INTRODUCTION

TRACING A “WONDERFUL RECORD OF PATIENT CONTINUANCES IN WELL DOING”

In 1905, an unnamed church official at Berthelsdorf, near Herrnhut in the Oberlausitz in eastern Germany, the home of the Moravian Church, wrote a letter of gratitude to Bruder Friedrich August Hagenauer, a long-serving missionary in the British colony of Victoria, which had of late become a state in the new Commonwealth of Australia. Hagenauer was nearly 80 years of age and was contemplating his retirement from public duties. He had recently sent to headquarters the diaries of the defunct Ebenezer mission station, a Moravian mission to the indigenous peoples of the area established in 1859 in the north-west of Victoria and closed in 1904 (see Figure 1). This had been his first posting, until he later moved in 1862 to the frontier landscape of Gippsland in eastern Victoria, where he established the Ramahyuck mission station in order to convert heathen Aborigines to Christianity. Yet at the close of nineteenth century, the number of Aborigines on both the stations had declined as a result of the Government’s policy of dispersing Aborigines of mixed descent into mainstream settler society. With the closure of Ebenezer in 1904, and only a hand-full of people left living at Ramahyuck, the Moravian mission in Australia in 1905 was drawing to a close. The Moravian official acknowledged the diaries’ arrival in Herrnhut as follows:

I think I have already referred to the Diaries of Ebenezer, which arrived safely. They were carefully examined by the custom house official (perhaps to see that they contained no dynamite) & they are now deposited in the Herrnhut Archive. I looked respectfully over some of their pages, & noted that they are not quite complete. But as to the time to read that wonderful record of patient continuances in well doing, well one could only wish that one’s busy life admitted of it. When some pen comes to write the history someone will be glad to have to find the time to study their pages.¹

¹ Unsigned (Herrnhut, Germany) to Hagenauer (Ramahyuck, Australia), 18 November, 1905, Copy held by Aboriginal Affairs Victoria (AAV), Microfilm (MF) 185, 1.
For many years these diaries, as well as the copious amounts of other writings from the Moravian missionaries in Australia, faithfully preserved for posterity, have lain mostly dormant, waiting for “some pen” to write a history of the Moravian’s endeavour in Victoria, Australia. This book draws upon such source materials to examine the Church’s work within this British colony during the latter part of the nineteenth century.

The work of the Moravian Church amongst the indigenous inhabitants of Victoria spanned six decades, with 1848 seeing the decision made by the Moravian Church’s Elders to undertake a mission to Australia, and 1908 the closure of the last Moravian mission within Victoria. When the missionaries first arrived it was to the area known as the Port Phillip Protectorate, which in 1851 became the Colony of Victoria, and in 1901 a state in the Commonwealth of Australia. The foremost aim of this book is to analyse the ways by which the Moravian missionaries navigated competing agendas within the colonial setting across these decades, especially those agendas that impacted upon their sense of personal vocation, their practices of conversion, and their understandings of the indigenous non-Christian peoples in the British settler context of the Victoria. The missionaries’ reactions to such challenges were primarily shaped by the long mission tradition of the Moravian Church (known in German language as the Evangelische Brüder-Unität or Brüdergemeine), which had established many missions across the globe, and actively followed the advice in the Gospels of Mark (xvi:15) and Matthew (xxviii:19-20) to, “Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.” Following this advice, the Moravians evangelised to people from many different cultures across the globe.

Beginning their evangelical missionary work amongst the slaves of the Danish West Indies in 1732, the Church expanded its missionary endeavours, as well as its diaspora, creating a substantial transatlantic network by the end of the eighteenth century, which continued to

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2 The term ‘Brüdergemeine’ is a translation from the name of the Ancient Church, the Unitas Fratrum, in which the Brüder is an inclusive term referring to both males and females. Gemeine is a term meaning ‘common, public, general’, and has been replaced in modern German by the term Gemeinde. See Arthur J. Freeman, An Ecumenical Theology of the Heart: The Theology of Count Nicholas Ludwig Von Zinzendorf (Bethlehem: Moravian Church in America, 1998), 4.

3 Matthew xxviii:19, King James Version with Strong’s & Geneva Notes.

4 See Appendix 1 for a list of Moravian mission fields and dates.