

C. F. Andrews in New Zealand

AMONG Rabindranath Tagore's papers at Santiniketan in India are two letters written from New Zealand in October and November 1915. They give a fascinating glimpse of the country as seen through the eyes of an exceptional man. Their author was an Englishman, Charles Freer Andrews, who was on his way to Fiji to enquire into the abuses of the indentured labour system on the sugar plantations.

A Cambridge University graduate and an Anglican clergyman, Andrews¹ had gone to India as a missionary at the age of 33 in 1904. He had been shocked by his initial experience of the racial exclusiveness of British society of the period in Delhi and Simla — the 'white caste' spirit as he described it — and he had turned in disgust from his own countrymen to the companionship of Indians. In an attempt to understand India more fully he had read widely in the literature of Hinduism and Buddhism, with the result that his belief in some of the basic tenets of Christianity had been shaken. How, he asked himself, could it be maintained that faith in Christ was the only way to salvation when there was such obvious truth and beauty in other religions? Were there not many paths to God as the Hindus asserted? For a man of Andrews' dedication and intensity of purpose, the effect of such doubts was profoundly disturbing and this was the beginning for him of a prolonged period of soul-searching, from which he emerged with a new sense of personal identity and a renewed purpose. Henceforth India would be his home and the service of the Indian people would be his mission.

His decision was shaped by three influences, all of which were to be central concerns for the remainder of his life. Each is reflected in his letters from New Zealand.

The first was his acquaintance with Rabindranath Tagore. Andrews first met Tagore in London in June 1912 when the Bengali poet was taking the English literary world by storm and when he stood on the threshold of the world fame brought him by the award of a Nobel prize for literature. His appeal for a cultural synthesis of East and West attracted Andrews strongly, and, after a period of eighteen months during which the initial acquaintance of the two men developed into intimate friendship, Andrews gave up his teaching post in a missionary college in Delhi to join the staff of Tagore's rural school at Santiniketan in Bengal.

I wish to express my gratitude to the Curator, Rabindra Sadana, Visva-Bharati, Santiniketan, for facilitating my research, and to the Vice-Chancellor and Council of the University for permission to quote from the Tagore manuscripts.

¹ He is the subject of an excellent biography, B. D. Chaturvedi and M. Sykes, *Charles Freer Andrews, A Narrative*, London, 1949.

The second influence on Andrews during this critical period of decision was his growing conviction of the demoralising influence of imperialism on subject peoples. He felt that Indian development was being stunted by British rule, and, as a consequence, he threw his support behind the Indian National Congress. As early as 1912 he declared that he looked forward to the day when India would be 'really independent', a statement which brought from his compatriots charges of treason, and earned for him in the Indian police files a description as a 'sentimental agitator'.

The third influence was his concern at the discrimination against Indians and the exploitation of Indian labour in many parts of the British Empire. During 1913 he personally called the Viceroy's attention to the conditions of Indians in South Africa, and in the following year he went out to Natal to assist Gandhi in the struggle he was leading against discriminatory legislation.

It was a similar mission that brought him to the South Pacific in 1915. Reports reaching India from Fiji indicated that Indian workers on the Colonial Sugar Refining Company plantations were being badly treated. Andrews made a tour of the recruiting centres in India, and the flagrant abuses in the system of indenture which his enquiries revealed convinced him that he should go to Fiji to see for himself what was happening there. He left India early in October bound for Australia and New Zealand, where he was to have preparatory talks with officials of the Colonial Sugar Refining Company and senior members of the two governments.

To most Australians and New Zealanders, concerned with news of the exploits of the Anzacs on Gallipoli and the progress of the dour struggle in the trenches on the Western Front, Andrews must have seemed an irrelevant and somewhat ridiculous figure, with his extraordinary views on the iniquity of empire, his constant concern with racial questions, and his passionate identification with India. For his own part, Andrews felt uncomfortable among Australians whom he thought brash and vulgar, although friendly enough. In a letter written on 15 October 1915 from 'a shady spot on the beach beside Sydney harbour', he told Tagore that allowance had to be made for national immaturity:

For one has to take account, at every turn, in order to be fair, that Australia is passing through the raw stage of youth. Otherwise the vulgarities, — the gambling, drinking, extravagance, & wordliness, — would be too openly offensive. I have found beneath all these a wistful tenderness, — and there is very little veiled hypocrisy. The careless crowd of riotous life sweeps past, but every now & then this wistfulness appears, — like a frail hare-bell amid a flaunting troop of marigolds.

And in a letter four days later he added:

There is a generosity here which redeems the sins of youthful pride. I have more hope for the Australian than for the Englishman. The Australian has vices, but hypocrisy is not one of them . . . The Englishman has become hardened in self-deception by long years of compromise with conscience. The Australian is young & generous. He may act flagrantly against his conscience — as a young man often does — but he will be too candid & honest to deceive himself. He will be a Publican, not a Pharisee.

Andrews' first letter from New Zealand was dated 30 October and was written on stationery bearing the impressive imprint of the 'Hotel Grand, Taumarunui, King Country'. Again it was addressed to Rabindranath Tagore:

My dear Friend,

This place is not really so 'Grand' as its name. It is a little wooden boarding house in a new, undeveloped part of the country. I came here because I heard that there were a few scattered Indians here at work in the brickfields. I arrived at one o'clock last night & found them early this morning & we spent most of the morning together. They are all of them Gujeratis and their simplicity would have delighted Mr Gandhi's heart, for they lived in a small shed & slept on the ground. They had kept to their strict vegetarian diet and found it rather hard to get along, as they could not buy dhal.² They had gentle tender faces and it was such a joy to see Indian faces once more in this far-away land — I cannot tell you how my heart leapt when I saw them & we were friends in a moment. Simple villagers they all were from Gujerat with a turn for adventure . . .³

I was glad to find that in New Zealand they had received much better treatment [than in Fiji]. There is very little race prejudice so far here in this new country. It is a remarkable exception among the Colonies. The Maories [sic] for instance have all privileges & rights of Europeans and the terms of camaraderie one sees in the railway train, for instance, are quite refreshing. These Gujeratis told me that they had votes for Parliament & municipal elections and the same rate of wages as Europeans. For their unskilled labour at wood cutting & brick making & jungle clearing they received 9 shillings a day or roughly 200 rupees a month. They looked extraordinarily healthy, and as I said, had such sweet gentle faces. They were supremely happy when I suggested that I should take my evening meal with them. I confess I did so with a little trepidation as I have not yet got over sea-sickness & can barely take anything at all yet: but I knew how it would please them & as it was Sunday they had the whole day to get ready. I tried hard to get them to give me a simple feast, but their whole heart & soul were in it making preparations. Fortunately all shops were closed so that they could not get any extra things, but they did wonderfully with the things that they had in stock & though it was very rich with butter (in lieu of ghi⁴) I did not feel its effect very much afterwards & it was worth it a thousand times over to see their happiness. We all sat on the ground and there was not an inch of spare room in the hut: we were all packed like sardines in a tin, with a fire in one corner & a room full of smoke. We talked away for about 3 hours and they told me all about their life. They have one great trouble & I hope to get it right before I leave. They cannot by any possibility get back to India, or bring their wives

² An Indian pulse.

³ Andrews does not explain here the circumstances under which these men came to New Zealand, but from a later note in his correspondence it appears that, disgruntled with conditions on the sugar plantations, they had left Fiji to seek employment in New Zealand.

⁴ Ghi is clarified butter.

out here: for all boats call at Australia & they would have to have 100£ to land in Australia even to trans-ship. I have met both Premiers now & they have been very sympathetic about India; so I intend to try them on this very small issue. There are not more than 100 Indians in all New Zealand & 2 of them have gone to the Front. If the Premier will not give simply a pass to these Indians to go home or if the Australian Premier will not allow it, then the sympathy is quite worthless. But I feel sure they will do so: & if so there will be this happiness from our visit that these young Indians will be able to get home to their wives & children.

Andrews' second letter was written from Auckland on 2 November:

At Tamaranui [sic] I met one of the most interesting New Zealanders who was born in the Colony. He had been trained as an Engineer & had been all about the world on ships & had been up the Brazil rivers on steamers, but his passion had always been art & music. He had retired & was teaching music & art in the school at Tamaranui & had thus a varied experience. He was overjoyed when he heard that I knew you & I had to run a fire of questions about you, which I was delighted to answer. I found on our walk together that he was a botanist also. It was very striking, my meeting a man of such culture out there.

He told me some most interesting facts about this new country. First, about the Maories. Our first treatment he said was as bad as bad could be & we went very near to extermination. But fortunately this was entirely changed when a better class of settlers came: and for the last 20 years or more things have been much better. They have all the rights and & privileges and there is absolutely no caste feeling. He had, himself, had many Maori pupils. They have a most wonderful idea of rhythm & dancing seems a second nature to them. They are only really happy in the country — not in the towns — They are children of nature still — their great delight is riding & they are wonderful horsemen, though the horse was not of course known in New Zealand before the British invasion. Musically, he found they had high instincts & tastes but it was difficult for them to assimilate European modes. The Maori admixture with the European by marriage had produced some of the most brilliant people & the most trustworthy: others were very shifty & indolent. It was, he thought, chiefly a question of education in sympathy with their nature instead of wooden methods. Then, he thought, admixture would be wholly good and it was always very fertile.

But the most interesting facts were about English children born in the Colony. He said that their physical development was remarkable — almost like a hot-house growth among flowers. They had sturdy limbs & strong constitutions & a freedom from disease. But the mental development did not take place along with it & the artistic side was stunted by the physical advance. As yet, the English settlers, — in one of the most beautiful countries in the world, with wonderful natural beauties, — had produced no poet, no musician, no artist. The physical development he said, seemed to tend more & more to the common place & and comfortable. There was 'more good nature in New Zealand than anywhere else in the world' he said & certainly I met this on every hand: and above all I found it in the kindly treatment of the Maoris & others of a different race: but nature seemed to exhaust herself on that side.

Strangely enough — this is very remarkable — the growth of English flowers & plants & trees took just the same course. The English oak for instance reached the size & stature in 50 years in New Zealand that took 500 years to develop in England. But the wood in New Zealand was not the strong oak wood, but an almost useless timber. It was the same with all the English trees. Many English flowers again became just like weeds & their growth could not be stopped. Such plants as our beautiful honey-suckle became 'noxious weeds'. One did not quite know what Nature was going to do! She had her own laws which seemed quite wilful & arbitrary. Some plants grew like weeds, others would not grow at all.

It was not so with the old vegetation. The old Kauri Trees for instance must have taken a thousand years to grow to forests primeval that were now being cut down for good, formed some of the very finest timber in the world. But it could never be replaced. The old trees would not grow side by side with the modern invaders. It was like the old population. It somehow tended to die out before the newcomers and yet the old was in many ways so much better. The Maori today in spite of kindly treatment is not what he used to be. And the forests of New Zealand, in spite of great care now being taken to preserve them seemed doomed to destruction.

Lastly, he gave a very happy picture of his own memories of the bushlife in his childhood. He said that after the first bad settlement was over (when merely the criminals were sent)⁵ there came a yeoman class from England, a good honest stock. And in his childhood everything in the Bush was free & open & common property. If you came to anotherman's hut & wanted food & he was away — you simply went in & made yourself a meal & left word you had done so — this was expected everywhere & everyone did it. There were no cases of theft, or next to none, though everything was left open & no one ever used lock & key. It was in those days when there were few settlers that New Zealand's generous ways were formed & its friendly habits. Now, he said, these still remained in the *country*: but the towns made such an idyllic life next to impossible & there had to be a 'new morality' of towns. Yet even there you would meet now & then this same old friendly trust and kindly feeling.

It is difficult at times to realise how 'new' New Zealand is. Up to 1850 or 1860 there was only a very tiny population. In the last 30 years the development has been very rapid on every hand, so he told me. Then the 'engineer' in him would come out & he waxed most enthusiastic about the possibilities of scientific development in the future. 'We need' he said 'never have great smoky factories & dark city slums in New Zealand. All the back born of the Country from north to South is Alpine with some of the finest water power in the world. We have only to harness the water-power of our Country by electricity and we shall have energy enough to drive all our ploughs, our railways, our lighting, our docks etc. And we can bring manufacturing plant into every village & need make no big town concentrations.'

⁵ Either Andrews or his informant is in error since no convicts were sent to New Zealand, though some who escaped from New South Wales or Van Diemen's Land settled in New Zealand before 1840.

There is one more asset — as yet partly untried & unknown — They have no abject poverty in New Zealand. Labour is so fully & securely organised that no one need be in poverty. Wealth has been remarkably distributed & the common labourer can earn 150£ to 200£ a year and his children can get the best education in the Country absolutely free.

When I asked him what he thought of the future, he was enthusiastic on certain sides. But what troubles him was what he called the 'over-physical development' of the race of English there, producing 'soft brain-wood' like the English oaks producing mere pulp instead of hard timber.

Here in, New Zealand, I have wished a thousand times over that you could have been with us! Willie⁶ has just come in and we have met & compared notes & his account is singularly in keeping with my own. But you will have heard from him direct. — In Australia I would not have felt that you could have been happy — everything would have jarred & jarred. But in New Zealand it would have been different and if you could have got away face to face with Nature, as Willie did, I believe that your happiness would have been very great.

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⁶ Willie Pearson, Tagore's secretary, was Andrews' companion on this visit to Australia, New Zealand and Fiji.