British Missionary Publishing, Missionary Celebrity, and Empire

Anna Johnston

By 1835, the Reverend John Blackburn could triumphantly announce to the multitudes gathered at the London Missionary Society meeting held at Moorfields that missionary writing had reformed the tastes and education of the British masses. Other ministers had previously warned that the “reading of bad books has a tendency to corrupt good manners” (Tyerman 18). But, Blackburn asserted, no longer were the public assailed by corrosive material, for the missionary press had provided them with alternative reading material that had re-educated their tastes, their hearts, and their minds. Moral tales, uplifting anecdotes, and images of missionary heroes now replaced dubious legends and fairytales. The conversion of British tastes was, as Blackburn’s sermon announces, only the preparation for world-wide salvation:

A century ago, the books which formed the intellectual food of the great bulk of Englishmen, betray, at once, the feebleness of their appetites, and the corruptness of their tastes. The reading of childhood was confined to legends, that did little for the imagination, less for the judgement, and nothing for the heart. The works of God were neglected, that the fabulous doings of giants and fairies might be remembered; and the daring exploits of pirates and freebooters were held up to the admiration of children, rather than the moral heroism of patriots and of martyrs. The volumes that enjoyed the general admiration of the mature, were, mainly witless or licentious novels, that would now scarcely command, by their talent, the notice of the simplest readers, and would receive for their immortality general reprobation. (15-16)

The London Missionary Society, the “largest evangelical institution peddling its spiritual wares in the arena of empire” (McCintosh 261), was a dominant figure in the religious press that flooded Britain with morally improving texts in the nineteenth century. Founded by godly businessmen, and staffed by working-class missionaries, the LMS used its publishing arm to proselytize, to advertise, and to amortize its vast expenses. The individualized reading of texts so crucial to Protestant ideology shored up both evangelical spiritualities and economies, and proved crucial to the success of the LMS in its home constituency and its foreign missions. The society’s texts connected the religious British public with the subjects of empire who, they believed, deserved British evangelization as a component of (and sometimes as a corrective to) British imperialism. The missionary publications that poured forth from the society’s presses were a key means by which Britons learned about empire, and learned their particular evangelical responsibility to those subjects of empire.

This paper interrogates the LMS missionary archive through theories of mass media, celebrity, and the democratization of reading. Susan Thorne has argued that the missionary movement’s “output of propaganda on its metropolitan home front exceeded that of any other lobby with colonial interests to promote” (6). The extraordinary promotion of missionary heroes such as David Livingstone and John Williams can be understood as the society’s willingness to exploit the aspirations of their potential recruits (mostly working-class men seeking a secure identity and position in a rapidly changing industrial society), but it can also be seen as an early example of the cult of celebrity in the mass media. As media theorists such as Graeme Turner have suggested, celebrity is tightly entangled with the discursive structures of the society that produces it, contributing extensively to the way that such a society engages in meaning making. Reflecting such critical questions back into nineteenth-century missionary archives provides us with a new way to understand the work of
evangelism in the period. It shows the pervasive links between mass culture and religion, and the intimate connections between evangelical Protestantism and the media in the nineteenth century.

The London Missionary Society Publicity Machine

The LMS generated an extraordinary amount of written and visual material to publicize their evangelical activities. Missionary periodicals, pamphlets, books, and visual material "sold" evangelism to the nineteenth-century public in order to foster support for missionary work, a support that needed to be simultaneously affective, political, and financial. The LMS publicity machine generated a vast array of material specifically designed to entice support from the general public, as well as from influential elites. In this way, the society embarked on what we would see today as an extensive mass marketing campaign.

The LMS carefully managed the information flow to its supporters. Joseph Altholz's impressive survey of the religious press in Britain notes that the archetypal religious magazine emerged in 1760 and "immediately established itself as the dominant type of publication for over a century" (5). Within this broad generic field, the missionary press dominated until the mid-nineteenth century when it was "swamped by the temperance press" (11). From its inception in 1795, the LMS published annual reports and an occasional publication called Missionary Transactions, but its official communication came through a section of the Evangelical Magazine. As their network of missionaries in foreign locations increased, and as the need for developing a broad-based network of British supporters became clear, the society recognized the benefit of strengthening the connection between these two networks by providing detailed information about evangelical work out in the field to those at home whose donations made that work possible.

The LMS disseminated highlights from the everyday work of its missionaries through periodicals and reports. Missionaries were required to provide at least an annual account of their work. Mostly these annual reports were written up from their own journals, sometimes as a direct transcription but more frequently as "edited highlights." Society officials back in Britain even thought that journals should be sent back home for inspection. Matthew Wilks, responding to the Society's lack of confidence in its early missionaries in Polynesia, suggested that both men and women should keep a diary, a small monthly book [in which] they may enter every Day how they have employed their time and these all be sent over up to the last month, before any vessel leaves - this would be a spur to them and guide to us. This ought not to be dispensed with anywhere. (Wilks) Fortunately for the missionaries, the society rarely insisted on this level of surveillance, though their reports were keenly scrutinized for details about the progress of evangelical work and for good publicity stories.

In the case of the LMS, these reports were recycled in the Society's quarterly Missionary Sketches, the quarterly Chronicle, and later in the annual Reports to the Directors. Each of these periodicals had a different intended audience and use, even though material was frequently recycled between publications. Missionary Sketches, designed "for the Use of the Weekly and Monthly Contributors to the London Missionary Society," were slim four-page leaflets with a detailed engraving on the front cover, mostly of "heathen" gods, artifacts, or mission buildings. An extremely low subscription rate entitled individuals to receive the basic LMS publication, and a kind of pyramid selling approach encouraged individuals to convince others to contribute to the society's finances:

Each person who subscribes to the Missionary Society One Penny per week, or more, is entitled to one of the Quarterly Sketches, and each person who collects from his friends or neighbours the amount of One Shilling per week, or upwards, for the Society, is entitled to receive the Quarterly Chronicle of the Society's Transactions. (LMS, "Missionary Sketches")

This sliding scale was indicative of the LMS' conflation of financial and spiritual value; it insisted that readers earn their access to knowledge and strongly encouraged them to spread the "good word" of missionary evangelism. Ethnographic in tone, Missionary Sketches described in detail
certain Hindu gods, specific native practices, or particular missionary successes in conversion, for example. They informed Britons about the specific instances of heathen otherness that evangelical interventions sought to eradicate and replace with British Christian ideals.

The *Missionary Sketches* may have been the bottom of the LMS' publishing stable, but they were carefully and strategically designed. Their short length aligned them with the religious tracts common in the nineteenth century. As Richard Altick notes, such tracts littered England:

> Tracts were flung from carriage windows; they were passed out at railway stations; they turned up in army camps and in naval vessels anchored in the roads, and in jails and lodging-houses and hospitals and workhouses; they were distributed in huge quantities at Sunday and day schools, as rewards for punctuality, diligence, decorum, and deloused heads. They were a ubiquitous part of the social landscape. (103)

*Missionary Sketches* were printed on cheap paper, and were clearly positioned at the disposable end of the LMS distribution chain. Yet they always had a striking cover design, emblazoned with lurid images of heathen gods or heroic missionary figures gesturing authoritatively to assembled natives, or, in an unconsciously self-referential mode, featuring missionaries distributing religious tracts and books to colonial Christian converts.

But if the ideological content of these illustrations was crude, the technology behind them was not. Many LMS illustrations were produced by George Baxter (1804-1867), a lithographer and engraver who invented a process to produce color prints from blocks and plates using oil-based inks. The "Baxter process" made good, cheap prints available for mass sale for the first time. Baxter produced an entire range of missionary images, from the black and white engravings that front the *Sketches* and the *Missionary Magazine and Chronicle* to a series of color prints of heroes of the LMS, including Revs. William Knibb, John Moffat, George Pritchard, and John Williams. Baxter's prints came to represent the "face" of the LMS: his portraits of missionary martyrs such as John Williams, who was slain by the natives at Eromanga in 1839, were a ubiquitous part of the LMS publishing lexicon. His images provide a fascinating example of the ways in which missionary endeavours entered nineteenth-century public culture, and circulated as mass market products.

During the nineteenth century, the LMS refined and diversified its periodical publications, producing a plethora of magazines specifically targeted to sectional interest groups or missionary groups. Some of these endured, while others represented only a transient moment in missionary publishing. Each title, however, was strategically promoted to its intended audience. In 1895, *News From Ajar*, a sixteen-page quarto magazine, featured a "coloured wrapper, freely illustrated with bright engravings" and was specifically intended "for Young People of both sexes – that is, for Senior Classes, Societies of Christian Endeavour, and Guild." This magazine, edited by George Cousins, included an editorial, "chats with missionaries," full-page illustrations, poetry, and puzzles: other features included art and craft projects and a coloring-in section called "The World's Babies." Children's magazines were keenly supported by middle-class parents who sought pious and appropriate material for their offspring. Indeed, all the successful children's magazines "of the first three decades of the century were issued either by evangelical organizations or by prominent evangelical clergy" (Topham 60). Throughout its history, as periodical archivists note, the LMS' juvenile magazine maintained "a constant stress on fundraising" (Barringer). 2 *The Chronicle*, which by the latter part of the century included the Quarterly News of Woman's Work, provided adults with a "coloured wrapper, got up in good style, and illustrated with original blocks." It had a circulation of 20,000 (Altholz 64). The Quarterly News of Woman's Work had circulated in its own right from January 1887 to October 1895, and it sought to provide "an individual link" between female missionaries abroad and their home supporters (Barringer). In 1893, it had a circulation of 10,000 copies. Despite this impressive circulation, the magazine lost money, and its move into the *Chronicle* mirrored the engulfment of the separate "Ladies' Committee" into the LMS Board of Directors.
These official periodicals and reports represent only the tip of the LMS publishing leviathan. These publications went directly to subscribers: they were, in effect, preaching to the converted. They did penetrate through British society, though. Susan Thorne describes how “the arrival of a travelling missionary caravan, filled with material artifacts from the colonies and free missionary pamphlets and magazines, was a signal event in isolated rural communities,” even until the turn of the twentieth century (7). The LMS produced a wide range of pamphlets and leaflets, and promoted these relentlessly in its book and periodical publications. Cheaper and more ephemeral than even the bottom-rung missionary magazine, these pamphlets were designed to motivate local communities and stimulate interest in missionary affairs. Sarah Geraldina Stock’s *Missionary Heroes of Africa* lists the latest LMS pamphlets and leaflets in 1898. These include: *All for Love: How Young People May Help the L.M.S.*  *How to Promote the Missionary Interest among our Sunday Scholars*  *How the World Could be Evangelised in this Generation*  *What Young Men can do for Foreign Missions*  *Woman’s Work in India: A Missionary Dialogue in Three Parts. For ten persons. For All His Benefits: A Plea for Thanksgiving Boxes*  

As Topham notes, this kind of cross-promotion of other evangelical texts was typical of religious periodicals: in many ways, this technique was key to the market penetration of religious media, for guidance about related reading matter aimed to “consolidate a community of purchasers for specific (in this case, pious) commodities” (61). These extremely cheap or free pamphlets — representing crude attempts to encourage Sunday school or general community groups to volunteer either their wages or their labor to the missionary cause — were written by retired missionaries, their wives, and other mission supporters. They operated as propaganda, reinforcing the importance of missionary work to religious Britons. But the LMS encouraged further publications that circulated in the wider public sphere.

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Early in its history, the LMS had strictly controlled the publications written by its representatives, but soon it realized the advantages accrued by a diverse range of missionary publications. When in 1814 Rev. John Campbell returned from a journey to South Africa, the Society insisted that “Mr Campbell be requested to prepare at as early a period as possible the Journal of his Mission to South Africa on account of the Society for immediate Publication.” Concerned that “Mr Campbell may receive as he has already various applications for the exercise of his occasional ministry,” the Examination Committee begged him to decline such invitations until the completion of his manuscript, and provided him with “a copy of this Minute … to enable him to refuse such Invitations” (LMS, Minutes). Campbell obeyed: his *Travels in South Africa* was published in London in 1815 and, like other missionary travel writings, it proved highly influential. As Stuart Piggot argues, both famous travel accounts such as those of Captain Cook and the numerous accounts of missionary travels and adventures published during the nineteenth century “were widely read and entered into the calculations of at least some missionaries” (132). Edmund Crisp, an aspiring missionary applying to the LMS in October 1816, explained that his desire to contribute to missionary service began “about fifteen months ago, in reading Mr Campbell’s *Travels in Africa*… The deplorable state of the heathen excited in my heart a holy compassion for their souls, and an ardent desire to make known among them the glad tidings of salvation” (Crisp). Crisp represents the ideal LMS audience: a pious young man whose reading of society publications inspired him to volunteer to serve as a missionary.

Missionaries such as Campbell spread out across the British colonies from the late eighteenth century, and their prolific writings were widely read by the religious public. Their detailed focus on cultures and peoples, although highly flavored by intense evangelical desire for conversion, meant that missionary texts had influence more broadly, too. LMS missionary John Williams’ *A Narrative of Missionary Enterprises in the South Sea Islands* was published in 1837, and proved to be an extremely popular best-seller. By 1840, one reviewer reported that
Missionary Enterprises had sold 40,000 copies (J.M. 129). Rod Edmond argues convincingly that this text “aimed to sell the South Seas mission at home” in a busy, campaigning narrative that he distinguishes from the missionary William Ellis’ Polynesian Researches (113). The latter, Edmond suggests, was “distinctively ethnographic and not conspicuously aimed at a missionary-supporting readership” (105). Edmond’s argument is persuasive, but the ethnographic focus certainly did not prevent many British evangelicals from reading Ellis’ book. However, the meticulous scholarship of Polynesian Researches ensured that readers outside of the evangelical community keenly read and purchased his book. While some commentators criticized missionary intervention in imperial and colonial affairs, and were sceptical about the reliability of missionary testimony given its religious bias, the influence of religious institutions and individuals was significant. Missionary travellers cultivated an intense demand for their narratives of voyages and adventures, from a growing evangelical public keen to follow the exploits of the religious adventurers that their congregations financially supported, as well as from the reading public interested in learning about colonial locations.

Missionary texts circulated widely and were reviewed in popular periodicals, particularly in the broad range of Christian media that catered to the voracious religious readership. Their contribution to the world of letters and scholarship was variable: some evangelical authors such as Ellis were genuinely gifted observers and also writers, and their descriptions of colonial cultures were well regarded by an educated readership. The talent of others lay in evangelical persuasion rather than disinterested scholarship, and their misunderstandings or misrepresentations of other cultures were lampooned by reviewers. The Journal of Voyages and Travels by the Rev. Daniel Tyerman and George Bennet was published by Frederick Westley and A.H. Davis in 1831: based on the journals of two evangelical men who travelled to the LMS mission stations around the world between 1821 and 1829, this volume of missionary travel writing was edited and transcribed for publication by James Montgomery, a minor British poet with evangelical sympathies. It was reviewed by the Eclectic Review, the Athenaeum (in four separate issues), the American Quarterly Review, and the Edinburgh Review. Most of these periodicals reprinted long sections from the text without commentary. The Edinburgh Review recommended the book’s two volumes highly: “they are well worthy the attention of those whose imaginations are delighted with pictures of other lands; but they may fairly lay claim to a higher character.” The American Quarterly Review, however, suggested that, “[c]onsidered as a connected narrative, they are ... rather tedious, owing to the prolixity with which the missionary operations are detailed.” The Athenaeum’s reviewer concluded that “[i]t is, indeed, to be wished that our travellers had brought more general knowledge to their task, to qualify and back their observations as a Christian depiction.” The reviews of the Journal of Voyages and Travels are fairly typical of the mixed reception that missionary travel texts received. What is significant, though, is that these reviews in the broader periodical press circulated missionary texts and knowledge to an educated reading public beyond evangelical circles.

This detailed mapping of the LMS publishing sphere demonstrates the ways in which this particular evangelical organization created and maintained a reading audience through a carefully targeted and widely disseminated textual campaign. As scholars of the nineteenth-century periodical press have suggested, the breadth and influence of periodicals in this period is hard to overestimate. Not only did “readers outside the relatively small and elite intellectual community [depend] largely on magazines, periodicals, and newspapers for their understanding of contemporary cultural issues” (Cantor xvii), but periodicals enabled the construction of particular reading audiences and identified a demographic readership that could be encouraged to identify themselves in relationship to a broader “imagined community” of fellow readers (see Anderson). As Topham argues, the attempt to create reading audiences “was linked to the creation and maintenance of particular social groups and cultural practices ... often associated with particular forms of sociability prevalent in Sunday schools, boarding schools, and middle-class evangelical families” (67).
The Christian Reader

The LMS sought to construct a reading audience through its canny manipulation of textual and media technologies, a readership that would unite religious Britons in a common cause despite differences of class, region, gender, and age. The LMS’ denominational status—predominantly Congregational, despite its initial aims for a non-denominational membership—ensured that its constituency encompassed the middle-class Britons whose religiosity was empowered by the evangelical revivals of the late eighteenth century. Its social influence was embedded both in the aspiring working classes and their culture of self-improvement and in its connection to a managerial class whose investment in morality and good works was key to their identity. The strategic diversification of the LMS’ textual market sought to bring together these ends of the middle-class spectrum. Practically, one could buy either the cheap edition of C. Silvester Horne’s The Story of the L.M.S.—bound in stiffened paper covers, this was specially offered to Sunday School teachers and Christian youth group leaders at the price of twenty-four copies for 20s. or the octavo edition with an ornamental cloth cover, complete set of maps, and many engravings for 2s. 6d. In fact, for 3s. 6d. one could purchase the latter with additional gilt edges and superior binding, or a foolscap quarto bound in cloth with bevelled boards for 6s. or, at the top of the scale, a foolscap quarto bound in morocco for 10s. Clearly, as LMS publicity claimed, this was “a book for every home and for every friend of the society,” regardless of class or the availability of disposable income. Publications such as this—which in concise but stirring narrative, recounts the thrilling events of the past hundred years, and brings before its readers the condition, circumstances, and need of the world when the Missionary enterprise was first entered upon ... and brings the story down to the present day”—united a readership connected by dissenting religion. Its sliding economic value—like that of the LMS’ differential subscription rates—neutered economic difference between evangelical readers. Indeed, arguably it naturalized that difference.

Thorne highlights the way in which evangelical institutions “played a critical role in providing the institutional structure on which middle-class formation depended” (55). Religious dissent provided “a politically oppositional model of middle-classness” (40), but it also insisted that social status could be improved by individuals who worked sufficiently hard on self-improvement. Aristocratic elites were condemned by evangelical Protestants for their “decadence” and “elitism,” but the fundamental class structure of nineteenth-century Britain was tacitly endorsed by the evangelical belief in individualism and the power of aspiration. Home’s The Story of the L.M.S., like other LMS texts, circulated through a diverse range of social realms, but in doing so it united evangelicals in a deep, horizontal comradeship (Anderson) that maintained class distinctions even as it sought to paper over them by focusing on piety and philanthropy. The subject of their shared Christian concern, importantly, extended beyond the nation into the Empire. Thorne suggests that by “uniting in missionary outreach to the colonised,” working-class, middle-class, and wealthy evangelicals “combined to form a national community on the basis of a shared capacity to bestow the gift of foreign missions” (169). Missionary publishing was a key means by which this shared imperial responsibility was generated and sustained.

While different classes of subscribers may have read different LMS publications, depending on their access to disposable funds and a culture of literacy, the fundamental content they were exposed to was very similar. This was not only because, as I have argued elsewhere, missionary texts are characterized by trite, recycled (if not plagiarized) narratives of colonial evangelization (Johnston, Missionary). Certainly, tropes of heathen depravity and Christian virtue cohered the missionary opus across genre and medium. But if we understand the nineteenth-century LMS archive as a site of a mass media campaign designed to promote both the institution and the work of its missionary representatives, we see that these texts mobilized particular strategies to achieve their aims. The promotion of missionary celebrity is the strategy that I want to examine here, for in uniting a diverse readership and cohering a miscellaneous body of
publications it provides the paradigmatic case through which to understand the effectiveness of missionary propaganda.

“The mighty men of Mission renown”

The widespread appeal of missionary celebrities such as John Williams, David Livingstone, and George Augustus Selwyn provided British evangelicals with heroes of religious and national stature. Candidates’ applications attest to the influence of earlier missionary celebrities on their desire to join the colonial evangelical ranks. The veneration felt for “the mighty men of Mission renown” (Ellis ix) was deeply influential in ensuring the willingness of future missionaries to offer their lives to God, the society, and the colonial heathen. The LMS provided many forums to ensure the ongoing supply of evangelical recruits for missions around the world. Sermons and public addresses celebrated missionary heroes. Preaching tours by acclaimed missionaries were crucial to the construction of a recognizable public identity. As Thorne demonstrates, “Missionaries returned to England from their sojourns abroad as conquering heroes of an uncharted heathen wilderness and were greeted by receptions not unlike those that would be accorded to military heroes and monarchs later in the century” (64). However, the numerous texts produced by the LMS were the means by which these public figures were retained in the public imagination. Hagiographic narratives, such as Rev. James Ellis’ biography of John Williams, constructed ideal masculine archetypes:

John Williams must ever occupy a prominent and unique position among missionary heroes. His remarkable mechanical genius, his romantic adventures, and, above all, his tragical death, continue to invest his name with a peculiar charm.... The chastened sweetness of his disposition..., his ingenuity in devising expediants, and his resolute persistence in what often appeared to be labour in vain, together with [his] large heartedness ... constitute him, in the writer’s judgement, the very Prince of Missionaries. (ix)

Crucially, narratives about men like Williams crossed class boundaries. While muscular Christianity tended to be associated with high Church, and thus higher-class, religious identities in the late nineteenth century, early exemplars such as Williams were, as Graeme Kent notes, “fairly typical of the lower middle class craftsman who made up the field-worker strength of the London Missionary Society” (47). The capacity of figures such as Williams and Livingstone to transcend the British class system and emerge as celebrities with common appeal and social agency was crucial to the LMS domination of the missionary press throughout the century.

David Livingstone is probably still the best-known British missionary, yet John Williams occupied a similarly high profile position in the public imagination in the first half of the nineteenth century. In important ways, Williams prepared the discursive ground upon which Livingstone’s legend would flourish. Both were LMS men, although both stretched the tolerance of the society and effectively redefined the relationship between individual missionaries and the society. Both proved to be excellent self-promoters, and in many ways these two individuals taught the LMS how to maximize their publicity campaigns. Considering the two together reveals the complex construction of missionary celebrity in the nineteenth-century public sphere.

Williams has received considerably less scholarly attention than Livingstone, yet in the nineteenth century his public profile among evangelical Britons was extremely high. Appointed to Polynesia in 1816, Williams showed few signs initially that he would stand out from the number of LMS missionaries recruited at this time. The traits that the LMS would later proclaim as inspirational and exceptional — his “mechanical genius” (Ellis ix) and an entrepreneurial spirit — challenged the practices of evangelization in the Pacific. Williams advocated the involvement of converted Islanders in the imperial trade routes of the region: when the directors of the LMS forced Rev. Samuel Marsden to sell the ship that the two men had used to send goods from Raiatea to Sydney, Williams simply built another. That is to say, Williams organized the islanders to build another. The construction of the Messenger of Peace became a key part of the mythology surrounding Williams. At the
time, however, the LMS was not at all supportive of Williams’ enterprise, concerned that commerce would taint the evangelical purity of their mission. In 1834 Williams returned to Britain, hoping to get a new ship and seeking financial support from the government. Williams conducted an extensive public lecturing tour, and applied to élite and influential Britons such as the Duke of Devonshire, Lord Minto, Lord Glenelg, and other statesmen for support for his commercial ambitions. During the next four years, he appealed to Presbyterian churches for missionary support and visited Scotland, thereby stimulating Scottish interest in the Pacific as a potential mission field. As Neil Gunson has suggested, through his initiative and decisive action “Williams changed the whole conception of the South Seas mission . . . The story of the Messenger of Peace soon acquired legendary status and Williams became a popular hero during the remaining few years of his life” (118).

The publication of Williams’ Narrative in 1837 ensured that the evangelical public supported his innovations and his commitment to the missionary cause. Williams’ personal profile, generated through his extensive lecturing tours, and his success with the public meant that the LMS retreated from their earlier scepticism about his methods. Indeed, narratives about Williams’ mechanical ingenuity and enterprising initiative were circulated continually by the LMS throughout its many publications, and in so doing they positioned Williams as the inspirational missionary par excellence. By 1865, LMS publications such as Ebenezer Prout’s celebratory Missionary Ships Connected with the London Missionary Society lauded Williams’ initiative:

there was one essential which he did not want – labour; as hundreds of natives were eager to do his bidding. Wood was, of course, amongst his first requirements; but the mountains were clothed with noble trees, and speedily, from morning till night, the ring of the native stone adzes might be heard on all hands, as the woodmen laboured to fell the old giants of the forest. (42)

If the frequent repetition of the Messenger of Peace narrative constructed a marketable image of Williams that the LMS used strategically to build support and entice recruits, Williams’ death on the island of Eromanga cemented that image in spiritual and national terms. Killed in 1839 when attempting to push missionary evangelizing into a new Pacific field, Williams became a martyr to imperial missions. His death, coming so soon after his promotional tour to Britain, received extensive publicity and, as Graeme Kent notes, led to many young men volunteering (Kent 86). His death stimulated a flood of hagiographic accounts, including Prout’s Memoirs of the Life of the Rev. John Williams, Missionary to Polynesia and Rev. James Ellis’ John Williams: The Martyr Missionary of Polynesia, and a plethora of eulogies, obituaries, memoirs, and reminiscences in missionary magazines. Graphic images and descriptions of Williams’ death at the hands of the Eromangans were repeated again and again. Baxter’s print The Massacre of the Lamented Missionary, the Rev. Williams was used to publicize Williams’ martyrdom. Baxter’s image was based upon John Webber’s print of the death of Captain James Cook, and thus, as Bernard Smith notes, Williams was positioned within an imperial tradition of representation. Like Cook, Williams had been brought down by the natives whom he had gone to “save.” Smith suggests that Baxter’s final print visually dramatized the contrast between the missionary icon and his “heathen” attackers: “the natives were . . . made darker in complexion; Williams was to be made ‘more heavenly’ . . . Such a print was admirably designed to suggest the saintliness of Williams and the spiritual depravity of his murderers” (245). Martin Green notes that Williams’ martyrdom had become such a “popular legend” by this time that even juvenile fiction such as Robert M. Ballantyne’s The Coral Island (1858) dwelt upon it (Green 47). Williams’ ultimate sacrifice to the hardships of colonial evangelization cemented his position as a missionary hero: his martyrdom ensured his legendary status in the LMS’ history.

If Williams’ popular status taught the LMS the power of missionary celebrities, David Livingstone would reinforce the value of such figures. Interestingly, the LMS had not learnt how best to handle individualistic missionaries: like Williams, Livingstone’s ambitious designs for African people brought him into conflict with the society’s more modest and
spiritually oriented goals. Appointed in 1839, Livingstone certainly did not appear to have the qualities that would lead to missionary celebrity: the LMS went close to rejecting him when “he utterly broke down when trying to preach his first sermon, and fled from the chapel” (Horne 234). In typical opportunistic fashion, the LMS managed to turn Livingstone’s inarticulateness into a virtue that should encourage other tongue-tied young men to volunteer for missionary work. A variety of LMS travel accounts had whetted the evangelical public’s appetite for narratives about heroic missionaries in Africa, including Campbell’s 1815 Travels in South Africa and his second journey account published in 1822, as well as Rev. Joseph Freeman’s 1851 Tour in South Africa. Livingstone’s pioneering evangelization of Africa promoted him to the top of the LMS pantheon. His Missionary Travels and Researches in Africa, published in 1857, sold 70,000 copies. As Patrick Brantlinger and others have established, “a national hero in the late 1850s, by the end of his last African journey in 1872 [Livingstone] was a national saint” (Rule of Darkness 180).

Narratives about this missionary hero constructed his public identity in a number of key ways. Success stories like Livingstone’s were crucial to LMS advocacy for lower class “godly mechanics” to volunteer for missionary work. Throughout the myriad recitations of Livingstone’s biography, his humble background, hard-working childhood, and thirst for education and improvement were heavily emphasized. Ralph Wardlaw Thompson and Arthur N. Johnson’s British Foreign Missions 1837-1897 (1899), for instance, positions Livingstone as a folk hero, an “everyman” whose dedication enabled him to transcend his impoverished background. He was the weaver lad from Blantyre, who had fought his way to knowledge with the indomitable perseverance which was one of his most marked characteristics, learning Latin by keeping his book on the loom as he worked, and obtaining a university course in Glasgow in the intervals of toil. (76)

Livingstone’s assiduous self-improvement, and his commitment to education and godliness as the means of social advancement, communicated to readers exactly the kind of life that the LMS prescribed for its missionary aspirants. Grocers, weavers, drapers, plumbers, clerks, rope makers, carpet makers, teachers, and warehousemen sent in applications to join the society as missionaries, inspired by working- and lower-middle-class success stories such as Livingstone’s.6

Livingstone’s 1856 return to Britain cemented his place in the public imagination. The LMS was at the height of its popularity at this time, following the “much-heralded missionary tours of the 1840s” by men such as Williams, which events “reached their apogee” in Livingstone’s triumphal return (Thorne 89). Andrew Ross suggests that the British public had been carefully prepared for the return of a British hero even before his arrival: “There had been a steady growth of publicity about him ever since news of his arrival at Loanda had reached London in 1855” (Ross 109). Changes to the stamp duty on newspapers meant that the general newspaper press experienced an increased daily circulation on an unprecedented scale. The publicity surrounding Livingstone’s return, then, “reached a new and growing audience which had not existed in the past … A significant part of this increasing public interest … was a thirst for stories about heroes and heroines” (109). The LMS had primed its evangelical audience to understand Livingstone in this heroic mode; the broader media built upon his evangelical fame, and developed his profile much further.

Livingstone’s reception in Britain reveals the ways in which his public profile shifted from a specifically religious mode into a broader role as public celebrity, as Ross’ account reveals. The President of the Royal Geographical Society, Sir Rodney Murchison, contacted Livingstone prior to his return, encouraging him to publish an account of his African journeys, and John Murray was eager to publish it. Murray offered Livingstone a much more attractive publishing proposal than other missionary authors could have hoped for: he was prepared “to bear all the costs of publication himself, including the engraving of maps and drawings, and to give Livingstone two-thirds of the profits made by the book” (115). Murchison’s careful manipulation of the newspaper reading public helped create an enormous public interest in the heroic figures of African explorers (109). Livingstone’s geographical achievements – he was widely acclaimed...
as the first European to have crossed the African continent - ensured that his profile shifted out of the specifically missionary realm. His differences of opinion with the LMS about the appropriateness of promoting commercial opportunities in Africa, in addition to spiritual interests, and his appointment by the British Government as consul ensured that "the LMS's most famous missionary son" (Thome 89) slipped out of their grasp to some extent. Murchison observed in 1858 that "the name of Livingstone was sufficient to attract an assembly larger than any room in London could hold" (qtd. in Thome 89). Yet the LMS remained deeply interested in Livingstone's subsequent work, even if it was not done in their name, and they continued to promote his specific talents as a missionary.

If Livingstone's fame shifted the public focus to his talents as an explorer rather than as missionary, the involvement of Henry Morton Stanley ensured that Livingstone's celebrity status in the broadest public sphere would be enduring. Stanley's famous account of his "discovery" of Livingstone was illustrated by artists and reproduced in books and magazines: his phrase "Dr. Livingstone, I presume?" still resonates in our popular lexicon. Of course, Stanley's search for Livingstone was a strategically planned media event initiated by the New York Herald under the editorship of James Gordon Bennett. Like Murchison before him, Bennett built upon Livingstone's earlier missionary celebrity and transformed him into a household name. An innovator in newspaper ownership and practice, Bennett "sought to give modern journalism a new role. It was to be a 'bold new venture in the cause of humanity, civilisation and science'" (Ross 225). The reception of Stanley's How I Found Livingstone (1872), with three editions in its first year of publication, led to his wildly successful speaking tours in Britain, which built upon and exceeded the kind of public profile that missionary speakers had previously received. As Thomas Richards argues, the press "reshaped the brash opportunist in the mould of a distinguished gentleman out to build an Empire" and thus ensured his public reception, even if Stanley's preparedness to endorse a variety of imperial commodities (soap, pipes, tents) rather compromised his noble image (Commodity 135).

Livingstone's death, like Williams', returned him to the missionary fold. Stories of his death focused on his African attendants, Susi and Churna, who were cast as the kind of faithful adherents that only a truly religious man could attract. More particularly, Livingstone's tableau of death was stressed, for it foregrounded his religious identity rather than his role as explorer or agent of empire. Missionary Travellers, a Sunday school book for children, described the final scenes:

The dim light of a single candle illumined the scene. David Livingstone knelt at the bedside, his head buried in his hands on the pillow. They waited for a moment. Was he at prayer? Then one of them stepped forward to touch his cheek. It was cold. In the act of prayer their beloved Bwana had died. (Woodley 93)

Evangelical texts for children revealed in the symbolism of Livingstone's death scene, for religious children could metaphorically stand in for the "child-like" African attendants, and Livingstone's death in an attitude of prayer beside his bed resonated with the everyday experience of practicing Christians. Missionary Heroes of Africa, Sarah Geraldina Stock's book for children, designates Livingstone to be "The Hero of Central Africa" and replays his death scene with an additional emphasis on a young boy who attended the great man:

He bade them good-night and they left him, all but a boy, who remained close at hand to wait upon him. Early in the morning the boy rushed in to Susi and Chuma, and begged them to come and look at their master. He was kneeling by his bed with his arms stretched forward. 'He has not moved all night,' said the boy. Then they found that he was dead. His work was done, and his spirit had passed away to be with the Lord! (Stock 92)

Stock's version of the story repositions Livingstone's body, perhaps compromising the message about bedside prayer, but her focus on the African child emphasizes the pedagogical transfer from African to pious British children. LMS historians lamented Livingstone's death, but emphasized that this death was one of many that evangelical work had demanded: "We may well say that the main cost of missions has to be paid
for in human life” (Home 270). The emphasis on medical detail that the most recent biography of Livingstone provides – particularly Ross’ repeated references to the anal bleeding that Livingstone suffered as a result of an undiagnosed tumor – would have rather compromised the nineteenth-century evangelical narrative, which turns to the spiritual rather than the bodily for its final message.

Livingstone represents both the epitome and the limit case of missionary celebrity. Because of his success, personal drive, and achievements in the colonial field, he became both the ultimate missionary and, simultaneously, something other than a missionary. Livingstone’s life has been mythologized in a variety of ways: “as a saintly hero of Protestantism, as an icon of imperialism, as the leading embodiment of resurgent Scottish self-consciousness, and lastly, in the 1960s, as the patron saint of African nationalism” (Ross 239). After his death, a plethora of publications celebrated – and appropriated – his life, in a variety of media including Livingstone’s edited journals, biographies, sermons, lectures, magazine articles, children’s stories, and so on. Livingstone’s fame exceeded the missionary media, but united a much broader British community in fascination to the nexus of empire, religion, and exploration.

“The Opium of the People”

Livingstone’s multivalent positioning in the nineteenth-century public sphere – co-opted simultaneously for evangelical Protestant sainthood and aggressive imperial acquisition – points again to the complicated relationship between empire and evangelization. Thorne rightly notes the irony that At the very moment when key representatives of the nation’s governing elite were complaining that Britain’s existing colonies were unprofitable burdens … missionary celebrities like David Livingstone were drawing evangelical attention to the national benefits of increased commercial interaction with the non-European world, and urging the British nation to colonize the foreign mission fields that remained beyond its formal reach. (96)

Within the African history of the LMS, the irony was even more acute. Their earlier candidate for the role of African missionary hero had been Rev. John Philip, whose Researches in South Africa (1828) expressed his campaign for justice for the Khoikhoi against the depredations of European colonization and saw him taken up by the liberal press as an altruistic humanitarian, but by his enemies as an anti-colonial meddler (Bank). That by the end of the first century of LMS involvement in Africa, another of their famous missionaries, Livingstone, could be taken up to justify the scramble for Africa showed the double-edged success of the society’s involvement in the mass media.

Scott Bennett identifies the production of reading matter as one of the earliest consumer mass markets, and argues that such markets can only come about “where widely shared interests or values exist or can be created … mass markets require some common ground, some common feeling, however partial or fleeting it may be in the day-to-day lives of the individuals who may make up that market” (251). The missionary media both created and depended on a mass reading public united by their interest in evangelical outreach and the subjects of that outreach: the foreign missions that were united by British imperialism. Missionary media brought together home supporters and British missionaries out in the field; it united missionaries in far-flung locations with each other; and it secured a flow of volunteers and funds to support evangelization. As Brantlinger has suggested, from Roman times onwards, “the spread of Christianity, which may itself be interpreted as a form of civilizing the masses, from the beginning lay outside the control of the ruling elites” (Bread and Circuses 47). The LMS, firmly embedded in the burgeoning middle classes of the nineteenth century, was ideally placed to benefit from the democratizing potential of Christianity, both ideologically and financially. In its time, religious sentiment did not have to be understood as having a separate secular outlet in mass culture, which would inculcate public interest in “stars, products, images, fragmentary news ‘events,’ and human interest stories” (99); the multitude of stories, images, anecdotes, and intriguing personalities within the LMS circuit could entertain the mass reading public and remain within the religious realm. Religious leaders might have
condemned the cheap fiction that competed for the reading public's attention during the nineteenth century, but they did not censured the editors of popular religious periodicals from accommodating "the human craving for wonder and romance... If the pious reader were prevented from reading sensational fiction or historical romance, his cravings for the emotions of pity, horror, and fear was to some extent met by such accounts" (Altick 122). Missionary texts provided the affective thrill of sensational fiction with the moral righteousness of religious certainty.

Missionary media also had a crucial pedagogical function. Just as missionary travellers were often the first Europeans to publish detailed accounts of foreign cultures, religious publications were the prime means by which many Britons learned about others. Periodicals produced by the LMS - like those published by other missionary and religious organizations - taught British readers about the cultures in which missionaries operated. They provided details of everyday life around the world; they disseminated illustrations of ordinary people in foreign climes; they published maps and described the changes that were occurring in the wake of empire. Particularly for child readers, as Altholz suggests, "these journals supplied much of the Victorian geographical knowledge and contributed to interest in the Empire" (124). In fundamental ways, the publications of the LMS helped "to democratize the imperial process, giving very large sections of the population an investment in securing a world that would be saved by their viewing" (Thorne 68).

Participating in a mass readership, sharing and extending that community of readers, was central to the development of British evangelical identities throughout the nineteenth century. Sujit Sivasundaram's examination of the Evangelical Magazine reveals the link between reading and charity, where charity could be enacted by encouraging the faith of others: "As a collective enterprise of shared knowledge, reading enabled evangelicals to persevere in their beliefs... By subscribing to the magazine it was possible to set a good example and reform the faith of others" (44-45). The directors of the LMS sought to inculcate these ideals within its domestic constituency. They also sought, quite deliberately, to teach that domestic readership how to think about their relationship with the Empire. In 1845, the directors of the LMS published a brief review of the first fifty years of its engagement in colonial missions. One of the first challenges of missionary outreach was combating the "popular falsehoods" that "Travellers in heathen countries, who had satisfied themselves with merely glancing at the surface of society, often excluded from their narratives": these were "enormous evils which even they could not have failed to perceive." After fifty years of investigation and publication, the directors declared, conditions had changed:

The moral condition of the heathen is better understood today by the children of our schools, than it was by the enlightened classes of society fifty years ago; and the necessity of the Gospel ... has become a familiar and undisputed truth. And by whom have the idle tales and gross fabrications of the ignorant and the interested been exposed? By the men of God sent forth from our midst, who have lived with the heathen and for the heathen; from whose concurrent testimony the Church has learned, and the world has been constrained to admit, that idolatry, in all its varied forms, is an abominable thing; that its principles are founded in falsehood and absurdity; and that its requirements are puerile, cruel, and obscene. (LMS, Brief Review 4-5)

The society's claim to have re-educated the British public makes clear its strategic and selective publishing aims. Missionary institutions such as the LMS were ideally positioned to argue for the superior authority of their narratives about empire: empowered both by the localized experiences of their representatives in the field and the truth claims embedded in Christian witnessing, missionary publications asserted - and achieved - cultural capital beyond their individual value. Knowledge, as Thomas Richards has persuasively argued, was crucial to fantasies of empire (Imperial): fantasies of imperial control and moral responsibility that were enabled by the proliferation of missionary texts throughout the nineteenth century and beyond.

University of Tasmania