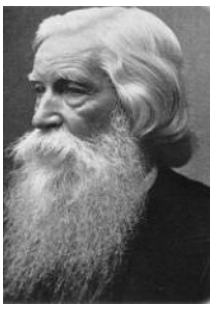
John Gibson Paton (1824-1907)



Pioneer to the South Sea Islands

"You will be eaten by cannibals" was the objection of many in Scotland when John Paton, aged thirty two, said he was going to preach the Gospel in the South Seas. John's reply was,

"Some of you are advanced in years and your own prospect is soon to be laid in a grave there to be eaten by worms. I confess that if I can but live and die serving and honouring the Lord Jesus it will make no difference to me whether cannibals or worms eat me. And in the Great Day my resurrection body will arise as fair as yours in the likeness of our risen Redeemer."

He had a passion to reach those who had never heard and this single-minded purpose endured for fifty years of service – mainly in the New Hebridian Islands (The Republic of Vanuatu today). I will try and trace the origins of this purpose and all that went into the making of this great pioneering missionary.

John Paton was born in May 1824 on a farm in southern Scotland. The influence of the Covenanters was very strong in the area. John grew up among memorials to those who had fought and suffered much for the sake of the Lord Jesus. John's parents were cast in the same mould as these Covenanters. His father was a stocking maker. His was a Godly home with family prayers and Bible reading at the beginning and end of every day. John said the memorisation and study of the Westminster Shorter Catechism **"laid the solid bedrock foundations"** of his Christian life.

He had a great desire to learn though he left school aged twelve. He spent all his free time studying Latin and Greek. Of his teenage years he said, **"I had given my soul to God and was resolved to aim at being a missionary of the Cross. How much my father's prayers impressed me I cannot explain. But on his knees – all of us kneeling in family worship – my father poured out his soul with tears for the conversion of those who didn't know the Lord Jesus throughout the whole world."**

Another occasion really impressed John. His father was away selling his work and the family ran out of food. His mother told the children that she had told God everything about their need and God would send them food in the morning. The next morning a present of food arrived from John's grandparents. They gave thanks! It was a lesson John never forgot.

John saved hard enough to go to Dumfries Academy for six weeks. Then he got a job distributing tracts for a church in Glasgow. This gave him a free year at the Free Church Seminary. Ill health cut short this year but later he returned to seminary only to run out of money and have to leave. At that point God provided him with a teaching post. He was very successful. The student role increased and a better-qualified teacher replaced him.

Again he couldn't pay his seminary fees. He was asked to join the Glasgow City Mission that paid a small salary. Assigned to a run-down area with no church, he began visiting and preaching. After a year he had six or seven believers meeting regularly in a hayloft for worship. The mission directors thought this area of Glasgow was impossible but John pleaded for another six months trial. This was granted. The breakthrough came and as the converts multiplied so did his meetings. After the six months five to six hundred were regularly attending the meetings. Sunday meetings began at 7.00 am. He also held Bible classes, prayer meetings and taught the Scriptures to these illiterate believers.

John was a vigorous advocate of total abstinence. He faced fierce opposition from publicans who saw their trade vanishing. Most in the area were Irish Catholic immigrants. When the

number of ex-Catholics grew, he was attacked in the press. He received anonymous letters threatening his life. Stones were thrown at him. Pails of boiling water were emptied over him. He refused to leave. Eventually the mission sent him away on 'holiday' to let things cool down.

Of this time in John's life one Glaswegian said, **"Paton realised – as no man I ever met did – the awful danger of the unsaved. He realised salvation was possible and that he might be the means of bringing the perishing to the Saviour and that he must live for that and that alone."**

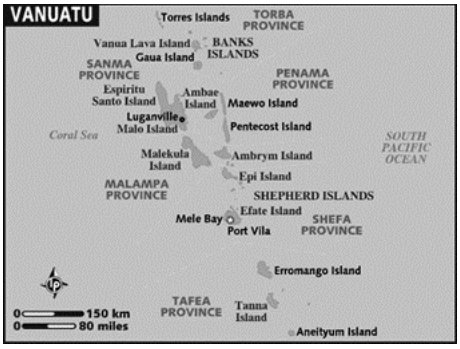
John said later that while working in this slum area **"I continually heard … the wailing of the perishing in the South Seas; I saw that few were caring for them while I knew well that many would be ready to take up my work in Glasgow… . Without revealing the state of my mind to any person this was the supreme subject of my daily meditation and prayer."**

John continued to struggle with his studies in theology at Glasgow University. He also studied medicine. Of this time he said, **"I was sustained by the lofty aim that burned … bright within my soul – namely to be owned and used by Him for the salvation of perishing men."**

The Reformed Presbyterian Mission was searching for someone to send to the South Seas. John was deeply grieved that no-one responded. He says, **"I sensed the Lord saying within me '***Since no-one more qualified can be found, rise and offer yourself***'. But I was dreadfully afraid of mistaking my mere human emotions for the will of God."** He decided to fast and pray for confirmation of God's call.

In the end he applied and was accepted for the New Hebrides Mission. When this was announced it met with opposition from almost everyone. **"Some retorted to me, '***There are heathen at home. Let us seek and save first of all the lost ones perishing at our doors.***' This I felt to be almost true, but I unfailingly observed that those who made this retort neglected those home heathen themselves …. They would ungrudgingly spend more on a fashionable party or concert or ball or theatre or worldly self-indulgence than their giving in a whole year for the conversion of the heathen at home."** But John's parents approved for they had long prayed that God would send him as "a servant of the Cross".

The New Hebrides consists of thirty or so islands spread over four hundred miles – about 1000 miles North West of New Zealand. John married Mary Ann Robson in Scotland and sailed with his wife and another missionary from Scotland in April 1858. Eventually the Patons arrived on an island in the New Hebrides called Tanna.



They bought land on the east coast and built a house in Resolution Bay surrounded by warring people with war paint and feathers in their hair fighting each other. One morning the cook told them that the slain in battle had been cooked and feasted on the night before. They had washed the bodies in the only spring and the blood had polluted the water. He hoped John and his wife wouldn't mind the strange tasting tea!

Cannibalism face to face is far different from reading about it. Widows, unwanted wives, aged parents and girls were all killed and eaten if convenient. The Patons' hearts were filled with horror and great pity. They began to work very hard to learn the language.

It was hard work. Several Samoan believers who had arrived before the Patons had been severely persecuted. One had been murdered and they had left. In February 1859 just three

months after their arrival, a son, Peter Robert, was born on 12 February 1859. But just 19 days later, Mary died from tropical fever soon to be followed to the grave by the newly born Peter at 36 days of age. John buried his wife and child together, close to their house in **Resolution Bay.** He built coral blocks around the grave. He spent nights sleeping on their grave to protect them from the local cannibals.



The grave of Mary Ann and baby Robert

John was now alone and was also suffering from fever. He said, **"With ceaseless prayers I claimed the island for God in which I had buried my dead with faith and hope."** The gravesite is still accessible to this day with a plaque marking the spot, erected in 1996.

The loss of his Godly young wife was perhaps the bitterest trial, but it was followed by many more. He kept a diary of his four years on Tanna. Every problem on the island was blamed on John – drought, disease, hurricanes, inter-tribal warfare and even the death of a chief. White traders encouraged the Tannese to fight among themselves so they could sell them weapons. All in all John had more trouble with those he called "white-skinned savages" than with the islanders.

The traders deliberately spread measles. About a third of the islanders died and the rage fell on John. He preached quietly and prayed never thinking of revenge. Several attempts were made on his life. He continued to pray **"Lord either protect me or take me home to Your glory."**

As his language improved John preached and some came to faith – four Tannese including a chief who had been a cannibal. But mostly John faced persecution and hatred. He often faced direct power encounters. Three sacred men declared their disbelief in God and said if they could obtain any scrap of food eaten by John they would have demonic power to kill him. In front of a huge crowd John deliberately bit into three pieces of fruit which he gave to each of the three men. He denied they had any power over him since he was a child of God. Many rites were performed and other sacred men called in. John remained perfectly healthy and preached to the crowd. Eventually the sacred men admitted their failure.

One Tanna war chief said to John, **"We hate the worship** (the small gathering of believers); **it causes all our diseases and deaths; it goes against our customs and condemns the things we delight in."** [How typical of all people everywhere!]

Eventually John was forced to flee. His home was destroyed and he fled to the believing chief for protection. The united enemy tribes approached and the chief's own tribe fled. The chief told John, **"I will watch. You pray."** John said later, **"We prayed as one can only pray when in the jaws of death and on the brink of eternity."**

But no spear was thrown nor arrow shot and suddenly the whole army turned and marched away in silence. John wrote, **"Without the abiding consciousness of the presence and power of my dear Lord and Saviour, nothing else in this world would have preserved me from losing my reason and perishing miserably. It is the sober truth that I had my nearest and dearest glimpses of the face and smile of my Blessed Lord in those dread moments when club and spear was being levelled at my life."**

John was 38 years old when he was driven off Tanna. He spent the next four years as a global mobiliser for the New Hebrides – raising up workers and finances. His main concern was to raise funds for a mission ship. His emphasised the overwhelming need of those without a knowledge of Jesus. He believed that when people appreciated the true situation, the call of God would follow resulting in prayer, money and new workers. His call was **"Come over and help us."** John was not only an advocate for missions. He always combined the challenge of missions with the challenge of committing one's life to the Lord and Saviour Jesus.



Margaret (Maggie) Paton
1841-1905

During this period he married Margaret Whitecross. She was a woman of great piety and strong character. She was a real ministry partner and help to her husband up to her death on May 16, 1905.

They had two daughters and eight sons. One daughter and two sons died in infancy; one son at died aged 2½. Two of their sons became missionaries in the New Hebrides and their daughter was married to a missionary there.

The first sailing ship – The Dayspring – arrived in Australia and went on to the New Hebrides. In 1866 John returned with Margaret to the New Hebrides settling on the island of Aniwa. They spent the next fifteen years on that island. Aniwa is about twenty miles North East of Tanna. They were assigned a piece of land full of old bones. Later the chief told them, **"We knew you had blankets, axes, knives, fish hooks and all such things. We said, 'Don't drive them off else we will lose all these things.' We let you have land but forced you to live in the Sacred Plot believing 'Our gods will kill them and we will divide all he has among the men of Aniwa.' "**

They watched John build but nothing happened. He planted banana plants and ate the bananas. Still no-one died. The chief concluded, **"John's God is stronger than the gods of Aniwa"**.

John and Margaret learned the language and started Bible translation. Few were friendly and all the dangers of Tanna were repeated on Aniwa. Many tried to club him or kill him in some way. He wrote, **"Nothing could be done but to stand in silent prayer asking God to protect us or prepare us for going home to His Glory"**.

The first to come to Christ was a chief whose brother had tried to kill John. This chief and his wife came to faith followed by a daughter and her cousin. John and Margaret were asked to look after orphans whose parents had been killed in fighting. It was often these children who warned and saved them. John kept preaching and eventually there was conviction of sin, repentance and a will to follow Jesus.

Murderers were highly honoured in this community. One young man who came to faith lamented that now he would never be famous. But he learned the way to true greatness becoming a teacher/evangelist not only to Aniwa but sent by the growing church to other islands.

There was only one small spring on the island controlled by two 'Sacred Men' who charged a lot for fresh water. John decided to dig a well. He prayed for wisdom as to where and then began to dig. The islanders thought him mad. Eventually he found fresh water. Later this saved the islanders from death during a drought. They called it 'Jehovah's Well'.

As a result of this miracle (in the eyes of the people) every inhabitant of Aniwa wanted to be baptised except two! Was this a mass conversion to nominal Christianity? Evidently not! United, the Aniwas resolved to ask God's blessing on every meal. They started Sunday worship. They constructed 'a church' with the central roof-tree of the chief's own house. These events occurred about three years after John and Margaret arrived on the island.

John was overwhelmed with joy at their first communion service. He wrote, **"At the moment when I put the bread and the wine into those dark hands once stained with the blood of cannibals but now stretched out to receive and partake of the emblems and seals of the Redeemer's love, I had a foretaste of the joy of glory that well nigh broke my heart to pieces. I shall never taste a deeper bliss till I gaze on the glorified face of Jesus Himself."**

Instruction went on throughout the island – by the path – under a tree – everywhere people would listen. Every village built its own school/church. Two orphanages were started and a girls' school where Margaret was the teacher. A new school was started to train island

evangelists who numbered more than 300 in John's lifetime. The Gospel rapidly produced a new society. The people rejoiced in the newly discovered love of God. Their lives shone in contrast to their former state. They showed an amazing zeal to spread the Gospel and so sent out teams to the neighbouring islands.

After 1881 John only rarely visited Aniwa since the Aniwan elders carried on the work so faithfully. John was struck by how close these islander believers were to what he thought the "ideal" – a church ruled by the Holy Spirit.

From 1881 until the end of his life in 1907 John and Margaret advocated for South Sea Island work – travelling to most English-speaking countries. They raised enough money to replace The **Dayspring** that has been wrecked on an uncharted reef. A third and a fourth ship followed The **Dayspring**. John ran a major political campaign in Australia to fight for the liberation of kanakas (young men from the islands who were kidnapped by traders and sold as slaves into the Queensland sugar plantations).

He also sought to prevent the sale of alcohol, opium and weapons by traders in the South Seas. Fights with these vested interests made him many enemies. But he lived to see the kanakas liberated and the whole process stamped out.

While John spoke and challenged he worked on perfecting the Aniwan New Testament. He finally finished and took the translation with him to the Island in 1878. In 1902 he made another visit and brought with him the first Aniwan hymnbook. He visited the island again in 1904 as an eighty year old. He had the joy of seeing Aniwan missionaries going to Tanna and winning many on that island to the Lord.

Such was the life of John Paton – an evangelist, discipler and church planter. He saw the churches he planted not only reproduce themselves many times over on one island, but also send out missionaries to many of the thirty islands in the New Hebrides group.

John's brother James brought out a biography of John and it had enormous sales and was translated into French, German, Italian and Japanese.

Near the end of his life, John wrote about the joy that carried him through his ministry and about his hope that his own children would undertake the same mission and find the same joy:

"Let me record my immovable conviction that this is the noblest service in which any human being, can spend or be spent; and that, if God gave me back my life to be lived over again, I would without one quiver of hesitation lay it on the altar to Christ, that He might use it as before in similar ministries of love, especially amongst those who have never yet heard the Name of Jesus."

John Paton lived to be eighty-three and the Lord's promise never failed him. His last years were mainly spent in Melbourne Australia. He died there on 28 January 1907 and was buried in Boroondara cemetery alongside his second wife Margaret who had died in 1905.


John and Margaret with their daughter and 5 sons.

The following quote shows clearly what sustained John as well as Mary and Margaret through the years:

"This is strength; this is peace; to feel, in entering on every day, that all its duties and trials have been committed to the Lord Jesus – that, come what may, He will use us for His own glory and our real good!"

John wrote his autobiography entitled:

John G. Paton – Missionary to the New Hebrides
An autobiography