

## BEGINNINGS

Lancelot Edward Threlkeld (Tkld) was born in Southward, on the London south bank, in 1788—the year the Australian landmark year—when his father and mother were respectively 29 and 27 years of age. While Tkld was as old as 32 when his father died in 1820, aged 61, and 43 when his mother died in 1831, aged 70, for some reason from the age of 7 he was raised by a female relative, probably an aunt.

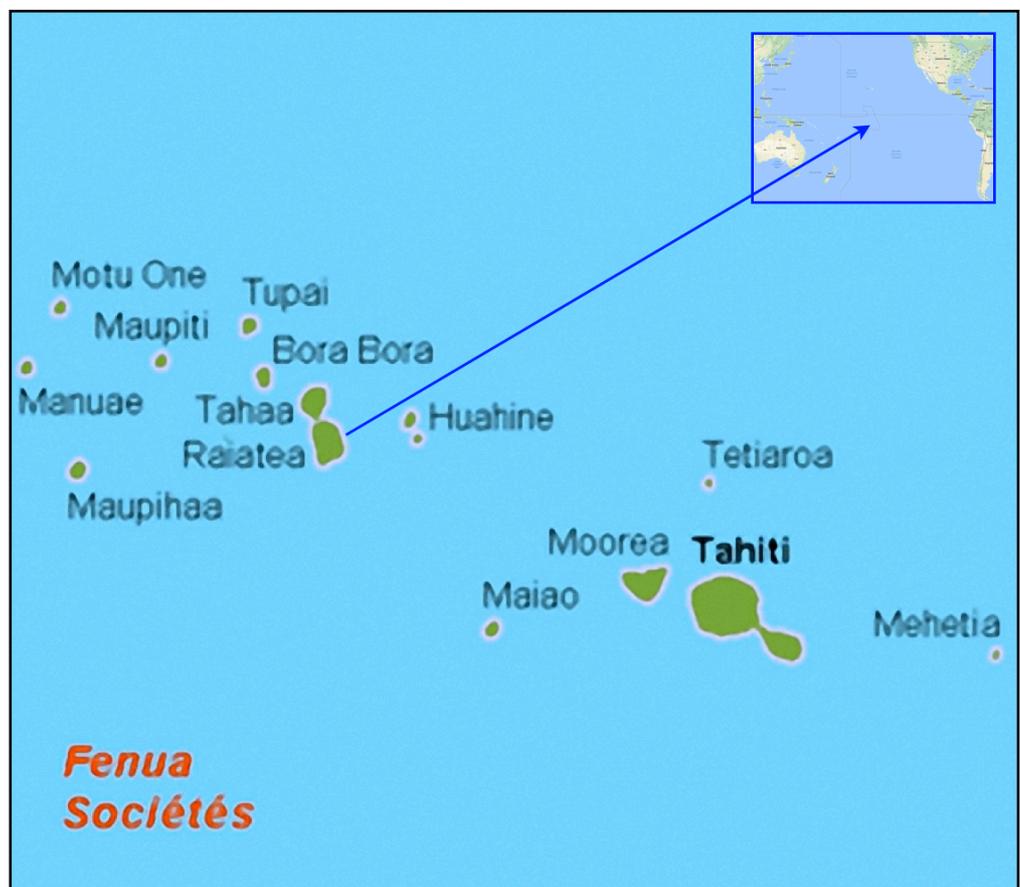
While growing up he had three near-death experiences from a fall, an illness, and nearly drowning. As a teenager he first took up an apprenticeship to a trade, then when about 17 formed the idea of becoming an actor, and signed up first with a circus and then a theatre company, and next made an unsuccessful attempt at business. He was aged 20 by this time, which is when he married a local girl Martha Goss, in 1808.

After returning to the idea of the theatre without success, for a further unknown reason he went to a village in Devon, Hatherleigh, in far southwest England. This was to prove life changing. There he met the vicar, the Rev. C. Glasscott, an encounter that turned his mind towards spiritual matters seemingly for the first time, giving him a sense of purpose in life that never thereafter seemed to falter. He began preaching, and at this time formed the idea of becoming a missionary, to the point of being accepted by the London Missionary Society (LMS). He duly went to London, then attended a Congregational seminary in Gosport near Portsmouth, finally being ordained on 8 November 1815 at the age of 27.

Instead of being assigned to Africa as had been first proposed, he was sent to to the South Sea Islands, leaving Portsmouth on the *Atlas*, with his by then pregnant wife, for that destination on 23 January 1816. Martha gave birth to a son while on board ship. The ship called in at Rio de Janeiro, and while there Martha became ill. Tkld made the decision to quit the ship and stay in Rio for his wife's sake, but while she recovered the infant, William, died.

This abandoning of the voyage brought Tkld into his first major clash with the LMS, the Society later communicating unsympathetically that he should have carried on with the voyage in fulfilment of his undertaking to save many souls, necessarily more significant in its view than a single soul only.

Tkld finally resumed the journey leaving Rio on 22 January 1817 on the *Harriet*. The new ship took them to Hobart Town, arriving on 21 March, before continuing onto



Sydney five weeks later, arriving on 12 May 1817. The next phase of the journey was on the *Active*, which called in at the North Island of New Zealand for a period, finally getting to the island of Moorea to the west of Tahiti on 17 November 1817, after 22 months' travelling from England.

By September 1818 Tkld was on the island of Raiatea, still further westwards in the archipelago. He was to stay there six years, during the course of which the children Thomas (1817), Martha (1819), Tabitha (1821) and Mary (1823) were to be born.

Martha, Tkld's wife, was to die on 7 March 1824, provoking a change. Tkld with his son Thomas, accompanied some members of a deputation from the LMS on a ship that eventually arrived in Sydney 19 August 1824. His three daughters were left for the time being with friends in Raiatea. Tkld had had the intention of proceeding on to London, but this was not to happen. While preaching in Sydney, and notably at the Ebenezer Presbyterian Church at Cattai, near Parramatta, he resumed an acquaintanceship with Dr Thomas Arndell and family, and after a stay of two months in Sydney married Sarah Arndell, the doctor's daughter, on 20 October 1824. This was to be only a day or so after he had been invited by the LMS deputation to consider a new missionary venture of evangelising the Aborigines. By agreeing to this Tkld marked a new milestone in his life.

#### **FAMILY**

The children by Tkld's first wife, Martha Goss (married on 1 February 1808) were:

Joseph Thomas	(9 Jul 1817)	24 (age in 1841 when the Mission closed)
Martha	(4 Nov 1819)	23 (age in 1841 when the Mission closed)
Tabitha	(17 Jul 1821)	20 (age in 1841 when the Mission closed)
Mary Williams	(23 Sep. 1823)	18 (age in 1841 when the Mission closed)

Children by his second wife, Sarah Arndell (married 20 October 1824) were:

Elizabeth Sophia	(16 Sep. 1825)	16 (age in 1841 when the Mission closed)
Lancelot Edward	(31 Jan. 1827)	14 (age in 1841 when the Mission closed)
Frances Hannah	(11 Apr. 1829)	12 (age in 1841 when the Mission closed)
Sarah	(30 Jul 1830)	11 (age in 1841 when the Mission closed)
Thomas Samuel	(29 Jun. 1834)	7 (age in 1841 when the Mission closed)

In his writings, Tkld often spoke about his eldest son, Joseph, and commented that he became fluent in the Aboriginal language of the Lake Macquarie district. The five eldest children had 16 years exposure to the language, and it would seem probable that they, too, might have become fluent in it. However, Tkld commented that the number of Aborigines at the Mission declined over the years, so reducing the opportunity for incidental language learning by his children.

He almost never mentioned the other children. Except, however, in a letter to William Ellis of 23 May 1840 he wrote:

**"Martha** who is 21 next November is afflicted with imperfect intellect, she does not speak plainly, nor can she commit to memory any thing with correctness.

**Tabitha** is a stout healthy lass and so is

**Mary**, who has just been a journey across the mountains on horseback with her Uncle of a distance of 112 miles going 35 one day 30-17 and 30 the other days then the Second Band consist of

**Elizabeth, Lancelot, Edward, Francis, Sarah and Thomas**, which is all, and through mercy all well.

**Joseph** is a Grazier 300 Miles up in the interior."

### **Lake Macquarie: WARNERS BAY**

The destination first considered was Moreton Bay, near Brisbane in Queensland. Eventually this was changed to Reid's Mistake, Lake Macquarie—without the site having been inspected. An area of 10 000 acres was to be reserved for the mission, the aim of which was to instruct the natives and preach to them in their own language. There were two or three settlers only at the Lake at this stage, and as a consequence, Threlkeld was to stay in Newcastle while a mission site was identified and a house got ready. Tkld left Sydney by ship for Newcastle on reconnaissance in March 1825, and may have at this time tentatively picked out a site at Warners Bay, next to one of the settlers, Jonathan Warner. The Threlkeld family, his new wife Sarah and the four children somehow reunited from Raiatea, left Sydney on 7 May 1825 to make their home at Lake Macquarie after an initial period in Newcastle while the mission site was being prepared.

Extract from Threlkeld's map of Lake Macquarie, 1827-33

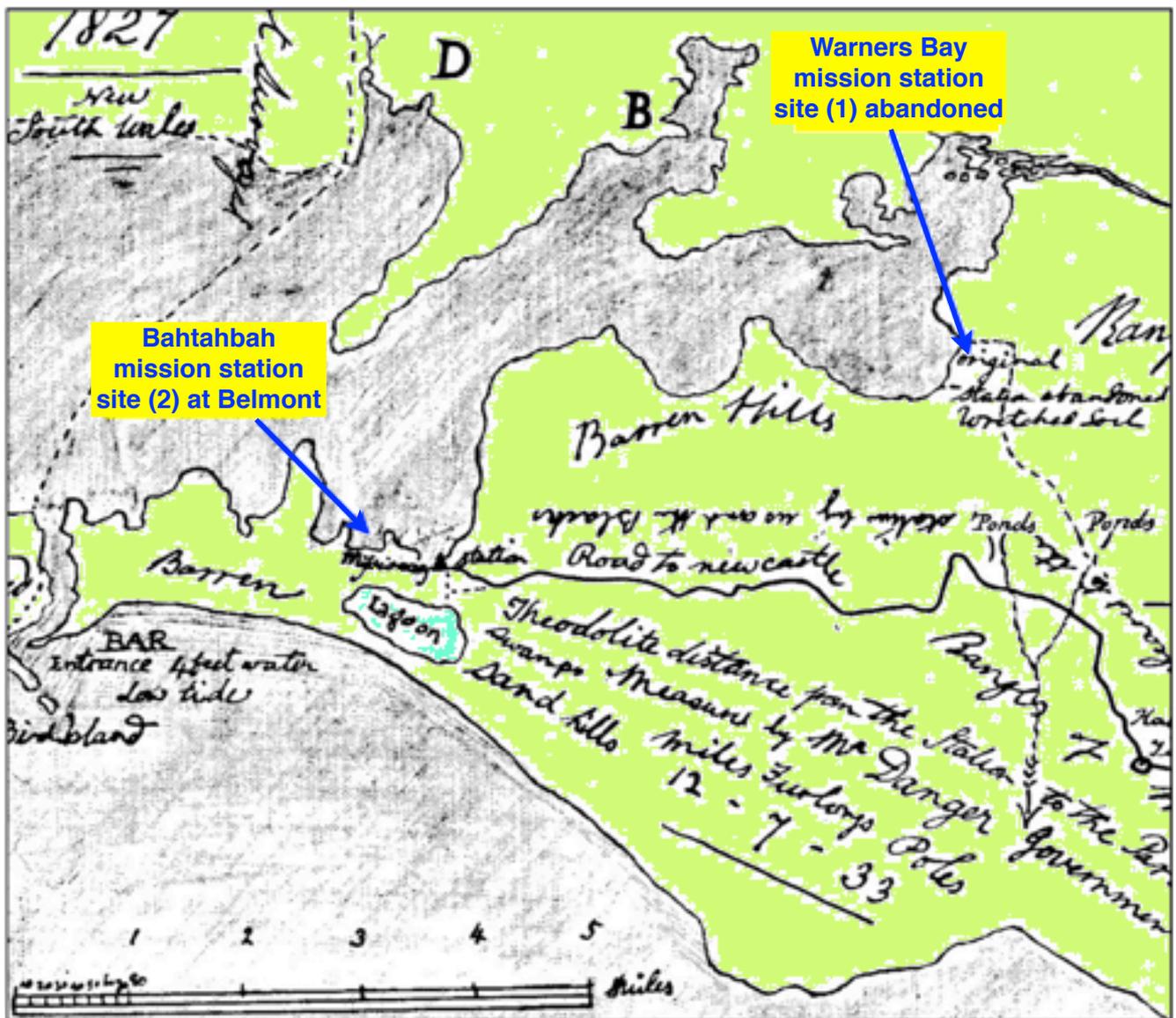
### **Lake Macquarie: BELMONT: 'Bahtahbah'**

In fact it was not to be until September 1826 they they finally moved in at Bahtahbah, in what is now Belmont, some time having been lost when the first location at Warners Bay had been abandoned after considerable labour because the soil was deemed too poor for the undertaking, as the map above shows. Here at last Tkld could begin to set about learning the Aboriginal language, and then to begin the evangelising of the local population.

Tkld and family were to be at Bahtahbah for two-and-a-half years from September 1826 to April 1829, but matters had already begun to go wrong. How could the LMS in London know about the practicalities, and costs, of setting up a mission station on the other side of the world, in a setting still almost in a wild state, virtually without transport, roads or any facilities? What they could see, however, all too well were the financial claims being made upon them, side by side with the lack of any compensating information about progress in conversions to Christianity. The upshot was to be that the period at this new mission station was to be dogged by financial concerns expressed by LMS about the costs incurred by Tkld in establishing and running the mission. This had become so pronounced that in March 1826, six months before Tkld was to move in at Bahtahbah, the LMS had insisted that its agent in Sydney, the Rev. Samuel Marsden, approve and countersign all bills drawn by Tkld on the Society (LMS), which at that time had grown to £900. A complicating factor was the time needed of around six months between transmission of a message and its receipt at its destination. It was this delay that accounts for the fact that it was not until November that year that Tkld was to respond by asserting that the mission could not be run at a cost less than £500 p.a., a notion rejected by Marsden. Matters were to deteriorate to such a pitch that Tkld was arrested on 15 November 1827, only to be rescued by Marsden personally clearing a debt on 26 March 1828 thus saving Tkld from imprisonment. But by this time the LMS had had too much, and on 21 April 1828 they resolved to close the mission, notifying Tkld of the fact in a letter dated 30 Mar 1828, which he was not to receive until 1 December 1828. Thus Tkld's period on the payroll of the LMS came to an end, although he was still to remain a member of the Society.

### **Lake Macquarie: PUNTEI (COAL POINT): Ebenezer**

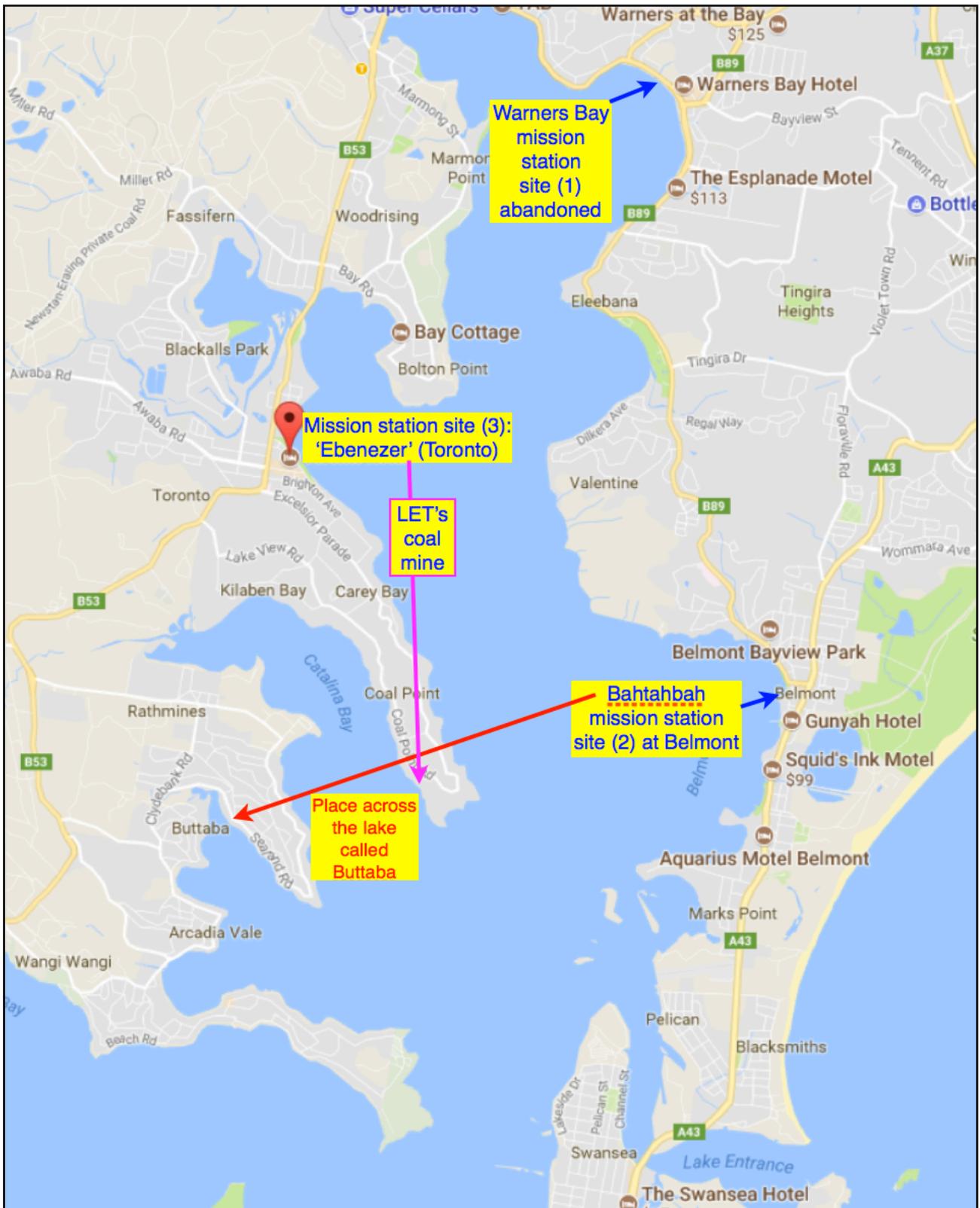
Tkld had become committed to the cause of the Aboriginal people in the area, and had made this known. Necessarily he had to move from the LMS mission, and what happened next was the N.S.W. Governor, Sir Ralph Darling, on 18 August 1829, instructed the surveyor-general Thomas Mitchell, to provide Tkld with a permit to mark out an area of 1280 acres at Puntei, the peninsula across the lake from Belmont (now Coal Point) for a new mission station. This came to pass, and once again Tkld had to have a house built for him, the site now being occupied by the Toronto Hotel, Toronto, marked on the map below. He named it Ebenezer,



after the locality his wife Sarah [Arndell] came from. The government provided him with a modest annual subsidy of £150, and in return Tkld provided an annual report, which he did for the years 1831-41.

Tkld and family were to stay at Ebenezer from around 1829-41, about twelve years. There were occasional notable visitors to Ebenezer during that time. One of these visits took place from sometime in April to 2 May 1836, when James Backhouse and George Washington Walker, Quakers, stayed there; these two also visited Tasmania, where they obtained some wordlists. Another couple were Lt Charles Wilkes, commander of the United States Exploring Expedition 1838-42, together with the expedition's ethnologist, Horatio Hale, who produced the final volume in the 6-volume account of the adventure. Hale worked on a dozen or so languages that were encountered, which included, in Australia, both Awabakal (which he called Kamilarai, for which he drew on Tkld's work), and Wiradhuri. (Hale pp. 471-531)<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> HALE, H. (1846a) The Languages of Australia. United States Exploring Expedition: during the years 1838, 1839, 1840, 1842 under the command of Charles Wilkes, U.S.N. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, U.S.A., Lea and Blanchard.



**MISSIONARY: Protector, Interpreter, Evangelist**

Tkld perceived his role as a missionary as having three aspects, as protector, interpreter and evangelist, and at Ebenezer he pursued these aims as best he could.

*Protector*

His efforts as protector were to prove to be virtually nought, for how could a lone missionary prevail against the prevailing tide of the times? In his *Annual Report* for 1838, on the subject

of interracial conflict, he provided an insight into the extent to which the Aboriginal people came off second best:

On reference to the Minutes of Evidence Laid before the Committee of the Legislative Council, on the Aboriginal question, at page 44, the list given consists of fifteen Europeans killed by the aborigines from 1832 to the present year, 1838; a period of 6 years, making an average of three persons a year, who have unfortunately been deprived of their lives, whilst a secret hostile process has been encouraged and carried on against the Blacks by a party of lawless Europeans, until it gained confidence, and unblushingly and openly appeared, to the loss of upwards of five hundred Aborigines within the last two years! Including the numerous massacres of men, women, and children and the two or three hundred, said to be slaughtered in the engagement which, it is reported took place, betwixt the Horse police, commanded by Major Nunn, and the aborigines in the interior.

### *Interpreter*

As interpreter, in the same Annual Report (p.7), he stated that this role was carried out notably 'In many cases which unhappily occurred at the Supreme Court, when several [Aboriginals] were transported and others hanged.'

The website <<https://www.mq.edu.au/search/search-results.html?q=Threlkeld>> included reports on Supreme Court cases at which Tkld acted as interpreter, often accompanied by the Aboriginal Biraban (M'Gill). These included:

- R. v. Tommy [1827] [24 November 1827: Tkld attended with Bungaree]
- R v Boatman or Jackass and Bulleye (1832) [10 February 1832: Tkld attended]
- R. v. Jackey Jackey, alias Wong-ko-bi-kan [1834] [8 August 1834: Tkld attended]
- R v Monkey [1835] [11 February 1835: Tkld attended]
- R v Long Dick [1835] [*Long Dick, Jack Jones, Abraham, and Gibber Paddy*, all Aboriginal Natives, belonging to Brisbane Water: 12 May 1835: Tkld attended]
- R v Mickey and Muscle [1835] [12 February 1835: Tkld attended]
- R v Murrell and Bummaree (1836) [5 February 1836: Tkld attended with McGill]
- R. v. Wombarty, 1837: 18 November 1837 [Tkld attended with McGill]

Other occasions when Tkld acted on behalf of the Aborigines:

- Case of Jack Congo Murrell. February 1836 [Tkld provided written statements]
- Case of *Charley*, a native black ... AUG. 22 [1835] [Tkld attended] [probably not Supreme Court]
- [347] The Queen against Long-Jack an Aborigine For the murder of his wife. Sydney May 1st 1838 [Tkld wrote a letter]

### *Evangelist*

As evangelist, Tkld's achievements may be summarised as an unstinting and productive effort on the one hand and abject failure on the other.

The positive effort concerned his successful attempt to acquire the local language, later known as Awabakal, and his producing the following writings concerning it, as summarised in the 1838 Annual Report, p.7:

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|--|--------------------------|
| 1. Specimens of the language                             | Printed. Copies expended |
| 2. An Australian grammar                                 | Printed. Copies expended |
| 3. The Gospel of Luke                                    | In manuscript            |
| 4. The Gospel of Mark                                    | In manuscript            |
| 5. The Gospel of Matthew to the fifth chapter            | In manuscript            |
| 6. Selection of prayers                                  | In manuscript            |
| 7. A selection of reading lessons from the Old Testament | In manuscript            |
| 8. An Australian Spelling Book                           | In print                 |

### **MIXED FORTUNES**

Tkld's many-faceted nature as a missionary, early settler, parent in a large family, student of language, and benefactor of Aborigines was to acquire another dimension. While at Ebenezer he was to find coal on his property, and undertook to work it, as the first such mine in the district. There are in fact coal deposits from Newcastle to Wollongong, and evidently at Puntei they were close to the surface. Tkld ended up with a small fleet of six vessels of

between ten and fifty tons to transport it. He was forced to sell the Ebenezer Coal Estate in December 1844 owing to the financial failure of his eldest son, Joseph.<sup>2</sup>

However, Tkld had had his own failure before this, as a missionary, from the fact that over the entire period of his residence at Lake Macquarie, and in spite of his exertions, not a single Aboriginal accepted the Christian faith. The likelihood of turning this situation around was to diminish, rather than improve, day by day, owing to the ever dwindling numbers of Aborigines at Lake Macquarie. This collapse in numbers of the target group was due to the overestimation of the population at the outset, the gradual translocation of the natives to Newcastle, and finally deaths, so that by 1841 there were effectively none left to convert. The NSW Government, which had supported the Ebenezer Mission since 1829, determined that it close at the end of the year 1841. So it was that during that year Tkld and family were to leave Lake Macquarie and transfer to Sydney.

### **SYDNEY 1841-59**

Tkld continued his work as an ecclesiastic in Sydney in the following capacities:

1842 South Head Congregational Church, Watsons Bay

184x Started school at South Head with money from wife Sarah (Arndell)'s bequest

1845 Took up a position with the Bethel Union Chapel for seafarers, in Erskine St, Darling Harbour (this moved in 1851 to Circular Quay east)

At 10 April 1857 Tkld was living at 8 Premier Terrace, William St, Sydney

In 1859 a new Mariners Church, an initiative of the Bethel Union, was begun, with Tkld in charge.

All the while Tkld maintained his interest in the language of Lake Macquarie, he was in the throes of compiling a lexicon, or list of all the words used in his translation of St Luke's Gospel, getting as far as the letter 'm', the work being published in the 1892 compilation of his work by John Fraser. At the abrupt end of the list there is the following message:

'NOTE.—This Lexicon is incomplete; the author was working on it at the time of his death.—ED.'

Threlkeld died on 10 Oct. 1859, aged 71.

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JEREMY STEELE

Friday 24 November 2017

#### References

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THRELKELD, Lancelot Edward. 1892. *An Australian language as spoken by the Awabakal, the people of Awaba or Lake Macquarie (near Newcastle, New South Wales) being an account of their language, traditions and*

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<sup>2</sup> Threlkeld referred in his Annual Report of the mission, 1836, about the language achievement of his eldest son, Joseph: 'My present employment is translating the Gospel of Mark, after which, I propose Matthew and John, which with Luke already accomplished, will complete the Evangelists, when they must be compared and diligently revised, in which my eldest son will be able, if it please God, to afford much assistance, from the superior knowledge he has acquired of the aboriginal language.' < [http://www.law.mq.edu.au/research/colonial\\_case\\_law/nsw/other\\_features/correspondence/documents/document\\_52/](http://www.law.mq.edu.au/research/colonial_case_law/nsw/other_features/correspondence/documents/document_52/) >.

customs / by L.E. Threlkeld; re-arranged, condensed and edited with an appendix by John Fraser. Sydney: Charles Potter, Government Printer.

Information about Threlkeld acting as interpreter at the Supreme Court:  
<<https://www.mq.edu.au/search/search-results.html?q=Threlkeld>.>