

BULMER, John (1833-1913)

Biography by John Harris.

BULMER, JOHN (b. Sutherland, England, 30 June 1833; d. Bairnsdale, Vic, 13 Aug 1913). Missionary to Aborigines.

Bulmer's parents having died in his infancy, he was raised by his uncle, William Bulmer. He took the motto for his life from the Latin inscription on a bridge near his birthplace—*Nil Desperandum Auspice Deo*—'Despairing of nothing under the guidance of God'. (Horace, *Odes*, 1, 7, 27)

In 1849, Bulmer was apprenticed to a cabinetmaker, John Eggers, with whom he emigrated to Australia in 1852. Eggers died on the voyage out, so Bulmer worked as a carpenter for two years to repay his passage. He then worked on the goldfields where he was appalled at 'the wicked way in which the Aborigines were treated'. (Bulmer Papers, 11/11) In 1855, seeing an advertisement for the recently-formed Melbourne Church of England Mission, Bulmer attended a meeting at St Mark's, Collingwood, offering himself for the mission planned on the Murray River. After some discussion of his Methodist background, he was accepted. 'My great desire was to try to do something for them, to raise them out of their misery.' (Bulmer Papers, 11/11)

At the junction of the Murray and Darling Rivers, the society was given a square mile lease containing a billabong which the local Maraura people called Yelta. There Thomas Goodwin and the young Bulmer constructed their mission station. They worked hard to demonstrate to the Aboriginal people the supposed advantages of a settled farming life. It was a struggle, as agriculture in that environment was impossible without irrigation. Bulmer rapidly learned Maraura, which greatly enhanced his acceptance by the local people. He translated Bible stories and used culturally-appropriate illustrations.

In 1858, Bulmer married a young school teacher, Miss Stocks, and shortly afterwards was invited to open a mission in Gippsland. Mrs Bulmer died in Melbourne in 1861. Bulmer went to Gippsland where, with the help of local Aboriginal people, he chose a mission site on Lake Tyers. Returning to Melbourne Bulmer married Caroline Blay. Together they commenced the Lake Tyers Mission in 1862, with both church and government support.

Twenty years of European pastoral settlement in the region had drastically reduced the number of Aboriginal people, who called themselves the Kurnai. Within a few weeks fifty of them regularly visited the mission. Once more, Bulmer's objective was to create a self supporting settled community. Reflecting on his Yelta experience, Bulmer felt that the missionaries had emphasised sin and God's judgement to the exclusion of God's love and grace, an imbalance he strove to rectify. 'I will not say we did no good ... we pointed out the terrible end, which awaited (them)... Still, this was not the gospel.' (Bulmer Papers, 11/2 and 3) At Lake Tyers Aboriginal men such as William Hanner, Billy McDougall, and Jeremy Barlow became Christians as early as 1863.

Bulmer's intention was to make the Lake Tyers community self-supporting. By 1868, it had assumed the typical mission compound form with neat rows of huts, schoolhouse, mission house and the church of St John which stands today. 'The blacks should be treated ... kindly but firmly ... This is the course I pursue ... and the blacks know very well that I love them and would do them good.' (Royal Commission on the Aborigines, VPP 18771878, 3, 50).

John and Caroline Bulmer became virtually synonymous with Lake Tyers Mission, guiding it through many difficult years. As government controls tightened, and Aboriginal people were sent to Lake Tyers from far afield, there were tensions between Bulmer and the government, as well as tensions

at the mission itself. Bulmer particularly opposed the Aborigines Protection Act of 1886, under which people of mixed parentage were declared to be white and no longer eligible to remain on missions. This caused traumatic splits in families, and Bulmer refused to implement the act for four years. He also protested against the transfer of people to Lake Tyers against their will, and became unpopular with officialdom.

Although a Methodist, Bulmer served the Church of England faithfully in key positions since 1855. In his seventieth year, he was finally ordained a priest on 6 January 1903. Lake Tyers was secularised in 1907, the government reluctantly allowing Bulmer to remain for religious duties only. Bulmer wrote 'everything in God's providence worked to bring me to this work and I have never desired to leave it ... I will end my life here among the poor blacks'. (Bulmer Papers 11/11) When he died in 1913, Bulmer had spent fifty-one of his eighty years at Lake Tyers.

Bulmer shared with nineteenth-century missionaries generally the view that Christianity was linked with European lifestyle. When converts seemed to 'fall back into the old ways' it was always a bitter disappointment to Bulmer and these 'occasions of sin' brought long-term disapproval. In time, however, Bulmer began to realise that Aboriginal people's problems were not intrinsically Aboriginal but common to all humankind. God, he came to believe, would understand and accept these people. He also came to see that there was much merit in traditional Aboriginal law: 'the old blackfellow was the better man'. (Bulmer Papers, 11/12 and 13)

In 1980, Phillip Pepper, a Lake Tyers man, recalled Bulmer: 'Our people were finished before the mission men came ... It's got on his gravestone, "John Bulmer was a devoted worker amongst the Aborigines", and that's true. He was a friend to the people and everyone who knew him said he was a great man - a good man'. (Pepper, 1980: 15, 83)

Bulmer Papers, State Museum of Victoria; John Harris, *One Blood* (Sydney, 1990); Phillip Pepper, *You Are What You Make Yourself to be* (Melbourne, 1980)

JOHN HARRIS

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