

John Whiteley

Missionary Martyr



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JOHN WHITELEY – Missionary Martyr

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It is one of those little ironies that occur so frequently in history, that the only Wesleyan missionary to be murdered by the Maoris was the one who had been their best friend. Yet in a strange way it seems fitting that John Whiteley the servant of the Christ of Calvary should crown a life of service by making the supreme sacrifice. For by his death he saved the lives of many people, just as by his life he had saved many erring souls.

CHILDHOOD AND YOUTH.

Born on 20th July, 1806, in the little hamlet of Kneesall, Nottinghamshire, John Whiteley was the son of godly parents. He spent his early years there in the shadow of Sherwood forest and it is not hard to imagine that one of his forebears was among the Merrie Men of Robin Hood. The same independence of spirit, the same courage, the same cheerfulness in the face of adversity were characteristic of both.

While he was still a boy his family moved to the neighbouring town of Newark, and there John attended the Wesleyan Chapel. In due course he was received into full church membership. He had early shown a strong aptitude for the spiritual side of life and in 1829 while not yet twenty-one he became a probationer attached to the Newark church.

The next three years deepened the young man's experience and strengthened his sense of call to the ministry. The Nottingham District Meeting accepted him as a candidate in 1831 and sent him up to London to face the Examination Committee. This trying ordeal included a two and a half hour oral examination by a panel of ministers among whom was the Rev. Richard Watson a noted theologian.

Having successfully survived this, Whiteley continued to prepare himself for the work to which he was called. It was at this period that he finally committed himself to the work of the Mission Field.

By the end of August 1832 John Whiteley's training was completed. On 4th September he was married to Mary Ann Hall, daughter of Mr. and Mrs. Willoughby Hall of South Collington. He took his bride straight to the Old Mission House, in Hatton Garden, London.

On 27th September he was ordained at Lambeth Chapel. The ordination charge was delivered by the Rev. Theophilus Lessey, a powerful preacher who reduced the assembled company to tears. John Whiteley was deeply moved and could only exclaim, "The Lord make me faithful, the Lord make me useful, may I live for Him alone."

These words, spoken from his heart are a typical expression of the creed on which he based his life. He lived and died for his Lord and Master, a faithful servant indeed.

"TO THE UTTERMOST PARTS OF THE EARTH."

The Rev. and Mrs. Whiteley were passengers on the "*Caroline*" which left England on the 23rd October, 1832, for Sydney. On the journey out it was at one time thought that they were being chased by pirates. Though this proved to be a false alarm, Mary was distressed and she was ill for some time afterwards.

The highest kind of courage is not that which knows no fear but that which overcomes fear. Mary Whiteley was blessed with such heroism. A nervous little woman suffering from constant ill health, she yet accompanied her husband out into the unknown, making light of the dangers and discomforts. She bore seven children and saw two of them die in infancy. She herself stood at death's door many times. Yet she was ever willing to do the Lord's commands, at no matter what personal cost. With her strongly grounded faith and her real love for the Maori people, she proved to be a fit helpmate for her husband. It is well to remember, what John Whiteley himself never forgot, that he owed her more than can easily be measured, and his greatness was also hers.

The tedious voyage came to an end in Sydney Harbour on 19th March, 1833. A few brief weeks on dry land gave the Whiteleys, bad sailors both, the chance to prepare for the voyage across the Tasman Sea. Mrs. Whiteley was far from well. Although she was advised to stay in Sydney until after her imminent confinement she stoutly refused. In early May she continued the voyage with her husband and Rev. Joseph Orton on the brig *New Zealander*.

They arrived in the Bay of Islands on 21st May and were welcomed by Mr. Busby, newly appointed British Resident, and Rev. Henry Williams of the Church Missionary Society. On the following Friday (24th), the Whiteleys were taken to Kidi Kidi (Keri Keri). Orton, who had been sent over to investigate the charges which had been made against the Rev. William White, Superintendent of the Wesleyan Mission, stayed at Paihia. He had been favourably impressed with the new recruit. In his report to the Missionary Committee in London he expressed his opinion in prophetic words.

"He (John Whiteley) is a steady, sterling man. I have no doubt he will prove to be a great blessing to our Mission."

How great a blessing Orton could scarcely have foreseen.

On 30th May, 1833, the Whiteleys departed for Mangungu by way of Waimate. Mrs. Whiteley was unwell and had to be carried in a litter. For all of them it must have been a trying journey. In his diary Whiteley wrote:

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"To cross the island at this season of the year when the rains are almost incessant and the roads, if such they may be called, are so tremendously bad is indeed a formidable undertaking."

Two days later they took up their residence in the house recently vacated by the Rev. John Hobbs, now on his way to Tonga.

Mary Whiteley was now seriously ill, and for six weeks her life hung on a thread. On 13th July Dr. Ross was sent for from Keri Keri, but he fell ill at Waimate and was unable to proceed. Word of this misfortune reached William Williams at Paihia, and he set out to give his assistance. Before he could reach Mangungu, however, at 7 a.m. on 15th July "after a tedious and dangerous labour of 57 hours, Mrs. Whiteley was safely delivered of a daughter." Only the timely arrival of Williams saved the mother's life.

FROM MANGUNGU TO KAWHIA.

Meanwhile John Whiteley had taken up his duties. On Saturday, 3rd June, he attended his first class meeting and was very impressed with the 60 Maoris who attended. He at once commenced the study of the language in which he was to become so proficient, and sought to learn all he could from his senior colleague. Unfortunately, within a matter of weeks, marked disagreement was evident.

A full account has been given elsewhere of the failings of Rev. William White. Suffice it to say that both Whiteley and White were men of strong personality, but while one was consumed with a passion for saving souls, the other had devoted his energies increasingly to secular affairs. Under the circumstances a clash was inevitable. Before the end of the year things had come to such a pass that the younger man had been suspended, and was virtually isolated in his own house.

Seriously alarmed about this, Orton sent strongly worded reprimands to both men and ordered them to compose their differences. Since he knew them both well, however, he thought it advisable to ask Henry Williams to see that Whiteley and his family were not in absolute want. White had refused to allow them food supplies after their suspension.

The quarrel was composed early in the New Year, and in February each man went on a journey through new territory. John Whiteley turned his footsteps to Kaipara, and spread the seed of the Gospel on his way; White went down into the Waikato and laid the seeds of strife with Anglicans. By July this had borne fruit in a bitter personal quarrel with Henry Williams. White wanted to appeal to the British Resident, but John Whiteley intervened, stoutly denouncing any such step as "unscriptural." By a display of that ready tact which was later to make him a peacemaker among Maori and Pakeha alike, he soothed over the surface of the quarrel.

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In November of 1834, William Woon was dispatched to Kawhia to set up a Mission Station. He was replaced at Mangungu by Rev. James Wallis who arrived at the end of the year. The strained atmosphere in which the work of the Station had been carried on over the past months, now developed into another quarrel between the Superintendent and John Whiteley. Wallis joined with the younger man in protesting against the activities of the Mission. To put an end to an intolerable situation. White decided that the two rebels should go to Kawhia and set up stations there.

It was not until April that this design could be put into effect. All three sailed south in the "Triton" and arrived at Brother Woon's Station on the 21st. A special District Meeting was held next day and the new arrangements were made. John Whiteley and James Wallis were to open up new stations on the Kawhia Harbour. Once they were established, Woon would be free to return to Hokianga, should the long awaited printing press arrive. White was granted a year's leave of absence to visit England, and the meeting requested that Revs. J. Hobbs and N. Turner should be returned from Tonga to New Zealand.

Whiteley was not very pleased with his new station as this comment shows:

"I must go and settle myself with two small children in still worse circumstances, two days journey from Bro. Woon at the head of a river which is not frequented by vessels on account of its entrance, and where I can have no supplies but by natives carrying them on their backs from Bro. Woon's—a distance of perhaps 50 miles." (The second daughter was born 5th October, 1834.)

Nor was his first impressions of the place such as to allay his fears.

"A rush house," he writes, "has been built for us by the natives— large and strong—39 ft. long by 29 ft. wide—no floor, no partition, no fireplaces, no windows, and worse still it was built in a hole at the foot of a hill." The unpropitious start had scarcely been over-come when Mrs. Whiteley gave birth to a son who only lived for a few weeks.

SUCCESS—AND FRUSTRATION.

In spite of these setbacks the work of God prospered. John Whiteley was not the man to allow physical discomfort or personal sorrow to interfere with his Master's Service. One aspect of the work was the establishment, before the end of the year, of a flourishing school where Mr. and Mrs. Whiteley taught the boys and girls respectively. The pains that they had taken to acquire a knowledge of the native tongue now bore fruit. As their fluency increased, so did their witness become more effective.

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In October an incident occurred which firmly established the "mana" of Te Waitere (as the Maoris called him). A dispute had arisen between two tribes over some land. The matter was amicably settled, but a party of warlike Waikatos, who were cousins to one party of the dispute, came over looking for blood. Whiteley acted promptly. He persuaded the threatened natives to go "bush" for a few days and keep out of the way of the war-party. Then he sought out the invaders and proceeded to harangue them. Since the contending factions never met there were no "incidents" that might have precipitated a fight, and Whiteley's firm courageous demeanour and the power of his eloquence, turned the invaders homeward in a couple of days.

Early in the following year the dispute with the Church Missionary Society over spheres of labour, which had been brought on by White, came to a head, and the Wesleyan missionaries received orders to withdraw from Kawhia. It was a sad day for Whiteley and Wallis. In thirteen months they had each built up a very considerable cause, and were just beginning to see some reward for their labours. Now, on three days' notice, they must pack and leave.

In those three days hundreds of natives from all parts of the surrounding district assembled to bid farewell to Te Waitere and beg him to stay. Only the comparative suddenness of the departure prevented an attempt being made to keep the missionary by force of arms. Whiteley himself, went as in duty bound, but protesting vigorously to the Committee in London.

NORTHERN INTERLUDE.

The District Meeting for 1836 was held at Mangungu on 17th October. The new arrangements were confirmed. John Whiteley was appointed to Pakanae on the Hokianga, and James Wallis to the Kaipara.

A happier period for the Wesleyan Mission had opened with the appointment of the Rev. Nathaniel Turner as Superintendent. He was a good commander who knew how to get the best out of his subordinates. Internal concord replaced the former strife, and the Mission was prepared to face the trying years that lay ahead.

Whiteley called his new station Newark in memory of his former home, and settled to a period of useful service. But his thoughts were still much occupied with Kawhia, and he did not cease to plead that the work there should be reopened, even if he himself could not be sent.

In 1837 war flared up in the north. Aided by the white man's death-dealing musket, blood-thirsty chieftains renewed age old feuds. But the white man had brought something else beside guns. The message of the Prince of Peace had put a 'new factor into the situation. While, for example, the old jackal Kaitoke prepared for war, four young men came to him and preached peace. Two of them he slew—but they died

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with words of forgiveness on their lips. More remarkable still, when Kaitoke and many' of his people were captured by the relatives of the murdered men, they were treated with kindness. This was a new sort of "utu" (revenge). The old chief was power-less against this weapon. The day came when he surrendered his heart to Jesus Christ.

The work of the missionaries was bearing fruit. The wounded were cared for, the dying comforted, and the prisoners treated with courtesy. The whole aspect of tribal war was changing.

About that time (1837) there came to Newark a party of Maoris who had travelled overland from Kawhia. They had risked being killed and eaten by traditional enemies to come and beg their friend Te Waitere to return to them. Whiteley wrote to London begging that he or another should be sent to answer this call. The Church Missionary Society had done nothing to fill the gap and the Maoris were endeavouring, very inadequately, to carry on.

Turner reached an agreement with William Williams that the Kawhia stations should be re-occupied by the Wesleyan Mission. In November he took Whiteley to make an inspection of the area. At the same time the party who had walked up to Hokianga were re-turned home by sea. A year had to elapse, however, before the permission from London could be obtained and the re-occupation actually take place.

RETURN TO KAWHIA.

The return so long awaited and so eagerly anticipated, was little short of a nightmare for the Whiteleys. It took them three months to make their way painfully from Hokianga to Kawhia. Thirty days of this was actual travelling time. Then on the day they arrived back (25th March, 1839) their 13 month old baby son died. The songs of greeting changed to tears of mourning.

Time for grief was short. The work of the Lord was pressing. Scarcely pausing to settle his family in their new home, John Whiteley made a hurried journey to Taranaki to prevent a clash between rival tribes. Having made peace he returned, but word of his suc-cess had gone before him, and his people felt a great contentment that their friend was back among them working for their good.

During Whiteley's absence pakehas had become more plentiful in the district, and liquor and guns were becoming common articles of trade. Not able to do a great deal except protest, Whiteley like other missionaries and many of the chiefs, welcomed news of Hobson's arrival early in 1840, in the hope that he would bring the law and order so sadly needed. Whiteley and Wallis were instrumental in getting the signatures of most of the local chiefs to the Treaty of Waitangi.

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Before this, however, in January 1840, Whiteley had visited the new white settlement at Nga Motu (New Plymouth) and Patea and conducted services. The real purpose of his visit was to choose sites for new mission stations. Another long journey was made in the July when he was summoned to the shores of the Waitemata, to investigate the tragic death of Rev. John Bumby who was drowned off Motu Tapu.

It was inevitable that such a staunch friend of the Maori should excite the dislike of the land-hungry settlers of the New Zealand Company. John Whiteley did not escape the malicious attacks that were the lot of most of the prominent missionaries. Never were charges less well-founded for no man was ever freer of any taint of self seeking. His colleagues knew his value and when the New Zealand Mission District was subdivided in 1841 he was appointed, protesting his own unworthiness, as chairman of the Southern District.

"IN JOURNEYINGS OFT."

To a man who had to make frequent sea voyages along the west coast of New Zealand, to be afflicted with constant sea-sickness was indeed a trial. Yet though he was desperately sick on every voyage John Whiteley never allowed that to stand in the way of his duty. Perhaps his worst ordeal was in 1842 when he was summoned to Wellington in connection with some land claims. Leaving Kawhia for Wellington, the ship in which he was travelling was blown out of its course and storm bound. At the end of five dreadful weeks they succeeded in making, not Port Nicholson, but Nelson.

However the visit to the new settlement proved to be a time of blessing. Whiteley met there Edward Green, a Methodist Local Preacher from Newark, and from him he heard news from his home town. On Sunday, 14th June, Whiteley conducted an open-air service—the first Wesleyan Service in Nelson.

The weather having somewhat abated, the ship set sail for Wellington and Whiteley was able to spend the next Sabbath in that Settlement.

As soon as his business was closed, spurred on by reports of his wife's bad health, John Whiteley set off on foot for Kawhia and made the journey in three weeks. This journey deserves to have an epic written about it for if ever there was a triumphal progress this was it. All along the road Te Waitere was greeted joyfully by his friends. At every village he stopped and preached the gospel. It was crowned by a safe return to his family to find that his wife was improved in health and all was well.

In the years that followed, Maori-pakeha relations were very difficult. The Maoris of the Taranaki area turned to Whiteley for advice, and the white officials—in particular, Governor Fitzroy— came also. They did not always follow it, unfortunately.

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The strenuous life he had lived was beginning to take its toll of John Whiteley's strength. In 1847 he sustained a rupture which became increasingly painful and made long walks difficult.

Education was always a matter near to Whiteley's heart and in 1845 he established the first school for European children at Kawhia. Three years later the Government set up an Industrial School for Maori children at that place, and naturally entrusted him with its charge. He was assisted by his eldest daughter, Elizabeth, a competent girl of some 15 years. She acted as her father's assistant in church matters too, and during his frequent absences kept things running smoothly.

Since 1843 Rev. J. Whiteley had been honorary postmaster at Kawhia, and it was largely due to his energy and influence with the Maoris, that an overland service from Auckland to New Plymouth was made possible. Without neglecting his multitudinous spiritual duties, he always found time to act in any civic capacity, believing that the service of his fellow men was the service of God.

"WHITELEY—THE PEACEMAKER"

Early in 1855 John Whiteley bade a final farewell to Kawhia where he had served so long and so faithfully, and was appointed to Auckland. Elected Chairman of the District, he proceeded to Australia after a few months to attend the first Australasian Conference. At this Conference it was decided that, in view of the disturbed state of Taranaki, Whiteley should be sent to New Plymouth. It was the best possible decision, for no man had more influence in that area with both pakeha and Maori.

His work at New Plymouth was thorough and painstaking. Already known and loved by the Maoris he soon established himself in the hearts of the pakehas. In 1857 he reopened the Grey Institution which had been closed on account of the war in 1842, and five years later established a Wesleyan Day School alongside the Liardet Street Church.

Since 1839 Whiteley had been fighting the strong drink evil amongst the natives, and in 1861 he joined with Josiah Flight, the leader of the Baptist community, in founding a Total Abstinence Society among these people.

War was again ravaging the land, and gradually most Europeans were compelled to retire to the fortified towns, but John Whiteley with a sorrowing heart for this evil, ranged the countryside on horse-back, holding services where he could, and where he could not, speaking to groups of two or three on the roadside. He apprehended no danger from the people whom he loved so well. His mind was too full of their troubles to worry about himself.

"GREATER LOVE HATH NO MAN ..."

By 1868 the war was dying down; white settlers were beginning to re-occupy their farms and peace seemed to be near at hand. But early in 1869 the warlike Ngati Maniopototo gathered in force near Awakino Heads for a raid on Taranaki. Councils were divided but the more fiery element urged that the time was propitious to sweep the pakehas into the sea.

A small advance party swept down on Pukearuhe (White Cliffs) on Saturday, 13th February, 1869, and murdered Lieut. Gascoigne, his wife and family. Then the soldiers were lured by a trick from the redoubt and all killed. This slaughter had barely been completed when a man on horseback was seen approaching from the direction of New Plymouth.

The rider was John Whiteley. Already that day he had been warned several times that there was trouble afoot, but, secure in his faith in God and his unique position among the Maoris, he continued his journey. Now as he rode up the track towards the block house a voice called out to go back.

"Why should I go back?" he replied, "my place is here."

"Go back Te Waitere your place is not here!"

"My place is here, and here I remain, for my children are doing evil."

With a jeering taunt that dead cocks do not crow, one of the murderers fired and brought down the minister's horse. Knowing the end was at hand, John Whiteley knelt in prayer as a fusillade of shot struck him dead. Without a doubt, he died as his Master did, praying for the forgiveness of his murderers.

The war party returned in high fettle and commenced to boast before the old chief Wahanui and his people of what they had done.

The news of the killing of the soldiers was received in silence, but the death of the woman and children evoked expressions of disgust. The death of Whiteley was related. A horror-struck silence followed. The women commenced a tangi. The men covered their heads in sorrow.

After a time Wahanui arose and ordered the camp to be struck and the people to retire into the wilds of the King Country saying, "Here let it end, for the death of Whiteley is more than the death of many men."

As the warriors turned back the way they had come and met their people they said one to the other,

"Kua patua e ahau te kau momona, kua pania a toto ki Parininihi."

"The fatted calf (i.e., the sacrifice) has been slain, and the blood has been sprinkled on Parininihi."

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By his death John Whiteley had averted a new outbreak of war and saved countless lives.

News of this martyrdom spread quickly through the land, and everywhere was received with deep sorrow. Letters of sympathy came in to Mrs. Whiteley from Maori chieftains. Government officials and from the humbler folk of both races. All of them felt they had lost a friend. Parliament passed a Pension Act giving the widow and her only unmarried daughter a pension of £100 a year for life. This amount which was 100 higher than the Petitions Committee had recommended, was a handsome tribute from a Government whose Treasury was hard pressed by the expenses of war.

John Whiteley was dead. But his influence was still felt and the work of God was advanced by it. We cannot but believe that had he had the choosing of the manner of his passing he would have asked for no other death, for he lived and died following closely in the steps of his Master and true to the spirit of his ordination prayer:

"Lord make me faithful,
The Lord make me useful,
May I live for Him alone.