



# 35926

BETTS, John; WATSON, William; COWPER, William

**Mission to the Aborigines. Report of the Aboriginal Mission, at Wellington Valley, for the year 1836 : Compiled from the Statements of the Rev. W. Watson.**

[Preceded by] *Extract from Letter of Mr. John Betts, Secretary to the Correspondence Committee, to the Honorable the Colonial Secretary, dated, Vineyard, June 1st 1837.* [Sydney, NSW : Legislative Council], [July?] 1837. Foolscap folio, [3] pp, letterpress printed; folded and mailed as a letter by Rev. William Cowper, Sydney, to Danderson Coates, Secretary of the CMS in London, the last side with address panel addressed in Cowper's hand 'D. Coates, Esq., Church Mission House, Salisbury Square, London', with oval cancel in red 'SHIP LETTER / SYDNEY / 8 AU / 1837', and a receiving mark with indistinct date of December (1837); at the foot of page 3 is a handwritten note, signed by Cowper, explaining that an interesting letter from William Watson about the Wellington Valley Mission is at present in the hands of Mr. Betts at Parramatta, and that Cowper had obtained this copy of the printed Report only yesterday, from the Clerk of the Legislative Council; two Webster Collection stamps, one with 2603 in manuscript; original folds, fore-edge a little roughened, a couple of small perforations where the seal was opened (partial loss of a few words in the printed text), else fine.

Very rare. Ferguson, 2321/31, noting two copies (Mitchell Library and NLA).

The Wellington Valley Mission – one of the earliest missions to Aborigines in Australia – was established in 1832 at the northern edge of the lands of the Wiradjuri, on the site of an abandoned convict settlement near the junction of the Bell and Macquarie Rivers, by two missionaries who had been selected by the Church Missionary Society Committee in Sydney: Johann Christian Simon Handt, a Prussian who had received his Lutheran training with the Basel Mission Society and had worked in Sierra Leone, and the less experienced Rev. William Watson, a Wesleyan-turned-Anglican. Both men were accompanied at the mission by their wives, Mary Handt (daughter of Pacific missionary, William Crook) and Ann Watson.

Although it remained open until 1843, the mission was doomed to failure from the outset, for a number of different reasons. Between Handt and Watson there was religious discord and a personal enmity, both of which festered throughout the mission's initial years, prior to Handt's departure shortly before this 1836 report was printed. (Handt would be replaced by another German, Jakob Günther, who clashed with Watson just as Handt had done earlier). The mission was associated with the CMS in name only – in reality, it was at the mercy of a parsimonious colonial government's indifference toward the project, and the government's reluctance to provide funds beyond a paltry £500 annual grant, coupled with intermittent yet severe drought, stymied its progress at every turn. The mission was beset by serious problems arising from an antipathetic and, in the worst cases, predatory local settler population: there was a constant and high incidence of sexual relations between European men and Wiradjuri women around the mission. Furthermore, while Watson did acquire some facility in the Wiradjuri language – to the extent that he was able to attempt several Bible translations and conduct prayer services in Wiradjuri – the CMS Committee would not commit to covering the cost of printing a Wiradjuri primer. Unlike Watson, Handt appears to have been uninterested in teaching in Wiradjuri,

and did not apply himself to learning the language with the same zeal as his colleague.

A thoroughly embittered Watson finally left the mission at the end of October 1840, having been dismissed from his position by the CMS in London after complaints about his behaviour by Günther and others. He took with him 26 Aboriginal children, in so doing continuing the sinister pattern of removing children from their families, and of forced child baptism, that he had practiced at the mission since his arrival there. Remarkably, Watson was then permitted to conduct his own "private mission" at Apsley, to the south of Wellington, until 1848.

Jakob Günther and his wife continued to run the Wellington Valley Mission after Watson's departure, but after a visit there in May 1841 the Anglican Bishop of Australia, William Broughton, declared the mission a 'complete failure'. The government eventually terminated its annual grant for the mission in 1843, and it was closed down; and, having managed to convert only a handful of 'deathbed penitents' and small children across its decade of existence, the Wellington Valley Mission has to be judged, even by its own standards, as a disastrous religious experiment.

Note: The original manuscripts of the papers of Reverend William Watson and Reverend Johann Christian Simon Handt are held with the Church Missionary Society papers in the University of Birmingham Library.

#### EXTRACTS FROM REPORT OF THE ABORIGINAL MISSION, AT WELLINGTON VALLEY, FOR THE YEAR 1836

*'... in the face of much opposition – of many prejudices – of an almost unbroken chain of vicious examples – and of a deplorable intimacy existing on all hands, between European men and Aboriginal females – there is reason to believe that both moral and spiritual benefit have been derived by the natives from Missionary exertions.*

*The central position of the Government grant or location at Wellington Valley, renders it an important station for missionary labours among the surrounding tribes, many of whom frequently visit the place, and thus become acquainted with the truths of the Gospel.*

*The vocabulary of the native language has again been revised and considerably enlarged. The Gospel of St. Mathew and almost the whole of the morning and evening services of our Church, have been translated into the language of the Aborigines – and in this language Divine Service is performed every Sunday. The missionaries have had under their care and instruction at different times, more than one hundred natives, besides occasional visitors, and others with whom they have conversed when on their journeys into the interior.*

*... in the early part of the year, Mrs. Handt, being in a state of ill health required every kind attention from her husband, the Rev. J.C.S. Handt, and in the month of April, they were both recommended to proceed on visit to Sydney ... since which period the Rev. Wm. and Mrs. Watson have been alone in the work.*

*At one time during the present year more than two hundred natives visited the Missionary station – and very frequently there has been a number of not less than forty to sixty under religious instruction. There are intimately attached to the Mission establishment: six elderly natives; five young men; eight boys; eight girls. Of these, twelve regularly sleep in the Mission House – the others, occasionally.*

*In every point of view, the Aborigines who are in connexion with the Mission are making a gradual, though slow advancement in civilisation and in christian knowledge.*

*The children, in general, improve as much as those of European parents, in all ordinary branches of education – reading, writing, sewing, and religious knowledge ... Of two young females, who were seduced from the Mission House, one in three months only had learned to read in the Testament and in the Prayer Book. Several of the young men appear to be weary of the bush life, and manifest a desire to possess property of their own: but they are afraid that other natives would soon dispossess them of what they might acquire ...*

*The Missionaries, at the commencement of their labours found the natives destitute of any knowledge of the true God ... But now ... several, under the preaching of the Gospel, and religious instruction, have been made acquainted with their inward depravity, and the sinfulness of their lives ...*

*One boy, ten years of age, and two children, who had previously been baptised, have died in the Mission House. The former ... by Divine Grace ... was enabled to say, "I do not want to get better, I want to die and to go to Jesus Christ – God has been very good to me."*

Note on Rev. William Cowper (1778-1858)

In 1808, at the invitation of Rev. Samuel Marsden, Rev. William Cowper was commissioned to take up

the position of assistant chaplain in New South Wales. He arrived in Sydney in 1809, where he was installed as minister of St. Philip's Church. During his first ten years in the colony he was Sydney's only permanent resident clergyman. Cowper's fiery evangelism was seen in an unfavourable light by John Thomas Bigge, who commented in his report 'that Cowper's "very strict notions ... of Christian duty" led him to adopt "a style of severity and prolixity" that was "repulsive" to most of his listeners; and that his long and diffuse discourses delivered *ex tempore* tended to deter "the higher and the middle classes" from regular attendance at church.' (ADB)

When Cowper sent this copy of the *Report of the Aboriginal Mission, at Wellington Valley, for the year 1836* back to Danderson Coates in London in August 1837, his eyesight was already failing, a fact which might explain why the note he appended at the foot of the report is written in unusually large-lettered cursive. Cowper writes: 'Aug. 2nd. The interesting letter from Rev. W. Watson mentioned in my communication to D. Coates Esq. is with Mr. Betts at Parramatta. This printed copy of the Report was yesterday obtained from the Clerk of the Council, and is now transmitted for the information of the Committee by (signed) William Cowper'.

Note on John Betts (1804-1852)

John Betts was the son-in-law of Rev. Samuel Marsden. (He was married to Marsden's daughter, Mary). In his capacity as Secretary of the CMS Correspondence Committee in New South Wales, Betts sent a copy of Watson's 1836 Report to the Colonial Secretary in London. An extract from his covering letter sent with the Report, written at the Vineyard estate, Parramatta, and dated 1 June 1837, is printed at the head of the text:

*'Sir, I have the honor of enclosing you herewith the Report of the Aboriginal Mission for the year 1836 ; compiled from the statements of the Rev. Messrs. Watson and Handt, at Wellington Valley, for the information of His Excellency the Governor'.*

This statement is significant for two reasons: first, it acknowledges the contribution to the Mission made by Handt, whose name does not otherwise appear anywhere in Watson's communication save for the dismissive two-line mention of the Handts' departure, on account of Mrs. Handt's ill-health, in April 1837. Second, Betts's wording makes it clear that the annual reports of the Wellington Valley Mission were compiled and printed at the behest of Governor Bourke.

Provenance: Private collection, Australia; ex Maggs Bros., London, c.1978; ex Webster Collection.

Kenneth Athol Webster (1906-1967) was a New Zealand-born dealer and collector in manuscripts, books, paintings and ethnographic artefacts relating to the Pacific. In the two decades after World War Two he built one of the largest and most important collections of this type of material ever assembled.

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