

Mission History

Lessons from the life of John Paton

John Gibson Paton was born on 24 May 1824, in a farm cottage in rural Scotland. He was the eldest of the 11 children of James and Janet Paton. James Paton was a stocking manufacturer.



John grew up in a small three room house – the kitchen-bedroom, the workshop and...

The "closet " was a very small apartment betwixt the other two, having room only for a bed, a little table, and a chair, with a diminutive window shedding diminutive light on the scene. This was the Sanctuary of that cottage home. Thither daily, and oftentimes a day, generally after each meal, we saw our father retire, and "shut to the door"; and we children got to understand by a sort of spiritual instinct (for the thing was too sacred to be talked about) that prayers were being poured out there for us, as of old by the High Priest within the veil in the Most Holy Place. We occasionally heard the pathetic echoes of a trembling voice pleading as if for life, and we learned to slip out and in past that door on tiptoe, not to disturb the holy colloquy. The outside world might not know, but we knew, whence came that happy light as of a new-born smile that always was dawning on my father's face : it was a reflection from the Divine Presence, in the consciousness of which he lived.¹

Many years later when he was at college his parents send John a letter:

Heretofore we feared to bias you, but now we must tell you why we praise God for the decision to which you have been led. Your father's heart was set upon being a Minister, but other claims forced him to give it up. When you were given to them, your father and mother laid you upon the altar, their first-born, to be consecrated, if God saw fit, as a Missionary of the Cross; and it has been their constant prayer that you might be prepared, qualified, and led to this very decision; and we pray with all our heart that the Lord may accept your offering, long spare you, and give you many souls from the Heathen World for your hire.

From the age of 12, John started learning the trade of his father:

We worked on the looms from six in the morning till ten at night, with an hour at dinner-time and half an hour at breakfast and again at supper. These spare moments every day I devoutly spent on my books, chiefly in the rudiments of Latin and Greek; for I had given my soul to God, and was resolved to aim at being a Missionary of the Cross, or a Minister of the Gospel. Yet I gladly testify that what I learned of the stocking frame was not thrown away; the facility of using tools, and of watching and keeping the machinery in order, came to be of great value to me in the Foreign Mission field.

How much my father's prayers at this time impressed me I can never explain, nor could any stranger understand. When, on his knees and all of us kneeling around him in Family Worship, he poured out His whole soul with tears for the conversion of the Heathen World

¹ All quotations are taken from *John G. Paton: Missionary to the New Hebrides, An Autobiography Edited by His Brother* (Edinburgh: The Banner of Truth, 1965 (first published in volumes in 1889 and 1891). The text is in the public domain and can be accessed [here](#). There is also a very helpful biographical sketch drawing lessons from the Paton story by John Piper, available free in audio, online and ebook [here](#).

to the service of Jesus, and for every personal and domestic need, we all felt as if in the presence of the living Saviour, and learned to know and love Him as our Divine Friend. As we rose from our knees, I used to look at the light on my father's face, and wish I were like him in spirit, — hoping that, in answer to his prayers, I might be privileged and prepared to carry the blessed Gospel to some portion of the Heathen World

He finally got the opportunity to go to college in Glasgow to pursue theological and medical studies — the first time he had been to a city. Two young men applied for the bursary — him and another man — and the scholarship committee couldn't decide so in the end they split the funds. This meant there wasn't nearly enough for them to live on, they lived on bread and water and their health broke down. After some months John got a job teaching in school — a very hard school with very tough kids.

Paton joined Glasgow City Mission:

Looking back upon these Mission experiences, I have ever felt that they were, to me and many others, a good and profitable training of students for the office of the Ministry, preparing us to deal with men of every shade of thought and of character, and try to lead them to the knowledge and service of the Lord Jesus. I found the district a very degraded one. Many families said ... they had never been called upon by any Minister, nor by any Christian visitor. In it were congregated many avowed infidels, Romanists, and drunkards, — living together, and associated for evil, but apparently without any effective counteracting influence. In many of its closes and courts sin and vice walked about openly — naked and not ashamed.

John was greatly used there — amid great opposition there were lots of conversions and he gathered many for Bible study. What particularly stands out from this time is his confidence in the gospel's power to save for eternity. This was no here-and-now-focussed prosperity message.

In my Mission district, I was the witness of many joyful departures to be with Jesus, — I do not like to name them "deaths" at all. Even now, at the distance of nearly forty years, many instances, especially amongst the young men and women who attended my classes, rise up before my mind. They left us, rejoicing in the bright assurance that nothing present or to come "could ever separate them or us from the love of God which is in Christ Jesus our Lord."

Several of them, by their conversation even on their death-bed, were known to have done much good. Many examples might be given ; but I can find room for only one. John Sim, a dear little boy, was carried away by consumption. His childish heart seemed to be filled with joy about seeing Jesus. His simple talk, mingled with deep questionings, arrested not only his young companions, but pierced the hearts of some careless sinners who heard him, and greatly refreshed the faith of God's dear people. It was the very greatest pathos to hear the weak quaver of his dying voice sing out, —

"I lay my sins on Jesus,
The spotless Lamb of God."

Shortly before his decease he said to his parents, "I am going soon to be with Jesus ; but I sometimes fear that I may not see you there." "Why so, my child?" said his weeping mother. "Because," he answered, "if you were set upon going to heaven and seeing Jesus there, you would pray about it, and sing about it ; you would talk about Jesus to others, and tell them of that happy meeting with Him in Glory. All this my dear Sabbath school teacher taught me,

and she will meet me there. Now why did not you, my father and mother, tell me all these things about Jesus, if you are going to meet Him too?"

Their tears fell fast over their dying child ; and he little knew, in his unthinking eighth year, what a message from God had pierced their souls through his innocent words.

On my sitting down beside him, he said, "Sit you down and talk with me about Jesus ; I am tired hearing so much talk about everything else but Jesus ; I am going soon to be with Him. Oh, do tell me everything you know or have ever heard about Jesus, the spotless Lamb of God ! "

At last the child literally longed to be away, not for rest, or freedom from pain — for of that he had very little — but, as he himself always put it, " to see Jesus." And, after all, that was the wisdom of the heart, however he learned it. Eternal life, here or hereafter, is just the vision of Jesus.

Paton was ordained by the Reformed Presbyterian Church on 23 March 1858. He was greatly used but increasingly heard a 'Macedonian call'.

HAPPY in my work as I felt, and successful by the blessing of God, yet I continually heard, and chiefly during my last years in the Divinity Hall, the wail of the perishing Heathen in the South Seas ; and I saw that few were caring for them, while I well knew that many would be ready to take up my work in Calton, and carry it forward perhaps with more efficiency than myself. Without revealing the state of my mind to any person, this was the supreme subject of my daily meditation and prayer ; and this also led me to enter upon those medical studies, in which I purposed taking the full course ; but at the close of my third year, an incident occurred, which led me at once to offer myself for the Foreign Mission field.

The Reformed Presbyterian Church of Scotland, in which I had been brought up, had been advertising for another Missionary to join the Rev. John Inglis in his grand work in the New Hebrides. Dr. Bates, the excellent convener of the Heathen Missions Committee, was deeply grieved, because for two years their appeal had failed.

He had quite a lot of opposition to his going overseas from respected elders:

A Mr. Dickson exploded, "The cannibals! You will be eaten by cannibals!"

This was not unreasonable. The islands were very much cannibal territory and the first missionaries had been killed and eaten within minutes of landing on one of the islands 19 years earlier (in 1839). But to this Paton responded:

Mr. Dickson, you are advanced in years now, and your own prospect is soon to be laid in the grave, there to be eaten by worms; I confess to you, that if I can but live and die serving and honoring the Lord Jesus, it will make no difference to me whether I am eaten by Cannibals or by worms; and in the Great Day my Resurrection body will rise as fair as yours in the likeness of our risen Redeemer.



John (now aged 33) married Mary Ann Robson and 14 days later accompanied by Mr. Joseph Copeland, they both left Scotland and set sail for the New Hebrides (now called Vanuatu), in the South Pacific North East of Australia.

There were basically four phases of John's missionary life: a few years on the island of Tanna, a period of mission mobilisation and PD travelling round Australia, Scotland and the US, another mission for several years on the island of Aniwa, and then further mission mobilisation until his death.

1. Tanna

John and Mary arrived on the island November 5, 1858 at the end of a long sea voyage and Mary was pregnant. The baby was born February 12, 1859.

Our island-exile thrilled with joy! But the greatest of sorrows was treading hard upon the heels of that great joy!

Mary had reaped attacks of ague and fever and pneumonia and diarrhea with delirium for two weeks.

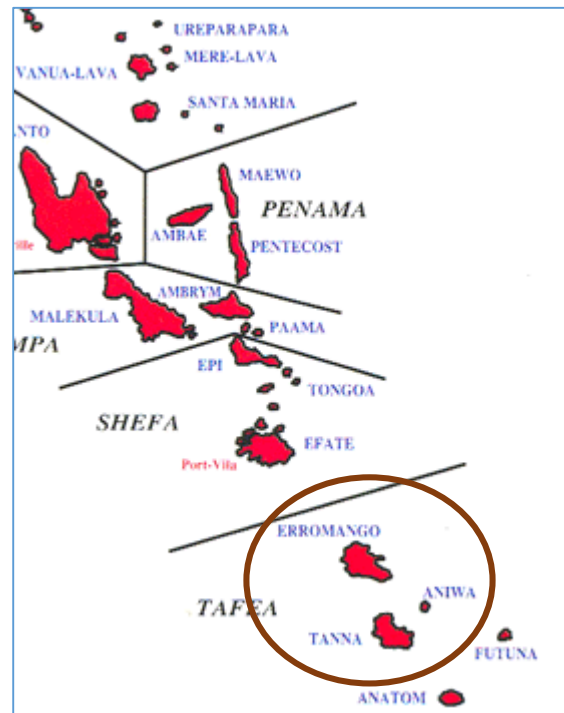
Then in a moment, altogether unexpectedly, she died on March third. To crown my sorrows, and complete my loneliness, the dear baby-boy, whom we had named after her father, Peter Robert Robson, was taken from me after one week's sickness, on the 20th of March. Let those who have ever passed through any similar darkness as of midnight feel for me; as for all others, it would be more than vain to try to paint my sorrows!

He dug the two graves with his own hands and buried them by the house he had built.

Stunned by that dreadful loss, in entering upon this field of labor to which the Lord had Himself so evidently led me, my reason seemed for a time almost to give way. The ever-merciful Lord sustained me . . . and that spot became my sacred and much-frequented shrine, during all the following months and years when I labored on for the salvation of the savage Islanders amidst difficulties, dangers, and deaths. . . . But for Jesus, and the fellowship he vouchsafed to me there, I must have gone mad and died beside the lonely grave!

I felt her loss beyond all conception or description, in that dark land. It was very difficult to be resigned, left alone, and in sorrowful circumstances; but feeling immovably assured that my God and father was too wise and loving to err in anything that he does or permits, I looked up to the Lord for help, and struggled on in His work.

I do not pretend to see through the mystery of such visitations – wherein God calls away the young, the promising, and those sorely needed for his service here; but this I do know and feel, that, in the light of such dispensations, it becomes us all to love and serve our blessed Lord Jesus so that we may be ready at his call for death and eternity.



He continued serving alone on the island for the next four years under incredible pressure:

From illness:

Fever and ague had attacked me fourteen times severely

Several times said farewell to everyone and thought he would die.

Danger from indigenous peoples of the island:

Trials and hairbreadth escapes strengthened my faith, and seemed only to nerve me for more to follow; and they did tread swiftly upon each other's heels.

Again and again his prayer was, "Protect me or take me home."

I . . . assured them that I was not afraid to die, for at death my Savior would take me to be with Himself in Heaven, and to be far happier than I had ever been on Earth. I then lifted up my hands and eyes to the Heavens, and prayed aloud for Jesus . . . either to protect me or to take me home to Glory as He saw to be for the best.

He prayed for deliverance but was also completely resigned to being taken to the Lord. He knew that it is not the case that faithfulness in prayer guarantees protection – his faithful wife died, other faithful missionaries died. His confidence rested totally in Christ's total sovereignty and goodness:

when natives in large numbers were assembled at my house, a man furiously rushed on me with his axe but a Kaserumini Chief snatched a spade with which I had been working, and dexterously defended me from instant death. Life in such circumstances led me to cling very near to the Lord Jesus; I knew not, for one brief hour, when or how attack might be made; and yet, with my trembling hand clasped in the hand once nailed on Calvary, and now swaying the scepter of the universe, calmness and peace and resignation abode in my soul.

Paton says at one point in his autobiography, "I am by conviction a strong Calvinist" and he certainly lived out what he believed. This confidence in Christ's sovereignty freed Paton to address his attackers not in fear but in love and often in an attempt to convict them of sin – amazingly in the very act of trying to kill him! – that they might be brought to repentance and faith.

My enemies seldom slackened their hateful designs against my life, however calmed or baffled for the moment. . . . A wild chief followed me around for four hours with his loaded musket, and, though often directed towards me, God restrained his hand. I spoke kindly to him, and attended to my work as if he had not been there, fully persuaded that my God had placed me there, and would protect me till my allotted task was finished. Looking up in unceasing prayer to our dear Lord Jesus, I left all in his hands, and felt immortal till my work was done.

One morning at daybreak I found my house surrounded by armed men, and a chief intimated that they had assembled to take my life. Seeing that I was entirely in their hands, I knelt down and gave myself away body and soul to the Lord Jesus, for what seemed the last time on earth. Rising, I went out to them, and began calmly talking about their unkind treatment of me and contrasting it with all my conduct towards them. . . . At last some of the Chiefs, who had attended the Worship, rose and said, "Our conduct has been bad; but now we will fight for you, and kill all those who hate you.

Interestingly, Paton's complete trust in God's sovereignty didn't mean he failed to take sensible precautions. He was not about to needlessly throw his life away – that would be poor stewardship of

the precious gift God had given him. So he combined strong faith with very practical means of protection and shrewdness in dealing with people.

Our continuous danger caused me now oftentimes to sleep with my clothes on that I might start at a moment's warning. My faithful dog Clutha would give a sharp bark and awake me. . . . God made them fear this precious creature, and often used her in saving our lives

He was far from just being defensive and reactive. He did his best to intervene in the frequent wars between clans. He would go to visit his enemies when they were sick and wanted his help, never knowing if it might be an ambush.

Another major challenge was the influence of European traders who occasionally landed on the island to trade guns, alcohol and other products. They were entirely godless, ruthless and often either accidentally or intentionally set back the mission work years by spreading disease, immorality, violence and a terrible impression of European religion.

In contrast, Paton was hugely grateful for a native man called Abraham from a neighboring island. At first there were a few Christian converts from other islands helping Paton on Tanna but as it got more dangerous from opposition and disease they all left but one -

That noble old soul, Abraham, stood by me as an angel of God in sickness and in danger ; he went at my side wherever I had to go ; he helped me willingly to the last inch of strength in all that I had to do ; and it was perfectly manifest that he was doing all this not from mere human love, but for the sake of Jesus. That man had been a Cannibal in his heathen days, but by the grace of God there he stood verily a new creature in Christ Jesus. Any trust, however sacred or valuable, could be absolutely reposed in him ; and in trial or danger, I was often refreshed by that old Teacher's prayers, as I used to be by the prayers of my saintly father in my childhood's home. No white man could have been a more valuable helper to me in my perilous circumstances, and no person, white or black, could have shown more fearless and chivalrous devotion.

When I have read or heard the shallow objections of irreligious scribblers and talkers [in Europe], hinting that there was no reality in conversions, and that Mission effort was but waste, oh, how my heart has yearned to plant them just one week on Tanna, with the "natural" man all around in the person of Cannibal and Heathen, and only the one " spiritual " man in the person of the converted Abraham, nursing them, feeding them, saving them " for the love of Jesus," — that I might just learn how many hours it took to convince them that Christ in man was a reality after all ! All the scepticism of Europe would hide its head in foolish shame ; and all its doubts would dissolve under one glance of the new light that Jesus, and Jesus alone, pours from the converted Cannibal's eye.

Paton is honest about the low moments. This was no happy clappy spirituality:

I felt so disappointed, so miserable, that I wished I had been in my grave with my dear departed and my brethren on the Islands who had fallen around me

There were very few converts during this four years on Tanna – and even they died. He tells stories of particular converts like Kowia, a chief on Tanna. When he was dying he came to say farewell to Paton:

"Farewell, Missi, I am very near death now; we will meet again in Jesus and with Jesus!" . . . Abraham sustained him, tottering to the place of graves; there he lay down . . . and slept in Jesus; and there the faithful Abraham buried him beside his wife and children. Thus died a

man who had been a cannibal chief, but by the grace of God and the love of Jesus changed, transfigured into a character of light and beauty. . . I knew that day, and I know now, that there is one soul at least from Tanna to sing the glories of Jesus in Heaven - and, oh, the rapture when I meet him there!

What is most moving in his account of his trials is the way that he records having the sweetest communion with Christ precisely when he was in the deepest trials and greatest danger. On one occasion he is surrounded by armed men and, it seems, seconds away from being killed:

My heart rose up to the Lord Jesus; I saw Him watching all the scene. My peace came back to me like a wave from God. I realized that I was immortal till my Master's work with me was done. The assurance came to me, as if a voice out of Heaven had spoken, that not a musket would be fired to wound us, not a club prevail to strike us, not a spear leave the hand in which it was held vibrating to be thrown, not an arrow leave the bow, or a killing stone the fingers, without the permission of Jesus Christ, whose is all power in Heaven and on Earth. He rules all Nature, animate and inanimate, and restrains even the Savage of the South Seas.

In his final weeks on Tanna John was constantly on the run:

Without that abiding consciousness of the presence and power of my dear Lord and Savior, nothing else in all the world could have preserved me from losing my reason and perishing miserably. In his words, "Lo, I am with you alway, even unto the end of the world," became to me so real that it would not have startled me to behold Him, as Stephen did, gazing down upon the scene. I felt His supporting power. . . . It is the sober truth, and it comes back to me sweetly after 20 years, that I had my nearest and dearest glimpses of the face and smiles of my blessed Lord in those dread moments when musket, club, or spear was being leveled at my life.¹⁵ Oh the bliss of living and enduring, as seeing "Him who is invisible"!

As the chase intensified, Paton describes his experience of hiding in a tree, at the mercy of an unreliable chief, as hundreds of angry natives hunted him for his life:

I climbed into the tree and was left there alone in the bush. The hours I spent there live all before me as if it were but of yesterday. I heard the frequent discharging of muskets, and the yells of the Savages. Yet I sat there among the branches, as safe as in the arms of Jesus. Never, in all my sorrows, did my Lord draw nearer to me, and speak more soothingly in my soul, than when the moonlight flickered among those chestnut leaves, and the night air played on my throbbing brow, as I told all my heart to Jesus. Alone, yet not alone! If it be to glorify my God, I will not grudge to spend many nights alone in such a tree, to feel again my Savior's spiritual presence, to enjoy His consoling fellowship. If thus thrown back upon your own soul, alone, all alone, in the midnight, in the bush, in the very embrace of death itself, have you a Friend that will not fail you then?

Finally, after some amazingly close calls and spectacular deliverances (on one occasion as a mob attempted to set fire to the house he was in a massive storm came from nowhere and deluged the area) he managed to escape the island onto a passing boat, leaving with only the clothes on his back. Incredibly, he then faced accusations from armchair critics in Europe (who had criticised him before e.g. when moving his house to a slightly safer part of the island – "he's gone soft"):

Conscious that I had, to the last inch of life, tried to do my duty, I left all results in the hands of my only Lord, and all criticisms to His unerring judgment. Hard things also were occasionally spoken to my face. One dear friend, for instance, said, "You should not have left. You should have stood at the post of duty till you fell. It would have been to your honor,

and better for the cause of the Mission, had you been killed at the post of duty like the Gordons and others.

As Piper notes in his book on Paton, how easy it would have been just to throw in the mission towel at that point and walk away from it all. But he didn't.

2. Mission mobilisation & PD

For the next four years John Paton did extraordinarily effective mobilization work for mission to the New Hebrides, travelling around Australia, the UK and US, speaking in hundreds of churches. Much of this travel, especially around Australia which was then largely an untamed, dangerous wilderness, was extremely hazardous and he had plenty of adventures getting lost, almost drowning in bogs and riding on crazed runaway horses.

What he particularly realised at this time was how his trials on Tanna had not been wasted:

Oftentimes, while passing through the perils and defeats of my first four years in the Mission-field on Tanna, I wondered . . . why God permitted such things. But on looking back now, I already clearly perceive . . . that the Lord was thereby preparing me for doing, and providing me materials wherewith to accomplish, the best work of all my life, namely the kindling of the heart of Australian Presbyterianism with a living affection for these Islanders of their own Southern Seas . . . and in being the instrument under God of sending out Missionary after Missionary to the New Hebrides, to claim another island and still another for Jesus. That work, and all that may spring from it in Time and Eternity, never could have been accomplished by me but for first the sufferings and then the story of my Tanna enterprise!

Paton raised not only a very large amount of money but was also the means of raising up many workers for the harvestfield, often pastors and preachers who left their posts to go overseas:

I was . . . filled with a high passion of gratitude to be able to proclaim, at the close of my tour . . . that of all her ordained Ministers, one in every six was a Missionary of the Cross!

And interestingly, as the church gave – money and men – it was blessed:

Nor did the dear old Church thus cripple herself; on the contrary, her zeal for Missions accompanied, if not caused, unwonted prosperity at home. New waves of liberality passed over the heart of her people. Debts that had burdened many of the Churches and Manses were swept away. Additional Congregations were organized.

His PD work was not without setbacks and discouragements though. After working so hard to fund a mission ship, *Dayspring*, after only a few months of service it was sunk in a storm. Even then he was able to see these things in the light of God's good sovereignty.

Whatever trials have befallen me in my Earthly Pilgrimage, I have never had the trial of doubting that perhaps, after all, Jesus had made some mistake. No! my blessed Lord Jesus makes no mistakes! When we see all His meaning, we shall then understand, what now we can only trustfully believe that all is well - best for us, best for the cause most dear to us, best for the good of others and the glory of God.

3. Aniwa

John married again in 1864, and took his wife, Margaret, back, this time to the smaller island of Aniwa. When they landed in November, 1866, they saw the destitution of the animistic islanders.

The natives were cannibals and occasionally ate the flesh of their defeated foes. They practiced infanticide and widow sacrifice, killing the widows of deceased men so that they could serve their husbands in the next world.

Their worship was entirely a service of fear, its aim being to propitiate this or that Evil spirit, to prevent calamity or to secure revenge. They deified their Chiefs . . . so that almost every village or tribe had its own Sacred Man. . . . They exercised an extraordinary influence for evil, these village or tribal priests, and were believed to have the disposal of life and death through their sacred ceremonies. . . . They also worshipped the spirits of departed ancestors and heroes, through their material idols of wood and stone. . . . They feared the spirits and sought their aid; especially seeking to propitiate those who presided over war and peace, famine and plenty, health and sickness, destruction and prosperity, life and death. Their whole worship was one of slavish fear; and, so far as ever I could learn, they had no idea of a God of mercy or grace.

The Paton's mission engagement involved learned the language and producing a written script, building orphanages, Margaret Paton teaching a class of about fifty women and girls in "sewing, singing, plaiting hats and reading". They "trained the Teachers . . . translated and printed and expounded the Scriptures . . . ministered to the sick and dying . . . dispensed medicines every day . . . taught them the use of tools . . ." etc. They held public worship every Sunday and sent converts from neighbouring islands to all the villages to preach the gospel. It was on Aniwa that 6 of the Paton's 10 children were born, 4 dying in early childhood or in infancy.

And so, with much the same approach, the same faithfulness, the same gospel as in Tanna, but with very different results:

by the grace of God Aniwa now worships at the Savior's feet

And, with his strong reformed theology, Paton was keen to give all the glory to God for this:

Regeneration is the sole work of the Holy Spirit in the human heart and soul ... Oh, Jesus! To Thee alone be all the glory. Thou hast the key to unlock every heart that Thou has created

4. No retirement

Even into his 70s Paton was still travelling around the world with his wife, mobilising for the cause of missions in the South Seas, and working on a translation of the New Testament into the Aniwan Language, translating hymns and catechisms and an Aniwan dictionary. Paton outlived his second wife by two years and died in Australia on January 28, 1907.

Legacy

Today, 105 years after the death of John Paton, roughly 94% of the population of Vanuatu identifies itself as Christian, about 70% Protestant, with perhaps 46% of the population being evangelical ([Operation World](#)). Paton's autobiography has become a missionary classic but he would be the first to say that the Great One is the Lord Jesus.