

# John Williams



## **SOUTH SEA SACRIFICE**

The brief life of John Williams, whom God used as a missionary martyr to the South Sea Islands.

He was born in 1796 in what was then a quiet country village called Tottenham near London. His mother was a Christian, but his father wasn't and the boy followed the father. Aged 12, he was forced to leave school and start a seven-year apprenticeship as an ironmonger. During this period he mixed with a gang of rough characters who wasted their time hanging around the London streets drinking too much. Then on January 3rd 1814, when he was 18, he was doing the usual thing, hanging around City Road, London, with nothing to do and a lot of time to do it in, when the wife of his master passed by. His friends were late so she had the chance to talk to him. She was heading for Whitefield Tabernacle near City Road and invited him to come. He tried to wriggle out of it, and hoped his friends would show up and give him the excuse he wanted, but there was no sign of them. Finally, he said he would come just this once. By God's grace, his conversion was complete before he left the service. Before many months had passed, he had broken completely with the world and was known as an ardent Christian. He became a Sunday School teacher and a visitor of the sick.

## **News of Tahiti**

It was at Whitefield's Tabernacle that he first heard about the South Sea Islands. News was given that the King of Tahiti had become a Christian and there was a need for missionaries. When he was 20, a lot of things happened. He got married; he was ordained and he applied to the London Missionary Society. Late in 1816 he set sail for the South Seas. About 20,000 miles later, he arrived in Tahiti, one year to the day after he had sailed. This was not the world of modern communication and medicine. This is sacrifice with a big 'S'. Anyway, Williams learned the local language in ten months instead of the expected three years. Instead of using grammars and dictionaries, he evidently learned by a conversational method. He made his base in the Society Islands which had been discovered by Captain Cook. Here he showed that he was a real DIY missionary. He built his own house with seven rooms - and all the furniture in it too. Next, he built a simple 16' long boat so that he could reach a nearby island. After one year, he built a chapel for the converts. It opened in 1820 with 2,400 natives attending the service. Williams organised these people into local churches. Every congregation was linked to all the others with something a bit like a synod which met regularly. In one of these meetings in the chapel, he baptised 500 natives at one time. But as in all Christian work, success stirred up opposition. An elaborate plot to murder him was thwarted, and when his wife heard the details, she gave birth prematurely to their second child - who died within 24 hours.

## **In Samoa**

He was always keen to visit as many islands as possible. You can imagine the use he would have made of a helicopter! By 1830, when he was 34, he decided to go to the eight Samoan Islands, but there was no ship big enough to go the 1,800 miles. It took Williams three months to build a ship of 80 tons which he named The Messenger of Peace. This in itself was a major achievement, but it was nothing compared with his achievements in Samoa. Soon after dropping anchor, the local king was aboard the ship and, with curiosity, took down a brass blunderbuss which had been loaded with eight bullets. After examining it, the King pointed it at Williams and was about to pull the trigger when a friend realised what was happening and stopped what would have been an awful accident. As a biographer commented: 'We are all immortal until our work is fully done.' By 1832, we find 700 Samoans assembled for worship on the Lord's Day. A great deal of Williams's success was the result of using native evangelists and teachers. After being away 18 years, he now decided to visit Britain. He and his wife did much deputation work and he wrote a book called Missionary enterprises in the South Seas. As interesting as Robinson Crusoe, said someone who read it. After four years, he was determined to return. There was an emotional farewell in Whitefield's Tabernacle. In his message he spoke almost prophetically: 'The perils that await me are great. I may not come back again.' Back in the South Seas with new missionary recruits and printed Scriptures in the native language, he now wanted to go to the New Hebrides which were 600 miles away from his base in Samoa. In 1839, he set off for the New Hebrides. Traders had got to the island of Eromanga first. They were after sandalwood which brought great profit. To get it they had treated the natives wickedly, and when Williams and his friend, Harris, came ashore they were attacked with clubs and spears, killed, and later eaten. John Williams was 43 years old. News travelled so slowly that it was to be four months before Mary Williams knew she was a widow. Before that century was finished, Eromanga had so many converts that John Paton could call it 'the Christian island'. This sacrificial life leaves us with a challenge which doesn't need to be spelt out

**D.J. Stephens**