Vanuatu

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Vanuatu, formerly known as the New Hebrides, consists of thirteen main islands and many smaller islands all located in the southwest of the Pacific Ocean. The capital is Port Vila on the island of Efate.

Introduction

The principal inhabitants of Vanuatu are Melanesians who speak English, French, and a form of pidgin English called Bislama. The educational system provides both French and English language instruction, the result of Vanuatu’s history of control by a joint British-French Naval Commission beginning in 1887, and later, in 1906, a British-French Condominium. These developments were chiefly to protect expatriate missionaries and traders rather than serve the interests of the indigenous population. Independence within the British Commonwealth was granted in 1980. Their constitution allows for a National Council of Chiefs which advises the government.

Seventy percent of the population is Protestant, mainly Presbyterian. Twelve percent of the population is Seventh-day Adventist. During the Second World War the American Army established bases among the islands and their influence...
led to a number of cargo cults—a belief system in which superstitious practices are expected to produce modern material wealth—among the local inhabitants. The islands are prone to earthquakes and there are a number of active volcanoes in the region. In 2015, Cyclone Pam caused loss of life and widespread devastation to property.

A Passing Visit

During the fifth voyage of the Pitcairn, Seventh-day Adventists called at Presbyterian mission stations on the islands of Efate and Ambrym where it was relatively safe. The captain was cordially received and spent time learning something of the island group. It was basically a reconnaissance exercise.

Positive Interest from Australia

In 1911, a clerk at the Australasian Union Conference (AUC) office, Victor Stratford, adopted Vanuatu as one of his personal mission fields, regularly mailing Life and Health magazines and letters to European traders and missionaries throughout the island group. There were some agreeable responses. Late in the same year, Calvin and Myrtle Parker, together with nurses Harold and Clara Carr, were appointed by the AUC to pioneer a mission base in Vanuatu. They took with them a portable home. The men went ahead to Port Vila on Efate, arriving on June 10, 1912. Their wives tarried at Norfolk Island until the home was erected and then they proceeded to Port Vila, arriving on August 11.

A Bittersweet Start

Port Vila was only a staging ground until a permanent site could be found. An extensive search both north and south of Efate resulted in the purchase of a property for £150 on the little island of Atchin off the north-east coast of Malekula. The Carrs’ moved to Atchin on June 19, 1913, and began giving medical treatments to the local people. Parker came to assist with the building of a mission station that included a clinic. Some progress was made, but tragedy struck on October 6 with the sudden death of eight-month old Harold Carr, Jr. who contracted bronchitis. The grief-stricken parents returned to Australia.

Surrounded by Danger

Parker settled at Atchin, knowing that the previous owner was driven out by the local people and his belongings torched. On the boat trip from Port Vila, he learned of two Frenchmen who had recently been murdered by islanders on Epi and Espiritu Santo. He had hardly settled before the Atchinese advised all Europeans to leave. Traders fled, leaving only the Parkers at their station. A few months later seven national Presbyterian teachers on the neighboring island of Malekula were killed and eaten. The government mounted an armed retaliation, killing one islander but losing four of their own men, two being cannibalized. Parker acted as peacemaker and negotiated a treaty between sides. Not long after this success he had to intervene again, negotiating peace between two warring families on Atchin.

Some Progress

Throughout the dangers, the Parkers felt safe enough to sleep with their home unlocked. Myrtle Parker began a school in 1914 with fifteen students and initiated social gatherings for the women in order to remove prejudice and shyness. She served rice and bread rolls with cereal coffee. Parker himself completed the church on Atchin, his first in the island group, and dedicated it on January 17, 1914. He imported a large bell and hoisted it into a tower outside the church, attracting much attention as it called people to worship. In 1914, the mission was also provided with a small boat, a yawl with a 5 horse-power engine, for short trips between islands. It came to be known as the Eran (light) and served to transport people and supplies as the mission expanded.

Norman and Alma Wiles, recent nursing graduates, arrived at Atchin in April 1915 as replacements for the Carrs. In Alma Wiles’s first report, she noted that men and women were culturally obliged to have separate worship services. The local dress habits intrigued her for the nationals wore practically nothing as opposed to the missionaries who endured the heat in their suits and neck ties. When the local men attended services, they donned a loincloth on entering the church and left it behind when leaving. Likewise, the women put on the dresses, which Myrtle Parker made, and hung them up again in the church before returning to their village.

On one occasion, Wiles took the Eran around the northern tip of Malekula to the village of Matanavat. The chief welcomed him and Wiles brought him back to Atchin to see the station. He was impressed and offered a site for a school at Matanavat. Parker was keen to establish a base on the west coast of Malekula in order to eventually reach the populous inland plateau where the infamous Big Nambas lived. Wiles dismantled the dispensary at Atchin and Parker used the materials to erect a mission home at Matanavat. Norman and Alma Wiles relocated to Matanavat in 1916. Before their move, Chief Ambi of the Big Nambas visited the new station and was overjoyed when Parker gave him a bottle of his “rub medicine,” a mixture of turpentine oil and kerosene for muscle pain and skin ailments. Ambi promised to build a church and school in the mountains. Leaving Wiles on the Eran, Parker walked into the heart of the cannibal’s territory to choose a suitable site for his third mission station. He prayed with them
before he left, every man respectfully turning his back.28
Parker experienced the joy of conducting the first church service at Matanavat on April 8, before he was appointed to Fiji in mid-1916.29

New Management
Andrew and Jean Stewart replaced the Parkers, retaining Atchin as their base for mission operations.30 Soon after their arrival, a trader and five of his children were murdered on Malekula, a sobering reminder of the dangers of living among treacherous cannibals armed with machetes and muskets.31 Nevertheless, Stewart and Wiles walked into their territory several times and met the high chief, Nikkambat, eventually finding that the people had kept their promise and constructed a hut made of native materials for Wiles, located inland from Matanavat.32 Wiles managed to learn some of their language and translated a few hymns.33

Wiles suffered from frequent malarial fevers requiring him to take respite in Australia. Ross and Mabel James were appointed to take up the work in the New Hebrides.34 An opening presented itself to pioneer in the Big Bay area of Espiritu Santo in 1919, so James established an outpost there instead of continuing at Matanavat.35 Jope Laweloa and his wife Torika transferred from Fiji to assist Stewart and James.36

Tragedy Again
Wiles returned to the isolation of Matanavat in late 1919, resuming medical work for those on Malekula.37 One islander nearly blew his hand off while trying to stun fish with dynamite. Wiles amputated the hand even though no anesthetic was available. Unrest among the Big Nambas clans continued and the local chief took it upon himself to guard Wiles. In a letter written by Wiles on February 11, 1920, he mentioned they were plagued by mosquitoes. It was an ominous message that proved to be his last report.38 Sabbath morning, May 1, he walked to the Big Nambas hut and conducted a service for them. On his return the symptoms of blackwater fever overtook him, and, despite his wife’s treatments, he passed away four days later. Lying off-shore was a ship’s crew seeking to kidnap youngsters for plantation work. They assisted Alma Wiles with her husband’s burial and left her to walk around the rocky coast to reach Stewart on Atchin.39 Making matters worse, it was only a matter of months before Jope contracted blackwater fever at Big Bay, another relatively isolated spot. Rapid treatment by James, Jope’s removal to Atchin, and Stewart’s prompt assistance in transporting him to Australia for expert care saved his life.40 He and his family returned to Fiji after giving three years of service at Atchin and Big Bay.41

One young boy, who had adopted the name Moses, chose to camouflage Wiles’s grave with sticks and leaves and lingered in the vicinity to make sure the Big Nambas did not exhume the body and eat it.42 Some Big Nambas did, however, return to the Matanavat mission home and loot and vandalize it. Stewart was utterly dejected when he discovered the people’s disregard of the mission, but he walked into the mountains to confront them and managed to negotiate an understanding that the mission property was taboo.43

Ambrym Island
A few young men from Ambrym Island attended the Atchin school and returned home to advertise its benefits.44 By 1922, requests for a resident missionary and teacher were being made by the Ambrymese. In response to these calls, Donald and Lilian Nicholson pioneered a station at Baiap on the south coast of Ambrym.45 It was an instant success. Reports in 1923 spoke of thirty-six students and more than one hundred attending church services.46 Sixteen were baptized and placed on the Atchin roll until their own Baiap church was officially organized late December 1923.47 Parker returned and at the same time conducted the first Adventist wedding in the island group.48 A Missionary Volunteer Society was formed, the seed bowl of a movement that generated many missionaries. For example, Robert, Joel, Joe, Masengnalo, and others, all from Ambrym, braved the dangers of evangelizing Malekula.49 More opened branch stations on the coast of Ambrym at Malavet, Yiunmae, and Namalavere.50 Some did translation of Bible studies and hymns.51 The members proved to be such a strength that Ambrym was provided with its own 8 horse-power cutter, the Kaoriloif (Tell out the Light) in 1923.52

Malekula Island
The looting of Wiles’s home indicted that the Big Nambas no longer wanted the mission to continue, but in 1922 they expressed the wish for work to start again.53 The following year, they were once again on a war footing and shooting at mission adherents.54 In 1924, the Big Nambas declared a truce,55 only to threaten to wipe out the mission in 1926.56

They laid in wait and fatally shot one adherent, Lilitul, but only months later declared they wanted the mission to stay.57 Their treachery knew no bounds. It only took one of their clan to get sick or die and their witch doctor would allege the spirits were angry with the mission presence. With every reversal, they would return to their cannibalism, polygamy, tobacco smoking, pig-eating, and pay-back murders. However, small numbers who believed in a better way of life left the mountains and built little villages around the mission homes on the north-western coast. These were located at Malua Bay, Espiegles Bay, Matanavat, Tanmiel (or Tonmiel), and Wo Wo.58
Espiritu Santo Island

At his base at Horata on Big Bay, James continued to operate a school. He was assisted by national missionaries, Amos and Malupisa, at an out-station called Vileasu. Niala and Lois were stationed at a second spot called Hapuna. It was while the *Eran* was on a visit to Big Bay in 1923 that it was wrecked on the reef. James salvaged the engine and much of the hull and had it rebuilt. Prior to his transfer a baptism of four candidates was conducted and he performed the first Adventist wedding on the island, for Jekavu and Eunice. Anton and Bertha Weil replaced James in 1926. Anton created a sensation by playing his cornet at church services, something the locals had never experienced, but were immediately drawn to because of their natural aptitude for music and singing.

Atchin Island

Up until 1926, Atchin served as the mission headquarters and main training school. At the time mission statistics reported 39 baptized members throughout the group of islands and 258 attending Sabbath School. It was a modest return for twelve years of work, but the response from the young people, specially their willingness to join the work force, persuaded church authorities to plan for larger training facilities. Medical work had initially broken down prejudice, but from this point onwards educational work would take center stage.

A Major Shift

As national missionaries occupied the stations, they expanded to neighboring villages in a domino effect that called for an increasing number to be added to the work force who had a very basic education. Mission leaders began a search for a larger training school site that would replace Atchin as mission headquarters. Late in 1925, they found an ideal spot on the southern edge of Aore Island that included the smaller Ratua Island. The total area was said to be 2,412 acres, then in the hands of solicitor Frank Wallace of Port Vila who had purchased it from a French plantation owner named George de Latour. (de Latour had bought it from four local people in 1885). On October 22, 1925, a contract of sale was signed by the AUC and on February 1, 1926, £613 was deposited into Wallace’s account.

James had taken delivery of a new auxiliary ketch, the *Loloma*, and began ferrying building supplies to Aore. He erected a shed for a few of his young men to occupy. Trouble began almost immediately. A neighboring French company, Société Peyrolle, disputed the transactions of de Latour and Wallace and began encroaching on the property to fell timber. An injunction was sought from the British authorities to prevent the French from further work and parts for a sawmill arrived, a donation from a Mr. Hawkins of Toronto, New South Wales. John “Jack” and Rose Radley arrived late in February 1927, to serve as carpenter and engineer for the sawmill and *Loloma*.

Gardens were established by James, school buildings erected, and a herd of goats placed on Ratua Island to provide a source of meat for the students. The institution, first named the New Hebrides Training School, opened on October 27, 1927. The following year enrollment was reported to be approximately fifty students. A dispensary was planned to provide simple remedies and instruct pupils in first aid.

During the next few years the land dispute grew worse. Soon after Radley’s arrival, his life was threatened by four members of Société Peyrolle with loaded shotguns. These Frenchmen planted a grove of coconuts on mission property and Radley uprooted them. Over time the French allowed their pigs to wander into the school gardens and destroy the student’s food supply. Radley later wrote that he shot forty-nine pigs, all of which were retrieved by the French and eaten. A similar fate happened to any French goats that strayed into mission gardens. Radley built a fence to protect the mission property, but the French cut it and caused further provocation by herding their cows into the gardens. Radley shot one and then the French drove a herd of about three hundred at low tide onto Ratua Island among the mission’s goats. Radley drove them off by exploding dynamite in their midst. Three times this occurred until finally the French posted armed men on Ratua Island to guard their cows. They were instructed to shoot Radley if he came onto the island, but Radley’s boys crept up on the guards and stole their guns. Radley handed the weapons to the police at Port Vila. In 1932, a court case of questionable legality was held at which Radley was not summoned or allowed to defend himself or call any witnesses. He was fined and a peace agreement was signed between himself and the French. However, It did not resolve the matter of ownership of the Aore site. That was not resolved until a 1945 court hearing at which evidence was provided that Wallace had, indeed, the right to sell the site to AUC and any French claim was unfounded.

Further Developments

The dispute surrounding Aore had little adverse effect on the educational program. Scores of students, both male and female, continued to be accepted into the school from any mission station. The training school was only hindered for a short period during 1942-1943 when expatriates were advised to return to their homeland because of war-time conditions.
The mission on Ambrym suffered a major setback when, on the Friday night of June 28, 1929, a volcanic eruption and lava flows destroyed the Baiap headquarters. There was no loss of life but it was nearly three years before the station was re-built. Meanwhile, Limbul was developed as the new headquarters for Ambrym.

In 1931, mission personal visited Tanna Island to inspect some land on offer at Port Resolution. It was found to be suitable for mission purposes and the Wells were invited to open this new area. A home and school were built there, and in rapid succession seven outstations sprang up and a number of young people were selected to be enrolled at the Aore school.

Further expansions were made with entries into Paama Island, Aoba or Ambae Island, Malo Island, and Tongoa Island. Some individuals on Paama, being close to Ambrym, had attended services earlier and were happy to donate a site in 1935 on which to build a station. In the same year, Hamley Perry was pioneering a base on Aoba Island. Malo Island near Aore was a difficult island to evangelize because the people deliberately avoided living in village clusters. Nevertheless, a young man named Reuben entered in 1939 and began a small school. Another by the name of Philip opened a Sabbath School of forty members on Tongoa Island in 1940. The scope of the mission had become widespread, necessitating four vessels to transport supplies, students, and teachers. These vessels in the 1930s were the Kaoriof, the Rani, the Lephare, and the Erán 2.

The first ordination of Ni-Vanuatu workers took place on July 18, 1938 at Aore. They were Masing Nalo, Joel, and Joe, all Ambrymese who had served as missionaries since the mid-1920s. By 1940, eight churches were organized with a total baptized membership of 488 and a Sabbath School attendance of over one thousand. Tanna Island, with eleven groups meeting regularly, had the largest representation of Seventh-day Adventists. Malekula, Ambrym, and Aoba Islands each had four worship groups. Espiritu Santo and Paama Islands each had two groups and Malo, Aore, Atchin, and Tongoa Islands each had a single group of believers. There was still room for expansion within those islands and to other islands.

National leadership gradually became more evident. One of the earliest examples was when Joel was given charge of the Atchin station (1938). Solomon Tevita was listed in 1954 as the first to hold a departmental office, with responsibility for Sabbath School activities throughout the entire mission. Iati cared for Tongoa Island and Takau supervised work on Tanna Island, both in 1958. At the same time Masing Nalo was placed in charge of Malekula Island, the scene of his earlier work. It remained a dangerous area, with three killings reported in 1955. In 1962, James Aru was responsible for Espiritu Santo Island and, later, Simon Karae led the Port Vila district on Efate Island.

**Recent Times**

In January 1999, Nos Terry Mailalong became the first Vanuatuan appointed president of the Vanuatu Mission. At that time, he had the oversight of forty-seven churches with a total baptized membership of 13,270. By 1984, administrative headquarters had been transferred from Atchin to Aore, to Luganville (Santo) to Port Vila, Efate Island.

Under Mailalong’s presidency an Adventist Development and Relief Agency depot was established in Port Vila to provide a rapid response to local disasters. It was, for example, activated as a result of Cyclone Pam in March 2015. Since that disaster most re-built churches, schools, and clinics have been insured against future damage.

The pioneering of untouched islands is ongoing. For instance, in 2013 the church in Port Vila sponsored a Fijian missionary, Solomoni Taipo, to evangelize the tiny island of Futuna near Tanna. His work resulted in a baptism of twenty-six on August 15, 2015, and two days later their new church was dedicated.

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The training school on Aore Island continues to function under its new name Aore Adventist Academy. A second school, the Epauto High School, is conducted in Port Vila, Efate Island. In addition there are thirty elementary schools scattered throughout the island group. Medical work, which featured in the earliest mission efforts, continues in six clinics throughout Vanuatu, namely Aore Clinic, Middle Bush Clinic on Espiritu Santo, Port Quimie Clinic on Epi Island, Fundue Clinic on Aoba Island, and Port Resolution Clinic and the Jet Clinic, both on Tanna Island. An arm of Hope Channel produces local programs for television.

Current statistics report a total of 89 churches and 24,721 baptized members, a ratio of 1:11 among the entire population.

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