

WORLD CHRISTIANITIES PRIZE ESSAY

# *Childbirth and Emerging Missionary Information Networks in Britain and the South Pacific*

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*This article explores how childbirth shaped the information networks that London Missionary Society missionaries helped develop between Britain and the South Pacific from the late eighteenth century. As Evangelical missionaries experienced challenging births in the South Pacific, they sought new forms of cultural knowledge, which they recorded in their reports to the society. Part of these knowledge networks included books on medicine and midwifery that the missionaries ordered from Britain. From the 1820s, moreover, some missionaries came to collate early forms of ethnographical and anthropological research on Pacific peoples, which examined indigenous ways of birth and postnatal care.*

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**I**n Moorea, in 1817, Mary Orsmond composed a letter to the London Missionary Society from her bed, while ‘perspiring from every pore’. The wife of the missionary John Orsmond, she had recently suffered the traumatic birth of a stillborn. Fellow missionary William Henry acted as ‘man-midwife’ during the long and painful delivery, which lasted ‘three days and three nights’ and which she supposed had caused an internal injury, one ‘beyond the skills of medical aid, at least such as

AJCP = Australian Joint Copying Project; CMS = Church Missionary Society; *HE* = *History of Education*; *JCP* = *Journal of Pacific History*; LMS = London Missionary Society; SOAS = School of Oriental and African Studies; SSJ = South Sea Journals; SSL = South Sea Letters

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these Islands afford'. Orsmond expressed her deep grief at the loss of her first born – 'a fine but dead child, ease, ease my throbbing heart, hush, hush my jarring passions'.<sup>1</sup>

Three months after the delivery, she and her husband moved from the mission station at Papetoai in Moorea to Afareaitu on the eastern side of the island for the 'benefit of the air'. Comprised of two valleys divided by a hilly ridge that extended from the mountains to the shore, Afareaitu was known to the missionaries for its fertile soil, abundant coconut and breadfruit trees, and its 'silvery streams' that ran down the sides of the dark green mountains.<sup>2</sup> Here, Orsmond was confined to bedrest, unable to get in or out of bed without assistance. Residing in an indigenous house she wrote that the people of the district were 'very affectionate' and visited several times a day, 'enquiring through the rails of the house' which appeared very much 'like a birdcage'.<sup>3</sup> Prior to the construction of plastered, European-style cottages, the first missionaries in the South Pacific typically lived in indigenous buildings. In his *Polynesian researches*, William Ellis, who the Orsmonds stayed with in Afareaitu, further described the accommodation. The oval shaped building was thatched with *rau fara* (pandanus leaves) and its walls were comprised of white *parau* poles placed several inches apart and kept in place with 'two or three light sticks called *tea*, [which] were tied horizontally along the outside'.<sup>4</sup>

Orsmond's letter conveyed the intense emotional and physical vulnerability that childbirth could cause missionary women in the early nineteenth century. It also illuminated the 'man-midwife' medical identities that missionary men like William Henry came to adopt in the mission field. Further, the letter hinted at the cross-cultural intimacies that occasionally developed between missionaries and Pacific peoples around childbirth, and the resultant material and metaphysical entanglements. This article explores each of these themes and argues that childbirth was a crucial component in shaping the global information networks that developed between Britain and the South Pacific from the late eighteenth century. As the missionaries experienced challenging births in the South Pacific, they sought new forms of cultural knowledge, which they recorded in their journals and letters to the society. These writings were then edited and reprinted in LMS periodicals, which aimed to 'generate support in prayer, money and recruits'.<sup>5</sup> This article also makes the case that the

<sup>1</sup> Mary Orsmond to LMS, 28 Nov. 1817, records of the LMS as filmed by the AJCP, SOAS, SSL, box 2, and online at <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2713966460>.

<sup>2</sup> William Ellis, *Polynesian researches, during a residence of nearly six years in the South Sea Islands*, i, London 1829, 161–2,

<sup>3</sup> M. Orsmond to LMS, 28 Nov. 1817.

<sup>4</sup> Ellis, *Polynesian researches*, i. 387.

<sup>5</sup> Terry Barringer, 'From beyond alpine snows to homes of the east: a journey through missionary periodicals: the missionary periodicals database project', *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* xxvi (2002), 135.

missionaries were influenced by the expanding medical print industry in Britain as they routinely requested books on medicine and midwifery. From the late 1820s, moreover, some missionaries came to collate early forms of ethnographical and anthropologist research on Pacific peoples, which examined indigenous ways of birth and postnatal care.

Established in last decade of the eighteenth century, the LMS was an Evangelical missionary society that proposed to ‘spread the knowledge of Christ among heathen and other unenlightened nations’.<sup>6</sup> The first mission developed on the fringe of Pacific societies, a series of catastrophes halting efforts in Tahiti, Tonga and the Marquesas Islands. Subsequent generations of LMS missionaries were more successful in settling and expanding into the Cook and Samoan Islands, and by the mid-nineteenth century, hundreds of indigenous missionaries were actively spreading the Gospel across the Pacific. As historians have shown, literacy and access to print helped draw Pacific and missionary worlds together.<sup>7</sup> On the transmission of oral culture into Christian sermons and print in Mangaia in the Cook Islands, Michael Reilly suggests that ‘Rather than replacing orality, these different communicative practices work together in various ways, allowing the island’s experts to keep passing on to new generations the words and wisdom of their ancestors.’<sup>8</sup>

In making this argument about the crucial role that childbirth played in shaping missionary knowledge production, this article contributes to three key areas of scholarship. First, it builds on the established body of research on gender and families in missionary history. From the 1980s, feminist scholars worked to recover women’s experiences in the development of modern missions. Patricia Grimshaw’s seminal *Paths of duty*, for example, investigated the professional and religious motivations of missionary wives and the conflict that developed between their domestic and public pursuits.<sup>9</sup> Subsequent research examined how the ‘Christian home’ was connected to the social and evangelical underpinnings of missionary societies.<sup>10</sup> Emily Manktelow traced the beginnings of the ‘white missionary

<sup>6</sup> Richard Lovett, *The history of the London Missionary Society, 1795–1895*, London 1899, 30.

<sup>7</sup> See the influential article by Gordon Parsonson, ‘The literate revolution in Polynesia’, *JCP* ii (1967), 39–57.

<sup>8</sup> Michael P. J. Reilly, ‘Talking traditions: orality, ecology, and spirituality in Mangaia’s textual culture’, in Tony Ballantyne, Lachy Paterson and Angela Wanhalla (eds), *Indigenous textual cultures: reading and writing in the age of global empire*, Durham, NC 2020, 134.

<sup>9</sup> Patricia Grimshaw, *Paths of duty: American missionary wives in nineteenth-century Hawaii*, Honolulu, HI 1989.

<sup>10</sup> Dana Robert, ‘The “Christian home” as a cornerstone of Anglo-American missionary thought and practice’, in Dana Robert (ed.), *Converting colonialism: visions and realities in mission history, 1706–1914*, Grand Rapids, MI 2008, 134–65.

family' in the South Pacific and South Africa.<sup>11</sup> These histories of missionary women, families and the domestic sphere have often overlapped with studies of colonialism and empire.<sup>12</sup> More recently, scholars have examined 'cultural exchange', emphasising indigenous agency and how the missionaries themselves were challenged and changed by intimate experiences on the ground.<sup>13</sup> David Maxwell has shown how the Christian household in missionary encounters was 'highly contingent' and 'vulnerable to disease and death, hunger and exhaustion, isolation, and loneliness'. Maxwell suggests that missionaries were reliant upon the people they were attempting to convert – materially and emotionally – and that the 'porosity of the missionary household' influenced the 'creation of ethnographic knowledge'.<sup>14</sup>

Some of this research has explored the more 'corporeal processes' involved, namely pregnancy, birth and postnatal care.<sup>15</sup> In a powerful microstudy about the death of a missionary infant in nineteenth-century South Africa, Elizabeth Elbourne linked the breakdown of the mission station to the parents' inability to care for the child, including the mother's inability to produce breastmilk.<sup>16</sup> Historians of medicine have also produced useful understandings. Megan Vaughan's study of European medicine in Africa, for example, demonstrated how missionaries and African communities understood childcare as an area of great symbolic and medical significance. Vaughan suggests that missionaries in Uganda initially became interested in birth and childcare through their campaigns against the 'diseases of immorality'.<sup>17</sup> Taking insight from these works on the transformative power of intimacy, this article argues that childbirth in the South Pacific mission stations helped recast

<sup>11</sup> Emily Manktelow, *Missionary families: race, gender and generation on the spiritual frontier*, Manchester 2016.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Margaret Jolly and Martha Macintyre (eds), *Family and gender in the Pacific: domestic contradictions and the colonial impact*, Cambridge 1989; Hyaeweol Choi and Margaret Jolly (eds), *Divine domesticities: Christian paradoxes in Asia and the Pacific*, Canberra 2014. See also the special issue, Esme Cleall, Ishiguro Laura and Emily Manktelow, 'Imperial relations: histories of family in the British Empire', *Journal of Colonialism and Colonial History* xiv (2013), unpaginated.

<sup>13</sup> See Patricia Grimshaw and Andrew May, 'Reappraisals of mission history: an introduction', in Patricia Grimshaw and Andrew May (eds), *Missionaries, indigenous peoples and cultural exchange*, Brighton 2010, 1–9.

<sup>14</sup> David Maxwell, 'The missionary home as a site for mission: perspectives from Belgian Congo', in John Doran, Charlotte Methuen and Alexandra Walsham (eds), *Religion and the household* (Studies in Church History 1, 2014), 431–2.

<sup>15</sup> Vicki Lukere, 'Wider reflections and a survey of literature', in Vicki Lukere and Margaret Jolly (eds), *Birthing in the Pacific: beyond tradition and modernity?*, Honolulu, HI 2001, 182. See also Manktelow, *Missionary families*, ch. v.

<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Elbourne, 'Mother's milk: gender, power and anxiety on a South African mission station, 1839–1840', in Grimshaw and May, *Missionaries*, 10–23.

<sup>17</sup> Megan Vaughan, *Curing their ills: colonial power and African illness*, Cambridge 1991, 66.

boundaries between men and women; and between indigenous and newcomer cultures.

Secondly, the article contributes to scholarship on colonial knowledge production and the material making of missionary texts. While some literary studies have explored how missionaries wrote about childbirth in the South Pacific, often the analysis has been confined to the level of the text. As Isabel Hofmeyr writes, this approach can ‘obscure questions of how meaning is made’ and ‘how books and their audiences interact’.<sup>18</sup> This article explores how missionary understandings of birth were produced on the ground and how these understandings were then recycled, reprinted and retransmitted through Evangelical print networks. Similar to works on missionary knowledge production, it suggests that missionary texts were ‘porous’ and moulded by local events, rather than ‘seamless projections of a coherent and self-contained ideology’.<sup>19</sup> In this regard, the article draws upon cultural history which emphasises the role that writing and printing technologies played in shaping missionary and colonial histories – an approach especially strong in Africanist historiography.<sup>20</sup>

Most of the primary material in this article comes from the official LMS archive, which chiefly preserved writings from the field. Missionaries were expected to send regular reports to the LMS headquarters. These writings updated the directors on the material needs of the missionaries, helped shape LMS policies and served an important propagandist function, entering the pages of the periodicals. In focusing on the transnational movement of missionary texts – the interweaving of British and Pacific worlds – the article incorporates understandings from global history, which envisages the British Empire as an assemblage of overlapping webs in which goods and intelligence were circulated.<sup>21</sup> Missionaries depended on expanding maritime networks to convey ideas and materials, and the web metaphor allows for breakages in material exchange networks. Missionaries frequently spoke out against the silence of LMS directors; promised goods and intelligence failed to arrive; and in the early decades of the mission, the missionaries pleaded for midwives to be sent to the mission stations. Much of the existing literature on colonial knowledge

<sup>18</sup> Isabel Hofmeyr, ‘Bunyan in Africa: text and transition’, in Martha Frederiks and Dorottya Nagy (eds), *Critical readings in the history of Christian mission*, Leiden 2021, 689.

<sup>19</sup> Tony Ballantyne, *Entanglements of empire: missionaries, Māori, and the question of the body*, Auckland 2014, 14.

<sup>20</sup> See, for example, Isabel Hofmeyr, *The portable Bunyan: a transnational history of the Pilgrim’s Progress*, Princeton 2004, and Stephanie Newell, Emma Hunter and Derek R. Peterson (eds), *African print cultures: newspapers and their publics in the twentieth century*, Ann Arbor, MI 2016.

<sup>21</sup> Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and race: Aryanism in the British Empire*, Basingstoke 2002.

networks tends to focus on debates over race, religion and political thought.<sup>22</sup> While these works recognise the significance of gender in these debates, they offer limited reflection on the gendered nature of bodily knowledge in the nineteenth century, concerning, for example, pregnancy, birth, breastfeeding and menstruation.<sup>23</sup> This article shows how difficult birthing experiences in the South Pacific mission stations facilitated the transnational circulation of gendered bodily knowledge. Through close analysis of published and archival sources, it also demonstrates how missionary print culture had little room for the traumas and tensions associated with birth that affected early mission work in the South Pacific.

Finally, the article sheds light on the relationship between science and religion in modern history. Historians have generally moved away from the idea that Evangelical missionaries were anti-science. Important works have shown how missionaries engaged with indigenous cosmologies, languages and medical ideas; and how they came to produce early forms of linguistic, anthropological and scientific research.<sup>24</sup> Sujit Sivasundaram's study of the LMS in the South Pacific demonstrates how missionaries aligned observations of the natural world with theological understandings and how engagement with indigenous ideas influenced the missionaries' scientific output. He argues that the 'the quest for an improved world linked by knowledge and commerce has an evangelical ancestry'.<sup>25</sup> Moreover, in an influential volume on missionary science, David Maxwell and Patrick Harries have argued that studying missionaries' scientific contributions offers insight into 'their reliance on local assistants and informants'.<sup>26</sup> Despite these inroads in academic research, there remains

<sup>22</sup> For example, Christopher Bayly, *Empire and information: intelligence gathering and social communication in India, 1780–1870*, Cambridge 1997; Ballantyne, *Orientalism*, and *Entanglements of empire*, and Alan Lester, 'Obtaining the "due observance of justice": the geographies of colonial humanitarianism', *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* xx (2002), 277–93.

<sup>23</sup> Both Zoë Laidlaw and Emma Rothschild explore female information networks; however, these studies examine the circulation of political and commercial intelligence. See Zoë Laidlaw, "'Aunt Anna's report": The Buxton Women and the Aborigines Select Committee, 1835–37', *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* xxxii (2004), 1–28; Emma Rothschild, *The inner life of empires: an eighteenth-century history*, Princeton 2011.

<sup>24</sup> See Patrick Harries, *Butterflies and barbarians: Swiss missionaries and systems of knowledge in South-East Africa*, Oxford 2007; John Stenhouse, 'Missionary science', in David N. Livingstone, Hugh Richard Sloten and Ronald L. Numbers (eds), *The Cambridge history of science*, viii, Cambridge 2020, 90–107.

<sup>25</sup> Sujit Sivasundaram, *Nature and the godly empire: science and Evangelical mission: the Pacific, 1795–1850*, Cambridge 2005, 4.

<sup>26</sup> Patrick Harries and David Maxwell, 'Introduction: the spiritual in the secular', in Patrick Harries and David Maxwell (eds), *The spiritual in the secular: missionaries and knowledge about Africa*, Grand Rapids, MI 2012, 59.

much more to be said on how childbirth – and the associated dangers – encouraged missionaries to engage with cultural knowledge, both through the medical texts that they requested from Britain and the cross-cultural relationships they formed with indigenous peoples. This article explores how childbirth in the South Pacific mission stations established the missionaries’ medical identities and brought forth writings and publications on indigenous birthing traditions.

*Childbirth and missionary writings*

Perhaps most striking in Mary Orsmond’s letter to the LMS in 1817 was the physical and emotional pain which she expressed – her recognition that the hand she used to write the account ‘was once said to be cold in death’.<sup>27</sup> In the early nineteenth century, prior to the development of anti-septics, anaesthesia and antibiotics, it was not uncommon for missionary women and their infants to become seriously ill or to die in childbirth. As Patricia Grimshaw and Peter Sherlock explain, childbirth could significantly undermine women’s constitutions, meaning that their health was often much more affected than their husbands’ by migration to new environments.<sup>28</sup> Though surviving this birth, Orsmond would later die from the delivery of another baby in 1819. Seven years earlier, in Moorea, three missionary women had also died in short succession: Sophia Davies in childbirth, followed by the death of her baby several weeks later; and Sarah Henry and Sarah Hayward, both from long periods of illness. Regarding the circumstances on the island, John Davies wrote to the society that ‘Death has made a large breach among us.’<sup>29</sup>

Orsmond’s letter is rare in the LMS archive and surprisingly understudied considering the window it offers onto birth in the mission field. Most of the texts in the early ‘South Seas’ collection were signed by men, reflecting the structure of the LMS in this period, including its male governance; the greater number of missionary men sent overseas in the first half of the nineteenth century; and the fact that the society did not officially commission married women as missionaries. Unlike their husbands, therefore, they were not required to send regular reports and letters to London from the field.<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, missionary women were still active record-keepers and influential in maintaining global information networks.

<sup>27</sup> M. Orsmond to LMS, 28 Nov. 1817.

<sup>28</sup> Patricia Grimshaw and Peter Sherlock, ‘Women and cultural exchanges’, in Norman Etherington (ed.), *Missions and empire*, Oxford 2008, 600–19.

<sup>29</sup> John Davies to LMS, 21 Oct. 1812, AJCP, SOAS, SSL, box 2, at <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2713966460>.

<sup>30</sup> Grimshaw and Sherlock, ‘Women and cultural exchanges’, 601.

Beyond the occasional letters they sent to the LMS, they kept personal journals and corresponded with contacts in Britain and other sites of missionary influence. Some studies have explored this parallel, familial network of letter-writing and in terms of future research, it would be interesting to investigate how its transnational character influenced women's experiences of birth and illness.<sup>31</sup> In Orsmond's letter, she asked the LMS to forward the letters that she enclosed to her parents and home minister. She also lamented the death of her 'beloved friend Mrs Adam of Trinidad in the West Indies with whom [she] corresponded' – the wife of Thomas Adam, who had commenced the LMS mission there.<sup>32</sup>

Missionary women additionally assisted their partners in producing the journals and reports that missionary societies requested. On the Church Missionary Society mission in New Zealand, Tanya Fitzgerald suggests that 'while a reader in the archive might not directly access CMS women's manuscripts, inevitably [they] might stumble on prose that these women may have contributed'.<sup>33</sup> As the LMS recommended that its missionaries send duplicate journals to ensure their 'safe reception', it is likely that the same process occurred in its mission stations. Sometimes letters to the LMS were signed by both husband and wife: for example, Mary Bicknell and Henry Bicknell's account from Tahiti in 1812.<sup>34</sup>

Furthermore, regarding the handwritten accounts of male missionaries, their partners' experiences in childbirth could deeply affect their emotional state and consequently their writing practices, especially through fear, stress and grief. Manktelow describes the anxiety that the male missionaries recorded in their journals and letters to the society, including Rowland Hassall who in Tahiti in 1798 explained that prior to his wife's labour he 'had a thousand fears through the Dr leaving and Returning home'.<sup>35</sup> These were recurrent fears across the first half of nineteenth century. In Upolu in the Samoan Islands in 1842, William Harbutt noted that his wife Mary Jane had recently given birth to a daughter after 'a time of anxiety and pain', and that in subsequent weeks she had 'suffered *very* much'.<sup>36</sup> Anxiety was also expressed in religious terms. Harbutt asked the recipient of his letter to 'pray that [Mary Jane] may be restored and

<sup>31</sup> For example, Tanya Fitzgerald, 'Archives of memory and memories of archive: CMS women's letters and diaries, 1823–35', *HE* xxxiv (2005), 657–74, and 'Cartographies of friendship: mapping missionary women's educational networks in Aotearoa/New Zealand, 1823–40', *HE* xxxii (2003), 513–27.

<sup>32</sup> M. Orsmond to LMS, 28 Nov. 1817.

<sup>33</sup> Fitzgerald, 'Archives of memory', 669.

<sup>34</sup> Henry Bicknell and Mary Bicknell to Thomas Haweis, 1818, AJCP, SOAS, SSL, box 2, at <http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2713966460>.

<sup>35</sup> Rowland Hassall as quoted in Manktelow, *Missionary families*, 133.

<sup>36</sup> William Harbutt to LMS, 16 Mar. 1842, AJCP, SOAS, SSL, box 5, at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2714778825>.



strengthened to the discharge of her duties in the family, the church and the world'.<sup>37</sup> Also from Upolu, in 1839, John Stair described how he and his partner had experienced 'many trials of faith and patience since the birth of our dear child in consequence of Mrs S not being able to suckle her'. In the same year, in Upolu, Ebenezer Buchanan stated of his wife's safe delivery: 'I am happy to add that though no human aid could be obtained she was upheld by Him.'<sup>38</sup>

Examining the material form and structure of missionary correspondence is further illuminating. John Orsmond wrote three accounts of his wife's labour and illness. Firstly, in a letter written twelve days after the event, he reports on the delivery and his sentiments across three pages. The abrupt way he ended the letter indicated the pressing nature of Mary Orsmond's continual pain: 'Every minute my afflicted wife is calling me you will therefore pardon my short epistle.'<sup>39</sup> In a second letter, written around three months later in December, he recounts the delivery once more and the subsequent worsening of Mary's condition. The rough presentation of his script – the quick, short-stroked handwriting, the blotches on the page and the frequent crossing out of words – hints at the couple's stressful circumstances.<sup>40</sup> Finally, in his journal entry for the day of the delivery, Orsmond described the stillborn baby's appearance, including the bruised and blackened head, and he sketched a drawing of its elongated form.<sup>41</sup> After this entry, Orsmond did not write in his journal for two weeks and the sporadic nature of his entries represents a period of persistent crisis. His next entry begins: 'A long time indeed. But during all these days I have not known what sleep means, nor have my clothes been taken off except to change my linen.'<sup>42</sup> By mid-September the couple had reached Afareaitu following an arduous journey by sea. Mary Orsmond 'vented her groans & tears' in the night and John Orsmond was 'greatly debilitated', his legs swollen and inflamed.<sup>43</sup> In December, he wrote again, explaining that the previous weeks were defined by 'Times of Domestic trial chiefly' and he had, 'therefore, not regularly written'.<sup>44</sup>

<sup>37</sup> Ibid.

<sup>38</sup> Ebenezer Buchanan to LMS, 26 Oct. 1839, ACJP, SOAS, SSL, box 12, at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2714376586>.

<sup>39</sup> John Orsmond to LMS, 20 Aug. 1817, AJCP, SOAS, SSL, box 2, at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2714017565>.

<sup>40</sup> Idem to LMS, 1 Dec. 1817, AJCP, SOAS, SSL, box 2, at [nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2714019252](https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2714019252).

<sup>41</sup> Idem, journal, entry for 10 Aug. 1817, AJCP, SOAS, SSJ, box 4, at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2712638058>.

<sup>42</sup> Idem, journal, entry for 31 Aug. 1817, ACJP, SOAS, SSJ, box 4, at 2712638311.

<sup>43</sup> Idem, journal, entry for 16 Sept. 1817, AJCP, SOAS, SSJ, box 4, at 2712638838.

<sup>44</sup> Idem, journal, entry for 1 Dec. 1817, *ibid.*

Missionary vulnerabilities around childbirth were not always apparent in the pages of LMS periodicals. The *Evangelical Magazine* (the society's chief print outlet) only mentioned Mary Orsmond's illness in the briefest terms. In 1818 the magazine reported on the intelligence received from the missionaries in the South Pacific: 'From these letters we learn that all the brethren and sisters except Mr Davies and Mrs. Orsmond,\* were well.' The information next to the asterisk at the bottom of the page explained that Davies was suffering from a fever and that 'Mrs Orsmond had remained in a very weak state for several months.'<sup>45</sup> LMS periodicals, of course, were also physically different to missionary writings, losing the material traces of the context in which they were written: the rushed handwriting, the pages filled to the edges with small script, the postscripts which mentioned family networks. As Elbourne suggests, the process of 'digging deep' in the archive uncovers the pressing domestic conditions – the tensions and traumas – that were often omitted in missionary propaganda.<sup>46</sup> Anthropologists have pushed for greater recognition of the material circumstances which shaped knowledge collection in colonial contexts. Johannes Fabian notes the conditions which affected travel writers and early ethnographers in Central Africa: often they 'were out of their minds with extreme fatigue, fear, delusions of grandeur, and feelings ranging from anger to contempt'.<sup>47</sup>

### *Medicine, midwifery and missionary reading lists*

While studies have concentrated on the support networks that developed among missionary women during the delivery of infants, childbirth also transformed boundaries between men and women in the mission stations.<sup>48</sup> As Mary Orsmond's letter revealed, William Henry acted as the 'man-midwife' during her labour in 1817 and he received praise for never leaving her side 'for three days and three nights'.<sup>49</sup> John Orsmond expressed some doubts about this development, writing to the LMS that 'Mr Henry attended in the time of labour but not without disgust to my feelings.' Orsmond continued that the idea of a 'midwife or man midwife for the mission is absurd' and he asked the directors to 'point out the man who will go from Island to Island when the different missions are formed,

<sup>45</sup> *Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle* (Dec. 1818).

<sup>46</sup> Elbourne, 'Mother's milk', 22.

<sup>47</sup> Johannes Fabian, *Out of our minds: reason and madness in the exploration of Central Africa*, Berkeley, CA 2000, 8.

<sup>48</sup> For example, Frances Porter, 'All that the heart does bear: a reflection on the domestic life of missionary wives', in Robert Glen (ed.), *Mission and moko: aspects of the work of the Church Missionary Society in New Zealand, 1814–1882*, Christchurch 1992, 135–51, and Manktelow, *Missionary families*.

<sup>49</sup> M. Orsmond to LMS, 28 Nov. 1817.

especially if he has 7 children as [William] Crook has'. He also mentioned his own transformed identity, describing how it 'devolves on [me] to prescribe medicines & perform the offices of nurse'.<sup>50</sup> Missionary writings were sometimes contradictory, however, and in further correspondence with the society, John Orsmond stated that 'Mr Henry was very kind' and did not leave his wife's side 'till she was delivered'.<sup>51</sup>

On childbirth in the South Pacific mission stations, Manktelow suggests that geographical and material circumstances largely determined who attended deliveries, despite women preferring 'female centric birthing rituals'.<sup>52</sup> In the early decades of the mission – when more missionary men were sent to the field than women – births were typically attended by those who were nearest: the women's husbands, their male colleagues, transitory surgeons. William Henry expressed gratitude to the surgeon who attended his daughter's birth in Tahiti in 1797.<sup>53</sup> After the delivery of Rowland Hassall's son in Tahiti in 1798, Hassall wrote that fellow missionary Benjamin Broomhall had 'spared no pains to obtain a knowledge in surgery that he Might be useful in labor'.<sup>54</sup> Thomas Blossom reported that when his wife was gravely ill after the death of their new-born baby in Moorea in 1833, 'Providence kindly sent a young man who had been a Doctor to a whale-ing ship.' Supposedly, this doctor was the last surviving member of his crew following conflict in Wallis Island.<sup>55</sup> From Upolu in 1839, moreover, Ebenezer Buchanan stated that his partner's labour was successful even though 'neither of the medical Brethren could attend her'.<sup>56</sup> The emergence of the 'man midwife' missionary, however, must also be connected to their adopted medical identities more generally, and their engagement with medical print.

Resulting from a series of failed appointments, the South Pacific mission stations typically lacked permanent medical practitioners and surgeons. Some missionaries underwent training before leaving Britain, but most were forced to learn how to treat, or attempt to treat, various illnesses on the ground. In Tahiti in 1839 Charles Green complained that there was only one surgeon attached to the Tahitian mission, a surgeon who 'very nearly poisoned one of the Missionaries' children'. Green added that 'every one must be "his own Doctor"' and he also wrote a short list of required medicines, mostly powders derived from opium.<sup>57</sup>

<sup>50</sup> J. Orsmond to LMS, 20 Aug. 1817.

<sup>51</sup> Idem, to LMS, 1 Dec. 1817.

<sup>52</sup> Manktelow, *Missionary families*, 136.

<sup>53</sup> William Henry journal, entry for 1797, AJCP, SOAS, SSJ, box 1, at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2712714227>.

<sup>54</sup> Hassall journal, entry for 31 Jan. 1798, ACJP, SOAS, SSJ, box 1, at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2712711036>.

<sup>55</sup> Thomas Blossom to LMS, 28 Oct. 1833, AJCP, SOAS, SSL, box 9, at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2714562366>.

<sup>56</sup> Buchanan to LMS, 26 Oct. 1839.

<sup>57</sup> Charles Green to LMS, 10 June 1839, AJCP, SOAS, SSL, box 12, at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-271427017>.

Across missionary writings in the first half of the nineteenth century, requests for medicine appeared in conjunction with requests for medical literature. From Savai'i in the Samoan Islands in 1837, Charles Hardie penned a long list of medicines for order from the society. The list ended with him asking for a copy of Anthony Todd Thomson's *Pharmacopoeias*.<sup>58</sup> Similarly, from Upolu in 1837, William Miles wrote to the LMS stating that the missionaries had not yet received the previously requested Epsom and Glauber salts, in addition to the third and subsequent volumes of James Copland's *Dictionary of practical medicine*.<sup>59</sup> In the early years of the Tahitian mission, James Elder, who received some surgical training before leaving Britain in 1800, wrote to the LMS about the medical books he had obtained by 1801. He listed more than twenty books on surgery and disease before mentioning: 'I hope you will have a better surgeon than me in the next mission to this Place, I will be very happy to be His Mate.' He explained that due to an outbreak of the ague and fever among local people, 'Bark and purging medicines will be necessary.'<sup>60</sup>

The missionaries' familiarity with medical literature reflected wider shifts in medical communication. As printing technologies developed, nineteenth-century Britain witnessed an explosion in medical print. Between 1640 and 1799 only thirty-three medical titles appeared in the periodical market but by the end of the nineteenth century, 458 titles had emerged.<sup>61</sup> The distance between professional and domestic medicine also began to narrow from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries as physicians published medical guides for the home.<sup>62</sup> Medical print culture, furthermore, overlapped with Evangelical print culture, and it is likely that the missionaries kept up to date with the latest medical publications through reading the periodicals that the LMS sent to the field.<sup>63</sup> As Niel Gunson notes, these texts conveyed the Evangelical understanding that medicine was an opportunity provided by divine providence. The *Evangelical Magazine*, for instance, presented regular updates on

<sup>58</sup> Charles Hardie to LMS, 6 Apr. 1837, AJCP, SOAS, SSL, box 11, at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2715048527>.

<sup>59</sup> William Miles to LMS, 8 May 1837, AJCP, SOAS, SSL, box 11, at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2715051519>.

<sup>60</sup> James Elder to LMS, [?] July, AJCP, SOAS, SSL, box 1, at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2713939158>.

<sup>61</sup> Jeanne Peterson, 'Medicine', in Rosemary Van Arsdell and J. Don Vann (eds), *Victorian periodicals and Victorian society*, Toronto 1995, 29.

<sup>62</sup> Paul Starr, *The social transformation of American medicine*, New York 1982.

<sup>63</sup> Periodicals like the *Evangelical Magazine* and *Eclectic Review* reviewed medical publications. In 1833, for instance, the *Eclectic Review* (Jan.–June 1833) noted that part II of the previously mentioned Copland's *Dictionary of practical medicine* was in press.

vaccination experiments in its 'religious intelligence' column.<sup>64</sup> These print networks came to include members of the British Evangelical community, who donated books to the society to send overseas. In 1828, in the *Evangelical Magazine*, the directors thanked various donors, including 'A. Black, Esq., for 6 copies of Macaulay's *Medical Dictionary*'.<sup>65</sup>

From the precarious birthing conditions on the ground in the South Pacific, it is perhaps unsurprising, therefore, that the missionaries also came to seek knowledge of midwifery in the books they requested – even as the directors in 1818 proposed that missionary wives must receive training in midwifery before leaving Britain.<sup>66</sup> Writing from Moorea in 1819, William Henry informed the society that he had been acting as 'man midwife to the females in the mission since the death of Mrs Hayward in the year 1812!', and he ordered a 'few good Medical Books ... and one of the best Modern Treatise on Midwifery'.<sup>67</sup> After decades of debate, man-midwives had established themselves as medical professionals from the mid-eighteenth century in Britain. This history was tied to the developments in medical print culture as practitioners such as William Smellie published numerous works on childbirth. Smellie's publications aimed to equip physicians with knowledge of the tools and treatments necessary for the complications that could arise during birth, and they helped shift midwifery into an increasingly medicalised context. His chief publication was the three-volume *A treatise on the theory and practice of midwifery* (1752). Though Henry was not explicitly requesting this text, the *Treatise* was highly influential on subsequent midwifery books. According to Lisa Cody, it helped 'advertise men-midwives' combined strengths as both vastly experienced, technologically adept scientists and emotionally observant, empathetic, sometimes chameleon-like attendants'.<sup>68</sup>

Further illustrating missionary engagement with medical print on midwifery, Elder's list of books from 1801 included two works on childbirth. Dispersed ink has obscured the author's name and therefore the title of the first text; all that has remained readable is 'on midwifery'. The second text was Alexander Hamilton's *Outlines of the theory and practice of midwifery*. Hamilton (1739–1802) was a professor of midwifery at the University of Edinburgh. His *Outlines* was originally intended as a manual for his students; however, he hoped that it would prove useful for

<sup>64</sup> Niel Gunson, *Messengers of grace: Evangelical missionaries in the South Seas, 1797–1860*, Melbourne 1978, 249.

<sup>65</sup> *Evangelical Magazine and Missionary Chronicle* (Sept. 1828), 420.

<sup>66</sup> Minutes of annual meetings of the LMS, xi, 24 Aug. 1818, AJCP, SOAS, at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2735916237>.

<sup>67</sup> Henry to LMS, 7 Aug. 1819, AJCP, SOAS, SSL, box 3, at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2714043835>.

<sup>68</sup> Lisa Forman Cody, *Birthing the nation: sex, science, and the conception of eighteenth-century Britons*, Oxford 2005, 153.

‘inexperienced practitioners’ as well as those who might contribute further on the subject.<sup>69</sup> The manual was practical in composition and divided into three sections: anatomy and physiology; pathology; and the various types of labours.

Missionary letters indicated that they intended to keep up to date with more recently released texts on medicine and midwifery. From Tahiti in 1806, Davies requested ‘a new medical publication called the Edinburgh practice of Physic’.<sup>70</sup> The editor of the title added a section on midwifery in 1802 so that the full title became the *Edinburgh practice of physic, surgery, and midwifery*. The newly published medical texts that the society came to send the missionaries similarly contained sections on pregnancy and childbirth, including Robert Thomas’s *Modern practice of physic*.<sup>71</sup> The society most likely sent the sixth edition of the book in 1820, released in 1819. It presented parts on the ‘Diseases of the Pregnant and Parturient states; and those of Infancy’.

Also, as medical knowledge shifted towards more binary conceptualisations of sex in the modern period, print entered the market on ‘female diseases’.<sup>72</sup> From Tutuila in the Samoan Islands in 1837, George Barnden requested ‘Graham on the Diseases of women’.<sup>73</sup> The author of the popular *Domestic medicine*, Graham published the treatise *On the diseases peculiar to females* in 1834. It was intended as a companion to the former work, which he explained had ‘not permitted the introduction of so full a notice as some desire to the diseases of females’.<sup>74</sup> Part I examined ‘diseases to which all women are liable’, including breast and womb cancers, prolapsed wombs and bladders, and irregular menstruation. The second and final part examined the ‘diseases of pregnant women’, including nausea and vomiting during pregnancy, and miscarriage. It contained sections on the ‘management of women after delivery’, specifying, for instance, when women should rise after giving birth. The publisher of the treatise, J. Hatchard and Son, additionally published sermons and theological texts, advertisements for which were presented in the initial pages of Graham’s treatise, further demonstrating the overlaps in religious and medical print in the nineteenth century.

<sup>69</sup> Alexander Hamilton, *Outlines of the theory and practice of midwifery*, London 1787.

<sup>70</sup> John Davies to LMS, 8 Mar. 1806, AJCP, SOAS, SSL, box 1, at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2713955807>.

<sup>71</sup> Minutes of annual meetings of the LMS, xiii, 14 Aug. 1820, AJCP, SOAS, at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2735957915>.

<sup>72</sup> Catherine Gallagher and Thomas Laqueur (eds), *The making of the modern body: sexuality and society in the nineteenth century*, Berkeley, CA 1987.

<sup>73</sup> George Barnden to LMS, 14 Apr. 1837, AJCP, SOAS, SSL, box 11, at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2715050476>.

<sup>74</sup> Thomas John Graham, *On the diseases peculiar to females*, London 1834, p. v.

*Childbirth, entanglement and missionary publishing*

As the missionaries sought medical knowledge in the form of books and printed guides from Britain, their entanglements with Pacific peoples also shaped the transnational information networks that emerged. From Afareaitu in 1817, Mary Ormond further wrote in her letter to the LMS that ‘Frequently two or three of the chiefs wives would sit by my bedside and wipe the cold sweats from my face or ... the mosquitos away from disturbing my repose.’ She also noted that during her confinement, a local woman watched over her with ‘unwearied attention’ until an affliction of her own kept her away. Ormond concluded from these exchanges that ‘In their dark, untutored minds exist the affection of a sister, the faithfulness of a friend, and they frequently exhibit the concern of more refined society.’<sup>75</sup> These comments conveyed the stadial thinking that commonly shaped missionary accounts in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. As Jane Samson suggests, the missionaries ‘othered and brothered’ indigenous peoples in their writings. They attempted to document universal principles between Christian and non-Christian peoples and the socio-cultural factors which divided them.<sup>76</sup> However, the letter also illustrated the intimacies that occasionally defined missionary and indigenous relationships around birth, especially when the local context of the writings is considered.

In recent studies of mission, historians have examined the material and metaphysical ‘entanglements’ that developed between indigenous and newcomer communities. Rather than viewing missionary history as involving the displacement of indigenous ideas and customs, scholars have explored how both sides of the encounter were affected in complex ways.<sup>77</sup> Mary Ormond, for instance, explained that, as she recovered, the local women who visited encouraged her to be ‘diligent’ in learning the language so that she could ‘pray with them and tell them about Jesus Christ’. She used the word *paurau* to refer to the local ‘language’ or ‘word’, therefore illustrating the ‘moderately creolised form of English’ that some missionaries came to write in their letters and journals.<sup>78</sup> As Ormond’s letter also conveyed, the living conditions of the first missionaries were another form of entanglement as they inhabited indigenous buildings or relied on local labour and materials to construct their own houses, especially in the early decades of the mission. In *Polynesian researches*, Ellis noted that the missionaries attempted to replicate European domestic spaces in Polynesian structures. They hung ‘mats and native cloths’ to

<sup>75</sup> M. Ormond to LMS, 28 Nov. 1817.

<sup>76</sup> Jane Samson, *Race and redemption: British missionaries encounter Pacific peoples, 1797–1920*, Grand Rapids, MI 2017, 72–3.

<sup>77</sup> Ballantyne, *Entanglements of empire*.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* 5.

partition off rooms, a departure from the local custom of housing families together in open spaces.<sup>79</sup> Still, as Orsmond's letter made clear, these demarcations were permeable.

The early missionaries recorded further instances of cross-cultural entanglement around birth and child care. In 1797, William Henry reported that Tahitian women nursed his baby and that the child received a second name *Mydidde no Otaheite*, meaning Child of Tahiti.<sup>80</sup> From the 1810s, as the missionaries started to make progress in the spread of the Gospel, some missionaries came to attend indigenous births. In 1820 the queen of Tahiti, Teri'ito'oterai Tere-moe-moe, requested that Hannah Crook attend her confinement and labour.<sup>81</sup> Hannah Crook's husband, William Crook, similarly attended Pacific women's deliveries. In Moorea in 1817 he encountered a woman 'among the grass and in the scorching rays of the sun, who had been in labour near twenty four hours'. He and the woman's husband moved her to a shadier spot, and for seven hours they, in addition to an older female relative, 'rendered her situation as comfortable as circumstances would admit'. Crook described presenting the father with a 'large and fine girl'.<sup>82</sup> As William Henry shifted into the role of the mission's man-midwife, he too came to attend indigenous births. Henry recorded in a letter to the LMS: 'no small portion of my time is taken up in administering medicine etc. and also in attending native females in difficult & bad cases of labour'. Possibly illustrating his engagement with the medical literature that he had requested on midwifery, he made 'it a point to attend them only in such cases'.<sup>83</sup>

Other missionaries were more reticent about expressing cross-cultural intimacies, perhaps wary that they would be accused of 'backsliding' like several of the first missionaries, and thus, their writings conveyed a greater sense of boundary maintenance. In around 1819, James Hayward submitted answers to the LMS on the 'Subsistence of the missionaries and their families', and when questioned on how much time was taken up by family matters, he answered that 'A Missionary among uncivilized people must do almost every thing if he wishes not to descend to a level with the people with whom he is surrounded'.<sup>84</sup> Several historical studies have explored how missionary propaganda used domestic themes to

<sup>79</sup> Ellis, *Polynesian researches*, i. 347.

<sup>80</sup> Henry journal, entry for [?] 1797, AJCP, SOAS, SSJ, box 1, at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2712714546>.

<sup>81</sup> Manktelow, *Missionary families*, 137.  
<sup>82</sup> William Pascoe Crook journal, entry for 3 Mar. 1817, AJCP, SOAS, SSJ, box 3, at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2712613279>.

<sup>83</sup> Henry to LMS, 3 Feb. 1825, AJCP, SOAS, SSL, box 3, at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2714379065>.

<sup>84</sup> James Hayward to LMS, 1819, AJCP, SOAS, SSL, box 5, at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2714059308>.



argue for the spread of the Gospel.<sup>85</sup> LMS periodicals circulated stories of uncaring and dangerous methods of childrearing among indigenous mothers, which emphasised the missionaries' triumph in ending practices like infanticide. These themes entered LMS periodicals for children. The *Juvenile Magazine* in 1844, for example, explained to its young readers that the killing of infants was once 'dreadfully common in heathen countries', including China and India, and that in the South Seas, 'there were women who had destroyed ten, eleven, and some even as many as seventeen children with their own hands!'<sup>86</sup> Esme Cleall's work on 'discourses of difference' in missionary accounts explores this particular trope concerning indigenous motherhood. Universalising language about families and maternity convinced British readers to sympathise with indigenous peoples, while narratives of cruelty justified the missionaries' attempts to transform indigenous cultures.<sup>87</sup>

The entanglements that nevertheless did sometimes develop between the missionaries and Pacific peoples around birth were both physically and cosmologically significant. As Bronwen Douglas explains, to most cultures in the Pacific 'religion is an embodied experience, encompassing human beings, gods or God, spirits, fauna, plants, places, rocks and other things within complex webs of relationship'.<sup>88</sup> Although Christian-based philosophy encompassed a more binary understanding of the cosmos (heaven and hell, body and soul), the missionaries still understood physical processes in religious terms. Some missionaries, therefore, framed their observations of indigenous births as involving competing cosmological ideas. In Tahiti, Rowland Hassall encountered a man rushing for an indigenous priest to oversee the delivery of a woman's child in 1797. Hassall followed the priest to the woman's house where he found her 'under a large Breadfruit tree in the Mist [*sic*] of the long grass in greate [*sic*] pains without help and in the open air'. He attempted to explain that she and her baby (born after he arrived) should be brought indoors; however, the priest told him that the baby was 'unclain [*sic*] and will be till it be given to the God twice'. According to Hassall, he eventually persuaded the priest to take the woman and her baby inside and afterwards the arrival of a bird singing a 'cheerful note' informed the priest that his God was not angry at him for forgoing local customs. Hassall recorded in his journal: 'I told him Birds were very common and that his god,

<sup>85</sup> John Barker, 'Drudges, shrews, and unfit mothers: representations of Papuan women in the publications of the London Missionary Society, 1873–1926', *Social Sciences and Missions* xxxi (2018), 7–33; Anna Johnston, *Missionary writing and empire, 1800–1860*, Cambridge 2003.

<sup>86</sup> E. Cleall, *Missionary discourses of difference: negotiating otherness in the British Empire, 1840–1900*, Basingstoke 2012, 35.

<sup>88</sup> Bronwen Douglas, 'Religion', in David Armitage and Alison Bashford (eds), *Pacific histories: ocean, land, people*, Basingstoke 2014, 193.

worship, & Bird, were vanity etc. But all that I could say to him could not shake his faith in his Bird, and God.’<sup>89</sup>

Two decades later in Moorea, Crook recorded in his journal the birthing rituals among local women, which included bathing in the sea and a period of confinement in a temporary structure.<sup>90</sup> In 1821 he once again commented on an indigenous birth and the associated practices. He observed the pregnant woman inside her home, ‘seated on a flat stone two or three inches thick placed on the ground’. Two women and her husband and brother took turns ‘pouring water upon her head & body without ceasing five minutes at one time’. They also ‘lighted a string of tiaire nuts, the King having prohibited oil’.<sup>91</sup> As Douglas Oliver writes, pre-Christian accounts of Tahiti and Moorea typically indicated that deliveries took place outside or in shelters designed for birth. The domestic setting that Crook described in 1821 perhaps reflected some of the changes that developed from the Tahitian King Pomare II’s embrace of Christianity in 1815 and the establishment of scriptural laws thereafter.<sup>92</sup>

In addition to the observations of indigenous deliveries that some missionaries made in their writings to the LMS, the transmission of indigenous birthing customs to paper involved the assistance of indigenous leaders. John Orsmond compiled a collection of indigenous beliefs, oral histories, genealogies and mythologies from his time in Tahiti, which has not survived. His granddaughter, Teuira Henry, compiled the notes he left behind in the edited *Ancient Tahiti* in 1928. The collection included a section on the ‘Rites for Children’, and according to the text, it was ‘Based on information from Pomare II, Mahine and the priests generally’. The account described the various practices associated with the delivery of royal children in Tahiti, including the sacred restrictions issued on the land and sea, the structures built for the delivery and the clothing and the washing of the infant. It also included the ‘chants’ spoken by the *paia* (family doctor) in Tahitian alongside English translations.<sup>93</sup> Scholars have examined the problems associated with these types of English-language sources. Tom Smith mentions the layers of filtration that occurred before oral histories were printed and the power discrepancies that coloured the sources. Overall, however, he argues that in relation to understandings of the past, the English-language texts can be read for the ‘creative tension between nineteenth-century indigenous and outsider

<sup>89</sup> Hassall journal, entry for 26 Oct. 1797, AJCP, SOAS, SSJ, box 1, at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2712710452>.

<sup>90</sup> Crook journal, entry for 4 Mar. 1817, AJCP, SOAS, SSJ, box 3, at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2712613279>.

<sup>91</sup> Idem, entry for 24 Apr. 1821, AJCP, SOAS, SSJ, box 4, at <https://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-2712677185>.

<sup>92</sup> Douglas L Oliver, *Ancient Tahitian society*, Honolulu, HI 2019, 413–14.

<sup>93</sup> Teuira Henry, *Ancient Tahiti*, Honolulu, HI 1928.

understandings', and that the genealogies in particular 'embodied neither straightforward Polynesian agency, nor the imposition of Christianity, but a fluid and evolving conception of the past'.<sup>94</sup> This understanding of 'creative tension' can be applied to understandings of childbirth, which shifted in relation to material circumstances and competing cosmological ideas. While the information compiled by Orsmond and then edited by Henry cannot be read for absolute insights, it does speak to how missionary understandings were produced on the ground through engagement with indigenous peoples and how these understandings were textualised and transmitted back to Britain.

This was a trend in other missionaries' publishing habits – for instance, Ellis's *Polynesian researches*, which made use of Orsmond's papers and included information on indigenous births. As Sarah Irving-Stonebraker suggests, though it would be anachronistic to suggest that Ellis considered his volume 'scientific' or 'ethnographic' in the 1820s, the types of knowledge he compiled on indigenous customs, religious practices, manners and relationships between kinship groups in *Polynesian researches* were 'precisely those that contributed to the growth of the "sciences of man" as they were becoming known'.<sup>95</sup> On the customs associated with birth in Tahiti, Ellis presented an account similar to those recorded by the missionaries in their journals and letters. He described the bathing rituals, the transfer of the infant to the *marae* (meeting house), the accompanying ceremonies and the offerings made by the priest. Similar to LMS periodicals, which showcased how missionary understandings were reshaped and repackaged for Evangelical audiences, his observations were interwoven with triumphalist discourse on the positive influence of Christianity in transforming Tahitian parenting practices and ending infanticide.<sup>96</sup>

While missionary print often conveyed a strong sense of authority on childbirth and maternity, their writings from the field revealed the wavering nature of their knowledge on the subject. Missionaries in the South Pacific frequently requested medical literature, and missionary families sometimes relied on indigenous support networks. Studying these early, intimate histories can illustrate why certain themes emerged in missionary texts, and they also demonstrate the relative powerlessness of European printed medical knowledge to assist with difficult and life-threatening births in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.

Although this article does not claim to be an exhaustive overview of medical entanglements between missionaries and Pacific peoples, it has shown how

<sup>94</sup> Tom Smith, 'Islanders, Protestant missionaries, and traditions regarding the past in nineteenth-century Polynesia', *Historical Journal* lx (2017), 71–94.

<sup>95</sup> Sarah Irving-Stonebraker, 'Comparative history and ethnography in William Ellis's *Polynesian researches*', *JCP* lv (2020), 1–17.

<sup>96</sup> Ellis, *Polynesian researches*, i. 341–4.

childbirth, in particular, shaped the information networks that interwove Britain and the South Pacific in the modern period. It demonstrates how challenging births affected missionary writing habits on the ground in the South Pacific; how Evangelical print omitted the vulnerabilities and cross-cultural dependences that shaped early mission life; and how childbirth recast boundaries between men and women, with the emergence of the missionary 'man-midwife' in the mission stations. This latter offers insight into the intellectual and material worlds of mission work, through directing attention to the medical books and medicines that missionaries requested from Britain. Finally the article investigates the cross-cultural intimacies that developed between missionaries and Pacific peoples over birth: how these entanglements were textualised in missionary writing and recycled back to Britain in printed form.