

Over the Fence



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WILLIAM COLENZO

Who is the greatest figure in Hawke's Bay's history, at least in the period since European settlement? As far as I am concerned it has to be William Colenso.

At the age of 21, Colenso arrived from England at Pahia, initially as a printer for the Anglican Church Missionary Society. Among other things he witnessed the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, expressing concerns that the Maori were not fully acquainted with its implications, and subsequently wrote the best eye-witness account of the ceremony. In that time he made many intrepid journeys throughout the North Island, including one traversing the Urewera country in the summer of 1840-41 (featured on a TV programme a couple of years ago). These and subsequent journeys proved Colenso to be a man of huge stamina and courage. In the process he indulged his insatiable botanic curiosity, collecting and identifying a prodigious array of plants. (The great British botanist Sir William Hooker described Colenso as 'in every respect the foremost New Zealand Botanical explorer'.)



The Rev. William Colenso.

In 1844, Colenso was ordained a deacon and appointed to the Ahuriri district (before the term 'Hawke's Bay' designated the land area) to set up a mission station here. This he did on a thoroughly unsuitable site at Waitangi, which was vulnerable to frequent flooding. He later explained that he had little option as this land was given to him by the Maori and was considered neutral to the various hapu. Colenso brought his new wife, Elizabeth, who he had married virtually by arrangement; a requirement that missionaries be married to avoid temptation. At least that was the theory. History has shown that it doesn't always work, as Mrs Woods found out. Unfortunately the marriage was a loveless one. One can imagine the strain on Elizabeth, living in such primitive and isolated circumstances, with Colenso absent with his missionary work for long periods.

There were two children to this marriage, a boy and a girl, but obviously things were not going well in the bedroom. Subsequently Colenso had an affair with a young Maori woman, Repeka, and to him she had a child. (This was quaintly described in the *Encyclopaedia of New Zealand* (1966) as 'an irregular association'.) This was a no-no to the sanctimonious church of the day and, not to put too fine a point on it, Colenso was dismissed. So much for Colenso's magnificent service to the church! (He was reinstated in 1894, nearly half a century later, although always known as 'the Rev. William Colenso'.) Nevertheless, Colenso was too much of a restless man to shrink

from an active life. He became involved in politics, being elected to the first Provincial Council, and remained a member from 1858 to 1865, sharing the chamber with the powerful pastoralists of the day. He was elected to New Zealand Parliament in 1861, but lost his seat in the next election to the formidable Sir Donald McLean. Colenso was a man of tempestuous and uncompromising nature bordering on arrogance and, rather intolerant of contrary opinion, subsequent attempts to re-enter public life resulted in some humiliating rebuffs. Actually, he became a man of modest wealth, although historians have not determined how. Much of this before and after his death he dispersed for public causes that were dear to him.

Colenso was a great and sympathetic authority on the Maori, with no peer up to the time of his death in 1899. Upon arriving at the Bay of Islands he soon became fluent in Maori and was responsible for the first authoritative Maori dictionary. Colenso was a man of unshakable religious faith, a great botanist, with an unquenchable thirst for knowledge, a great diarist, of huge physical endurance; in every way a truly great, if flawed, man.



Site of Colenso's mission station at Waitangi, Awatoto.

Colenso's grave, near entry to Napier Hill cemetery.

Memorial at Mokai, western side of Ruahine Ranges "COLENSO Missionary Explorer First Visit 1847"

At his interment at the Napier cemetery many of the townsfolk turned out to honour him, but not a single member of his family was present. In many ways he may well have been a lonely man.

Have we honoured him enough? That affair with Repeka . seemingly in a subsequent age, if not that one, not such an horrendous crime . diminished him in the eyes of many. Indeed, he suffered huge remorse himself. In 1959, Colenso High School was opened; a fitting tribute to his contribution to education and science. A fine school, but hidden in a Napier suburb. In more recent years the site of his mission station was made a reserve, easily visible from the coastal Napier/ Hastings road as traffic flashes past. In 1948 an authoritative and exhaustive biography was published (but to me not an easy read), jointly authored by A G Bagnall and G C Peterson.

So why am I writing this? Well, the 17th of November next year will be the bi-centenary of Colenso's birth, in Penzance, Cornwall. Can we consider in the time a more prominent memorial to this man who contributed so much to Hawke's Bay and New Zealand history, for the benefit of both Maori to whom he was known as Koroneho, and Pakeha? Maybe a bust, if not a full-blown stature in a prominent situation is in order. Are there any publically-spirited individuals, companies or professional firms willing to pick this idea up?

Suggestions welcome.

ANNE TOLLEY

John Armstrong, a good political commentator, writing in the *Herald* on the 18th of January, made this rather strange comment about embattled Education Minister Anne Tolley:

“There is a twang in her voice redolent of the Hawke’s Bay squattocracy which makes her (unintentionally) sound as if she is talking down to people.”

This is news to me; a squattocracy accent that sounds like condescension? And if so, how come Anne has got one? In any case, only other people have accents, so there is no such thing as a Hawke’s Bay accent. But pity Anne Tolley. She has landed the toughest portfolio in a National government, and she’s struggling. Parliament is a brutal place and she is now seen as the weakest minister and the opposition, jackal pack-like, have rounded in on her and are going for her throat. She’s made the ultimate blunder of using the word *unpleasant* when answering questions in the House, and this, fairly or otherwise, is taken as weakness and a lack of confidence in her portfolio.

Recently when in Hawke’s Bay she was quoted as lamenting that she was damned if she did, and damned if she didn’t. This smacks of self-pity and an unintended acknowledgement of being on the defensive.

She is trying to lift the standards of education by the national grading of schools. Good on her. I hope she succeeds because the future of this country depends on us having the best possible standards of education.

What follows is taken from a long editorial out of the *Hawkes Bay Herald** on 6th June 1900, revealing that Anne Tolley is by no means the first Minister of Education to have to grapple with the teaching profession to change the education system of New Zealand. Maybe in this case, though, the pressure was in the opposite direction.

A general salary scheme in combination with a scheme of classification based upon service and qualification would bring about vitality and an educational impulse that are not possible under our present limited arrangements, and if the present Minister of Education can be induced to adopt some such plan we believe it will meet with the general approval of teachers and the results would amply compensate for the change, as under any plan the children of the colony will benefit, and this after all is the prime motive for any educational change.

*The *Hawkes Bay Herald* began in Napier in 1857 as a morning paper. Its presses were destroyed in the Earthquake and so thereafter printing was done by the *Hawke’s Bay Tribune*, a Hastings-based evening paper. In 1937 the two papers combined to form the *Hawke’s Bay Herald Tribune*.

SMOKING IS NOT GOOD FOR YOUR HEALTH

Very surprising!

It was seen as something of a breakthrough when in the US the Surgeon General issued a landmark report in the mid-1950s that proved that smoking was bad for your health. Here’s another quote from the old *Hawke’s Bay Herald* of 24th January 1884:

“Physicians of the highest eminence had declared that smoking was injurious to health and longevity.”

This report was in reference to a conference of Sunday and secular day school teachers in Britain (the parlance of the day) and was driven more by moral than health considerations, but it’s a foresightful comment anyway. Smoking was seen as usually the first step in a lad’s downward career, and normally leaning on a solace to ease and labour never sought or cared for by women, making the smoker to be idle without being weary of idleness, tending to take the ambition out of him, and to make him happy when he should be miserable, and content when his divine duty is discontent.

TREES OF HAWKE'S BAY

One of the most interesting trees we have is *Metasequoia glyptostroboides*, commonly known as Dawn Redwood. This tree was thought to be extinct, known only by fossils, until in the early 1940s (the exact year seems to vary according to the reference) very much living species were discovered in a remote part of China. Seeds were taken to the Arnold Arboretum in Boston, Massachusetts after the War and propagated there, thereafter being distributed around the world. So any specimens in New Zealand would not predate the mid-1950s.

Dawn Redwood is a very attractive tree, being one of the few deciduous conifers (in this respect as well as its form it is similar to the swamp cypress, *taxodium*). It has delicate, weeping, feathery foliage that colours in the autumn before falling. It likes deep moist soil and in such conditions is relatively fast growing. It deserves more amenity cultivation in Hawke's Bay.



Dawn Redwood in full autumn colour near the begonia house in Cornwall Park. It has a twin in Frimley Park.

WELL SAID

Unsubscribe+

Email from former *Hawkes Bay Today* editor Louis Pierard received shortly after I sent out *Over the Fence* issue No6.

(Readers may recall my comments that editors are intolerant of criticism.)

LAST WORD

If you haven't already, don't forget to take a look at the new website: www.overthefence.org.nz

Cheers

Ewan Mac