

## William Threlfall (1799-1825) Wesleyan Methodist Missionary to Southern Africa

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*\* Note: It can be difficult teaching and researching about missions history in Africa for several reasons, one of which is the immense size of Africa and second the diversity of mission societies, churches, and organizations which have been involved in missions in Africa. Last year we included Todd Stat-ham's "Survey of Surveys" to help lecturers and students alike know about the chief survey books on African church and missions history. Another helpful resource is the online Dictionary of African Christian Biography. This resource can help one learn much about African church and mission history through biographical vignettes and stories. As able, I try to write entries which are missing for this online dictionary. Last year I contributed an article on Gutschke, a German Baptist missionary; this year one on William Threlfall. See, the Dictionary of African Christian Biography (DACB) at <http://www.dacb.org/index.html>.*

The development of early Wesleyan Methodism in a diversity of regions in southern Africa is associated with the missionary William Threlfall, despite the fact that he was only in southern Africa for the last four years of his short life. A review of his life reveals much about early 19<sup>th</sup>-century Methodism in England and its expansion in Africa.

### Threlfall in England

William Threlfall was born at Hollowforth, Lancashire, England near Woodplumpton, Preston on 6 June, 1799. His father, Richard, had left the Church of England and identified openly with Methodism thereby making the family home a centre for local Methodist activity. The family was one of stable financial resources. Consequently, William received a good early education and can be considered very much a gentleman even though he did not attend Oxford or Cambridge. William was converted when sixteen while hearing a local Methodist preacher speaking on the Parable of the Prodigal Son:



When the preacher came to speak of the compassion of his father, against whom he had sinned – seeing him a great way off, – I could hold no more from weeping; my hardness gave way, and my soul was dissolved in penitential tenderness. While he spoke of the love of God to poor sinners, and His willingness to save all them who come unto Him (may I never forget it!...), He set my soul at liberty... Now I could praise God from a conviction of His mercy, and knew He was my Friend....

This conversion testimony clearly is in line with the then contemporary Methodist theology of conversion. There is also a hint here of Threlfall's future heart that desired others to know this reality.

At age eighteen Threlfall became a local preacher for the Methodists in Lancashire and with noted blessings as people were converted under his preaching. By October, 1817 he felt called to become a missionary to Madagascar. It appears that Threlfall had been reading extensive accounts of the work of the London Missionary Society on the island of Madagascar, and it was through this reading that his call focused upon this African island. This desire to minister on Madagascar was to stay with him the remainder of his life.

Threlfall's call to missions was first confirmed in a private meeting with the noted Methodist missionary Joshua Marsden of the West Indies, who interrogated Threlfall about his call. Marsden confirmed him in the call and urged him to read the lives of David Brainerd, Francis Xavier, John Eliot, and Henry Martyn. Following this reading, Threlfall was proposed as a candidate for the ministry by the Quarterly Meeting of the Garstang Circuit, Lancashire in March, 1820. This was followed by him being accepted at the District Meeting in Liverpool in May, 1820 when Dr. Adam Clarke was present. At that District Meeting, Threlfall's name was recommended to the Missionary Committee which was to meet in September, 1820 in London. Threlfall was accepted at that Committee meeting, which convened under the chairmanship of Jabez Bunting. The decision of the Committee was to determine the fitness of the candidate for missions. They did not rule out Madagascar but that was not their central concern.

### **Channel Islands**

The Committee assigned Threlfall to proceed to labour in the Channel Islands before going to Africa. The purpose of this was to afford the young missionary candidate a month to assist and no doubt be mentored by John Brown (the former missionary to St. Domingo who was now on Jersey). Threlfall ended up serving almost one year in Jersey and Guernsey in the Channel Islands (October, 1820-September, 1821). It was a very full year of preaching, conducting class meetings and love feasts, visitation, and the study of French.

After leaving the Channel Islands, Threlfall returned to London, where he was ordained on 25 October, 1821 along with one other Methodist missionary – Threlfall for Africa and the other for the West Indies.

### **Cape Colony, Albany District (South Africa)**

The Methodist Missionary Committee decided to send Threlfall to South Africa to work amongst the Xhosa with William Shaw in the Albany District. He was not sent to Madagascar at this time because the Wesleyan Missionary Society lacked funds to commence work there. Threlfall accepted their decision and so sailed for the Cape Colony in early January, 1822. He arrived into Cape Town in April, 1822 and stayed there with Rev. Barnabas Shaw, the general secretary of the Methodist Mission in the Cape Colony. Barnabas Shaw was one of the two preeminent founders of Methodist missions in South Africa – west and east. Threlfall's life was to be intertwined with Barnabas Shaw in many ways. Threlfall was then sent on to work with William Shaw, who had come to the Albany District in 1820 to work with the newly arrived settlers and to also do missions work. Preaching began in Salem and from there Threlfall itinerated. His trips took him to Somerset East and his time in Albany District included his preaching at the dedication of the new Methodist chapel in Grahamstown (10 November, 1822) as well as at the opening also of the new chapel in Salem (31 December, 1822). While in the District he travelled as far north-west as Graaff-Reinet. He had gone to Graaff-Reinet to encourage Rev. William Broadbent who had to leave Griquatown for medical assistance. While there, Threlfall met Dominee A. Faure of the Dutch Reformed Church, who gladly welcomed the two Methodist missionaries. It was here that Threlfall had some tutelage in Dutch from Rev. Broadbent.

William's Shaw's strategy was the formation of a chain of Methodist mission stations from Port Natal to the west of Salem. He wanted to see the settlers ministered to but also the development of indigenous missions. While there Threlfall was mainly ministering to the settlers and not to the indigenous Xhosas further into "Kafferland". He wanted to do more pioneering missions and longed for work in Madagascar. Threlfall was sent back in May, 1823 to work under Barnabas Shaw's direction with the free Coloured community and slaves in Cape Town after about only nine months in the Albany District. Threlfall had hardly arrived back to Cape Town when he was offered free passage by the captain of the *Lieven* as a missionary to Delagoa Bay (southern Mozambique). Barnabas Shaw and others concurred that Threlfall was the one to go in order to undertake the start of a Methodist Mission Station at Delagoa Bay. On the 22<sup>nd</sup> of July, 1823 Threlfall arrived at Delagoa Bay – the first Methodist missionary to attempt a mission station there.

**Delagoa Bay (southern Mozambique)**

Threlfall was granted a hut to use in the village of Stengelly by Majetta the Chief of the Kingdom of Temby. Here he began to study the local language by learning vocabulary and constructing sentences through practicing with the villagers. He also travelled further inland to other villages. However, in less than ten weeks (30 September, 1823), the first signs of fever (malaria) began. He recovered and proceeded with more visits into the interior plus a fourteen-mile trip up the coast to meet the Governor at the Portuguese Fort. However, the fever returned. It appears when he inquired about returning to the Cape he was refused passage by English sea captains, so he remained at the fort on the Portuguese side of Delagoa Bay and lived with a native from Goa named Tiexero. His time amongst the Portuguese appears to have been well spent in peace making in particular. Full recovery did not come so he hired two native boys to help him board a whaling ship, the *Nereid*, which had stopped at Delagoa Bay for fresh water and vegetables. The captain agreed to put him ashore at an inhabited port which would have either been Port Natal or St. Augustine's Bay. However, this did not happen as a fever epidemic broke out on the ship and the captain changed course from Madagascar to Cape Town. The source of the fever was from the fresh water taken on at Delagoa Bay. Threlfall wrote to his parents later that he had read the funeral service for thirteen of the crew and that he also had to help to "manage the ship". When the ship reached Cape Town, it was quarantined in Table Bay. The Methodist missionary James Whitworth obtained permission to board the ship and cleanse it and care for the sick and dying with the aid of the two native boys from Delagoa Bay.

**Leliefontein, Little Namaqualand (South Africa)**

Threlfall's recovery in Cape Town was slow, so Barnabas Shaw who was stationed at Leliefontein (Lilyfountain) in Little Namaqualand proposed that Threlfall come there to recover and labour as able. Thus, Threlfall is found at the Leliefontein Mission Station in the Kamiesberg on 24 October, 1824. Here recovery did happen and Threlfall quickly became very involved with life and ministry on the station: gardening, teaching in the school, preaching, visiting, and assisting in building a new mission house for the Shaws. Threlfall wrote home with much adulation about his experience working with the Namaquas at the station:

Probably the Namaquas as a tribe have the finest voices and best ears in the world, especially the females. They know nothing of Music as a science, but after getting the air of a tune, they, as if by a sort of instinct, find various chords for every note and so modify their voices that a stranger who could not see them would take their full strains for a fine-tuned Organ under the hand of a skilful musician, but soft and pure, and smooth, and flowing and easy and sim-

ple that one hymn tune sung by them is more gratifying to my ear than all the oratorios I have ever heard.

(22 December, 1824)

In the letter he went on to tell how the hymn tune *Calcutta* was popular at the Station with the Namaquas, and he encouraged them to learn the tune at Hollowforth in Lancashire, even including the staff music to aid them.

The Shaws ended up going to Cape Town for several months and Threlfall was left in charge of the Station. Upon Barnabas Shaw's return, it was decided to recommence a Methodist mission in Great Namaqualand near Warmbad. An earlier attempt in 1817 met with little success due to unrest at the time.

### **Great Namaqualand (Namibia)**

The Namaqua peoples are a branch of the Khoikhoi and are distinct from the Bushmen in this region. The mission to Great Namaqualand that was resumed was by a party of three: William Threlfall and two Namaqua Christians, Johannes Jager and Jacob Links. Links was the first aboriginal from southern Africa to be accepted into the Methodist ministry in 1822.

These three men left Leliefontein in late June, 1825 and proceeded north with the hope of reaching the Fish River. They first crossed the Orange River and travelled northwest to Warmbad. Reaching Warmbad, they restocked and headed northward but had to return to Warmbad for unconfirmed reasons. Before setting out again, they obtained a guide for the northward journey: Naugauap, a Bushman. Evidently as they started north, two more Bushmen joined the party; these men were known to the guide. This development created some controversy as Threlfall opposed their joining them.

A few nights later the three missionaries were asleep when the two Namaqua Christians were murdered. Threlfall awoke and called out but he too was then struck and murdered. The guide and his assistants removed their clothing, took all articles from the men, left their bodies there and departed. There were weeks of speculation as to whether or not the three were alive or not.

It is likely that the murders of the three missionaries took place about the middle of August, 1825, perhaps August 11<sup>th</sup>. Details about their murders came out eventually in the trial which followed. The one accomplice was flogged and Naugauap was executed.

Tilman Dederling states that the murders occurred at what was latterly called Dakakabis. The remains of the three missionaries were buried in 1835 by the Wesleyan missionary, Edward Cook. Their remains were discovered again in 1986 and a memorial was erected on a farm, *Allgemeine Zeitung*, Windhoek, Namibia on 14 September, 1987.

It would appear that the attempt by the Wesleyan Methodists to resuscitate the mission into Great Namaqualand ended in failure. However, the

death of Threlfall particularly moved Josiah Nisbett to encourage the Methodists to enter Great Namaqualand once again and to assist with finances. In 1834 a Wesleyan missionary, Edward Cook, was sent and at Warmbad a mission station was established for the Methodists. The work slowly advanced in Great Namaqualand by the Methodists who, due to financial constraints, officially turned over their stations there to the Rhenish Missionary Society in 1867.

### **Summary Conclusion**

William Threlfall's life ended at age twenty-six. He did not leave any organized mission stations, churches, or educational centres which he could claim to have founded. Thus some may be inclined to see such a missionary as a failure. Not all missionaries leave a legacy of a string of new stations or churches. Rather Threlfall belongs to a long list of those who pioneered work for others to follow and establish.

In assessing Threlfall's life one must emphasise the evident impact of his preaching with effect in Lancashire; the way he was greatly beloved after one year in the Channel Islands such that those to whom he ministered had his portrait painted so that he could be remembered when he left for Africa, surely a sign of affection; the testimony of William Shaw about Threlfall's one year in the Albany District and his involvement particularly with the settler chapels at their beginning phase; the short term at Delagoa Bay that in due time led to the Wesleyan Methodists establishing their mission work there (interestingly enough Threlfall was not forgotten as the name of the mission was the Threlfall Mission); and the testimony of Barnabas Shaw concerning Threlfall which speaks of his spiritual worth:

To all that has been stated respecting him, – Mr. Threlfall—I can bear testimony; but yet the one-half has not been told. For spirituality of mind and earnestness in prayer, for affection to the natives, and a longing desire by all means to win them to Christ; for deadness to the world and zeal for the glory of the Redeemer in the extension of the gospel, I never saw his equal.

Dederling recently wrote about Threlfall as having “a religious zeal that borders on fanaticism”. This assessment runs contrary to Barnabas Shaw's assessment. It is further contrary to all of the evidence also from Threlfall's contemporaries in the Wesleyan Methodist Society: for all of them it was a matter of life and death to take the gospel to the world (the three stated, “they have faithfully warned us, but being disposed to proceed in what we all think to be our duty to God and fellow men...”). Two interpretations emerge, but this may be the case for many in Christian mission work. Threlfall and the other two missionaries who were murdered were going into a region, Great Namaqualand, which was highly unstable at the time, but they saw the gospel as a calling regardless of the cost.

Threlfall's murder certainly impacted Wesleyan Methodist work in the United Kingdom. His example and life and death – martyrdom – became an inspiration to many to take up the work of foreign missions. Some testified that his example inspired them into missionary service. James Montgomery, the noted hymnist, wrote a popular poem to Threlfall's memory.

Finally, Threlfall's involvement with the Wesleyan Methodist Society in southern Africa connects him to two of the founding Wesleyan missionaries, Barnabas Shaw and William Shaw, and the first indigenous Wesleyan minister. Threlfall's work in Africa also falls into the period of the next wave of new societies entering southern Africa to explore and to commence new stations across a vast region. Thus, Threlfall represents that new grouping of pioneering missionaries who were to enter southern Africa in the critical years of the 1820s as the new societies began to flourish.



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