

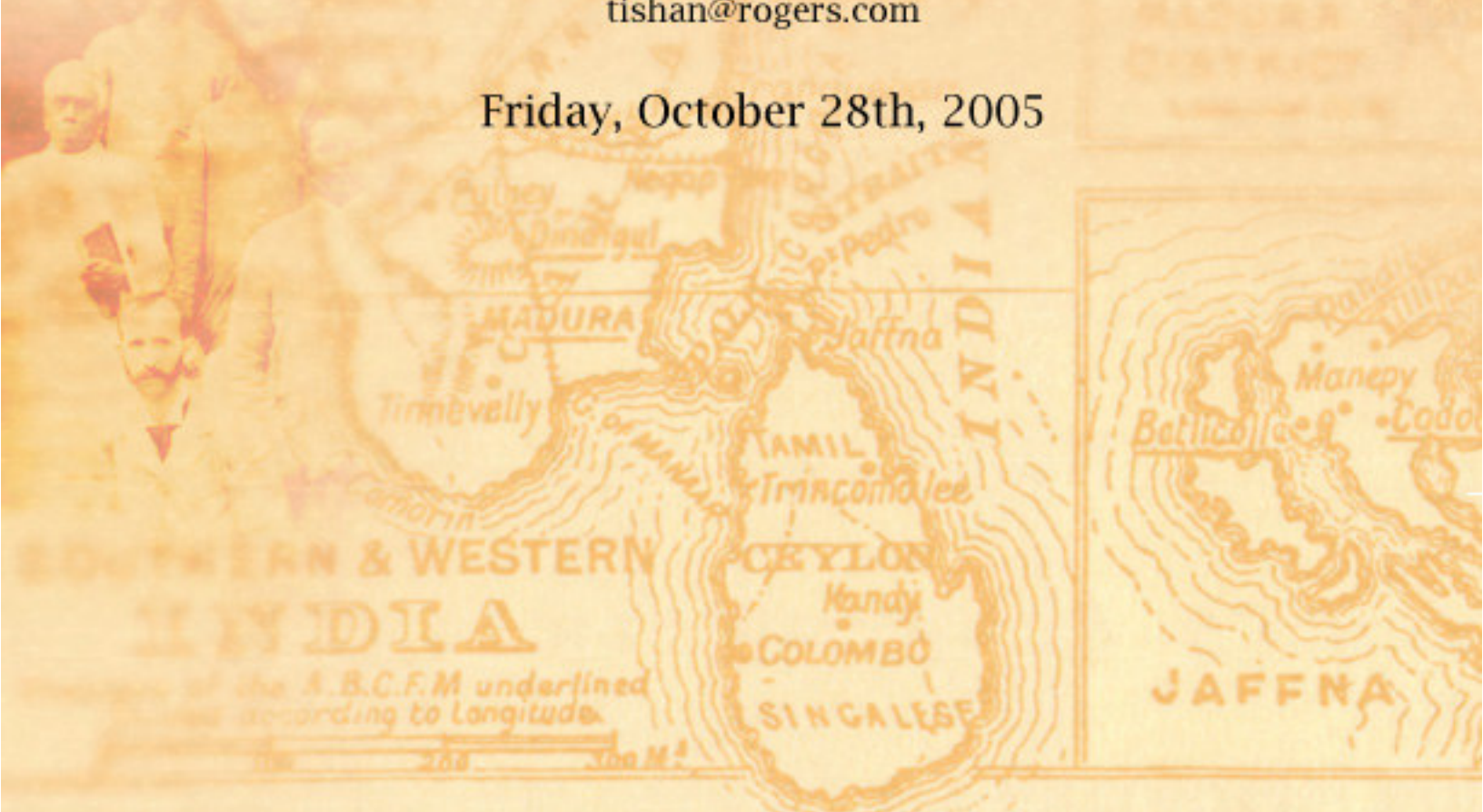
A Brief History of the American Ceylon Mission in Jaffna

Based on the Manuscripts of the
American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions
1816 - 1947

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Dedicated to the missionaries of the American Ceylon Mission and their families, to
whom the people of Jaffna will always be indebted

...and to my parents without whom none of this would have been possible.

Special thanks to Harvard University and the Houghton and Lamont Libraries.

Note: This article contains a summary of the presentation given on October 28th, 2005. For more information or to obtain a copy of the enhanced complete presentation on DVD, please email me at tishan@rogers.com or visit my web site at <http://ceylontamils.com/acm>.

My name is Cyrus Tishan Mills. Many people have asked me how a Sri Lankan Tamil came to have such a name. In fact there are many Tamil families from Jaffna have similar surnames that originate in England, or more accurately, New England. It becomes even more confusing when I tell them that I have no European ancestors. So where do these names come from? I have asked myself these very same questions for many years and it has led me on an incredible journey of discovery, not only about my own family history but also the work of American and Canadian Missionaries in Jaffna over the past 200 years.

To really appreciate the incredible pioneering work done by American missionaries among the Tamil people of Sri Lanka we have to first understand the religious landscape of this part of the world.

Religion in the east

Long ago, Jesus gave these commands to his disciples: “Go into all the world and preach the good news to all creation”, (Mark 16:15). “You will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth”, (Acts 1:8). And so the Disciples of Christ became the very first missionaries and while many travelled to the west, a man by the name of Thomas travelled to the east. In fact, as the story goes, he travelled as far east as southern India, where he was later martyred. Because of his efforts there have been Christians in this part of the world for nearly 2000 years yet it did not reach the island of Sri Lanka until much later.



The Apostle Thomas



A 19th Century Hindu Priest

a safe sea route to the East Indies.

During and after the lifetime of Thomas, Hinduism was, and still is, the dominant religion among the Tamil people. Over next 1500 years Hinduism prospered in Southern India and Northern Sri Lanka. Powerful empires arose in Southern India and their Hindu influence was felt in Sri Lanka and even as far east as Indonesia and Thailand. There was a renaissance of literature, classical dance and culture and Hinduism was deeply rooted in all these traditions.

At the same time, Buddhism prospered in the southern parts of Sri Lanka, especially among the Sinhalese. In addition, Islam was introduced by Arab sailors and merchants from India. For many years, these Muslims controlled trade routes between the East and

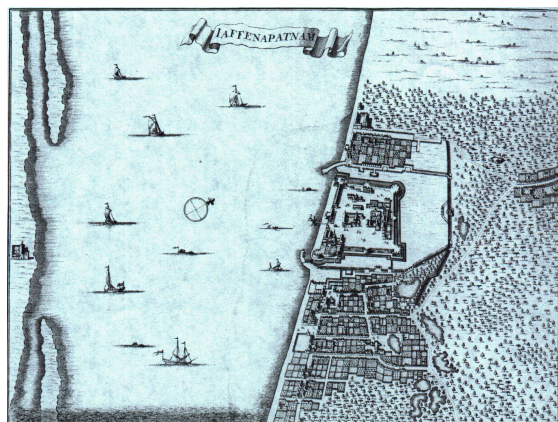
the West, and ultimately, this is what drove the Portuguese to find



Tamil Muslims

Roman Catholicism

The Roman Catholic faith was introduced to Sri Lanka by the Portuguese. Seven years after Vasco De Gamma rounded the Cape of Good Hope, the first Portuguese traders began trading at the present day capital of Colombo. Not long after, they moved north to the kingdom of Jaffna because they realized its strategic importance for trade and control of the sea route to southern India.



Portuguese Fort, Jaffna

The 1540s saw the arrival of the first European missionaries in Jaffna. The Portuguese missionaries were in fact acting under the orders from the King of Portugal to convert people of the lands in which they gained control, to Roman Catholicism. Among the fisher communities along the northern coast, they won many converts who were baptized by a man known as the Apostle of India, Saint Francis Xavier. This angered the ruling king of Jaffna who promptly had 600 of his own people killed in Mannar. Needless to say, things weren't going well for the first missionaries in this part of the world.

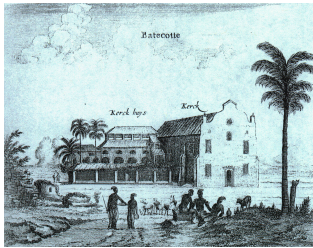
In addition, the Portuguese gained a reputation for being cruel and ruthless. It is reported that in Jaffna, the Portuguese destroyed some 500 Hindu temples and began converting people by force. Yet others claimed to be converts so that they could do business with the Portuguese and retain their possessions and power among the local people.

The Dutch Reformed Church

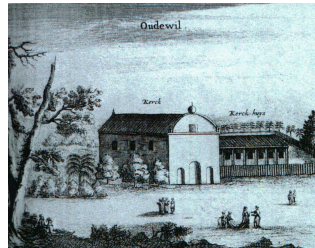
After 150 years on the island, there were quite a few nominal converts to Catholicism among the Tamil people. Eventually the Portuguese lost control of the coastal parts of the island to the Dutch in 1658.

For the Dutch, who were Protestants, their memories of reformation struggles in Europe were still fresh and they hated the Roman Catholics. They expelled many of the Catholic priests, closed clergy training schools and tore down the remaining symbols of Roman Catholicism.

In comparison to the Portuguese, the Dutch were more systematic and organized. In their attempts to convert the local people, the Dutch built churches and schools in many parishes.



Vaddukodai, 1672



Uduvil, 1672



Manipay, 1672

Thousands became nominal converts, probably because of the coercion applied by the Dutch. Under Dutch rule, no native could have title to land or gain government employment without becoming a Christian and being baptized. As a result, most Tamil people accepted baptism but behind closed doors they still practiced Hinduism.

Unfortunately, very few trained clergymen came from Holland and so religious leadership was scarce. The Dutch Reformed Church brought forth a faith which seemed cold and focused on Christian doctrine making it less attractive to the Tamil people compared to Roman Catholicism, which in many ways imitated the ceremonies and idolatry of Hinduism. Unfortunately, the Dutch were more interested in trade than in evangelism. Eventually the Dutch religious leaders lost hope and departed from the island. As a result, for years, the local Christians had no religious leadership and many of them converted back to Hinduism.

The British Era

After 138 years the Dutch were replaced by the more powerful British in 1796. In terms of religion, the British were more tolerant than previous European powers and they declared religious freedom on the island. All laws against Roman Catholics were rescinded in 1806. The result was that the remaining small population of Protestants converted back to Hinduism and Roman Catholicism.

At the same time, the British made efforts to maintain and grow the Protestant community by recognizing the Dutch clergy that were left and re-opening local clergy training schools. The British also allowed missionary societies into the island and in Jaffna there were the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society and the Church Mission Society from England but by far the most enterprising and most ambitious of these groups was the American Ceylon Mission (ACM).

It was only after they arrived that they realized how unsuccessful the efforts of the past 300 years were in bringing Christianity to the people of Jaffna. They had barely scratched the surface.

Origins of the American Ceylon Mission

The origins of the ACM date back to 1810 at a time in America when a hard-working and pious group of New Englanders became convinced that it was their responsibility to spread the Gospel, especially after hearing of the millions of people in the British Colonies that had never heard about Christianity. In 1810, these ambitious New Englanders set out to realize this dream and founded the American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions (ABCFM).

The very first missionaries of the ACM, set sail for India, only two years after the society was created. In those days, it took many months to sail from Boston to the East Indies. The very first missionary ship that left Massachusetts took nearly 6 months to arrive at its final destination. A missionary and his wife would spend that time in a room that was 4 x 6 feet without a porthole. On a long journey like this, it was not uncommon for people to get sick and die of diseases such as typhoid. It was certainly a difficult passage.

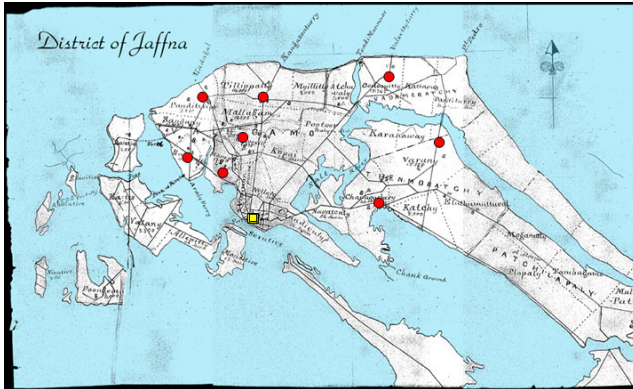
These missionaries finally arrived in Calcutta on June 17th, 1812 but they didn't stay there for very long. At the time, Great Britain and the United States were at war in what was then the British Colony of Upper Canada. As a result of this situation and the fact that the British East India Company had no use for missionaries, the British authorities in Calcutta ordered the missionaries to leave.

And so in August of that same year, Mr. and Mrs. Newell left Calcutta went to Mauritius for a temporary stay until they sorted matters out. As if things weren't bad enough, that winter, Mrs. Newell and her young daughter died. Yet Mr. Newell's spirit was not broken. In 1813, Mr. Newell set sail for Bombay in response to letters from missionaries there, but instead by chance the ship docked in Colombo, Ceylon where it stayed until 1814 before continuing on to Bombay. During that stay, he got to know the missionaries who were already there and taught at their churches. At the time, there were only TWO protestant missionaries on the island. Before leaving, the then British Governor of Ceylon invited Mr. Newell to start an American mission in Ceylon.

Immediately after the war ended, the ABCFM sent five missionaries by the names of Richards, Bardwell, Warren, Meigs and Poor to setup a mission station to minister among the Tamil people of Jaffna which they saw as a stepping stone to reaching the people of Southern India. And so in early 1816, the American Ceylon Mission was founded in Jaffna.



Rev. Daniel Poor



ACM Mission Stations

to understand Christian texts written in English. Only a few years after arriving, the Americans had setup various institutions of education in Jaffna including free village day schools for young children. They also setup separate boarding schools for older students.

The ACM eventually established eight mission stations in the northern part of Sri Lanka. Of these, the most important by far were Batticotta (known locally as Vaddukoddai) and Manipay which were the locations of the main school, medical mission, printing press and churches.

Mission Schools

When the missionaries first arrived in Jaffna, they found that the greatest impact they could make was through education. It would allow them to interact with the local people and allow the natives



An ACM Children's School, circa 1899

According to a report in 1848, there were nearly 150 primary schools and 16 English day schools with over 600 students, in various villages which acted as feeder schools to the boarding schools for older students. Enrolled in these schools were more than 30,000 students in the first 40 years of the mission alone. It was through these schools that the mission reached out to the native Hindus and their families.

Women's Schools



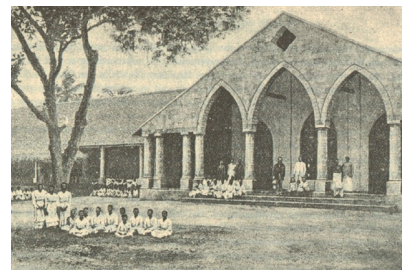
Miss Leitch and girls, 1880s

In terms of education and empowerment for women, the missionaries made a big impact. When they arrived, there was strong local opposition to the education of women. Women were seen as not much more than the property of their husbands and their primary role in society was to be a housewife and bare children. According to the Americans, in 1816, only 3 women in Jaffna knew how to read and write.

When the Americans arrived, this changed for the better. They setup three types of schools for women: station schools, village schools and a boarding school in the town of Uduvil. The most important of these was the Uduvil Girls Boarding school, founded in 1824 by a missionary named Harriet Winslow which is the first female boarding school in Asia and one of the first schools for women in Asia.

At first, to overcome local opposition to educating women, the schools offered gifts such as the promise of money for a dowry and clothing for the girls who attended. By the 1850s however, public opinion regarding education for women had made huge

strides and many people had their daughters educated at Uduvil. These women would go on to pursue professions in nursing, medicine and preaching as Bible Women.



Uduvil Girl's School, 1880s

Men's Schools

The most famous school of the ACM was a boarding school for boys founded in 1823 in Batticotta. In its first year, the newly founded seminary took 50 of the most promising students from the smaller boarding schools that already existed. The course of study at the Seminary, which took 8 years, was very rigorous and taught a wide range of subjects including English and Tamil literature, science, mathematics, and of course the scriptures.

The main purpose of establishing this school was to graduate students who would be proficient in evangelizing to the Tamil people of Jaffna and as well as in India and to generally raise the local standard of education but as its reputation became widely known, the school was expanded and many graduates took up posts as officers of the British Government.

Sir James Emerson Tennent, who was the Chief Secretary of the British Colonial Government of Ceylon from 1845-1850 writes this about the Seminary in 1850 regarding his visit to the school:

"The examination, which took place in our presence, was on History, Natural Philosophy, Optics, Astronomy, and Algebra. The knowledge exhibited by the pupils was astonishing; and it is no exaggerated encomium to say that, in the extent of the course of instruction, and in the success of the system for communicating it, the Collegiate Institution of Batticotta is entitled to rank with many an European University."

The mission was very proud of the seminary, as documented in a report in 1855 which boasts about the skill of its Tamil teachers and the quality of its graduates.

"The present state of the institution, if we look at it in view of some of the objects for which it was founded is very encouraging. There is a core of able and well qualified native teachers, fitted to give instruction in all important branches, and the attainments of those under their charge are such as in many cases to do honour both to the teachers and pupils. It has attained a commanding influence in the community, as a literary and scientific institution, and is a stepping stone by which many have been able, at a cheap rate, to rise to posts of influence and emolument."

Even with all this praise however, the school failed to produce as many earnest Christians as was expected. In 1855, the seminary had 96 boarding students but only 11 were members of the Christian Church. In addition, the prominence that was given to Science and English was what attracted many students up to that point, as a means to gain employment with the government. As a result, after 1855, many changes were made throughout the seminary, including the discontinuance of English classes and the admittance of only Christians. Subsequently, the school was closed. This came as a shock to the local people who eventually took up its cause. In 1867 the alumni of the Seminary as well as prominent members of the Jaffna community raised money and founded a college which would become the successor of Batticotta Seminary called Jaffna College which still stands today.

The Medical Mission

In addition to these schools, the mission also had a medical department which was also crucial to their mission work.

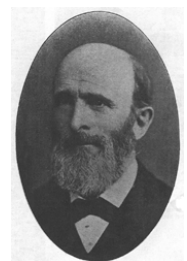
As the various groups of missionaries of the ACM arrived and departed Jaffna, there was always one missionary trained in medicine at the mission. The primary role of this person was to take care of the missionary families, however, eventually, it became evident that there was a great need for medical attention of the local people and also to train native doctors. Before that time, the native people of Jaffna did not have knowledge of western medicine. The only type of treatment given was what was called Ayurvedic treatment but did little good to any sick person.

Of the first group of missionaries who arrived in 1816, Rev. Warren and Rev. Richards had a basic knowledge of medicine. They brought some medicine with them and for the most part, they took care of the missionaries but they did what they could to help the people of Jaffna as well. Mr. Warren describes his medical work at Tellipalai in 1816-1817:

"Our attention has been called to the sick around us. Many flocked to our doors for medical aid, as soon as they were informed that we had the means of assisting them. We have reason to hope that God will bless our attention to them, for their spiritual as well as temporal good. It affords us an opportunity to recommend the great Physician to many from different parts of the district whom we should probably otherwise not see. We may converse with them in the most favourable circumstances to leave a good impression on their minds. Our morning prayers are often attended by many who come for medical aid, at which time we preach to them Jesus Christ."

Dr. Scudder followed Mr. Warren in 1819 and continued in medical evangelism. He opened a dispensary in Panditeruppu and Chavakacheri. In 1836, Dr. Ward arrived in Jaffna and taught at the mission seminary in Batticotta. Dr. Ward's recommendation to the mission was that they educate one doctor for each of the mission stations so that they could look after the Tamil Christian communities there. With the financial support of the British Governor of Ceylon, he began to train native doctors. All in all, he taught 10 students, but unfortunately only two actually completed the course of study (Jeremiah Evarts and Ira Gould).

In 1848, Dr. Samuel Fisk Green arrived in Jaffna, a recent graduate of the College of Surgeons and Physicians of New York, only 25 years old. The mission had decided to train native doctors for each of the stations but Dr. Green would educate many more doctors to work among their own people. He founded a medical school that became highly reputed across the entire island. He taught his students to become self-supporting practitioners and even encouraged them to stay away from Government or plantation service where they would earn more money, but instead told them to stay with the Christian mission so they could spread the gospel through their work. The school became so widely respected that even the British Government offered government funds to help the school.



All of Dr. Green's students were all graduates of Batticotta Seminary and so they had a good knowledge of English. Together with Dr. Green, they translated many books on western medical science into Tamil. This was done in hopes that books written in Tamil would bring greater acceptance and also that the practitioners of Ayurvedic medicine would also become enlightened to the truths of western medical science.

In 1852, the mission gave Dr. Green a small house where he founded a hospital beside the mission station. He also started a dispensary through which he issued medicines for the various mission stations through the medical assistants he trained for each station. The dispensary and clinic at Manipay were in the mission house and each morning, the patients would wait at the back veranda. Each person was given a ticket on the back of which was printed in Tamil, a summary of the Christian message. After this, there was a 15-minute

sermon, usually by the assistant physician. When patients came to see the doctor, conversations were often turned to morality or religion and some people were given religious tracts.

Eventually, Dr. Green became one of the few Westerners to become fluent in Tamil and even published a Tamil Dictionary for Medical Science. During his time, he trained 60 medical assistants and doctors, translated over 4000 pages of medical texts and treated thousands at his dispensary and hospital. His contribution would leave a mark on the entire island and beyond through his students. Even the Sri Lankan Government recognized his contribution by issuing a stamp with his portrait in 1998 in honour of the 150th anniversary of his arrival on the island.

There was even a Canadian connection to the medical mission through Dr. Thomas B. Scott and his wife. Dr. Scott was educated in Arts, Theology and Medicine at Queens University in Kingston, Ontario. His wife Dr. Mary Scott, who was the daughter of a Congregational minister in Canada, was also trained as a teacher, nurse and finally a doctor. Dr. and Dr. Scott were sent by the ABCFM to Manipay in 1893 and spent many years in Jaffna. Thanks to the thousands of dollars raised by the Leitch sisters, they built what was first called the General Hospital in Manipay and eventually renamed it the Green Memorial Hospital. When it was completed, it had accommodations for 70 patients and an operating room. The Scotts practised medicine and evangelized among the people of Jaffna for many years, even after both their sons succumbed to disease and died in Manipay.



Dr. Curr and Nurses, circa 1916

The medical mission also made contributions to the advancement of education for women, especially after the arrival of Dr. Isabella Curr who supervised the hospital in Manipay when the Scotts were away. Dr. Curr also directed another hospital through the mission called the McLeod Hospital for Women and Children at Inuvil. Dr. Mary Scott and Dr. Isabella Curr trained many nurses in Jaffna. The training of small numbers of women nurses was described by one historian as “revolutionary” at the time. This became one of the first professions for women in Jaffna.

American Names among Tamils

Many of the Tamil Christians of the ACM stations took American names for various reasons when they were baptized. Many were young converts who were disowned by their families and the taking of a new name also signified that they were joining a new family. Some chose their own names from the Bible such as Abraham and Nathaniel. Yet others took the names of missionaries who had been their mentors.

Most commonly, students in the ACM schools were given an alias that was used during school. This was usually the name of an American sponsor from one of the New England congregations supporting the ACM. Some students who eventually became Christians took this name permanently when they were baptized. For example, the following individuals who were among some of the early converts changed their names as follows:

- Muttukumaru Sithamparapillai became William Nevins.
- Arumugam Nannithamby became Robert Williams.
- Vairavanathar Sinnathamby became William Cotton Mather.

Like these people there were many converts over long history of the ACM and without a doubt those native Christians played a crucial role in the mission as preachers, pastors, teachers, translators, interpreters, printers, writers and doctors.

Printing Press

The founders of the ACM realized the importance of Christian literature in Tamil. The result was founding of the first printing press in Jaffna which saw the publication of many scientific, religious and historical texts in both English and Tamil. In 1841, they founded the island's second oldest newspaper, the Morning Star. The newspaper was devoted to articles on many subjects including religion. Its pages were even open to articles that criticized Christianity and many people read the paper to read the answers that the missionaries had, to those criticisms. According to American and non-American readers in 1916, the paper was judged to have had “a powerful influence on public opinion in Ceylon.”

Health Problems in the Mission Field

During the course of the ACM, there were many hardships for missionaries. In the first 28 years of the mission, there were 60 missionaries in Jaffna, 28 men and 32 women. Eighteen of these died and another 18 were forced to leave because of poor health of a wife or husband or both. In the same period, 85 missionary children were born in Ceylon and 12 died. Many people died from tuberculosis and cholera.

Caste

The caste system of the Hindu religion was seen as a direct obstacle to the acceptance of the Christian faith. In Jaffna various historians have counted the number of castes as being between 24 and 150 depending on the various sub-divisions that are included. This complex system of castes and their relationships with each other was entrenched into Jaffna society and the missionaries saw its negative effects in their stations. In many cases, high caste Christians refused to eat food cooked by low caste people and demanded that low caste people always sit on the floor in schools and churches while they sat on chairs.

From the beginning, the ACM took the position that caste had no place in the Christian church. Because of the pioneering work of the missionaries of the ACM in changing local attitudes toward caste, generations later, the caste system is denounced by many Tamil Christians and even many Hindus of Jaffna.

My Family



Dr. C. T. E. Mills and family, 1880, Manipay

A few years ago, I discovered on the Internet that there existed a college in Oakland, California, USA, called Mills College. This was a women's college founded in 1865 by Cyrus and Susan Mills. As it turned out, Cyrus and his wife were missionaries in Ceylon between 1848 and 1854. After reading the biography of the founders of Mills College, I discovered to my surprise the origin of my family surname.

My great-great-grandfather, Ethirnayagam Murugesar, was born on December 31st, 1839 into the family of Kapitan Ethirnayagam Mudaliyar of Vaddukodai, son of Velupillai, Maniagar of Valigamam West, and grandson of Subramaniam Udayar of Vaddukodai. They were all staunch Hindus. His father sent him to study at Batticotta Seminary when he was 14 and eventually, against the wishes of his family, he became a Christian. When he was baptized, he chose to take the name of his mentor and friend, Rev. Cyrus T. Mills, who was the president of Batticotta Seminary at the time. This fact was unknown to my



Dr. C. T. E. Mills and his medical students, 1880, Manipay

family until recently.

In 2003, my family and I visited Mills College in California. As the biography of the founders of the college has told us, a Batticotta boy in Jaffna had taken the Mills name and even several years after the Mills' had moved to California he wrote to them and sent photos of his family (shown above) and of the students he taught in Dr. Green's medical school.

Conclusion

Although the Christian church in Jaffna today has had many obstructions in its way, in a culture that has such ancient roots in non-Christian traditions, the missionaries of the American Ceylon Mission overcame many of these obstacles to achieve their dream of creating a self-governing, self-supporting and self-propagating indigenous evangelical church in Jaffna.

The ACM brought with them a pioneering spirit from America and made an incredible contribution to the religious and social well being of the people of Jaffna.

The ACM sent over 125 missionaries to Jaffna, many of whom gave the best years of their lives to missionary work in Jaffna. What set the missionaries of the ACM apart from their European predecessors was that they weren't there for financial gain. In fact, there were times when they were not wanted there.



Welcoming Party to 1901 Deputation

Still they were determined and humble, always believing that they should win people over by their actions and not simply their words. Rev. Miron Winslow who arrived in Ceylon in 1820 had these words for an outgoing group of missionaries at the Bowdoin Street church in Boston in 1835:

"Profit by the experience of those who have gone before you. Enter readily and humbly on the most humble and self-denying labours... Let your precepts be embodied in your actions. You should stand before the Hindoos more in the character of witnesses for the truth, giving your simple testimony in its favour, than as champions for it by the weapons of argument.... They will be quick to discern your character; and they will give weight to your testimony in proportion to the holiness of your life."

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