

Reverend William Deans Cowan

William Deans Cowan was born about 1844 at Newbattle, Midlothian, Scotland. He was the eldest son of James COWAN and Jean DEANS.

In 1851 he is living at West Houses, with his parents and siblings.

In 1871 he is lodging with Benjamin and Mary Hicks at Fore Street, Looe, Liskeard, Cornwall and studying as a Theology Student. A short biography from Global Plants website states that he trained at Western College, Bristol and was later ordained at St Andrew's Parish Church in Edinburgh.

In 1874 William married Cecil Callow CRAIG at Duddington in Midlothian. He joined the London Missionary Society and shortly after their marriage he and Cecil made the journey to Madagascar where he took up his Missionary work. William and Cecil spent 7 years in Madagascar and five children were born whilst they were living there: Jessie Rae 1875, James Craig 1877, Cecil May 1887, William Ross 1880 and David Craig 1881.

William had a keen interest in the flora and fauna of the island and besides teaching the Malagasy students in Fianarantsoa he made expeditions to collect specimens to send and bring back to the UK. The Natural History Museum in London contains many of his specimens such as lemurs, reptiles and birds. Some species that he catalogued bear his name A giant tree frog (*Platypelis Cowanii*) and Cowan's Shrew Tenrec (*Microgani cowani*). He also wrote a book "The Bara Land: A Description of the Country and People). They also have a collection of 52 water colour drawings of Madagascan Orchids by the Reverend William Deans Cowan

[William Deans Cowan \(1844-1923\) collection of 52 watercolour drawings of Madagascar orchids - Natural History Museum UK \(NHM\) \(exlibrisgroup.com\)](#)

<https://plants.jstor.org/stable/10.5555/al.ap.person.bm000065410>

[Mantella cowanii — Wikipédia \(wikipedia.org\)](#)

In 1883 he received the Murchison Award from The Royal Geographical Society for journeys in Madagascar

William and Cecil return to the UK in 1881 and William resigned from the London Missionary Society although he made further visits to Madagascar. For a time they returned to Scotland where another son was born: Archibald 1883. They then moved south and George was born in Forest Gate, Essex in 1889 and Jeannie in 1891 in West Ham, London. Cecil died in 1891 either at childbirth or soon after. William is recorded as a widow, a clerk in Holy Orders living at 101 Osborne Road West ham with his children except for Jeannie. She is recorded as a visitor at 17 Salisbury Road with Victoria Creaton, Jeannie's age is given as 1 month. Victoria may have been a wet nurse looking after Jeannie.

In 1901 William is living in Wales, he is a clergyman in Llandrinio, Montgomeryshire. His three daughters are living together in Brighton, Sussex and Jessie Rae and Cecil are working as elementary school teachers and looking after Jeannie. George is a boarder at St John's Foundation School in Leatherhead, Surrey.

In 1911 William is recorded as a visitor staying at The Rectory at Tredington, Warwickshire with William and Edith Edwards. He then moved to Beyton in Suffolk where he was a Rector at the Parish Church, he died and was buried there in 1924. Probate for his estate was granted to his son Archibald Alan Cowan, schoolmaster. Effects £713 2s 1d.

The following is a piece translated from **FIANGONAN'I JESOA KRISTY ETO MADAGASIKARA**

COWAN, WILLIAM DEAN

De 1844 à 1923

Protestant

Madagascar

William Deans Cowan spent only one time as a missionary of the London Missionary Society (LMS) in Madagascar.

Seventy years later, however, one of the young Malagasys he had had as a boarder and who had become chief of his region, remembered him with gratitude, and a century later there was a renewed interest in his scientific research.

The variety of his duties, carried out with total self-denial, whether they were described as "religious" or "secular", although he himself did not make such differences, and the intensity of his devotion to Madagascar and the Malagasy, provide a good example of what life was like for many Protestant missionaries during the last quarter of the 19th century, whatever the society to which they belonged.

Born near Edinburgh, Scotland on 21 June 1844, Cowan was educated at Western College, Bristol, and was sent by the LMS to Fianarantsoa, where he arrived in 1874. His missionary work for the next seven years could be reduced to major topics: first, church and district, according to the use of the LMS at the time. Cowan was responsible for a mother church in a large centre, along with all the other churches and schools in the "district" associated. He was in charge of two large parishes in Fianarantsoa: Ivohidahy and Antranobiriky; and the districts of Lalangina and Isandra, about 50 churches and about as many schools. He obviously had strong Malagasy colleagues as auxiliaries, even if they were not yet fully trained. Second, he was to lead the construction of some important buildings. Thirdly, he had to ensure the training of future Malagasy leaders. It would have been premature to establish a true school of theology, but he organized a course for groups of men, known as "preachers," whose importance was great after the mass movement towards the Church that led to the conversion of the queen of Tananarive, Ranaivalona II, in 1869. With progress in the neighbouring provinces in mind, Cowan invited the sons of the chiefs of these areas to his boarding school, expecting that they would then return home and have a good influence on their surroundings. For her part, Ms. Cowan taught girls how to sew.

In 1877 Cowan founded a "Christian Union of Young People" (YMCA), similar to the one already existing in the capital, whose objectives were evangelization with all that it could at the time involve teaching, instruction and transforming the kind of life. It was also about getting young people interested in the natural sciences and elementary geology, taught in the field. Laboratory equipment for chemistry, a microscope (sent from England) were made available to them. Cowan began to build a library in English and Malagasy. The members of the Union had a meeting every Saturday morning and were given presentations on a variety of topics, preferably related to what affected them closely: Betsiléo products, history, folklore, etc. Finally, Cowan also had medical work, because after Dr. G. W. Parker, a doctor at the LMS, left for the capital, he was in charge of the clinic, initially with the help of two and then six young Malagasy nurses in the course of study. In five years, they provided care to 12,000 patients.

The missionary's daily activities included, for example: at 7 a.m., teaching preachers, three days a week; at 8 a.m., teaching in the Governor's Quarter; from 9 a.m. to 11 a.m. or 12 p.m., a clinic, then visits patients at home, often with long conversations, which made him familiar to many people in the Fianarantsoa region. In the afternoon he did other classes; on weekends, he visited churches. Such a busy schedule should not be seen as the desire to do everything by oneself or almost, but to meet the urgent needs of the Church. Through all this activity, Cowan wanted to put into practice a direction that is important to emphasize: about his Malagasy colleagues in charge of parishes he wrote: "We think that the more we trust these men for their ministry, the better their work is done, my rule being to do nothing that my pastors or deacons can do themselves." Here is also a piece of advice he liked to give: "Remember that I am only here to help you do what you cannot do on your own. Think about it and tell me what you've decided. »

He also wrote about the Unionists: "Young people must seek and fight for ideas of their own, regardless of the Mission and its publications, rather than merely echoes of it."

As a missionary, Cowan travelled extensively. His most important movements took him, among others, to South Ambohimanga, with his colleague Rowlands, to Ihosy, on the south-east coast where he saw the famous "stone elephant, vatolambo", and to an area southeast of Fianarantsoa where chiefs had invited him as mediator.

In 1881 Cowan returned to England on leave and resigned from the LMS the following year. However, he returned to Madagascar for about two years, apparently associated with other Britons, for a business deal that was short-lived. Returning to England, he became an Anglican and continued his ecclesiastical activity until his death in 1923.

He continued to be interested in the Missions, in Madagascar and elsewhere, and was one of the leaders of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel (SPG).

By the conditions of his work and especially by his great travels, Cowan had the opportunity to show his scientific spirit and he published numerous notes on geography, on important ethnic groups such as the Tanala and the Bara; also on birds, ferns and lepidoptera. As a member of the Royal Geographical Society. Its butterfly collections are kept in Edinburgh and London.

J. T. Hardyman, L. Molet

THE SCOTTISH GEOGRAPHICAL MAGAZINE.

TRAVELS IN EASTERN AND SOUTH-CENTRAL MADAGASCAR.

Read before the Society, at Edinburgh and Glasgow, 1881

BY THE REV. WILLIAM DEANS COWAN.

FROM the autumn of 1874 until the early spring of 1881, with a short intermission, it has been my good fortune to be connected with the civilising agencies at work in the island of Madagascar. During this period of over ten years, I was resident in the eastern and south-central parts of the island. Several expeditions were made throughout these districts, and some interesting geographical exploration and scientific research were obtained.

As very little was previously known of the country and region visited, the facts ascertained were all the more valuable.



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Title: Geographical Excursions in South Central Madagascar

Author: COWAN, Rev. William Deans.

Publisher: London: Royal Geographical Society, 18xx

Item is in ORIGINAL Condition, With Blue Wrappers - As Issued, (All the Ads!!!)

Notes & Condition: Accompanied by a vivid and profusely detailed map of Madagascar's south-east kingdoms divided ethnically by Tanala, Bara tribes, the author's narrative provides highlights from his geographical reconnaissance, undertaken from 1875 to 1881. He also imparts fascinating details of tribal custom, remarking on circumcision, crime and justice, hospitality, pottery and other rudimentary implements, cattle raiding, etc. He includes

route chart from his surveys. Cowan was thorough in his investigations, his positive relations enabling him to settle amongst previously unknown tribes. He returned with an abundance of specimens of flora and fauna for natural scientists, discovered new species of the chameleon, and a most interesting map of uncharted areas of South Madagascar finally materialized.

Excerpt:"The Tanala houses are made of bamboo, split and flattened; they stand generally a few feet above the ground. All the Tanala proper content themselves with the folded leaves of the cardamon plant for spoons and drinking cups, this being one of their peculiarities, which distinguishes them from the Ampelafa and the Bara."

Excerpt.

Little-Known South Madagascar - Spectacular Large Colour Map!

16 pages. Plus an extra large fold-out colour map measuring approximately 76 x 56cm. Original condition with blue wrappers, titles to front, all the ads. This is a complete issue, seldom found in such good and original condition.