

## Review Article

*Prophets in the Wilderness: The Wesleyan Mission to New Zealand 1819-1827.*

By J. M. R. Owens. Auckland University Press and Oxford University Press, 1974, 192 pp. N.Z. price: \$6.65.

THIS ACCOUNT is a delightful work, written with a gentle sense of humour, an observant eye, and a wry tongue. The first part of the book is the narrative history of the ill-fated Wesleyan mission at Whangaroa, whose short existence was terminated when the station was sacked, early in 1827, by a portion of its patron tribe, together with some of their kin from the Bay of Islands. John Owens shows that this form of historical writing can be, when used to purpose, a very effective way of revealing the actual problems under view: a tiny group of men who struggled with the business of survival in a human environment that was never really welcoming. He shows their gradual loss of direction, as the eager response which they had expected to their message failed to eventuate, and that, as a consequence, they increasingly concentrated on the physical tasks of building a community. By the end of 1826, after three and a half years, the Wesleyan mission was a substantial and wealthy enclave in the Maori world at Whangaroa, while the missionaries had earned themselves a local reputation for parsimony, even downright meanness. Their pursuit of their daily tasks of labouring, planting, chimney-making, and house-building (about all of which they constantly complained) had come to be, without anyone being quite aware of it, the immediate focus of their lives. But this accumulated wealth earned them the jealousy and resentment of Ngatiuru, their physical protectors. Some two thousand pounds worth of property was abandoned to the Maoris in 1827. Dr Owens weaves his narrative well. We learn, for example, of the frailties of the Reverend Samuel Leigh, whose hypochondria was common gossip, with some (but only some) justification. Yet it had been his determination, plus his 'mean-spirited jealousies', which had ensured the launching of the mission. As well as Leigh's inability to survive in the actual field of labour another problem emerged: the somewhat belated recognition that missionaries should not be bachelors. The troublesome issue of sex led to a series of extraordinary voyages, not only across the Tasman (in vain) but across the world in the pursuit of zealous young partners. Of course, no-one thought of looking for wives amongst the New Zealanders.

This separateness of the missionaries' existence from the people they had come to convert did not only manifest itself in this issue. Their separateness was marked physically by the fences they built, with latch gates, around their affluent community at Wesleydale. Nathaniel Turner's drawing of the station at the end of 1826 has as its central point an enormous British flag, flying proudly behind a maze of picket fences. Alien and separate, the missionaries earned the hostility

of Ngatiuru because they seemed to prosper by their exemption from the social demands and expectations that operated upon those around them. It becomes difficult, then, to accept Dr Owens' thesis, developed in the second section of the book, that a 'mutual' influence and a 'mutual' exchange of ideas was gradually occurring; an exploration of each others' ideas and ways (pp. 46, 147).

In the later chapters, Dr Owens analyzes three major themes: the resentment and frustration of Ngatiuru which led to the sack of Wesleydale; the context of the economic and social relationships between the Whangaroa Maoris and their mission during its short life; the exchange of ideas which occurred between them. While Dr Owens can show that the Maoris were absorbing certain aspects of the European values, in a period when the pre-eminent atmosphere was one of rejection of those values as irrelevant, it would be somewhat idealistic to consider the interplay an equal one. There is little evidence here of an extensive influence on the missionaries. To some degree, they modified their initial emphasis on hell-fire preaching when they found that their God was vulnerable to ridicule for his cruelties and that their pictorial descriptions of hell appeared to their audience to be somewhat contradictory: how could it be consumed in flames and still be dark? Dr Owens encountered a rare tribute to the Maoris' sense of freedom and their enthusiasm for life in the journal of John Hobbs, who contrasted them with the 'poor Englishman "who if not under the cheering influence of his favourite poison [was] like an oyster without eyes or ears incapable of enjoying life"' (p. 145). But Hobbs was under the temporary and probably equally heady influence of the wayward Anglican missionary Thomas Kendall, who had just visited Wesleydale, as Dr Owens notes. Hobbs's lapse was not to recur. Certainly, the missionaries struggled against such temptations from the path of righteousness — and one of their number was to fall, as the later career of William White revealed — but to them such admissions were weaknesses, not strengths. Evangelicalism did not accept the equality of the heathen nor of his society; it admitted only his potentiality for improvement.

Dr Owens is on firmer ground when he shows that this underlying principle, that the first function of the mission was to make the heathen aware of his cultural inferiority and of 'new wants' which would lead him towards 'civilization', served at Whangaroa to create feelings of relative deprivation, rather than a response 'for God'. 'Cargo spoke louder than cult' (p. 120). From this analysis of the reasons behind the destruction of the mission, Dr Owens goes on to re-examine the applicability of Harrison M. Wright's thesis of 'domination', as the initial stage in a recognizable sequence of Maori responses to the permanent advent of Europeans in their land. At first sight, the Whangaroa case study seems evident proof of such an argument. Dr Owens shows, however, that the appearances are deceptive. For the very presence of the mission created a desire to continue a relationship with it, to maintain access to the Europeans' technology and their trade goods. It was itself a modifying factor on the Maoris' 'domination', as they feared an absolute loss of supplies by missionary withdrawal. That economic dependence had been generated is evident in the various dreams about Te Reinga reported to the missionaries as early as 1825: not only was it full of kumara and old friends, as it had always been, but now it was packed with European ships and muskets — and there were three European wives for the Whangaroa chief Te Aara (George). Instead of the thesis of Maori 'domination', which was originally derived from the American anthropologist Ralph Linton, Dr Owens offers us another anthropologist's notion to test, that of A. R.

Radcliffe-Brown and the way in which social sanctions were used against the newcomers. Both groups, in fact, resorted to some forms of sanction to control the relationship both wished to continue though obviously their terms were not parallel. The missionaries' threats of withdrawal countered those of Maori violence and it probably was the fear of military back-up, derived from the *Boyd* experience, which protected the missionaries' lives when the station itself was destroyed. Consequently, it can be said that the Maoris at Whangaroa held back from absolute confrontation even at the end; their tactics were rather those of controlled violence. This was a device which had been used effectively by Hongi Hika at the Bay of Islands to manipulate 'his' stations and to get what he wanted out of 'his' missionaries: continuing access to their goods and smithy, when their terms were unacceptable to him. But because the missionaries were not simply another tribal group, the Maoris did not operate all the sanctions of a pre-European existence; already they were modifying and adapting their expectations. Nevertheless, it was apparent that the missionaries were physically the weaker party, although possessed of enormous relative wealth, and consequently the ordinary sanctions of *muru* were finally applied at Whangaroa. Maori inter-tribal conflict had always been substantially concerned with competition for economic wealth. But, at the same time, it is also possible to trace other responses to the missionaries' presence: if resentment had been aroused, so had shame; if rejection of the missionary ideas can be seen, so can syncretism (in the modifications of the delights in store at Te Reinga), and so can compartmentalization, with a division of gods controlling manifestly different peoples. Perhaps one of the more pragmatic responses to the new ideas about the after life was the view offered by one man in 1825 that, as those in hell would clearly outnumber those in heaven, it could be readily conquered in an armed raid! A wide variety of individual reactions to the missionary presence can be traced; nevertheless, the balance is still heavily towards rejection of their ideas as irrelevant, unsatisfactory, or incomprehensible. Ten years later the balance is fast tipping the other way and the missionaries were themselves commenting on the visible changes.

Dr Owens suggests that in this process (which he refuses to demarcate) the important influences were the ideas themselves and the improved means of communication. 'Content and communication mattered more than context' (p. 147). But his own study shows that the context in which the ideas were presented shaped the Maoris' understanding of those ideas. The context made the ideas relevant, and the Maori responses were primarily pragmatic, out of the belief that association with the missionaries would be beneficial to them. The Whangaroa Maoris in the early 1820s were already juggling with alternatives of tactics and policy for dealing with the new issue in their lives: the permanent presence of Europeans and their own rapidly developed economic dependence upon European trade goods. They were also articulate about other changes in their lives, noticeably the increasing number of Maori deaths. The missionaries themselves placed emphasis on an immediate relationship between the events of this world and the Hand of God. They made explicit connections between sin and the origin of death. They made equally explicit connections between reward for faith and material prosperity: 'Once we were as you are, clad as you are, living in houses similar to yours, but you see now we possess all things.'<sup>1</sup> Christianity was presented to the Maoris in the context of their relative deprivation. This sense of deprivation had been injected into Whangaroa society. The urgent desire for mastery of the technological secrets of the Europeans,

including the mastery of the supreme secret of them all, literacy, provided the context in which Christianity would spread.

Dr Owens, in an unexplicated phrase, asserts that it was only with the 'mental transformations that came with literacy' (p. 141), that the missionary ideas of salvation became intelligible. However, the idea of salvation is not necessarily relevant to those who have learnt the skill of reading but it is to those who have acquired a sense of sin. Such a notion had first to be introduced among the Maoris. William Yate, one of the Anglican missionaries, recognized that the initial basis of their teaching was to arouse an awareness of sin: 'I want to make them feel their bonds. There is no seeking after Christ till the fetters of sin and satan gill *the Spirit*. — I do not think at present that there is a native in the whole island who knows what it is to feel the burden of iniquity. — Though they are all pressed down with a weight more tremendous than I can describe they are unconscious of it.'<sup>2</sup> The Maoris had their own sense of social shame, *whakama*, which was sustained by ridicule and social gossip within the community, but it was, as Dr Owens acknowledges, very different from the missionary concept of guilt. Acceptance of the 'Word of Truth' meant acceptance of the need for salvation: 'They have been much deceived of late by their God and are beginning to feel that Atua cannot save them.'<sup>3</sup> Certainly, literacy would expose the Maoris to these new concepts in a far more pervasive manner than the earlier religious 'conversations', for literate Maoris immediately became teachers to others and continuous discussion of the stories and parables became possible. Communication — the initial mastery of the language by the missionaries themselves and the printing of the Bible piece by piece in Maori — was unquestionably fundamental to the spread of Christianity in New Zealand in the 1830s and 1840s. Literacy opened up the existence of other peoples to the Maoris, while they acquired a Biblical identity for themselves and a new sense of uniqueness, that of belonging to the children of God. They were given access to what appeared to be the words with power. They were offered the solutions of 'peace' and 'love' to the problems of war and death, ideas which are powerfully persuasive in their simplicity. But the context in which all these ideas were placed was the fact of European power, the fact of European wealth, and the fact of Maori technological inferiority. From the moment Maori groups began to ask for missionaries, their requests were couched in terms of the first benefit that they expected: access to trade. Some complained rather subtly that they were already "believing for nothing" and wanted a Missionary to reside amongst them.<sup>4</sup> Others found the problem posed for them when they were asked by their missionary, 'what their superstitions had done for them in a temporal point of view.'<sup>5</sup> The Maoris understood that they were part of a wider world in which the Europeans seemed to have access to more knowledge than themselves and who now offered them new choices. "Come, friends . . . let us all believe: it will do us no harm. Believing, what will it do? It will not kill us, for the white people do not die; it will not make us ill, for the white people are not ill; it will not make us ashamed, for the white people are not ashamed; therefore, let us all, all, all, believe; and perhaps it will make the white people's God gracious to us; and our souls will not be any long devilified, but will be Christified; and we shall all, all, all go to heaven."<sup>6</sup>

The missionaries, of course, did not offer 'The Truth' in the terms that many of their pupils understood it and when communities found that the association with the missionaries seemed to provide no particular visible benefits, many lost

interest. The brief intense relationship between missionary and Maori developed out of the introduced economic and spiritual needs and was sustained for a short period by the Maoris' fear of the missionaries' withdrawal of their benefits. As the economic advantages became less a missionary-directed monopoly and when the spiritual rewards were shown to be less tangible than they had once hoped, the intense enthusiasm of the 'mihanere' Maoris was to fade. For some, the ideas could stand alone, but for many they could not.

Dr Owens has given us a fine study which encompasses far more than the brief career of the mission at Whangaroa; his book poses many questions and offers many suggestions for those who are fascinated by the problems involved in the study of what happens when people of different cultures are brought into sustained contact with each other. It is a book which deserves a wide readership.

JUDITH BINNEY

*University of Auckland*

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Conversation of the Church Missionary Society missionaries with the Bay of Islands chiefs 'Shunghee, Rewa, Titori, Hihi, Uduroa, Pakida, Tenana', at Kerikeri, 15 November 1825, Mission Books, IV, 48, CMS Archives, microfilm, Alexander Turnbull Library.

<sup>2</sup> Yate to CMS Secretaries, 14 April 1829, Letters 1827-1834, Correspondence, New Zealand, CN/099a, CMS Archives.

<sup>3</sup> Alfred Brown, Journal, I, 16 June 1836. Typescript, Auckland Institute and Museum.

<sup>4</sup> Brown, Journal, I, 26 September 1835.

<sup>5</sup> James Hamlin, Journal 1826-1837, 30 August 1835. Microfilm, University of Auckland.

<sup>6</sup> William Yate, *An Account of New Zealand and of the Formation and Progress of the Church Missionary Society's Mission in the Northern Island*, 2nd ed., London, 1835, p. 216.