Massacre of the Missionaries

The Roving Reader Files

Where do our ideas about foreigners come from? Why do we view them the way we do?

I've often wondered about this and concluded it's partly due to ‘cultural inheritance’. What do I mean? Well, the other day I nearly fell over when visiting the Special Collections archive at Manchester Metropolitan University (MMU). Nothing to do with the staff. Just that there on display were two images that almost throttled me with the force of what they communicated about inherited attitudes to foreigners. Due to the kindness of the archivist, you can see them too.
Produced in 1841 by George Baxter (who’d invented the first commercially viable colour printing process), they are two amongst many portraits he published depicting Christian missionaries and their activities, some of which appeared in missionary literature of the day. The two you can see here were particularly influential. They conjured up vividly scenes from the final days in 1839 of Rev John Williams and James Harris, as they went about spreading Christianity to ‘save and civilise the natives’ in the Pacific region on behalf of the London Missionary Society.

Famous missionaries such as Williams were heroes of the era, with eager admirers thirsty to read about their exploits. In the first image, there stands the Reverend at the front of his little boat – white, tall, earnest and upright, with dark clothes neatly pressed. On the island shore gather crowds of semi-naked brown natives, listening to him with curiosity. In the second image, there lies the Reverend in the sea, about to be clubbed to death and eaten by similar natives, this time with fury, hate and evil written all over their faces.

This was big. The news of the terrible event shocked the world. Whatever could have happened? Why did the natives do this? How did they come to dislike Williams and Harris sufficiently to massacre them in this cruel manner?

That’s a story for another day. The moment I saw the pictures, what concerned me was something else – the similarity between these beautifully-crafted images and countless others that have appeared in Boy’s Own annuals, movies, news footage and documentaries ever since. Somewhere at the back of my mind they merged with the ‘cowboys and Indians’ childhood folk memories of ‘the other’ who’s out to get us, who hates us, who we have to control…

Now, I’m sure Baxter, Rev Williams, Harris and most of their followers were sincere and had the best of intentions. No doubt they passionately believed in ‘uplifting the benighted heathen’ (even if the benighted heathen didn’t perceive themselves in need of such attention). But we need to look beyond that. I’m suggesting that prints like these from over 170 years ago were instrumental in etching images of the ‘barbarous foreigner’ on our collective psyche, forming part of a ‘cultural inheritance’ that’s been handed down from generation to generation in some quarters without much consideration.

The CNN of their day, illustrations such as these filled the minds of many a later missionary (not to mention servant of the Empire) at a time when cinema, television and social media weren’t even twinkles in anyone’s father’s eye. They also filled the minds of thousands upon thousands of pious readers back home, who’d never actually met a foreigner, but who donated hard-earned pennies to missionary societies working across the globe to eradicate ‘barbarity’.

Whether they reflected any ‘objective truth’ or not, these images took on a life of their own in the popular imagination which still has repercussions today…

Specialising in the history of race relations, the Centre preserves material which covers the unfortunate historic effects of such images on how different races view each other. It can be difficult to recognise
inherited attitudes for what they are. Sometimes, just sometimes, we experience something that can help. The ‘Massacre of the Missionaries’ did that for me.

‘The Reception of the Rev. J. Williams, at Tanna, in the South Seas, the Day before he was Massacred’ and ‘The Massacre of the Lamented Missionary the Rev. J. Williams, and Mr Harris’ were printed in oil colours and published together by George Baxter of London in 1841. Baxter was a personal friend of Rev. Williams and produced these prints as a memorial as well as to raise funds for Williams’ surviving family. The prints are part of the Mary Butcher Collection of Baxter Prints held by MMU Special Collections. Just so everyone realises that not all the effects of missionaries were negative, let me point out a volume on the shelves of the Centre which tells the story of Baptist missionary to Jamaica William Knibb, who preached freedom to the slave population in the early nineteenth century. Needless to say, he was highly unpopular with the slaveholding classes. He was sent by his supporters, however, as their advocate to lecture in Britain and speak before both Houses of Parliament on the state of West Indian colonies in the 1830s. See Philip Wright’s Knibb the Notorious – slaves missionary 1803-1845 (published 1973). In fact, George Baxter produced a colour print of William Knibb as well, which is also part of the Mary Butcher Collection. I haven’t seen it yet, but I think I’ll pop into MMU Special Collections soon to take a look…