

*The World, the Flesh and the Devil. The Life and Opinions of Samuel Marsden in England and the Antipodes, 1765-1838*

By Andrew Sharp

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Reviewed by Peter Lineham

This huge 926-page book would in former times have been published in two volumes, and become practicable for reading. The present reviewer in the end succumbed to purchasing an additional ebook version in order to make the monster transportable. Such gargantuan texts often prove unreadable, but this cannot be said for Sharp's work. In essence it offers a refreshing look at Samuel Marsden, the New South Wales chaplain and supervisor of the pioneer Anglican missionaries in New Zealand. Somewhat surprisingly he offers a robust defence of the man.

Sharp is best known as emeritus Professor of Political Studies at the University of Auckland, and writer on political ideas of the English civil war of the seventeenth century and on changing New Zealand concepts of nationhood, so his choice of subject is somewhat surprising. He is most enlightening in expounding Marsden's political and social views. Sharp analyses Marsden's thought acutely as a compound of Benthamite Enlightenment ideas and Christian providentialist thinking, explaining Marsden's support for commerce and civilization as well as Christian conversion.

Sharp freely acknowledged at the outset that he struggled to like his subject. He struggles to expound his evangelical beliefs, although he clearly worked very hard on this. There are a range of minor mistakes - John Newton did not write "Abide with Me"; the prison reformer was John not William Howard, Sodom can hardly be placed in South Canaan! Sharp's analysis of Marsden's somewhat unoriginal views on theology are not insightful. But he has laboured to understand even this aspect, thus taking very seriously the responsibilities of the biographer.

Sharp emphasises that Marsden was not of gentry stock. Sponsored by leading evangelical Anglican luminaries to Cambridge, Marsden imbibed their emphasis on subordination and duty in social relations. Marsden made much of his success in the southern hemisphere, and did not change his social theology.

There is a long history of debate in the Australian context about Marsden and his role, much of which probably hinges on the way Marsden fell out of favour with the reforming administration of Governor Macquarie. Falling out with Macquarie, he became the focus of intense criticism during that administration, and paid the price for his stubborn refusal to cooperate or to withdraw from public life. Since then a succession of writers have kept airing the Macquarie-sponsored attacks on the character of Marsden, and only A. T. Yarwood achieved any degree of fairness. An appendix to the book looks at Marsden's unfortunate historical reputation, and New Zealanders will be interested to read Sharp's blunt appraisal of Sinclair's attitude to Marsden. Sharp is, however, no expert on colonial Australia, and his account offers a surprising perspective on Macquarie, in order to robustly defend Marsden's honesty, probity. The argument makes sense of Marsden as a man of intense convictions and emphatic concern with his own good reputation. Sharp defends Marsden's role and conduct as a magistrate, comparing him with English priest magistrates (although one might argue in response that Marsden's evangelical sponsors would have seen the two roles as incompatible even if the governor did not). Macquarie and Marsden initially disagreed on the rehabilitation of former criminals – and it was Marsden who took the less forgiving approach. Sharp boldly defies the historical consensus praising Macquarie, and it is interesting that he shows how Marsden's interest in New Zealand grew as he was deprived of responsibility in Australia.

Sharp also excuses Marsden's lack of support for a mission to Aboriginals (a project that Macquarie supported), insisting that he had sincerely tried. He usefully contrasts Marsden with his predecessor, chaplain Richard Johnson, who retired to England defeated by the lack of official support, and whom Marsden long struggled to rehabilitate.

Marsden's hostility to religious liberty made him an unattractive establishment figure in the colonial setting. He could be criticised for his limited commitment to pastoring his recalcitrant flock as Sharp concedes, but as Sharp shows, the reputation of the flogging parson came later. Sharp allows that Marsden was not saintly, and was prone to resentments and instinctive defensiveness, but suggests that these were lesser faults than they are sometimes portrayed. Macquarie's pettiness in his treatment of Marsden certainly tarnishes the reputation of the reforming governor, but Marsden did not help himself by his unwise decision to seek to vindicate his reputation through the courts.

New Zealand readers are bound to be interested in Sharp's view of "Marsden and the missions", which has traditionally been held in high regard until our secular historians dismissed him and Richard Quinn accused him of sundry crimes. Sharp focuses on how and why Marsden directed the missions, and closely relates this to the political troubles of Marsden in New South Wales. The anti-Marsden publications of 1817 had a direct impact on the mission. Sharp suggests that it was Macquarie or one of his supporters who suggested to Ruatara that the mission did not have benevolent intentions towards the Māori, leading to Ruatara's hesitation about supporting the mission.

Marsden was a very practical theorist of missions, and Sharp notes that his decisions in New Zealand were based on his analysis of the failure of the initial LMS mission in Tahiti, which he put down to the lack of firm direction. His financial acumen also proved a useful skill which he deployed for the LMS and CMS missions, both of which struggled with unrealistic dreams and limited funds. He was realistic also in his idea of the needs for well-organised missionary settlements. He recognised the need that the mission develop local leadership. Most of his emphatic expectations were eminently sensible, aiming to keep the mission from being caught up in local tensions, and gaining a degree of independence as soon as possible. From the outset he saw the necessity of a written Māori language. He was sympathetic to trade, because he thought this would draw Māori into a wider world and would protect the missionaries. But Sharp emphasises that despite allegations at the time and since, Marsden's focus was never on making a profit for himself, and nor did he do so.

Sharp does not attempt a history of the New Zealand mission, but he enables us to understand Marsden's approach to mission, which seems to have done much to make it acceptable to Māori, and to compensate for the weakness of his early missionaries. He also acutely analyses the problems that Marsden encountered with the missionaries and their recalcitrant selfishness or individualism, as he saw it, although there is much more to be said from the missionaries' point of view about the frustrations of an imperious Australian master, and of the sense of crisis that led them into the musket trade! The possibility that he might have abandoned the mission in his frustration is emphasised by Sharp. Sharp rehearses at length Marsden's case against Hall and Butler, for example, but there is much to be said from their point of view (and the lengthy quotations enable us to see this to a degree).

It is on the subject for which Marsden will be always associated, that New Zealand should be civilised before it was evangelised, that Sharp makes his most critical contribution to the understanding of the role of the mission in New Zealand. For Sharp's careful analysis of Marsden's writings concludes that he saw civilization in an instrumental way, and reversed his view on the priority of civilisation over evangelism after 1830. He was strongly opposed to the

takeover of New Zealand by British settlers, while he saw value in small commercial bases in the islands, but Sharp thinks he favoured a British protectorate. He thought that the natives were in a “state of nature” and would see little value in people who came to converse about religion. Consequently, he preferred simple practical men as missionaries, with a sound piety but not natural preachers. He worried about missionaries becoming lazy and he wanted them clustered in mission stations, for practical security. Sharp traces Marsden’s views back further than others have done, to his earlier dealing in Australia and with Tahiti. He did not see it as a fundamental statement of theory but a working practice. He also identifies a gradual change of approach towards an emphasis on evangelization in the alter period of Marsden’s work in New Zealand.

Marsden comes out from this lengthy treatment very much warts and all, but deserving of more respect than historians have usually given him, although it must be said that there are alternative views on his conduct in both Australia and New Zealand. The scale of the volume owes something to the indulgence of very extensive quotations from Marsden’s writings, published and unpublished, and arguably this was unnecessary, especially when one considers how accessible some of Marsden’s correspondence is on the Marsden Online site of the Hocken Library, but this gem came too late for Sharp’s work, which has been a long time in the making.

If the book is gargantuan, it is nicely (if not lavishly) produced, with 94 illustrations in plates inserted in four sections of the book, but just five of these are directly related to Marsden. There are a hundred pages of endnotes, and a very good index. But perhaps that is a symptom of this book, which very thoroughly if not exhaustingly places Marsden back in his own life and times.