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The Legacy of William Carey

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The author of this article is, in my opinion, the most careful and exact researcher on the Serampore Trio at work today. In this lead article he gives a realistic evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of Carey's thought and work and of his dependent relationship on the Marshmans and on Ward.

Editor

A scholarly quest for the 'history Carey' is long over-due. In spite of the fact that scores of biographies have been written about him, layers of popular mythology still remain to be cut through before the actual contours of his career as a pre-Victorian mission leader will be uncovered. His immediate brethren in the 1830s revered him as 'the father of the Serampore Mission', while evangelical posterity went much further and saluted him rather inaccurately as 'the father of modern missions'. Since then, many attempts have been made to coopt him as a heroic figurehead for the revitalization of missions in 'the modern era'.

One thing certain is that a wealth of primary missiological sources and of erudite, contextual studies still remains to be examined. This largely untapped deposit is enough to merit a new era in Carey scholarship. It has much to contribute to an analysis of the course of a very unassuming English Baptist, who was born on August 17, 1761, and dying on June 9, 1834, ended up as something of a missionary archetype.

HERMENEUTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

The enigma of William Carey's life, historical significance, and missiological legacy is not easily resolved. What are we to make of this 'consecrated cobbler' who invested so much of his life in a Calcutta college and then founded one of his own?

Let us begin by considering the epitaph he chose for his tombstone [p. 294](#) in Bengal. Far from being incongruous, it reflected the struggle that he and his close colleagues went through in life and the modesty with which they looked back on whatever they managed to achieve. The words were taken from the last verse of hymn 181 in John Rippon's *Arrangement of the Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs, of the Rev. Isaac Watts, D. D.* (1802, third edition). They were used by Joshua Marshman at William Ward's funeral, eleven years before our subject's demise. Carey felt they were particularly apt and chose the first couplet for himself:

A guilty weak and helpless worm,
On thy kind arms I fall.
Be thou my strength and righteousness
My Jesus—and my all

Of course, this reflected Calvinistic conviction of personal unworthiness to stand alone before the Almighty; but there was, arguably, more to the inscription than that. Carey and his close colleagues were quite sure that they did not merit being decked with garlands

or halos. Each was persuaded that it would be enough to be remembered simply as one who had sought to do his duty as a servant of Christ.

Ernest A. Payne was one of the few mission historians who realized that there was something profoundly enigmatic about Carey as a person. He asked in 1961: ‘How are we to reconcile his intense self-distrust with his great achievements, the range of his interests and his apparent [in]decision of character?’ Of all Carey’s biographers, only his nephew Eustace got close enough to him ‘on the mission field’ to realize that there was something odd about the way in which Carey functioned and contributed to the running of ‘the Serampore Mission’ (independently of the Baptist Missionary Society from the 1820s). His critique appeared in various publications and was given a more missiological turn by William Adam, a perceptive, young, Baptist missionary in Bengal of whom Carey once wrote very highly.

Just as relevant for our hermeneutical inquiry is evidence emerging from within the inner circle of the Serampore mission operation. Along with Carey, William Ward and Joshua Marshman rose to fame in some British circles and became known as ‘the Serampore Trio’. They were amazingly close-knit as a leadership team. For several decades they complemented one another in an intricate way. Indeed, very few people in Britain ever realized how dependent Carey was on his partners for insight and a wide range of initiatives. This in itself should alert us to the great need there is to refrain from assuming that Carey should be given the limelight, while his lesser-known colleagues fade p. 295 into the background. To the contrary, historical integrity requires us to recognize that too much has been attributed to him at others’ expense—as if he were a great, solitary figure who towered above his contemporaries. Carey would have been horrified to think, for example, that he was being credited with the wisdom of men such as Andrew Fuller, John Ryland, John Sutcliffe, or Charles Grant—not to mention his own partners and a host of other expatriates in Bengal. That is why a somewhat ‘trinitarian’ approach is called for, which sees Carey as one member of a triumvirate, and which recognizes that he was greatly indebted to three immediate groups of people: the Baptist Missionary Society’s home-base troika of Fuller, Ryland, and Sutcliffe; a sizable number of Orientalists and *pandits* (learned men) in Bengal; and his own close colleagues along with their dedicated wives. This does no despite to his person. Rather, it considers him *in situ*, recognizing what a huge difference others made to his life both before 1793 and after 1799. We therefore do well to distinguish carefully between his pre-1800 legacy and his post-1800 legacy.

Before 1800, Carey passed through three apprenticeships—as an artisan, a pastor, and a missionary. From then on, his career moved through several phases that mirrored the evolution of his metropolitan mission beside the Hoogli estuary of the Ganges delta. These phases also reflected developments in the fortunes of the East India Company and in the course of British rule in India. When such factors are taken into account, and special attention is given to the cultural dynamics of the Baptists’ Serampore enterprise, it becomes natural to reevaluate some of the popular ‘pleasing dreams’ that have accrued to his memory. These we will now outline, believing that ‘truthfulness will be more of a contribution’ than ‘heroic myths’ to the cause of mission.¹

INSPIRATION AND OBLIGATIONS

Carey’s much-narrated years in England before 1793 certainly make a good story. His father, Edmund Carey, was a weaver who became ‘master of the small free-school’ in

¹ Cf. Dorothy Friesen, *Critical Choices. A Journey with the Filipino People* (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988), p. 106.

Paulerspury, Northamptonshire, when William was about six years old. The boy's own grandfather, likewise, had once been the village's schoolmaster, so it comes as no great surprise that he himself turned to primary school teaching, in another of his county's villages, when he was in his mid-twenties. His [P. 296](#) uncle, Peter Carey, was a local gardener who had once served as a soldier against the French in Canada. He stimulated his nephew's imagination greatly. Thus, although William was a poor country boy, living in a landlocked province far from London and the sea, he *was* able to count his blessings. These he turned to good use by applying himself to acquiring knowledge during his spare time. He had two sisters and one brother who survived infancy. Brought up in an Anglican home, he married Dorothy Plackett, the daughter of a local Dissenter, in 1781, several years before he became a Baptist.

William Carey lived during a time of great change, when Europe's Enlightenment was beginning to make itself felt in English church and society. While a teenager, newspapers and mass-produced literature periodically came his way. As a young Midlands man, he became vividly aware of the outside world through reading about the American revolution and Captain Cook's voyages of discovery in the Pacific. He was most fortunate, during his shoemaking years, to live within reach of some noted Bible expositors. Anglican and Baptist pastors such as Thomas Scott, Andrew Fuller, Robert Hall, Sr., and John Sutcliff provided him with guidance and a sense of church history that helped him with guidance and a sense of church history that helped him break free from the straitjacket of hyper-Calvinism: viz., an exclusive type of Reformed theology that denied that sinners were duty-bound to exercise faith before they could be saved. A neo-Puritan theology much indebted to Jonathan Edwards was thus mediated to Carey without his having to pore over theological tomes. That freed him to focus on language-learning and to pursue his geographical interests during the little spare time he could find at day's end.

Six years (1787–1793) were spent pastoring Particular Baptist churches in Northamptonshire. That was when he became aware of early Protestant missionary work in North America during the previous 150 years. Given the evangelical-Calvinist convictions he had assimilated, he began to argue that *means* should be employed to propagate the gospel throughout the world. By 1792, he finally prevailed on his provincial brethren to consider seriously founding a society to 'preach the Gospel to every creature'. With their support, he wrote an unpretentious booklet that has been popularly called 'the charter of modern mission with its argument, review, survey and programme'.² Entitled *An Enquiry into the Obligations [sic] of* [p. 297](#) *Christians, to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens*, it provided missionary apologetic and made practical suggestions in a forthright manner. His indebtedness to other authors for information was undoubtedly great. Distribution of the eighty-seven page pamphlet was very limited in Carey's day; however, it did contribute significantly to the formation of 'the Particular Baptist Society for Propagating the Gospel amongst the Heathen' in October 1792. Humble and hesitant though that first step was, it surely represented a leap of faith on the part of the dozen or so Midland Baptists who first subscribed to the cause. This voluntary society was the prototype of what came to be known as the Baptist Missionary Society (BMS) by the end of the century.

UNUSUAL DEVELOPMENTS

² M. H. Khan, 'History of Printing in Bengali Characters up to 1966,' London: School of Oriental and African Studies (microfilm copy of a Ph.D. diss.), 1976, vol. 1, p. 218.

Because times were so hard in Britain during the years after the French Revolution, late 1792 was a rather inauspicious time for ‘launching out into the deep’. Many questions remained to be answered by the infant society, yet Carey forged ahead, declaring: ‘Expect great things. Attempt great things.’³ Little did they think how they would be overtaken by events. John Thomas, the eccentric, footloose, Baptist medic-cum-evangelist who had spent several years in Bengal, strangely appeared on the scene. After some rudimentary screening by the BMS’s first leaders, his offer of service was accepted, as was Carey’s. Thus by June 1793, after many embarrassing crises, Carey and his family, which included five young children, found themselves setting sail for India in a foreign ship that was engaged in clandestine trade for illegal English interests! ‘Providence’ of a very unusual—even ominous?—sort was at work. Five months later, the largely unprepared mission party managed to slip into Bengal. Then six years of high drama began, in which Carey’s wife was tragically driven insane. In order to survive, and to avoid deportation by the East India Company, Carey eventually accepted employment as superintendent of an ill-fated indigo works in the remote interior of Bengal. An ‘interloping’ Dissenter who had recently displayed republican sympathies in Britain was a *persona non grata*. Thus Carey was under enormous pressure to conform. As he did so, the BMS managed to establish itself and make an impact on history. **P. 298**

During the first decade in Bengal, Carey discovered a surprising range of private enterprise and intellectual activity at work within the expatriate community. Precedents were to be found for almost every activity that his Serampore-based mission would engage in. For the most part, the Serampore Trio harnessed and adapted others’ ideas, inventions, and procedures for use in an integrated missionary enterprise. Pragmatic, ‘Enlightenment’ values operated within the framework of evangelical Calvinism, in the era of Britain’s industrial and agricultural revolutions, to introduce something quite unusual into the stream of missionary history. Mission perspectives thus broadened; but the aim was unchanged: to convert India’s people and those who were part of the European occupation.

How different Carey’s missionary career would have been had Marshman and Ward not arrived in the tiny Danish ‘colony’ or entrepot of Serampore at the end of 1799! Their arrival upset all his mission plans, virtually forcing him to move to the coast, dangerously close to the British-controlled metropolis of Calcutta. However, he was soon to value his new colleagues highly. They rescued him from becoming a solitary missionary here contesting with heathen natives after the manner of David Brainerd. They provided the sort of skills needed for the creation of a team that could free him from most mission management and outreach responsibilities.

Here too we must add how much *shalom* was brought to his life by petite Charlotte Rumohr. Six months after his first wife died (1807) in a state of derangement in Serampore, he married this linguistically gifted, Danish lady-of-means whom he had baptized in the Danish enclave in 1802. With her, he enjoyed thirteen years of joy, until she passed away in 1821. Another gracious helpmeet came along two years later in the person of a British widow. Mrs. Grace Hughes had been part of colonial Bengal for many years; she was to survive him. With all their help over three decades, he was able to devote his energies to a sedentary, though extremely demanding, ministry of Bible translation and college tutoring in secluded surroundings. It was a very unusual arrangement for one who was apparently a ‘mission pioneer’, but it reflected the extraordinary and unique

³ A. Christopher Smith, ‘The Spirit and Letter of Carey’s Catalytic Watchword’, *Baptist Quarterly* 33, no. 5 (January 1990): 226–37.

situation that the Serampore Mission managed to take advantage of between 1800 and 1837.

This sheds light on an apparently innocuous comment that Carey made in 1810 in a letter he wrote to Andrew Fuller, the secretary of the BMS in Britain whom he trusted so highly. In it he confessed: 'In point of zeal he [Marshman] is Luther; I am Erasmus'. This pointed subtly to the *modus operandi* of the Serampore triumvirate. It corroborates other evidence picturing Carey as a pious, irenic, hard-working, low-key [p. 299](#) leader who maintained a rather retiring, literary lifestyle, thanks to the complementary labours of two stalwart co-directors, and a large team of pandits. Unlike Marshman, who was an aggressive evangelical, every ready to contend 'up front' for the mission, Carey was a more meditative person who preferred to 'sit on the fence' in times of strife. Perhaps that facilitated his surprising appointment by the British Governor-General in 1801 to the post of tutor in Bengali—and later to the professorship in Bengali, Sanskrit, and Marathi—in what would now be called the 'Civil Service' establishment of Calcutta's Fort William College. The *Enquiry* had never envisaged such a development. Such 'subimperial' employment made all the difference to his career as a linguist and translator and dramatically affected his mission's prioritizing.⁴ It meant that he functioned as a metropolitan official who never travelled beyond the twelve-mile stretch between Serampore and Calcutta after 1799. For more than thirty years, one of his major tasks was to earn huge amounts of money (many hundreds of thousands of pounds sterling, in today's values) and to secure printing contracts from the government for the Serampore Mission Press. By such means, the Trio sought to make themselves and the evangelization of northern India financially independent of the BMS. At the same time, they made themselves so useful to Bengal's British rulers that they secured a significant measure of immunity from official opposition.

A REALISTIC VIEW OF ACHIEVEMENTS

William Ward, Joshua Marshman, and Hannah Marshman each made a massive contribution to the Serampore Mission, severally running the large printing and publishing press, counselling Christian workers, managing the finances and public relations, developing mission strategy, running a boarding school and many day schools, as well as directing and caring for a large household including many orphans, missionary widows, and servants. Thanks to them, their wives and their protégés, Carey was able to concentrate on work in his study, being spared the rigours of furlough in Britain when serious disputes with the BMS had to be tackled. In fact, he never left Bengal. He went [P. 300](#) there 'for life', and it was from that distant position that he emerged in the public mind as a mission catalyst. He was much more a mission motivator and Bible translator than a pioneer in the heart of India—or a mission strategist. Thus it was the number of *languages* into which he carried out or superintended (rudimentary) translations of 'the Holy Scriptures', rather than the small number of Hindus that he led to Christ, that impressed pre-Victorian and Victorian minds and made him a household name in evangelical circles. Direct evangelistic outreach generally fell into the hands of junior missionaries and

⁴ On the creeping capitalist 'subimperialism' that occurred in Bengal from 1765, under the aegis of the British East India Company, see P. J. Marshall, *Bengal: The British Bridgehead, Eastern India 1740–1828*, vol. II.2 of *The New Cambridge History of India* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1987), pp. 70–136. Bengal became 'a largely autonomous British-Indian state that was rather loosely connected with imperial Britain and pursued its own purposes of "safety" and consolidation' until the early 1830s.

people who were rather inaccurately termed ‘native’ brethren by 1805. Much heart-searching was to follow.

In financial, literary, educational, and technological terms, there can be no doubt that Carey and his colleagues made their mark in Asia at the beginning of Protestantism’s ‘modern missionary movement’. Many in the Anglo-Saxon world sought to emulate them, and their accomplishments were chronicled religiously by scores of biographers. However, more than a century was to pass before perceptive scholars of Baptist history, such as Ernest A. Payne and Daniel E. Potts, stepped forward to further the task of accurate historical inquiry. Many secular historians did likewise. As a result, the field has been wide open since the 1960s for a new investigation into Carey and his partners’ lives, times, and work. Thus we turn now to identify some aspects of his missiological legacy, hoping that interest in the legacies of Marshman and Ward will be revived in the process.

Many questions need to be answered on theological, ideological, cross-cultural, strategic, literary, and leadership aspects of the Serampore Baptists’ grand enterprise. For example, one might ask whether it is valid to view Carey’s *Enquiry* as a paradigm for his and his colleagues’ missionary career. Here the evidence suggests in notable ways that it is very difficult to respond in the affirmative. So often, the triumvirate made decisions at variance with the tentative guidelines set forth in the pamphlet, which was written before Carey ever left the English Midlands. During his lifetime, much more was probably made of his original catalytic watchword—‘Expect great things. Attempt great things’—which was later embellished by British Baptists.

It can be argued that the six-word dictum provides criteria that are more appropriate for evaluating the course and outcome of his life and mission. This motto was coined in keeping with postmillennial expectations that God would do great things throughout the world during their lifetime, and in certain respects the BMS men were not disappointed. Carey and his colleagues certainly attempted great things in God’s name and were thrilled to see the formation of so many [p. 301](#) missionary societies around the turn of the century. But great accomplishments, in Western terms, depended on herculean efforts being made, most often at the expense of almost overwhelming personal cost. Carey’s plentiful correspondence bears ample testimony to that. Providence had a way of earthing inclinations to a ‘theology of grandeur’ in lifelong experience of a *theologia crucis*. As a result, Carey had no time for glib enthusiasm. He was too aware of personal and corporate failure—not to mention serious limitations—in many areas of his mission’s operation and witness to entertain eulogies or attempts to set him up on a pedestal. A call for biblical realism therefore needs to be taken very seriously by future researchers into the actual scope of his team’s achievements, particularly in the cross-cultural sphere.

A TALE OF TWO MODELS

There is no need to minimize what Carey and his cohorts achieved in the areas of philology, Bible translation, Orientalism, literacy, education, publishing, technology, relief work, social reform, botany, evangelization, and mission promotion. Our concern is simply to identify the actual parameters and essential achievements of their capital-intensive, pre-Victorian missionary enterprise. Thus we turn to consider the two models from which they may be said to have operated: the ‘primitive’ and the ‘professional’.

In the 1790s, Carey began as a lonely pioneer, with little of this world’s goods, living to some extent like a ‘faith missionary’ of late Victorian times. He related to the pastoral BMS leaders back in Britain in a cordial, informal, and fairly intimate manner. All that changed as the BMS slowly institutionalized, as his position improved in the Governor-General’s prestigious college, after he married for the second time, and particularly after

the death of Andrew Fuller in 1815. This ‘change’ was symbolized, first, by the creation of Serampore College on a grand scale emulating Brown College, Rhode Island, and Fort William College; and second, by the Trio’s subsequent dispute with the BMS leadership under John Dyer over property rights and control of the mission estate at Serampore. In the second instance, Carey’s team believed they could appeal to (what I have called) the ‘primitivist’ model of relations that they had enjoyed for twenty years while Fuller headed British support. Their fundamental operational, and supposedly financial, ‘independence’ of British direction had been taken for granted then. Such a model was an effective way of building up relationships in Britain and North America. For sincere theological p. 302 reasons, key supporters such as Christopher Anderson (of Edinburgh, Scotland) advocated the Serampore cause by promoting a heroic image of embattled veterans ‘at the cutting edge’ of mission.⁵ However, none of those supporters ever managed to visit Bengal; thus they do not appear to have fully realized that Carey’s enterprise had become more centralized than ever before. Was it becoming more of a burdensome ‘monument’ than a lively movement? Few, if any British Baptist leaders were clearly aware that Carey’s team operated according to one model at their colonial base and yet appealed by means of another for practical expressions of solidarity from their mother-country. It was as if they functioned in two different worlds. No doubt that helps to explain why Marshman had such a turbulent furlough in England between 1825 and the rupture with the BMS in 1827.

During Carey’s last twenty years, tensions increased rather than decreased in the Serampore Mission. Its identity as a Dissenting operation was rather ambiguous at times, and great problems were experienced in trying to accommodate a second generation of mission personnel. Institutionalization of the mission and maintenance of a large establishment resulted in the leaders increasingly losing touch with grassroots Indian life—notwithstanding their huge investment of time in linguistics and translation. Thus they became *sahibs* rather than *sadhus*. Even though they tried to put on a brave face in public, it caused them great sorrow that the real number of converts and homegrown churches resulting from decades of their (and their associates’) ministry was so low, by many standards. That is why they admitted in an important report in 1817: ‘relative to the work of conversion in India, perhaps all our expectations have been far wide of the mark’.⁶ Perhaps they would have had far more indigenous ‘disciples’, perhaps Baptist life in India would have been much more vibrant, perhaps the Serampore Mission would not have collapsed once the last of the veterans died (Marshman in 1837), if the resolute troika had focused on incarnating the gospel directly in the midst of India’s rural society rather than investing so heavily in professional, metropolitan means. p. 303

TRADITION IN THE BALANCE

It is a commonplace that Carey ‘did more than any other man to awaken the conscience of Protestant Christians to the spiritual need of millions worldwide who had never heard of

⁵ Cf. A. C. Smith, ‘The Edinburgh Connection: Between the Serampore Mission and Western Missiology’, *Missiology* 18, no. 2 (1990): 185–209. Also see the obituary on Carey by the BMS, in *Periodical Accounts* 9 (1835): 12.

⁶ On such confessions, see Smith, ‘The Spirit and Letter of Carey’s Catalytic Watchword’, pp. 233, 236f.

Jesus Christ'.⁷ But such a generalization may be far too sweeping. At least it needs to be examined carefully and restated with a sense of historical discrimination. To do this, we need to discover 'the historical Carey' beyond the periphery of the Victorian era.

We will consider him as a Victorian and post-Victorian rallying point for Protestant mission shortly. Here, we would return to basics, noting that heroic imagery could be applied to him properly between 1793 and 1799. That imagery remained in the popular mind during the next ten to fifteen years, especially during moments of high enthusiasm in Britain over the dramatic exploits of the Three. Certainly, he had enormous potential for endurance, and for submission to the inscrutable ways of Providence. He rose up the social scale in remarkable fashion in Bengal in harness with Marshman and Ward, and with the help of scores of employed assistants, he was able to perform wonders, until 1818. Then the building of Serampore College took over, and Ward tragically succumbed to cholera. After that, it was hard going to keep the mission afloat. Strife with the BMS on various fronts sapped away at precious energy and stymied or retarded missiological progress. Then the East India Company got into serious financial difficulties. Thus his old age was a time of tears and strenuous labour to protect his mission enterprise from collapsing.

Some commentators have declared that Carey was 'a forerunner whose missionary vision displayed a breadth and boldness which frequently embarrassed his contemporaries and immediate successors'.⁸ Perhaps that was so. Certainly, at times he appeared in the estimation of British evangelicals to be quite radical, holistic, and ingenious in his efforts to advance 'the Redeemer's cause' in southern Asia. To be sure, he played a major role in diffusing Christian principles throughout the subcontinent, and in encouraging Anglo-Saxon Christians of many denominations to co-operate voluntarily for the sake of propagating the gospel overseas. But let us not hastily dismiss all the penetrating observations made of the Serampore project by the young British Baptist missionaries who parted company from Carey and his [p. 304](#) colleagues. Of course, much can be said on both sides, but those observers did have a unique opportunity to grasp how the Serampore mission actually functioned. Their published critiques therefore must be considered as firsthand testimony that has important implications for study of the Trio's legacy.

To obtain the sort of light that will disperse some of the murky mist surrounding Serampore mission history, we would be well advised to tackle questions such as the following: How did India respond to the Western, Christian overtures made to it by Carey and his cohort? Could she distinguish them clearly from the framework and values of British rule? Were India's people pleased to accept 'benefits' from the occupiers' 'civilization' only so long as they could avoid making way for 'the Kingdom of God'? In Carey's day, did Protestant Christianity truly become accepted by true Indians, or was it mostly 'Asiatics' (the *mestizo* offspring of European men and Indian women) who heard the Baptists gladly and then formed churches? It is also worth asking whether the Serampore mission was subverted by the very forces of Western 'modernity' and subimperialism that did so much to change the face of India. Such inquiry, of course, must

⁷ Cf. Brian Stanley, 'Winning the World', in [anon.] *Heritage of Freedom*, Tring, England: Lion Publishing, 1984, pp. 78, 83. See Carey's letter 'to the Society' from the Bay of Bengal, dated October 17, 1793, in *Periodical Accounts*, 1 (1793): 63–64.

⁸ E.g., Stanley, 'Winning, the World', p. 81.

be carried out in further studies.⁹ Because of that, we will now draw to a close by focusing on Carey's missiological significance.

LEGACY AND LEGEND

From 1826 onwards, Carey and his Serampore colleagues receded into the background of British Baptist approval. For a decade or more, official mission promotion referred very little to the lead they had set after 1800, except when funds were needed to be raised for Bible translation and publishing. Publications and statements from the Trio's pens—from the 1792 *Enquiry* to the significant, 1827 Edinburgh edition of *Thoughts on Propagating Christianity More Effectually among the Heathen*—were allowed to fall by the wayside or were consigned to oblivion.¹⁰ By the 1830s, Serampore College, the crown of their mission, began to look as if it were 'a white elephant'. Thus we [P. 305](#) search in vain for evidence that Carey and his partners had much of an explicitly *missiological* impact on North Atlantic mission leaders—except perhaps among Baptists—during the last two or three quarters of the nineteenth century. Their legacy was of a different kind.

The Baptist Trio in Bengal, and Carey in particular, were transitional figures in 'modern missionary history'. They paved the way for conservative Dissenters to launch forth into an era of pragmatic, evangelical mission outreach. They represented the meeting of American and British Protestant concerns for evangelizing 'the heathen' at a time when missions were promoted only by a very small, zealous minority in the churches. Their cross-cultural evangelistic efforts probably had more in common with Puritan missions in North America than with mainstream Victorian evangelization in Asia. Their methods of Bible translation became a matter of considerable debate in their own day and needed to be overhauled. To be sure, they anticipated some Victorian and post-Victorian *missio*-theological reflection, but as evangelically reformed Baptists they were far more Calvinistic than were successive missionary generations. Their task was to make the most of the tense time during which Britain's role in the East Indies evolved from being purely commercial to being fully imperial.

Space does not allow us to reflect further on why Carey and his friends produced such a very small amount of missiological literature, by twentieth-century standards. Their hands were tied by so many other responsibilities. Their concern was simply to provide basic tools for communicating the gospel. They were filled with gratitude that the Lord spared their lives to do as much as they did for so long in Bengal, where the life expectancy of Europeans was extremely short. Carey, therefore, would not have stirred from his eternal rest if he had heard his dear friend Christopher Anderson declare in a special memorial sermon in Edinburgh in 1834 that his 'labours, however great', were 'chiefly preparatory or prospective'.¹¹

Surprisingly, extremely little has been done to investigate the extent [p. 306](#) (and nature) of whatever indigenous church growth did actually occur in Carey's mission

⁹ Such questions are explored in my forthcoming volume entitled *The Mission Enterprise of Carey and His Colleagues*, to be published by Mercer University Press, Macon, Ga.

¹⁰ Cf. Ernest A. Payne, 'Carey's "Enquiry"', *International Review of Mission* 31:122 (1942): 185–86; and Smith, 'Edinburgh Connection': 185, 190–93, 199–200. The 1827 work was written by Joshua Marshman, although Carey was privy to its contents before its first printing in 1825.

¹¹ Christopher Anderson, 'A Discourse Occasioned by the Death of the Rev. William Carey, D.D. of Serampore, Bengal', Edinburgh, 1834, p. 20 (delivered on November 30, 1834). Anderson called Carey 'the Father of the Mission' at Serampore. When Carey thought that he himself was dying in 1823, he asked that [Psalm 51:1–2](#) should be taken as the text for his funeral sermon.

domain throughout the nineteenth century. Yet there have been many during the last hundred years or more who have held him high as a universal figure or missionary archetype. Symbols abound for him, as patriarch, apostle, prophet, or pioneer of modern Protestant missions, although some judge it wisest to see him as a convenient figure head—who could not possibly have represented every aspect of the movement. All this calls for differentiation between ‘the Carey of tradition’ and ‘the historical Carey’. It leads us to identify some of the diverse streams that either converged in his life or came together in the pilgrimage of the Trio.

In Carey we have a person accessible both to the humble poor and the self-made middle-classes of the Anglo-Saxon world. He is a figure who embodied the ideals, values, and aspirations of British evangelicals during the pre-Victorian phase of their country’s imperial history; a nonconformist and a Dissenter who became a valued member of Britain’s political establishment in Bengal. He is a self-educated young tradesman who rose to become a linguist and Orientalist—even a professor in a prestigious college; a penniless cottager who founded a grand scholarly institution of his own. He is a shoemaker who married an aristocratic lady; a rustic worker who used bare hands and improvised tools in an English backwater, who became a works foreman in the wilds of Bengal, only to end up at the cutting edge of European technology. He is a passionate village evangelist who spent precious years translating Hinduism’s scriptures into English. Both a specialist and a generalist, he was an individualist and a trusty team-player, who operated in creative tension between the poles of what are now labelled pragmatism and dogmatism, liberalism and conservatism, ecumenism and evangelicalism, imperialism and independency. He is revered as a world-oriented ‘man of vision’, albeit from the European ‘Enlightenment’. He was a catalyst extraordinary who operated during an unrepeatable and critical *kairos* in world history.

This was the man who has featured in popular tradition as a marvellous, if not mythical, ideal, a supposedly familiar figure in mission history, about whom much has remained hidden for far too long. He has become legendary for arousing brave and purposeful notions of ‘good old days’ in the pre-Victorian era. Yet that has happened *in spite of* the certainty that he would deplore such usage of his name and memory. Thus he would be fully justified if he chose to address us by means of the words of counsel that he and his brethren gave to two young missionaries in 1807. Serampore sent them to Burma on a pioneer, reconnaissance mission, with this sound advice: [p. 307](#)

On every subject of research weigh well as you see, all you hear; take up nothing hastily. We are not so sanguine as to hope for satisfactory answers to all these questions ... [in] a month or two. Get whatever real information you can ... Satisfactory information on these points will much help ... the cause to be begun there.¹²

BIBLIOGRAPHY

An extensive collection of Carey’s letters writings, and publications is now housed in the consolidated Baptist Archives in the Angus Library, Regent’s Park College, Oxford. The

¹² These ‘Instructions to the Missionaries Going to Rangoon’ were presented to Mardon and Chater in the form of a letter, dated January 13, 1807, signed by the Trio and three new missionary recruits. The quotation is from the last of twenty points drawn up by William Ward. The MS is to be found in the BMS Archives, Oxford (box IN21), and in the BMS Archives microfilm reel no. 35. [The BMS is to be thanked for granting the present writer permission to quote from items in its archives.] For salutary hints on the dangers of myth-making (applicable to missionary biography), see Os Guinness, *The Gravedigger File* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1983), especially pp. 117–20.

Baptist Missionary Society Archives for 1792–1914 are otherwise available in microfilm form, published by the Historical Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention, Nashville, Tennessee 37234, USA.

Major Writings by Carey

(excluding small pamphlets, addresses, reports, and financial appeals)

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| 1792 | <i>An Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians, to Use Means for the Conversion of the Heathens, in which the religious state of the different nations of the world, the success of former undertakings, and the practicability of further undertakings, are considered.</i> Leicester, England. Further editions: 1818, 1892, 1934, 1961. |
| 1801 | <i>Dialogues Intended to Facilitate the Acquiring of the Bengalee Language.</i> Serampore (three editions in seventeen years; published in Bengali). Otherwise known as his <i>Colloquies</i> . |
| 1800s | <i>Itihasmala</i> (in Bengali), or <i>Garland of Stories</i> . Calcutta. A lively, earthy picture of the manners and notions of Bengali people. |
| 1824 | <i>Dictionary of the Bengali Language</i> [87,000 words]. Calcutta. |
| 1828 | <i>Letters from the Rev. Dr. Carey</i> (edited Joshua Marshman), London. Three editions. |

p. 308

For a listing of the Bible translations and Scripture portions (into many Indian languages) that he carried out or superintended, see Samuel Pearce Carey, *William Carey*, 8th ed., London, 1934, p. 426. For the three dictionaries and six grammars he wrote for various Indian languages: *ibid.*, p. 214.

Selected Works about William Carey

More than thirty biographies were written on Carey between 1836 and 1990, mostly in English, but also in Bengali, Danish, Dutch, German, Swedish—and perhaps other languages. An excellent essay was written on some of the better works in English by Ernest A. Payne some thirty years ago: ‘Carey and His Biographers’, *Baptist Quarterly* 19 (1961): 4–12; see also his ‘A Postscript’, *Baptist Quarterly* 21 (1966): 328–31; cf. 19 (1962): 156.

Only the most noteworthy accounts and interpretations of his life are mentioned below; penetrating studies that make mention of him in his immediate contexts will be identified elsewhere.

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| 1836 | Carey, Eustace. <i>Memoir of William Carey, D.D.</i> London (2d ed. in 1837). |
| 1852 | Carey, William Henry, <i>Oriental Christian Biography</i> , 3 vols. Calcutta. |
| 1859 | Marshman, John Clark. <i>The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman and Ward, Embracing the History of the Serampore Mission.</i> 2 vols. London. |
| 1885 | Smith, George. <i>The Life of William Carey—Shoemaker and Missionary.</i> London. |
| 1923 | Carey, Samuel Pearce, <i>William Carey, D.D., Fellow of Linnaean Society.</i> London: Hodder and Stoughton (8th ed. by the Carey Press in 1934). |
| 1967 | Potts, E. Daniel, <i>British Baptist Missionaries in India, 1793–1837: The History of Serampore and Its Missions.</i> Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press. |
| 1978 | Drewery, Mary, <i>William Carey: Shoemaker and Missionary.</i> London: Hodder and Stoughton. |

Dissertations dealing with Carey are not provided here because they are out-of-date and have been superseded by the works cited above.

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Carey's 'Enquiry'

Ernest A. Payne

Printed with permission from International Review of Missions (1942)

Carey published his booklet 'Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use means for the Conversion of the Heathens' one year before he left for India. The author of this article outlines its content and likely source material. He argues that the message of the Enquiry is valid for today's apologetic for missions

Editor

I

In the spring of 1792 there appeared an unpretentious booklet of eighty-seven small octavo pages. It was printed in Leicester, and was offered for sale there by various booksellers, and in three shops in London and one in Sheffield. There are reasons for thinking that it had no very large sale, and it rarely, if ever, finds notice in literary histories; yet it has been reprinted at least three times in the last century and a half, and there will be many references to it in the next few years. For Carey's *Enquiry into the Obligations of Christians to use means for the conversion of the Heathens* is a real landmark in Christian history. The modern era of the missionary expansion of the Church dates from 1792, and this pamphlet: sets out the plea of one of those chiefly responsible for the new movement.

Shortly after its publication, Carey preached his famous sermon with its two heads, 'Except great things.... Attempt great things', and less than five months later the Baptist Missionary Society was formed followed in quick succession by the London Missionary Society, the Church Missionary Society, the Religious Tract Society, the British and Foreign Bible Society—to name but a few of the organizations formed as channels for the rising spirit of evangelical enterprise. Those years were notable in general history for the French Revolutionary Terror and the emergence of Napoleon. The literary historian recalls the work of the Lake Poets and their circle, and that of Burns and Blake. Those interested in the emancipation of the human spirit think of the writings of Tom Paine, William Godwin and Mary Wollstonecraft. These were Carey's contemporaries, and he seems at first sight 'a poor journeyman shoemaker' in comparison. He had few literary graces. He shunned p. 310 the limelight. He belonged to one of the Dissenting bodies. Nor was his a picturesque personality in the sense in which such a description is usually applied. Yet when he died forty years later, a revolution in the position and outlook of the Christian Church had taken place, and he had himself taken an outstanding part in it. Recognition of Carey's greatness has grown with the years, and we stand now amazed not only at his unparalleled series of translations, but also at the farsightedness of his missionary planning. Not a little of the secret of what had been achieved may be found in the pages of the *Enquiry*.

II

The contemporary records and traditions give us few detailed hints of the circumstances in which it was written. It was begun while Carey was pastor of the little Baptist church in Moulton, a youthful pastor who supplemented his very slender stipend by keeping a school, and who surely needed so to do, for he had a wife and small family to support. He had set about his task reluctantly, conscious of his limitations; but concern for the cause of Christ in the far corners of the earth made him brave, particularly when he realized that even the more sympathetic of his ministerial neighbours would require a good deal of convincing that it was possible or right for them to do anything themselves about the condition of those overseas, save perhaps pray for them. It is thought that the final decision to write on this issue, which he had already raised—with no very encouraging

result—in the Ministers’ Fraternal of the Northampton Baptist Association as early as September 1785, came on a visit to Birmingham three years later. Carey was by then twenty-seven, and was trying to collect funds for the enlarging of the Moulton chapel. In Birmingham he met Thomas Potts, a business man only a few years his senior, who had been in the American colonies, and who had there had contact with both Red Indians and Negroes. Potts promised Carey ten pounds for the printing of a pamphlet setting out his concern.

In the early summer of 1789 Carey moved to the church at Harvey Lane, Leicester, and it was no doubt there, amid increasing calls and responsibilities, but also with access to more books, that he slowly shaped his material. It was ready, in part at least, by May 1791, for that month his formal induction services to the Leicester pastorate took place—services held, as was customary in those days, a year or so after a man’s first regular preaching to a people—and at the close of the day Carey read to a little group of friends what he had written. About twenty ministers had been present during the day, and we may assume [p. 311](#) that it was those who had had to ride a distance who remained for the night and who heard the first draft of the *Enquiry*. There can be little doubt that Carey’s closest friends were there—Ryland of Northampton, Fuller of Kettering, and Sutcliff of Olney—and that they gave him the benefit of their criticism. Pearce of Birmingham, had been preaching the evening sermon at Carey’s induction, and it was at his request that Carey’s manuscript was read; probably Thomas Potts had asked him to enquire as to its progress.

During the following months Carey revised and perhaps expanded what he had written. Some time during the winter of 1791–2 it was taken to a certain Ann Ireland, printer and bookseller in Leicester, and the next spring it made its modest appearance.

III

He who reads the *Enquiry* to-day is struck, first of all, by its sober matter-of-factness and its modernity. More than a fourth of the pages is taken up with schedules detailing the different countries of the world, their length and breadth, the number of their inhabitants and the religions there represented. Throughout there is the clearest division into sections, and the regular numbering of the points made. It is brief, logical, precise, more like a Blue Book or a committee’s report than a prophetic call to the Church of Christ. No appeal to eloquence or sentiment is here, no elaborate building up of proof-texts from Scripture, no involved theological argument, but a careful setting down of facts. The very title is significant of the man.

After a brief introduction urging that those who use the Lord’s Prayer ought to inform themselves as to the religious state of the world, the book is divided into five sections. The first is ‘an enquiry whether the commission given by our Lord to his disciples be not still binding on us’. Was the command to teach all nations intended only for the Apostles? If not, then only the impossibility of fulfilling it would exempt us from doing our part. But that it is not impossible is shown by what has been done by Jesuits and Moravians, and also by English traders. Nor does it exempt us that there are still many in this land ‘as ignorant as the Southsea savages’. Section II consists of ‘a short Review of former Undertakings for the Conversion of the Heathen’, beginning with Pentecost and giving in a dozen pages an outline of the progress recorded in *Acts*, then a few references to the expansion of the Church in the early centuries and in the Middle Ages, and on to the sporadic seventeenth and eighteenth century efforts among the Indians of America and those in India and the East Indies. The ‘survey of the [p. 312](#) present State of the World’, which forms Section III, has been referred to already. After the statistical tables, into

which long hours of work and much searching must have gone, there come a few candid general remarks. It would appear, says Carey, that of the 730,000,000 of the world's inhabitants, 420,000,000 are still 'in pagan darkness' and a further 130,000,000 are 'the followers of Mahomet'. In the enumeration of the Christians, 'Catholics' or 'Papists' are clearly distinguished from Protestants and from those of the Greek and Armenian Churches; they total in all but 174,000,000. The most barbarous of peoples 'appear to be as capable of knowledge as we are'. Where there is a higher civilization, there is often equal ignorance of the gospel, and 'it is a melancholy fact that the vices of Europeans have been communicated wherever they themselves have been'. Muslims clearly need special attention. Even among those who bear the Christian name, particularly those of the Eastern and Roman Churches, there is much ignorance and even vice. 'Nor do the bulk of the Church of England much exceed them, either in knowledge or holiness; and many errors and much looseness of conduct are to be found amongst dissenters of all denominations'. Section IV urges 'the practicability of something being done, more than what is done, for the Conversion of the Heathen', replying specifically to objections that these heathen peoples live too far away and are too uncivilized and barbarous in their ways of life; that missionaries could go only at the risk of their lives and might be unable to obtain the necessities of life (there is a fine passage here on the Christian minister as the servant of God); that language difficulties would be insuperable. These are all shown to be excuses, not valid objections. Finally, Section V indicates the immediate practical steps which might be taken: first, fervent and united prayer, then the energetic use of the new opportunities provided by the opening up of the world to trade and the organization of a society with a committee charged to make a beginning at the sending out of missionaries. Carey appeals to Christians of all denominations, but drives home his challenge pointedly to his own friends:

In the present divided state of christendom, it would be more likely for good to be done by each denomination engaging separately in the work, than if they were to embark on it conjointly.

The expenses would easily be met by the regular tithing of their incomes by Christian people, even though many of the subscriptions could be but a penny a week. Indeed, this would also provide much needed money for the evangelization of the villages of England. 'We have only to keep the end in view, and have our hearts thoroughly p. 313 engaged in the pursuit of it, and means will not be very difficult'. 'Surely', he concludes, 'it is worth while to lay ourselves out with all our might, in promoting the cause and kingdom of Christ.'

IV

Even a brief outline shows how the *Enquiry* deals with questions of missionary apologetic and strategy still surprisingly relevant. Dr George Smith, writing in 1885, called it 'the first and still the greatest missionary treatise in the English language'. It has not yet been surpassed.

Where did Carey get the materials for it? Primarily, of course, from his own thinking and praying about its central theme, and from a close study of the Bible. He was also helped by the reading of Captain Cook's *Voyages* and the latest geographical handbooks of which he could get a sight, and by a careful noting (as Mr Deaville Walker showed) of

the *Northampton Mercury*.¹ Jonathan Edwards' *Humble Attempt to Promote Explicit Agreement and Visible Union of God's People in Extraordinary Prayer* had had deep influence on the Northamptonshire Baptist churches from 1784 onwards, and Carey bears testimony to the quickened spiritual life which was showing itself as a result of the special monthly prayer meetings, but he expresses in parenthesis his doubt about Edwards' interpretation of prophecy. Some book on church history must have been to his hand, or else a general encyclopaedia. A few sentences from the earliest work of his friend Andrew Fuller may have started him on what became the heart of his pamphlet. 'Let the present religious state of the world be considered', wrote Fuller in his notes about prayer for revival at the end of *The Nature and Importance of Walking by Faith* (1784). But neither separately nor together do these suggested sources explain the simple strength, sincerity and cogency of the pamphlet, qualities which make it readable and effective after one hundred and fifty years, whereas the works of Jonathan Edwards and Andrew Fuller now require much effort, as do also those of the contemporary pamphleteers, Tom Paine and Mary Wollstonecraft. These all seem much more remote from us than does Carey.

One or two further points are worth noting. The argument in Section I is, according to an autobiographical letter sent by Carey twenty years p. 314 later to Fuller, a setting out of his considered reply to the ministers who snubbed him when he raised the issue at the Fraternal in 1785. There is a friendly allusion in Section II to the work for the Caribs and Negroes of 'the late Mr Wesley' (who passed away while the *Enquiry* was being completed)—a reference the more welcome because not all Dissenters regarded the great man with favour. Among the things for which Carey gives thanks as resulting from the special monthly prayer meetings it is somewhat surprising to find this: 'Some controversies which have long perplexed and divided the church are more clearly stated than ever.' This refers, no doubt, to the discussions among Baptists about Calvinism. Do we give thanks to-day as theological issues become plainer? A remark of Gustav Aulén, the Swedish thinker, would have met with Carey's approval:

Theological controversy is not always an unmixed evil. Time and again a pointed formula to which some controversy has given birth has served as a protective covering to save some positive insight into truth from being lost and forgotten.

V

What sort of circulation did the *Enquiry* secure? The cost of publication was covered, largely at any rate, by Thomas Potts' provision. It was offered for sale at one shilling and sixpence. At the meeting on October 2nd, 1792, at which the Baptist Missionary Society was formed, Carey promised all the profits to the new enterprise, but I have not been able so far to trace any record of sums received. Indeed, a resolution in the first B.M.S. Minute Book suggests that the business side of things did not go too well. At a Leicester committee on March 20th, 1793, just as Carey was setting out for India, it is recorded:

As Mr Carey printed his late publication with a view to subserve the Mission and publicly proposed that the profits should be appropriated to it, and as many of them are yet unsold, Resolved that the Society shall take that publication upon themselves, and that Mr Sutcliff, of Olney, be appointed to transact the business of it.

When John Thomas, the eccentric doctor who became Carey's companion in India, visited the churches on behalf of the new mission, he took copies with him, and so no

¹ Carey notes that many people had given up using West Indian sugar. Cowper's 'Pity for Poor Africans' was in the *Mercury* for August 9th, 1788.

doubt did Fuller, the first B.M.S. Secretary. But how many people read it? The striking sentences on the Christian minister, alluded to above, were quoted by the Anglican, Melville Horne, in the *Letters on Missions* which he issued in 1794, as p. 315 well as by Christopher Anderson in his fine memorial sermon for Carey in 1843. Otherwise, references to the *Enquiry*, save in biographies of Carey, are hard to find.

Perhaps the truth is that its prose style was not sufficiently polished or elaborate for those whose lives spanned the gulf between the English Augustans and the Victorians, nor had it sufficient of the conventional popular theology and piety about its phrases. Confirmation of this view is to be found in the fact that when Isaac Mann wrote to John Ryland in 1817 suggesting a new edition, the worthy doctor replied: 'I very much question whether it would be expedient to reprint Dr Carey's Pamphlet NOW, or whether it would add at all to his reputation to do so'. Ryland was overruled, it is true, but the 1818 edition of the *Enquiry* is a very diminutive paper-covered publication with the statistical information set in connected form in smaller type, and with three short appended notes, one on Carey's early days, one on the translations that were being made at Serampore and one on the number of adherents of the chief religions of mankind. Interest in the *Enquiry* was revived in 1892 at the time of the B.M.S. centenary; and in 1934, for the hundredth anniversary of Carey's death, a facsimile was produced by the Carey Press by the photographic process.

It is not, however, as a literary curiosity that it deserves attention, nor simply as a document underlying the modern missionary movement. It still has a message. Its arguments are needed for a twentieth-century apologetic. Its shrewd common sense still indicates the kind of recruits needed for work abroad. Its exhortation to missionaries 'to encourage any appearance of gifts amongst the people of their charge' is not yet universally heeded. Its very detachment, under-statement and absence of verbiage give it effectiveness to-day, even though its facts and figures need replacing by those in the *Interpretative Statistical Survey* and Latourette's *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, and it needs supplementing by certain other lines of approach, and most notably by an emphasis on the nature and function of the world-wide Church, such as is given by Wilson Cash in his recent James Long Lectures. But the ordinary Christian has no time or capacity for large-scale works. He wants the gist of the matter presented in terse and unadorned fashion, and here Carey remains supreme. It will indeed be a pity if many are not led by the hundred and fiftieth anniversary of its appearance to study the *Enquiry* and to face its challenge.

The late Dr. Payne was President of the Baptist Union of Great Britain and Ireland. p. 316

The Enquiry

William Carey 1792

(Excerpt)

SECTION 1