

REV LANCELOT THRELKELD (1788 - 1859)

Born in England in 1788, Lancelot worked in the circus and the theatre in London before he was converted to the Christian faith in his early twenties. He became a missionary with the London Missionary Society in 1814, and with his wife travelled to the Pacific Islands via Rio de Janeiro in 1816.

When his wife died in 1824 he almost went back home to London, but instead was convinced to establish a mission in Australia for Aboriginal people in the Lake Macquarie area, north of Sydney. He remarried and set about the construction of his mission station with determination, despite many being pessimistic about its possible success.

He spent as much time as possible learning the local Awabakal language. Contrary to other people of his time, he saw the Aboriginal people as being intellectually equal to Europeans.



After 2 years the mission was thought to be too expensive and the LMS encouraged him to abandon it. Lancelot was not deterred; he obtained a government grant of land nearby and received some modest Church of England and government financial support. He ran commercial ventures on the side, such as grazing cattle and later establishing a coal mine, to supplement this income.

Lancelot had an Aboriginal helper named Biraban, who helped him learn the Awabakal language, as well as local tribal customs. In 1830 together they translated the gospel of Luke, which was the first book of the Bible to be translated into an Aboriginal language. Before this, the approach had been to teach Aboriginal people English in order that they read the Bible in English. Threlkeld's missionary strategy was 'first obtain the language, then preach the gospel.' It would be more than a century after Threlkeld before mission societies adopted this strategy of preaching the gospel in the language of the people.

He published a number of linguistic works, including *Specimens of a Dialect* (1827), *An Australian Grammar* (1834), *An Australian Spelling Book* (1836) and *A Key to the Structure of the Aboriginal Language* (1850).

He was concerned to ensure that the Aboriginal people had the skills to maintain an independent livelihood. To this end he instructed them in agriculture and farming, but met with little success, failing to understand the nomadic Aboriginal way of life.

After 15 years Threlkeld did not succeed in gaining one convert. Unfortunately, due to massacres and European diseases, the Awabakal people were also rapidly declining in numbers. The mission had to close in 1841.

Lancelot moved to be a pastor in Sydney but continued to work for Aboriginal welfare, acting as a translator in court. In 1910 the church building at Watson's Bay where he was a pastor was destroyed during a hurricane.

Later he was appointed to the oversight of the Mariner's church, a ministry to sailors who arrived off ships visiting the Port of Sydney. He was doing this work when he died in 1859. Flags on ships in Sydney Harbour flew at half-mast when he died, out of respect for 'the Sailors' Chaplain'.