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The missionary as government agent on the Eastern Frontier: 1818-1830

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Chapter III

The Prelude to the System (cont.)

From 1817 onwards Somerset began to show an even greater interest than before in the Eastern Frontier. With reports reaching the Government early in 1817 of the abandonment of the Zuurveld by ninety families of the original one hundred and forty-five which had accepted Cradock's offer to settle there (1) Somerset himself travelled to Somerset Farm in order to attempt to stem the tide of retreat (2). On 2nd April, 1817, he entered Kaffirland and interviewed the principal chiefs of the Xhosa tribes west of the Kei (3). It was Somerset's intention not to acknowledge or treat with any of the other chiefs except Gaika (4), with whom he came to some agreement regarding the suppression of cattle theft (5); he also requested Gaika to protect Joseph Williams (6). In view of the fact that Gaika himself admitted that he had little power over the other chiefs who considered themselves independent of him (7), it seems that an ancilliary motive to Somerset's patronage of Gaika may have been the fact that with Williams close at hand, to act as his agent; one weak but manageable chief of some standing was worth any number of strong uncontrolled ones (8).

Somerset's devices for promoting increased control of frontier affairs was justified, not only by later events (9) but also by sheer necessity resulting from the decision of the imperial authorities to curtail colonial expenditure, and the concurrent project for reducing the garrison in South Africa; this process destroyed the entire basis of the defence system which Somerset had devised

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(1) Theal (History), I, p. 323.
(2) Ibid.
(3) Theal (Records), XI, p. 311.
(4) Ibid.
(5) Ibid.
(6) Ibid.
(7) Ibid., p. 313.
(8) It had been tradition for the Colony to regard Gaika as the "recognised ally of the white man" (Macmillan (B.B.B.), p. 33).
(9) See below, p. 39.

during his tour of the frontier in April, 1817 (1). The hints which Bathurst had cast in February, 1816, concerning the desirability of curtailing expenditure by sacrificing portion of the Cape Corps (2) began to take form and substance by March when Somerset was requested to "enter upon a minute investigation of all sources of public expense throughout the Colony" (3). By January of 1817 the reduction of the garrison was urgently demanded by Bathurst (4). It is important, if not completely significant, that this almost coincides with the period during which Joseph Williams was first allowed to settle in Caffraria, and he had barely arrived when he was followed by detailed instructions aimed at improving the condition of the frontier (February-August, 1816) (5). Williams died in August, 1818 (6), and John Brownlee was appointed to take his place in December, 1818 (7). Brownlee's instructions left no doubt as to what was required of him in this capacity as a missionary in Caffraria on sufferance of the colonial authorities (8), and the detailed and stern requirements are in direct proportion to the troubled condition of the frontier; just as William's appointment and instructions stood in proportion to the fear that a reduced garrison might not be able to cope with disturbance on the frontier. The appointment of a missionary with civil functions to Caffraria in 1816 is one part of a total process by which Somerset was trying to find a solution to the frontier problems presented him by the reduction of the garrison, which was reduced in some respects to

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(1) Theal (Records), XI, p. 334, Somerset to Bathurst, 17th May, 1817.
Theal (History, I, p. 328) says it weakened the frontier defensive force and resulted in increased depredations by the Kaffirs.
(2) Theal (Records), XI, p. 72, Bathurst to Somerset, 10th February, 1816.
(3) Ibid., p. 96, Bathurst to Somerset, 29th March, 1816.
(4) Ibid., p. 241, Bathurst to Somerset, 1st January, 1817.
(5) Williams was granted permission to proceed to Kaffirland in February, 1816 (C.O. 4836, p. 262, Colonial Secretary to Read, 14th February, 1816); he arrived at his proposed location in July, 1816 (Philip, II, p. 166).
(6) Philip, II, p. 181 (Extracts from Mrs Williams' journal).
(7) See below, p. 55.
(8) Ibid., pp 60 ff.

corps containing "the most desperate criminals" (1). Somerset's hint to Bathurst in November, 1817, about populating the Zuurveld with emigrants from England who would act in a defensive capacity forms part of the same pattern (2).

To the troubled state of the frontier during the latter half of 1818 and the greater part of 1819 we must now turn. Somerset's negotiations with Gaika had not created a satisfactory relationship either between Colonist and Bantu (for cattle raiding continued as before (3)), or between Gaika and Ndlambe. The hostility between these rivals burst into open warfare which led to the defeat of Gaika at Amalinde, the assistance of the Colony being sought by Gaika to the subsequent discomfiture of Ndlambe. No sooner had the Colonial forces left when Ndlambe attacked Gaika once more, and invaded the Colony (4). By April, 1818 all was confusion, and Ndlambe's warriors had penetrated as far as Grahamstown. It was October, 1819 before order had been sufficiently restored for Lieut-Colonel Bird to parley with Gaika about peace on the frontier (5). In addition, as if the conflagration on the Eastern Frontier were insufficient material to cause Somerset perplexity, the situation about Griqua Town had been deteriorating and a number of Bastaards under the leadership of Coenraad Buys had not only been plundering the Griqua and committing murders, but threatening both Lattakoo and Klaar Water by their activities(6). In this area Somerset's measures for control took another form; Graaff-Reinet and Tulbagh were subdivided and a new district formed "where the immediate eye of a magistrate may best restore order". A settlement was established for the Griquas with a Dutch Reformed Church Minister in charge (7).

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(1) Theal (Records), XI, p. 401.
(2) Ibid., p. 404.
(3) Theal (History), I, pp. 325-326, 328.
(4) Ibid., p. 337.
(5) Ibid., pp. 337-341.
(6) Theal (Records), XI, p. 254.
(7) Ibid., XII, p. 111.

The settlement reached with the Kaffirs in October, 1819, regarding the frontier was one which at least one historian has dubbed "imperfectly conceived, and so cavalierly executed that there was never any real hope of its permanence" (1). It is essential to examine this settlement in detail for two reasons; first, to determine whether Chumie was a mission station beyond the frontiers of the Colony and thereby ascertain that any control which Somerset wished to exert on the missionaries at Chumie was control of "extra-colonial" missionaries; and, second, in order to show, by discussing the nature of the "Neutral" or "Ceded" Territory, that the frontier policy pursued by Somerset had coherence and vision and that it is clearly linked with the use of the missionary as Government Agent who, not only acting politically would also disseminate Christianity, and by so doing would spread Civilisation which would result in an orderly frontier.

It may seem sufficient to accept contemporary Colonial Office opinion that Chumie mission station was in Caffraria as sufficient evidence that it was thus situated (2). But a reasonable amount of doubt existed among the authorities about the exact location of the frontier, and therefore some attention must be paid to the question of the exact line of demarcation to ensure that the fact that Chumie <u>was</u> an extra-colonial mission is unassailable (3).

The official description of the agreement reached between Lord Charles Somerset and Gaika is to be found in Somerset's communication with Bathurst of 15th October, 1819:

> "... The Caffer border shall in future be the ridge of the Kat River Hills from the Winterberg to where the ridge joins the river Chumie, the Chumie itself to its junction with the Keiskama..." (4).

This was sufficiently vague, for it left in doubt exactly where "the ridge joins the river Chumie", and the description could

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(1) Macmillan (B.B.B.), p. 61.
(2) C.O. 5964-5971, Establishment Tables of the Cape of Good Hope, 1823-1830.
(3) Opinion was divided as to whether it was the Gaga or a tributary further north(Theal(History), 1, p. 343.
(4) Theal (Records), XII, p. 338.
For a correction of terminology see below, p. 41 , footnote (2).

apply to any of the tributaries of the Tyumie River (1). Thus it becomes necessary for us to determine which tributary of the Tyumie River was being referred to.

The upper Kat River basin is enclosed partly by the east end of the main Winterberg range, partly by the Elands Mountains and partly by a high spur running from N.E. to S.W. which begins near Gaika's Kop with a peak called Menziesberg and ends in a peak officially known as Tyumie Peak and locally as Juanesberg (2). The N.E. - S.W. ridge is the water parting between the Upper Kat and Upper Tyumie basin. The tributaries of the Upper Kat draw their supplies partly from the Elands Mountains and partly from the N.E. face of the ridge and the right bank tributaries at the lower end of the upper basin originate behind the Tyumie Peak (Juanesberg). Also originating under the Tyumie Peak is the Gaga River which is the only tributary of the Upper Tyumie which penetrates more closely into the end of the spur than the higher tributaries of the Tyumie. The Gaga River originates at the end of the ridge whereas all higher tributaries originate along the face of the ridge. The Gaga is therefore the largest tributary and holds water for a longer period than the other tributaries.

In view of the position of the Gaga it would be the most "natural" boundary of the Colony under the circumstances. But in

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(1) It is essential to remember that Chumie mission station, as Brownlee's place of residence came to be known (see below, p. 61) is not on the Tyumie river, but on the Gwali, a tributary of the Tyumie. We shall employ the term "Chumie" to describe the mission station, and "Tyumie" to describe the river (See Shepherd, p. 34, footnote (asterisk)).

All other contemporary descriptions of the agreement between Somerset and Gaika leave the vagueness of the junction between the ridge and the Tyumie undefined: Stockenstroom, I, pp. 336-337; No 583-1836, p. 2, Evidence of Captain Aitcheson.

(2) H.A. Reyburn is correct in pointing out that what Somerset described as the Kat River Hills are not really the hills bearing that name at all; the real Kat Mountains today are situated further towards the N.W. But he is incorrect in defining the vital spur as part of the Winterberg range. It is really part of the Elands Mountains ("The Critic", February, 1936, p. 115).

addition it is possible that Somerset, being influenced by European conditions, selected the Gaga because it held water the longest. It is significant that the month during which the demarcation took place is the time when, just after the first seasonal rains, the upper tributaries (on one of which Chumie mission station was situated) would be dry, and the lower tributaries would still contain water.

It is, however, on the score of the creation of the so-called "Neutral" Territory that Somerset had been castigated by certain historians.

> "After the war of 1819, Lord Charles Somerset seems to have had the idea of setting patrols to keep the land between the Fish and the Keiskama empty of both black and white. But his settlement was imperfectly conceived, and so cavalierly executed that there was never any real hope of its permanence" (1).

For Macmillan's doubt about a definite attitude of Somerset towards the apparent project he must be praised; for his judgement on the manner in which the apparent settlement was carried out he must be censured. To judge Somerset's settlement in this fashion is to ignore the interest displayed by Lord Charles in frontier problems since his earliest days in the Colony. Perhaps this judgement is the result of a preoccupation with the past, and the tendency to place Somerset's action in the direct line of sequence to the suggestions which had been made many times about the possibility of solving the problems presented by the frontier by creating a neutral belt between the colonists and the Kaffirs (2).

In the first place, there seems to be a great deal of doubt among accredited historians as to whether Somerset did in fact intend the territory to be neutral in the sense that it was to be

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(1) Macmillan (B.B.B.), p. 61.
(2) With the submission of Colonel Collins' Report on the frontier (1809) the idea gained strength. It was a matter for discussion among "many of the older inhabitants" of the frontier, including Stockenstroom's heemraden (Stockenstroom, I, p. 126).

cleared permanently of both colonists and Kaffirs (1). There is no doubt that he intended that both groups should be cleared as far as possible from the territory in question in 1819; it is not certain that he intended that this condition should persist in perpetuity (2). The very number of permanent posts which were required to prevent the Bantu from re-entering the area (3) by their very presence negated the idea of neutrality. If it were the intention of Somerset to create a strip of "Neutral" Territory why did he show such extreme indignation when others referred to the area under discussion as the "Neutral Ground"? (4). It would

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(1) Walker states so categorically. "All the country between the Fish and the Keiskama ... was declared neutral territory" (History, p. 161).

Theal speaks of "a wide belt of unoccupied ground between the two races" which was the "plan of the Governor" (History, I, p. 345).

But neither in the case of Theal nor Walker does the evidence suggest this conclusion. Walker states the sources of his information and none of these sources permits such a categorical pronouncement. (Theal (Records), XII, pp. 193, 203, 306, 320, 337 ff.). Theal, on the other hand, does not give his references.

Macmillan who seems to have studied the problems more deeply than the first two, is much more reserved, both when writing in (B.B.B.) and C.H.B.E., VIII. In the first case he concludes that "After the war of 1819, Lord Charles Somerset seems to have had the idea of setting patrols to keep the land between the Fish and the Keiskama empty of both black and white" ((B.B.B.), p. 61). In the second case he shows more doubt: "If the objective were really, as tradition had invariably asserted, to use the occasion to establish a Neutral Belt or 'vacant tract', the bargain was not only vain but disingenuous" (C.H.B.E., VIII, p. 303).

In 1825 Somerset committed himself definitely to a policy of an "uninhabited tract" (Theal (Records), XIX, p. 394). But this statement, as Macmillan rightly points out, was a "second thought" (Macmillan (B.B.B.), p. 63, footnote (1)).

(2) H.A. Reyburn in "The Critic", February, 1936, p. 115.
(3) Theal (Records), XII, p. 246.
(4) Somerset's comment in Rose, p. 246.
Rose reads: "This country, called the neutral ground ..." next to which Somerset has commented vigorously: "The author seems to be totally ignorant of the subject."

appear that Somerset eschewed the word "neutral" because he never meant the area to be neutral in the sense which implied that the tract of land between the Fish and the Keiskama Rivers would serve as a permanent vacuum between the two cultures. He may, of course, have objected to the term on the grounds that the term "Ceded Territory", which he employed from the start (1), should be applied as the latter term implied that the area was part of the Colony, whereas "Neutral Territory" did not carry this connotation. And again, if this were so, then surely the logical end of land which was ceded to the Colony would be occupation eventually by colonists, at least. To Moodie, for one, there was no question of "neutral" ground but "ceded" territory ready for occupation (2).

It seems that Lord Charles Somerset did not think of the area between the Keiskama and the Fish as remaining "neutral" for any great length of time (3). Neither the colonists nor the Kaffirs would be permanently expelled from the land. The core of his plans for the Eastern Frontier, in 1819, seems to lie in his statement that

> "It will only be by peopling this country (4) and gradually civilising the Caffer tribes that the habits of the latter will be finally eradicated" (5).

Somerset apparently thought of a "tract of uninhabited country" along the frontier of the Keiskama River as an initial measure to prevent further plundering by the Kaffirs, and to enforce this there would be military posts and patrols (6). Gradually this tract would be filled <u>from both sides</u>, in the first instance by the colonists, to ensure "security" (7), and secondly by the Kaffirs themselves, provided they had reached an unspecified level of

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(1) Theal (Records), XII, p. 339.
Keppel-Jones, p. 57.
(2) Moodie, II, p. 18 ff; Theal (Records), XII, p. 344.
There is no doubt that Somerset regarded the Keiskama as the new frontier of the <u>Colony</u>.
(3) H.A. Reyburn in "The Critic", February, 1936, p. 115.
Also see below, pp.117 f. for further evidence on this contention.
(4) "This country" in the context can only apply to the Ceded Territory (See (5) below).
(5) Theal (Records), II, p. 339.
(6) Ibid., XII, p. 338.
(7) Ibid., p. 339.

Civilisation which would cure them of their "predatory habits" (1). When this stage should be reached the military support for the present system of policing the frontier could be withdrawn (2).

Such an explanation is at least as feasible as the legend of the "Neutral Territory" which has lingered far too long in our history. The vision which this plan shows is not attributed to Somerset, and precisely because insufficient attention has been paid to the collateral evidence of his relationships with the extra-colonial missionaries during the years preceding and following the settlement of October, 1819 (3). By December, 1818, Lord Charles Somerset was maturing a scheme for using the off-shoots of Christianity, as well as the propagators of the Gospel, to assist in the control of the Eastern Frontier (4). To this end missionary

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(1) Inferred from Somerset's comments in Rose, pp. 81-82. These observations by Somerset indicate quite clearly that when Somerset spoke in 1825 of not permitting the Ceded Territory to be occupied "until our endeavours to civilise the Kaffirs have been successful" (Theal (Records), XIX, p. 394) he was thinking of not allowing the territory to be inhabited by either Europeans or Bantu. The European settlement depended on the civilisation of the Kaffir. But see above, p. 43, footnote (1).

(2) Theal (Records), XII, pp. 339-340.

(3) As in Key, p. 16 ff, where the frontier policy of Somerset is discussed at length without reference to his relations with the missionaries. In other cases, e.g. Walker (History), Somerset's relations with the missionaries are treated without regard to the possibility that Somerset may have had a definite plan for using the missionaries to control the frontier.

(4) The details of this scheme are discussed below, p.53ff. The significance of the following paragraph in Somerset's despatch to Bathurst of 15th October, 1819 is often overlooked:

> "It will only be by peopling this country and gradually civilising the Caffer tribes that the habits of the latter will be finally eradicated. By inhabiting the frontier districts, security will by degrees be attained, and I am not without hope that the tribes on the border may be progressively civilised, as upon mentioning Mr Brownlee to Gaika during our conference, he expressed (as I had the honour of informing your Lordship he had done on a former occasion) the most anxious desire that Mr Brownlee should be allowed to reside with him. When these objects shall be, in some measure, effected, the military support which is now indispensable, but which appears not to have been adverted to when the force to be stationed in this Settlement was decided upon, may be withdrawn" (Theal (Records), XII, p. 339).

The dual aspect of Somerset's frontier policy - i.e. the creation of a neutral area and the use of missionaries to assist control by changing the habits of the Kaffirs - which has been consistently ignored by historians - was recognised by Colebrook (p. 188).

activity was encouraged on the Eastern Frontier after December, 1818 only under certain restrictions. The legacy of the past when the missionaries had merely been regarded as undesirable autonomous cells within the Rule of Law had given way to direct control of missionaries for political purposes. To the direct North (i.e. from Griqua Town Westward) there was not the same prevailing tension; there was no need of rigid frontier control and hence no need to control missionaries. Therefore this area proved a useful outlet to satisfy the demands of the humanitarian spirit, which emanating from Great Britain, demanded that missionaries proceed in an unfettered fashion beyond the frontiers of the Colony. Robert Moffat and Kitchingman were amongst the disappointed spirits; hoping to proceed to Griqualand-Bechuanaland they found themselves relegated to the "innocuous seclusion" of Namaqualand (1). Similarly Barnabas Shaw found difficulty in obtaining permission to proceed to the Kamiesberg in Namaqualand (2).

Meanwhile, to perfect his plans for the control of missionaries in general Somerset utilised to the full the poor internal conditions of the L.M.S. in the Cape and attempted to win the assistance of Dr John Philip who had been detailed to investigate the condition of the missions in South Africa.

Dr Philip arrived in Cape Town in February, 1819 (3) and Somerset's behaviour towards him is clearly indicative of the Governor's preoccupation with the necessity of controlling missionaries in those parts of the frontier which merited his attention. He was very glad to receive him, and, it appears, his kindness was not without purpose for

> "at first both Philip and Campbell were disposed to accept not only the official hospitality, but also the current almost conventional criticisms of the missionaries" (4).

Certainly by June, 1819 Somerset was convinced that Philip had not

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(1) Macmillan (C.C.J.), p. 124, footnote (1).
Du Plessis, pp. 155-156.
(2) Du Plessis, p. 168.
(3) Walker (History), p. 158.
(4) Macmillan, op. cit., p. 123.

taken long to see

> "how full of evil the present system of missions is" (1).

Early in 1819 when Philip and Campbell were summoned to an interview with Colonial Secretary Bird, they learned that Somerset had been empowered by Lord Bathurst to put down all missionary institutions (2). In reply Philip and Campbell pointed out that this would not have been Bathurst's intention that such an order should be executed before they had visited the stations and reported accordingly (3). The truth of the matter seems to be that Colonial Secretary Bird - who saw eye to eye with Somerset as far as missions were concerned (4) - was, on Somerset's behalf, trying to press Philip to do away with extra-colonial missions (5) and attempting to force his hand with a show of authority which neither he nor Somerset possessed (6). With the Eastern Frontier ablaze Somerset's apprehensions had once more been directed to the possibility that the situation might be aggravated by an outburst at Griqua Town, and from this latter example he inferred that

> "... whatever errors may have been committed in the establishment of the system upon which the missions within the Colony have been conducted, and however injurious, in my view of the case, the consequences of these errors have been to this settlement, the danger arising from those stations which have been established immediately beyond our limits, the members or inhabitants of which consider themselves independent of colonial law and control, is far greater, and will require at no distant period the most vigilant attention" (7).

With his plans for control of the Eastern Frontier through missionary agency already under way (8), and with Griqua Town threatening this plan for security as (in his view) all other

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(1) Theal (Records), XII, p. 246, Somerset to Bathurst, 30th June, 1819.
(2) Macmillan (C.C.Q.), p. 122.
(3) Ibid.
(4) See below, pp. 63-64.
(5) See (7) below.
(6) The only authority Somerset did possess was that Bathurst had expressed his intention to prohibit further missionary expansion until explanations had reached him of the conduct of the missionaries in the Colony (Theal (Records), XII, p. 107).
(7) Theal (Records), XII, p. 246, Somerset to Bathurst, 30th June, 1819.
(8) See above, pp. 35-36.

extra-colonial missions would threaten it if they were not controlled, the last shreds of the importance of missionary institutions as the reservoirs of labour in the relationship between missionaries and Government disappear. Before August, 1818, Somerset had still on occasion used labour as an excuse to further his ends with Joseph Williams in Caffraria (1); now the extra-colonial missions were seen in one light only: as potential sources of danger to the authority of Lord Charles Somerset, endangering the Rule of Law which he had so strenuously been shaping.

> "I should on no account," he wrote to Bathurst in June, 1819, "without positive directions to the contrary from your Lordship, permit any additional missionaries to cross the colonial boundaries for the purpose of strengthening the present missions or adding to the number of those already formed, and I have signified to Dr Philip that it is my opinion that Mr Andereon's establishment, which he has named Griqua Town, should be broken up, and that he should be settled either within the colonial border or so close to it as to be considered under the control of the Colonial Government, and the people attached to him subject to the local law of this place. The establishment of a theocracy entirely independent of the Civil Government was Dr Van der Kemp's favourite and avowed plan, and to the attempt to reduce that plan to practice is to be attributed the misrule which has given so much annoyance to the local magistracy there" (2).

So it was that by 1819 humanitarianism was confirmed in its role as a variable and transitory factor in the relationship between the missionaries and the Government. The needs of the Colony demanded it. What prevented the extra-colonial missions from being extinguished completely was a belief prevalent in Great Britain at the time which propounded the doctrine relating Christianity to Civilisation (3). The prospect of uniting so many functions in the office of one man, the missionary, was singularly attractive to Somerset, who saw frontier control not only in terms of missionaries giving frequent reports of details which would otherwise never be brought to his notice, but also at the more elevated level, where order would spring from Civilisation (4).

It was only at this stage in the history of the sub-continent

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(1) See below, p. 51.
(2) Theal (Records), XII, p. 248.
(3) See Comte, op. cit.
(4) The relationship of Christianity and Civilisation to Somerset's plans is discussed below, p. 54 ff.

where such close control of missionaries was possible. It was possible because the wave of the humanitarian movement had not yet been allowed to flood the interior with so many missionaries that control would be difficult; neither had another flood broken the established pattern of South Africa, and created other frontiers with the Kaffirs in the interior, creating with them a multitude of problems regarding the role of the missionaries. The experiment attempted by Lord Charles Somerset was a small one. There were, in all, only two missionaries listed as Government Agents, financed by the Colonial Government (1). It is principally with the activities of one of these men which the remainder of this thesis is concerned. But in his actions and reactions, and ultimate fate, lies the reasons why the principle of employing the missionary as Government Agent on the Eastern Frontier, in this extreme, definitive form, broke down. The experiment of voluntary submission to an exacting temporal authority was not repeated again. Whatever system remained on the Eastern Frontier after William Richie Thomson had resigned his post as Government Agent at Chumie, it was not the clearly defined and carefully calculated scheme which Somerset had evolved, but a shadow of what had been a comprehensive and far-sighted plan.

Having considered the conditions which gave rise to the office of the missionary as Government Agent on the Eastern Frontier, we may now focus our attention more sharply upon the story of the men who played the leading roles.

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(1) The establishment tables from 1821 to 1830 reveal that only John Brownlee and William Richie Thomson are listed as missionary Government Agents, receiving salary from the Government (C.O. 5963-5972). Joseph Williams was never a salaried Government Missionary, drawing his salary from the L.M.S., and John Melville (see below, pp. 86ff) was a secular Government Agent.