

PRIMITIVE METHODISM IN NEW ZEALAND – SESQUICENTENARY

By I. J. Whyte



When the New Zealand Methodist Churches completed their union in 1913 the names of the groups were submerged, and rightly so, in the new name. Gone are Wesleyan, Bible Christian, United or Free Methodist, and Primitive. All except Wesleyan are hardly remembered at all today. But it remains a fact of history that they made their mark in their day, and unbeknown to many, their legacy remains.

At the sesquicentennial of the first Primitive Methodist work in New Zealand, held at New Plymouth, the arrival of Rev. Robert Ward with his wife Emily and children was commemorated. People with Primitive Methodist connections or interest gathered from Dunedin to Northland to recall their good heritage. The original site of the first preaching, the Henui Bridge over the Huatoki Stream is hardly recognisable, but

Fitzroy Church contains the historic markers, and the memorial cross erected at the centenary.

A descendant of Robert Ward, a long-time Presbyterian Ivan Ward, who is organist at Whiteley Church, led a choir for the commemoration. The Ward family held its own reunion shortly after and plans a family history.

"Primitive" may seem an odd name today. It means that the church stood by the beginnings of the Wesley movement - in particular the open air preaching and the movement of the Holy Spirit among the poor. It was not a development by separation from the existing Wesleyan Church but an independent development in the northern part of England reaching agricultural and colliery areas that the Wesleyans had not penetrated.



Rev. Robert Ward 1816-1876

The "Prims" were a large and successful movement in England, America and Australasia. Unions in all countries have removed the title but not the heritage.

There were strong Primitive causes in the New Zealand cities, in many towns and in rural areas that could be serviced from them. Lay preaching was its great strength, and women had plenty of opportunity in that and other ways.

Because of its base among the poor it had a strong voice on social issues, and provided leaders for social movements.



Site of the Robert Ward's first preaching at New Plymouth 1844. An engraving from a painting showing the Huatoki Bridge (lower right) at Henui.

At Fitzroy on September 3, 1994, a Saturday evening gathering remembered the work of Ward and the Primitive Methodist growth. At the Sunday Service the President of the Methodist Church of New Zealand Te Hahi Weteriana O Aotearoa, Rev. Mervyn Dine, acknowledged that even he had had "a steep learning curve" in preparing his commemorative address.

There was an Auckland commemoration on October 29, 1994 at the Methodist Mission, which was the mother church of Auckland Primitive Methodism. Auckland was a few years behind New Plymouth but had the same father, Robert Ward. He responded to Auckland's plea for a missionary as soon as a second missionary arrived in New Plymouth.



"Mount Egmont" - "This month we give an engraving of Mount Egmont. Fifty years ago, in the open air, and in view of this beautiful mountain, the Rev. R Ward delivered the first Primitive Methodist sermon in New Zealand ... For many years Mount Egmont was the centre of the Maori wars. At times feuds raged fiercely between different tribes, and from 1859 to 1869 the Taranaki war raged, when fire, destruction, and bloodshed were a common occurrence. The climate is healthy, the land rich and well watered. The people are plodding, industrious, frugal, hospitable, and though few are rich many are in comfortable circumstances."
- *"Editorial Notes, The New Zealand PRIMITIVE METHODIST, October 1, 1894"*