and David Tatoo, a South Sea Islander, who is there still.

Before the end of the year Mr. King had begun to go up and down the river, and to follow the tracks overland, sometimes through silent shadowy forest so thick that the sun's rays were rarely seen, over muddy paths that were mere tangled masses of slippery roots and prickly creepers, and sometimes through sago swamps, or across creeks on a hurriedly made raft, to the twenty or thirty villages and the goldfields on the Gira River, close to the German territory.

That the people were still wild, and the district still unsettled, is shown by the following, written by Bishop Stone-Wigg in 1901, just after paying a visit to the Gira, when he had found the people "timid at first, but reassured when they heard the missionaries' errand was to put down fighting and to spread peace":--

"A week or two ago the Mamba and Gira natives, in a frenzy for blood, made a combined expedition against the natives of Waria River, beyond the Gira, and attacked them in force. But the Waria men are fine fighters, judging by the size of their spears, one of which was brought away at the time and given to

me for the museum at Dogura. The attack was repelled, and twenty of the marauders who fell in the skirmish were carried away and eaten. The defeated natives then fell in with some village constables from the Mamba River, who had been sent out armed with rifles to arrest or shoot a notorious prisoner, who had escaped in irons from gaol. These armed men were enlisted by the defeated coalition, and another attack was made on the Waria River natives. The rifles did fearful execution, and twelve of these unfortunate men were killed. Their bodies were cut up, the flesh smoked, and brought home on poles to the Mamba, as pigs' flesh is carried. It was the distribution of this 'food' that led to detection. A portion was given to a man who had learnt better things, and he threw the flesh into the river and reported the matter to the magistrate, who at once took steps to punish the aggressors."

"I have been here eight months," wrote Mr. King, towards the end of 1900, "and am only now able to speak for myself, however simply. When I reach a village, I get the people together, and give them an address. I tell them they are to be friendly with the white man, and that fighting is to stop. Then I tell them about the Father in the sky, what His words are to us, and about His Son, Who came to earth. I know they cannot take in much, but the people who have heard it before will talk about it afterwards. But now the Name of God and of our Lord has been declared on the Gira; and the sound of a hymn in the tongue of the people has risen among the coconuts in the most northern village we know of in British New Guinea. As far as I can see, the language on Mamba and on Gira is the same. I am told that at Ope, and even at some parts of the Kumusi (rivers south of the Mamba), we shall have the same advantage. Thus all the study and time spent in learning Binandere will not have been wasted. It is difficult, but I think we understand a good deal of the construction of it now, and our vocabulary is somewhere near its first thousand words."

Mr. Ramsay was an athlete and something of a boxer--a man strong in arm as well as in character. He got on well with the white men and the natives, and soon won their confidence. There were, at this time, fully two hundred miners and other whites in the district, and about three hundred carriers, brought thither from other parts of New Guinea. The Bishop wrote sympathetically of these pioneers of civilization, as men who were "suffering vicariously for those who will follow and reap the benefit." "I must confess myself," he said, "an admirer of the digger, with all his faults. . . . On the higher side he is much-enduring, generous-hearted, kindly, and as a conversationalist, both interesting and instructive. Again I noticed how well their carriers looked, and how kindly was the relationship between the two classes. I must acknowledge that in this I was agreeably surprised."

A school was opened at S. Andrew's, and soon there was an attendance of fifty or sixty children. On the principle that cleanliness comes very near to godliness, part of the daily routine for all these children was a plunge in the river just before school. Mr. Ramsay used to blow a whistle and call out "Fall in!" and the children used to go and do it.

Services were held regularly at five places--on S. Andrew's station for the surrounding villages, at the Government station of Tamata for the white settlement, and at three villages down the river. The preachers for the village services were generally New Guinea Christians, two of whom soon learnt enough Binandere to begin their evangelistic labours. "Thus," as Mr. King said, "the plants raised from seed sown at Taupota and Dogura are now commencing to shed their seed on soil which promises a rich harvest."

One of the first boarders on the station was a boy named Goibo. His full name was Goibo Garoba ("The Angry Rat"), but he was the "gentlest, dearest little fellow imaginable." His old mother, though glad for him to live with the missionaries, used to come over every day from her village on the other side of the river, bringing him food morning and afternoon, and paddling her own canoe, even when the river was in flood. This boy, like most of the Mamba people in those days, had tasted human flesh; and it was even necessary, now and then, to examine very carefully the presents of food that were thus brought by their parents and friends to the boys living on the station.

The missionaries used to take Goibo about with them on their cross-country journeys, when they were bound for strange villages, and he greatly helped them to make friends. Mr. Ramsay taught him a number

of acrobatic tricks, and when the people were surly, or slow to accept the white men's advances, Goibo's antics would put them in a good humour.

One Sunday in November, just after morning service, a deputation of natives--village constables, men who had been in the police force, and others--was waiting for Mr. King. They had brought a present of coconuts, and wanted to know if he would tell them why they were having so much rain, and whether he could do something to stop it. The river had risen and the water was swamping their plantations and rotting their taro. It was keeping them from work in the gardens, and from procuring daily food. When any trouble of this sort comes to a native, his first thought is that somebody is to blame, and then he looks about to find out who it is.

Certain of the natives believed that some one had placed banana leaves under the water, and so brought the rain; others suggested that the barometer on Mr. King's verandah and the rain gauge which stood out on the grass might have something to do with it. Mr. King ventured on a few general explanations as to the relation of cause and effect, with particular application to the fact that he measured the rain after it fell and not before, and that neither he nor any other man, white or brown, had any control over the amount, or manner, or place, or time of its falling; and then he went on to speak of God Who sits above the waterflood; and in the afternoon he preached to them about Elijah and the cloud that was no bigger than a man's hand.

So the missionaries do their work. There are set services and regular classes, hundreds and hundreds of them, every year, and preachings in the villages: but many useful chances come when a few natives, frightened or puzzled or merely amused by something that is beyond their common experience and simple understanding, decide to go along and talk it out with the missionary, who seems to them to know very nearly all about everything.

At the end of two years, Mr. King, very weak after a bout of influenza, accepted the offer of a trip to Samarai in the *Merrie England*. On the way back he landed for the first time at the mouth of the Kumusi River, and walked overland to S. Andrew's, visiting many villages as he went, and finding that Mr. Ramsay had all but died of blackwater fever in his absence. "May God grant us grace," he wrote, when Ramsay had recovered and he himself had settled to routine work again, "may God grant us grace to go on steadily, for though one can proclaim the Good News at a casual visit to a village, it takes years of patient striving to build up a Church."

Six months afterwards, just as they were getting ready to build a mission hospital, flames from a rubbish heap ran along the ground and caught the church, and in ten minutes it and the schoolroom had gone, and the hospital had to wait until these two large and necessary buildings had been put up again. The local storekeeper and the Resident Magistrate both offered help, and the natives undertook to work without wages. Among the most zealous workers were two men for whom the Mission had procured terms of imprisonment a few months before, and Mr. King thought it would be hard to find "a more practical proof of their friendliness towards us and of the gradually increasing readiness to accept our teaching."

In August, 1902, two nurses, with a white carpenter and five native workmen, and Selwin and Elisabeta from Wedau, left for the Mamba, to build and open the hospital. This was a little building thirty feet long and fourteen feet wide, with a ten foot verandah all round it, and walls and roofing of ruberoid. There was a dispensary built into the verandah, and nurses' quarters of native material.

In the short year of its existence this hospital was a centre of useful medical work, both among white men and natives--Mr. King was himself a patient for a week, with blackwater fever--but the over-worked nurses broke down in health, and the expense was so heavy, that within a few months of the Bishop's return from England the ladies were withdrawn, and the hospital closed as a part of the "Great Retrenchment."

Mr. Ramsay was sent to Australia in April, 1903, to read for Holy Orders; the Rev. E. W. Taylor died in

June; the Rev. H. Newton had gone on a long overdue furlough; and for six months after the Bishop's return Mr. King was the only priest left in the diocese. Mr. King's furlough was also due, but he waited for a time at Boianai to prepare some sixty candidates for Confirmation. The miners were leaving the Mamba for other fields, but David Tadoo and a New Guinea Christian pupil teacher went on with the native work at S. Andrew's after Mr. King went away.

In 1905, the Bishop had been on a visit to the Gira goldfield, and was coming down the coast to Buna Bay, whence he intended to walk to the Yodda goldfield. The Resident Magistrate of the northern division was to meet him at Ope River, half-way between Mamba mouth and Buna, to make arrangements for the opening of a new station. Altogether, there were twenty-two persons on the little launch, including eleven carriers, and two laymen, and a South Sea Islander, and three native boys for the new station.

They reached the river mouth early one afternoon in July, and found the south-east wind blowing straight in and a big sea running, the surf breaking fiercely on the sandy bar. It was at this spot that the Bishop and Mr. Ramsay had been upset out of a dinghy, and in no little danger from unfriendly natives, four years before.

The launch was towing a large whale-boat heavy with stores, and the Bishop's first anxiety was to get these things safely landed. The boat had lost its rudder on the way up, but the engineer of the launch was an expert seaman, and offered to take the boat through the surf. The launch was anchored a little way out and there seemed to be no great risk in the engineer leaving it for a time. The whale-boat, with an oar lashed aft, got safely through the surf, and the Bishop began to look anxiously for its return, as the launch was jerking ominously at its anchor chain.

"I had just caught sight of the returning boat," wrote the Bishop, "when the chain snapped, and the launch was adrift. We got the awning down and the sails up as quickly as possible, the waves rolling in and making it hard to keep our feet. The wind was driving us straight on to the breakers, and the vessel could make no headway against it. The engineer and boys saw our plight, and faced the surf with nerve and vigour. If they could reach us with a minute or so to spare, the engine would be started and the vessel could get out to sea. The space between us was rapidly reduced, chiefly owing to the speed with which we were driven nearer the shore. It was a moment of extreme tension when the whale-boat faced the biggest rollers. Had it surmounted them the launch might just have been saved: but it was an impossible task, and the boat was completely filled, and then turned bottom upwards, leaving its occupants in four feet of water, but unable to stand against the force of the waves.

"Very shortly afterwards the launch struck on the bar, and huge seas washed over it. We had tried our best to close up the engine-room, but without avail. It was hard enough to keep our feet at all, much less to shift gear, close up skylight, ports, and scuttle. The waves lifted the vessel and threw it down again, driving it in nearer and nearer. Fortunately the bottom was soft sand and clay, but the strain on the timbers must have been great. We got what we could out of the launch, the boat's crew pulling themselves up to the vessel by the line we threw out to them, and working bravely under most unpleasant conditions. Some of the carriers were completely cowed; but others, and the two Christian launch boys in particular, were indomitable in their efforts.

"Having got what we could out of the vessel, we left it one by one, and struggled through the waves to the beach, where we dried our belongings and tried to be philosophical. It was heartrending to see the vessel that night. Like a human being in the coils of some resistless monster, it tossed and writhed in mute and helpless agony, and at daybreak next morning, when it was high tide, the two masts alone appeared above water.

"We did not forget to be thankful that night for mercies received. As in an historic shipwreck, we 'escaped all safe to land,' and 'the barbarous people showed us no little kindness' --a very different experience to that of 1901, for now they brought us large quantities of native food, and helped us next morning to save what

we could from the wreck."

Two Government officers came quickly from Buna, and with the help of some one hundred and fifty natives, the launch was lifted out of reach of the spring tides, and shored up high and dry on the beach.

The Bishop had to wait for a week before he could get away from the neighbourhood; but during that time he walked along the coast, and chose a site for a station at Ambasi, three miles nearer the Mamba, on a low hill which promised, and has proved, to be as healthy as it was beautiful, with a fairly sheltered anchorage and protected beach, where stores could be landed dry, and where there was a fair population who were eager for the missionaries to settle among them.

It was to S. Margaret's, Ambasi, that Mr. King returned, and though he still makes the long whale-boat trip periodically to S. Andrew's, to visit David Tadoo and superintend his work, Ambasi has been the chief station of the district ever since. There is a station, now, in charge of South Sea Islanders, near the Ope, and another in Gona Bay, not very far from Buna. The first Baptisms in the northern division have taken place quite recently, and among the first of the Binandere to become Christian was Goibo, the "Angry Rat," who once helped the Mission by "turning Catherine wheels to the glory of God."

Project Canterbury