

The mission presses

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The Basel Mission continued, in its mission fields, the printing tradition of its home city. It established printing presses in Mangalore, in the Gold Coast and in China, which printed Bibles, hymnbooks, catechisms, school books, grammars, dictionaries and periodicals in the local languages. The press in Mangalore, founded in the 1840s, became one of the most important printing establishments of southern India. Among other works, it printed the Kannada-English dictionary of the Basel missionary Ferdinand Kittel, published in 1894, which remains a standard reference for the Kannada language.¹

The mission presses played a role in the development of the written languages of the regions in which they worked. By fixing spellings, producing grammars and printing books, they contributed to the standardisation of languages that had been primarily oral or written in different scripts and conventions. In the Gold Coast, the Twi and Ga literature printed by the mission became the foundation of written literature in these languages. In India, the Kannada and Malayalam publications of the mission contributed to the modern literary culture of Karnataka and Kerala.

The mission presses thus extended the Basel tradition of printing, which Part B traced to Amerbach and Froben, to Africa and Asia. The printers of the sixteenth century had made Basel a centre of the European republic of letters. In the nineteenth century, the mission printers made the Basel Mission a contributor to the literary cultures of West Africa and southern India. In both cases, printing was an enterprise that combined capital, technical skill and a purpose that went beyond commerce.

1 Notes

1. On the Basel Mission Press in Mangalore (founded in the 1840s) and Ferdinand Kittel's A Kannada-English Dictionary (Mangalore, 1894), see the literature on the Basel Mission in India and on Kannada lexicography. To be verified. ↩

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