

John H. White
and
The Coast Mission

THE STORY OF A PIONEER HOME MISSIONARY

by H. R. WRIGHT



The Rev. John H. White

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Foreward

The Rev. H. R. Wright has done a fine service in recording this brief sketch of the life and service of one of our honoured Home Missionaries. Mr. Wright knows the work from inside, and this booklet is itself a very good statement of the place and function of a Home Missionary written by a man who has himself filled the office with credit.

It was my privilege as a youth to have known the Rev. J. H. White in his later years in Wellington - a little man with shining eyes and snowy patriarchal beard and sprightly step, and a great lover of his Lord. Young and old followed him with sincere affection and respect, and his ministry was a benediction. I welcome the publication of this all-too-short record. *Geo. I. LAURENSEN,*

General Superintendent, Methodist Home Mission Department.

THE COMING OF THE HOME MISSIONARY

It has been remarked that in New Zealand the reach of the Methodist Church has often exceeded its grasp. This is not a criticism. This is a recognition of the Church's desire to extend the Kingdom of Christ at all costs — a desire sometimes expressed in the undertaking of tasks beyond its strength in trained personnel or material resources.

During the days of the Maori Mission, lay-preachers known as catechists were frequently employed by the Church. These men made possible an extension of the work otherwise beyond its strength. Men like Miller of Whakatamutumu served very faithfully in this way. In the true Methodist succession, they did heroic, sacrificial work, never sparing themselves that the Gospel might be told forth. They were the forerunners of the Home Missionary. The rapid increase in pakeha settlement after the Maori Wars brought more pressure upon the Church's manpower. There were not nearly enough trained men to meet the needs of a rapidly growing population. To meet the situation the Church fell back upon its earlier expedient, and called upon its local preachers to fill the gaps. They responded, and a new significant period in the life of the Methodist Church was commenced.

It is not easy to say who the first Home Missionaries were. The average local official of those days did not realise that the Church was making history, so that local and district records, which would have told us a great deal, were not always well-preserved. Dr. Morley mentions "Bishop" Andrews labouring at Motueka in 1857, and Mr. S. Stone at the same place in 1866. There may have been other, and even earlier Home Missionaries. The first official mention of such men is in the Minutes of Conference, 1875, the year in which the Connexional Home Mission Fund was established. There is mention of:—

THOMAS JAGGER, AUCKLAND
EDWARD NEILSON HAWKES BAY

J. S. HUDSON, AUCKLAND
JOSEPH GREY, OTAGO

These men, and many of those who followed them in the work, had little to support them beyond their Christian zeal. Looked at with mixed feeling by the ministry, because of their lack of training, with stipends often inadequate, they endured every form of inconvenience and discomfort which the pioneer settlements of those days could offer. Yet they took the Gospel of Christ into the highways and byways of New Zealand. They served people of every religious affiliation — and of none. They laid securely the foundations of very many of our now prosperous Circuits. Truly, "they being dead yet speak" in churches built and in families established in the faith through their ministries.

Among those who have an honoured place in the ranks of early Home Missionaries is John H. White. His story is similar to that of many others. This account of his labours in establishing the Coast Mission is told in some detail, as a humble tribute to the men who in the hour of the Church's need served her well, and made the name of Home Missionary worthy of recognition.

THE NEED

When the last decade of the 19th century opened, the coastal country south of New Plymouth was still largely a wilderness of swamp and karaka bush on the flats, with the bush increasing in density and variety as the land sloped up towards the mountain. The beginnings of settlement, interrupted by the Maori Wars, was in full swing again. There were roads — of a sort — through the area, but the beaches were still being used as highways, with tracks leading off to the infant townships.

The area we are concerned with, from Oakura to the Oaonui River, contained a large number of settlers, living mostly in tents and whares. They were beginning in earnest the task of taming the wilderness, that it might some day blossom like the rose. Some brave women were there, trying to maintain family life, and some adventurous elderly folk, with their roots in the orderly religious life of Britain. The majority of settlers, however, were young single men. Life was crude and harsh, with no amenities at all. A seven-day week of work was the usual thing, with little or no provision for things spiritual.

The only services being held in that area were at Okato where the Primitive Methodist and the Anglicans were holding a service on alternate Sundays in the schoolroom. Mr. T. P. Hughson — future Vice-President of Conference — had recently arrived there, and with his devoted wife had started a small Sunday School. In his reminiscences he describes the arrival of the Rev. John Nixon, on horseback, complete with "bell topper and long black coat looking rather sickly," for his first service. Discouraged, perhaps, by an arduous journey and a small congregation, he suggested that it might be best to leave the area to the Anglican preacher. Mr. Hughson, with J. F. Eustace, W. Andrews and A. Ashley supporting him, objected strongly. "That would be going backwards," said Mr. Eustace.

Mr. Nixon then said he would try to visit the settlers' homes in the week preceding his service. This he did, and better attendances at services resulted. Unfortunately the Primitive Methodist Quarterly Meeting objected to so much time being given to Okato. Failing to find a suitable man to establish a Home Mission Station there, the Primitive Methodists finally withdrew altogether. The Anglican services also ceased, owing to the advanced age of their preacher, and thus the sheep were left without a shepherd.

An approach was then made, by the men mentioned above, to the Wesleyan Methodists at Whiteley Church, New Plymouth. There seems to have been a "gentlemen's agreement" between the two branches of Methodism, whereby the Wesleyans pioneered to the north of New Plymouth, and the Primitives to the south. The Whiteley folk had established a preaching place at Waitara, and had also pioneered the work at Inglewood. They now hesitated to go beyond agreed

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boundaries. There was much trafficking between Okato and New Plymouth as the claims and needs of the Coast were urged upon the Whiteley officials. Finally — the consent of the Primitive Methodists having been obtained — the Wesleyans, under the leadership of the Rev. C. H. Garland, decided to act, and began to look for a man to establish a Coast Mission.

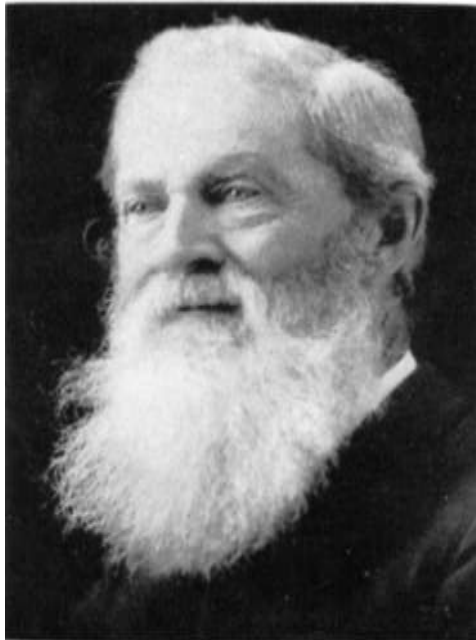


OKATO METHODIST CHURCH
Erected 1898 during the ministry of the Rev. J. H. White.

THE MAN

John H. White was born at Ludborough, Lincolnshire, of Methodist parentage. He was converted at the age of fourteen. His name appears on the Plan of the Grimsby Circuit in 1884, as a Local Preacher and as Sunday School Superintendent, though he had been preaching many years before that. He was thus well trained in the best Methodist traditions. For some years he acted as Emigration Agent for the New Zealand Government, being responsible for the sending of very many families to settle here, especially to Taranaki. It is said that Lincolnshire farmers, incensed at losing so many of their best workers, declared that he dared not go to New Zealand him-self — he would be hanged on the nearest tree! He came.

Mr. White brought his wife and family to New Zealand in 1893. Landing at New Plymouth and settling there, he served for some time in White and Carters (now White's Ltd.). Not altogether happy in a business career, Mr. White responded gladly to the call for a man to establish the Coast Mission. "He was appointed contrary to Conference regulations," says T. P. Hughson rather gleefully. But as sometimes happens in Methodism —and elsewhere — the telescope to the blind eye brought splendid results. No better man for the job could have been found.



BREAKING IN THE GROUND

The area worked by Mr. White was some 25 miles long, the breadth varying from four to twelve miles. There were, of course, no church buildings. All religious activities were held in homes and schoolrooms. Five preaching-places, Tataraimaka, Okato, Warea, Pungarehu and Rahotu, were immediately established, with weeknight meetings at Ngariki Road and Kahui. During his first year the Missioner made it his business to make contact with every settler in his district, over 700 visits being paid. White travelled, of necessity, on horseback. The state of the "main" roads may be imagined from a practice of the White family. They gauged the depth of the holes in the roads by standing their bicycles in them. When one considers the time involved in travelling, in seeking out isolated settlers in broken country, in counselling, comforting — and where necessary admonishing — in organising and administering his scattered district, in addition to the regular preaching activities, the first year of the Coast Mission must have been a time of intense and strenuous labour for the Home Missionary.

Mr. White had a splendid asset in his family, who ably and willingly assisted him. They travelled many miles each Sunday, teaching in Sunday Schools, providing music for services, and even conducting worship. There was an historic occasion at Rahotu on January 9th, 1899, when White's daughter, Mary Lizzie White, later Mrs. Arnold Wells, was received by the Rev. C. H. Garland as the first woman to be accredited as a Methodist Local Preacher in New Zealand. (This devoted lady preached her last sermon exactly 55 years later at Upper Moutere, Nelson). The youngest son, H. Temple White, now so well known in the world of music, also gave freely of his gifts to assist the work. "My own family have strengthened me beyond measure," was White's tribute to them. They were certainly in the true Methodist succession!

A glance at the first Membership Roll, compiled by Mr. White in 1895, is interesting. Among the families named there, the Kitchingmans now have three representatives in our ministry. The Hughsons are still very active in Taranaki Methodism. (During his first year on the coast White baptised Magnus Sinclair Hughson, destined to follow in his father's footsteps as Vice-President of Conference). The Symons, Billings and Pepperell families still help to maintain the Church at Rahotu. The Corbett family, a member of which was Minister of Lands and Maori Affairs in recent years, returned to the Anglican fold, as did the Andrews, when that Church later established itself in the district. Both were a great help in the earlier years at Okato. Some families, like the Smiths and the Pearces, have been absorbed into other circuits. Others have dropped out of Church life or have disappeared from ken — a sad commentary on the wear and tear of the years, perhaps. Yet in the families named, and in the growing strength of the Church on the coast, there is living evidence of a work of the Spirit begun there through John H. White.

ESTABLISHING THE CHURCHES

Mr. White made his headquarters at Rahotu. The need was probably greatest there, Okato being fortunate in its strong lay leadership. The first thought of the missionary was to build a place of worship, "that we may familiarise our people with the nomenclature, traditions, genius and excellences which at once distinguish and are the prized heritage of the Methodist Church," he wrote. His vision was always a broad and statesmanlike one. Writing to the Whiteley superintendent in September, 1900, he says: "Three churches have now been built in four years, but to complete the chain two more townships sorely need them." St. Paul would have appreciated this man's zeal!

The first church to be built on the coast was at Rahotu. A parcel of land, 3½ acres, with a small cottage which became the first parsonage (it still stands), was purchased in 1897. On January 16th, 1898, the church was opened. No time was wasted in those days! The building cost £210. Thanks to the missionary's brother, S. B. White, and his brother in law C. C. Carter, it was opened free of debt. Present at this historic event were Revs. G. Bond (District Chairman), C. H. Garland, W. Cannell and T. G. Hammond. Several Maori children were baptised by Mr. Hammond, symbolising the witness of the new church to both of our races. This property at Rahotu is now the home for Camp Egmont, the first permanent Bible Class Camp in Taranaki. John White would rejoice to know that.

Okato came next. John White reports "a memorable and historic meeting" there early in 1898. There were only 19 people present, but "such a spirit of liberality, unanimity and large faith prevailed that it was decided forthwith both to buy the site and build the church." That night £68 was promised, and the amount was soon doubled. Costing £250, and seating 150 people, the Okato church was opened for worship on New Year's Day, 1899. Okato has lived up to White's hopes for it, and is today a thriving partner in the Opunake Circuit.

There is some interesting history attached to the next church built under White's leadership, at Tataraimaka. He had been holding his services there in the new Anglican church. On Christmas Day, 1898, he baptised a child, one Maurice James Smith. The vicar of those days objected to this. He did not deem it fitting that a non-conformist Home Missionary should observe this sacrament in his church — and said so. All White's Free Church zeal was aroused. "This baptism caused our Exodus from the Egypt of Anglicanism," he records in his baptismal registrar. Moving, as always, through his church courts, he began immediately to urge his people there to build their own place of worship at Tataraimaka. It was not easy, for they were few and money was scarce; but he succeeded. The foundation stone was laid on January 11th, 1900, and sixteen days later the building was completed! It cost £178, and served its district well until a movement of population, plus easier means of travel, made it redundant.

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Its timbers, together with its foundation stones, are now a part of the Okato Sunday School Hall.

A happy footnote to the story is provided by living evidence of a much more tolerant spirit prevailing today. Four miles from Tataraimaka, at Oakura, a Methodist-Anglican church building, administered by a committee drawn from both Churches, functions most harmoniously. Thus does time bring its healing balm and broader charity.

The fourth (and last) church to be built under White was at Pungarehu. It cost £153 to build. Today it is the centre for the only Protestant cause in a predominantly Roman Catholic district. A small but loyal congregation maintains it. At the laying of the foundation stones in April 1902, one of the ladies officiating was Mrs. Rutherford, the mother of the future atomic scientist. Sir Ernest Rutherford. How little did those gathered that day on the site of that wayside Bethel anticipate the dire consequences of those studies her son was then engaged in!

CONFIRMING THE CHURCHES

The Coast shared with all Taranaki the peculiar pressures of the dairying industry on Church life in those days, and the nomadic habits of a large part of its population. Congregations rose and fell. Some folk excused themselves from worship with claims of "necessary Sabbath work." Some had "a haste to be rich which pays scant regard to the work of the Lord or the operation of His Hands," as White put it. But his zeal never flagged. Six to seven hundred visits a year were paid to people's homes and class meetings were regularly held. "Believers were confirmed in their faith and sinners restored to grace." He pressed the Church authorities for "cheap Christian literature, racily written," to put into the hands of young men. He led his people in regard to the Liquor Question, then of great moment in New Zealand. "We gave proof that Methodism is no dead letter in Temperance Reform," he writes after the poll of 1900. Though immersed in such activities, his own family was not neglected. Compelled to be much away from home, each day he managed to send to one of them a postcard, with a message written in rhyme.

Although passionately loyal to Methodism, White's first thought always was for the cause of Christ as a whole. He grieved over the divisions between the evangelical churches which weakened their witness. When the Salvation Army established a "Garrison" at Pungarehu in 1899, ostensibly for work among Maoris, but with unhappy results, temporarily, for his own work among the settlers, he wrote: "It is high time that Protestant evangelical churches discovered methods of mutually providing for spiritually destitute districts, and preventing the overlapping which distressingly weakens fellow labourers." His words apply today!

The weather was no mean opponent of church attendance in those days. September, 1903, was phenomenally wet. White records that on one Sunday in that month "Not a single service of worship was held by any church on a 60-mile stretch of country to the west of Mt. Egmont." At Rahotu that night a solitary passerby was surprised to see a light in the church. He stepped in out of the drenching rain. "He and the congregationless preacher conversed together on Christ's claims, and by the Grace of God one was that night added unto the Church." He continues: "That tokens of good such as this are bestowed upon us we give glad thanks, but sorrow continually that so many will to remain outside all Christian influences and mind only earthly things." In that spirit did John White labour. By such ready devotion was Methodism established on the coast.

THE ROLLING YEARS

The years went by and, inevitably, the itinerant system of our Church laid its hands upon White. In 1904 he was moved to another sphere of labour. A Minute in the records of the March Quarterly Meeting, held at Rahotu, expressed the feelings of his people.

"Much regret was expressed concerning the removal of the Rev. John H. White. Touching reference was made to his years of service. Recognition was also given to the self-forgetting spirit of Mrs. White. . . . Miss White's manifold help in home and school and pulpit has been above all praise, while Mr. H. Temple White has been distinguished by his consistent Christian character, and the varied and valuable services efficiently and unweariedly rendered from his youth up."

Another son, Herbert, was then commencing a lifetime of service at Whiteley Church. Thus did the spirit of a man pervade his household and touch the life of a district.

J. H. White served successively at Kumara, Kimbolton, Patea and Brooklyn. In each place he left a record of faithful service, marked by a zeal for his Church, and a passion for souls. Never sparing himself; understanding in his dealings with people; exercising a tender care for his wife in her failing health; he endured unto the end as a faithful soldier of Christ Jesus. Miss Shannon, of Waituna West, recalls "his happy, encouraging and inspiring services, and his friendly cheerful disposition which made him such an acceptable visitor." Others remember his work for the community during World War I and the 1918 influenza epidemic.

One of his constant concerns was for the welfare of his fellow Home Missionaries. President of their Association for several years after its formation in 1907, he exercised a wise influence in the management of their affairs. Their status was often ambiguous in the eyes of people not fully understanding our system; while their conditions of employment in earlier years were often far from ideal. White's concern was not merely for better conditions of employment, with adequate provision for retirement, but also that the name of Methodism might not suffer. Writing to his Superintendent in 1897 he says:

"In such districts as mine I am fully persuaded that were Home Missionaries permitted to administer the sacrament it would be of the highest advantage, affording comfort to our members . . . besides vindicating ours as at least one of the Churches of the Lord Jesus Christ. No small matter in these days of sacerdotal pretension."

Home Missionaries of a later period owed much to White's advocacy, which was inspired by a deep loyalty to Methodism and his love for his fellow men.

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After 25 years service John H. White retired in 1920, and on July 13th, 1928, at the advanced age of 85 he fell on sleep. The official tribute in the Minutes of Conference, 1929, after describing his service says:

"John White was a man beloved by all who knew him, held in the highest esteem. He was an ardent temperance worker, and lover of the Methodist hymn book, and a devoted and consecrated servant of God. He being dead yet speaketh through a gracious memory."

So the founder of the Coast Mission passed to his own reward, content, one feels, to hear only the Divine "Well done, good and faithful servant."

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would like to express my thanks to those who have assisted me with information:—

Mr. H. Temple White, for some personal history of his father.

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—*H.R.W.*