

The Anglican Historical Society of New Zealand *Te Rōpu Hītori o te Hāhi Mīhinare ki Aotearoa*

Alfred Charles Barker

Physician, photographer, philosopher - and man of faith.

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In retirement I have had the opportunity to look more closely at some of the books I have steadily accumulated over 50 years. One of these is a handsomely bound 'Missionary Register', published in 1846. Inside appears the handwritten inscription: 'Alfred C Barker; Jan 3/49. Rugby.' After years of idly lying on my bookshelves, I only recently recognised this as a book that was once the property of Dr A. C. Barker, one of the Canterbury Pilgrims who arrived at Port Cooper (Lyttelton Harbour) in December 1850.



Alfred Charles Barker

A quick check of the standard account of his life showed that Barker was a bibliophile as well as a physician, photographer, and philosopher.¹ But how did he come to have that account of CMS missions, much of the volume devoted to CMS mission work in New Zealand, almost two years before the settlement of Christchurch and the Plains? What kind of faith lay behind his interest in acquiring such a publication? And how did that faith affect his ideas and outlook?

Alfred Charles Barker still has descendants active in the Anglican Church in this diocese today, one of them a retired Archdeacon.² Dr A. C. Barker and his family were passengers on the 'Charlotte Jane', one of the first four ships to bring settlers to Canterbury. In the popular mind, he is recalled as a physician who lived in the heart of Christchurch from its foundation. But perhaps he is even better known as a photographer who recorded for posterity early Christchurch and Geraldine on photographic plates.

The Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, after drawing attention to his 'eccentricities of dress and manner' and acknowledging him as 'a competent and respected physician' as well as 'a voracious reader, ... very active among the intelligentsia of the settlement,' cursorily passes over the religious dimension of his life and contribution to the shaping of Canterbury by a brief reference to the way he 'involved himself in church and educational activities.'

This does less than justice to A.C. Barker's Christian faith as a vital feature, if not the most significant component, of his life and character.³

In October 1858, Barker's wife Emma suddenly and unexpectedly died, leaving him with a family of eight children under the age of 13 to care for on his own. The youngest was only five weeks old. His response to this devastating personal loss reveals something of the depth of this faith. Writing of Emma's last hours to his clergyman brother Matthias in Wales, he records: 'Never did her faith in her Saviour's merits waver in the least. She was enabled to take firm hold of His gracious promises. As hour after hour slipped away, I found her faith grow brighter and the confidence that under her was an Almighty arm ready to bear her safely through the dark river when at last she fell asleep in Jesus. May God grant me so to follow in her steps that at the last day we may all stand a united family at the right hand of God.' ⁴

But Barker's faith was not mere Victorian sentiment or an emotional response to a severe personal crisis. He was well versed in the Scriptures. Seven months after Emma's death he writes to his cousin, Sarah, setting out in comprehensive detail the New Testament teaching on the dead in Christ. He concludes an extended dissertation with this confident assertion: 'If you take the Bible, carefully study it, and endeavour to dismiss from your minds all preconceived Romish notions, I doubt not but that you will at length agree with me.' ⁵

Theological Issues: the Inspiration of Scripture

He also gave much time and thought to theological issues and controversies of the day, sharing his reflections in his correspondence with Matthias. For example, on the inspiration and authority of Scripture, he held independent views of his own that were not identical with those held by his even more ardently evangelical brother. In 1865, for example, he wrote: 'I cannot find anywhere that the writers of the Bible claim the verbal infallibility you are ready to grant them. For the message they have to deliver - they do claim most emphatically the divine instruction

- or rather assert that it is not their's at all but God's.' ⁶

Eighteen months earlier he had set out his understanding of the relationship of human reason to divine revelation, an issue for him arising out of the debates and controversies emerging from the other side of the world, of which he seems to have been well aware. He writes: 'What a miserable state the religious world seems to be in - at least, your side of it. I have not read either side nor do I intend to do so - but the more I read my bible the more I become convinced that the error lies in supposing that inspiration and infallibility are convertible terms - I find the Apostles plenarily inspired and yet still liable to human error. Why then should we conclude that their infallibility was given to their writings which was denied to themselves? Is not the truth somewhat like this - that inspiration was intended to supplement not supersede reason? That in those matters where reason is obviously incapable of directing us - there direct revelation from God comes to aid his creatures, but that in all matters within the reach of those powers naturally given to man he is expected to use them and is liable to failure if he uses them badly - that such was the feelings of the writers of the New Testament seems to me to be proved by the language used by St Luke in his Gospel and the Acts - where he quotes his human knowledge as being an 'eyewitness' as his authority and also where St Peter - speaking of St Paul's writings - admits that many of that Apostle's writings are 'hard to be understood.' ⁷

His understanding of this critical 19th century issue he expressed in this way: 'It appears to me that we Protestants in yearning after infallibility have only substituted the Bible for the Church - but that God never intended to grant infallibility in detail on this side [of] eternity. Certainty of knowledge of past events is only to be attained by man from accumulated evidence ... So all the grand cardinal truths of Christianity are secured to us not only by the direct teaching of the Holy

Spirit but by the repeated recording of such messages by those who received and heard of them.’⁸

He was willing and able to enter into debate with some of the sharpest theological minds among the clergy in Christchurch at that time. In a letter to Matthias in 1862 he describes how he: ‘... had a long discussion with [Dean] Jacobs the other night ... the termination of which as usual resulted in agreeing to differ and on his part an assertion that my notions were pure Pantheism, an accusation which however sits lightly on my conscience as long as I am borne out by the dear word of Scripture.’⁹

His Reading and Wider Correspondence

His theological reflection embraced the controversies of the day arising out of the publication of Charles Darwin's writings and books such as ‘Ecce Homo’ (which he sums up as: ‘... to my mind one of the most detestable and dangerous books which has appeared for years.’¹⁰

His reading reveals acquaintance with Froude's History¹¹ and Austin's Geology¹², as well as with all Darwin's works. Barker himself wrote several articles and letters for both The Press in Christchurch and the British Guardian¹³ on the subject of evolution. He delivered a paper to the Philosophical Institute in Christchurch (which he co-founded) on ‘Continuous Creation versus Darwinism’¹⁴ and he corresponded with James Edward Fitzgerald¹⁵ and Frederick Weld, then Governor of West Australia.¹⁶ His home was a regular resort for informal intellectual discussions, Julius Von Haast being one constant visitor.¹⁷

Engagement with the Ideas of Darwin

In the two years before his premature death at the age of fifty-four, Barker was consumed by the controversies raging over the theories promoted by Charles Darwin.

In October 1871, he advised Matthias: ‘I send you

by this mail the newspaper (The Press) containing my paper on Darwinism. It has not met with much approval here ... I hope it may be more successful at home ... I cannot but think it right in these days of outrageous infidelity that one should raise one's voice in protest against the obviously illogical trash which passes muster by Philosophy in the world. Darwin's last work, the ‘Descent of Man’, for ridiculous inconsequence beats anything I have ever seen and yet it is generally received in England and that the President of the British Association openly promulgates the idea that all life on the globe came from the moss-grown fragments of a comet!!! As it certainly would take a Deity to make the moss, I doubt what the Philosophers gain by merely putting off the Creation into early Time - except the pleasure of saying to God – ‘Be thou far from me!’ How such rubbish can be listened to astonishes me.’¹⁸

A month later, the reception this paper had received stung him into writing a further response to the ideas of the Darwinians, and he sends this to Matthias in advance of its presentation. ‘I enclose with this a second paper I have written, but not yet delivered, on Darwin and his misdeeds ... When I wrote the first, I had not read Darwin's last work thoroughly – I have since done so. I think it of such an abominably irreligious character that I own I am astonished that it has been received so quietly in England. More than all I am grieved to see that clergy instead of openly opposing it seek to compromise and explain it away.’¹⁹

Four weeks later he again corresponds with Matthias on this same issue: ‘I am glad to see that Darwin has honestly come forward and proclaimed himself what he calls a ‘pure theist’ (modern lingo for ‘Deist’ I suppose). Now if anyone reads his book, they are fairly warned that the theory is that of a very clever Deist and readers must choose betwixt him and Christianity and the Bible.’²⁰

Christmas and New Year come and go, and at the height of the Canterbury summer Barker is once more on his hobby-horse, writing with heated passion and indignation: 'One thing at least I am sure of, that if you clergy don't bestir yourselves to meet this flood of scientific infidelities which is overspreading the world, your 'candle will be moved out of its place' and you will cease to be the teachers of mankind. It is pitiful to see the squabbling going on about externals when the vital truths of Christianity are attacked -and nothing disturbs me more than to see clergymen loudly proclaiming their adherence [to] and belief of Darwin's damnable doctrines and talking of their agreement with revealed truth etc!!' ²¹

Barker was clearly hurt by the lack of sympathy for his views and assessment of Darwinian ideas that he detected among the Canterbury clergy at that time. By early March he was expressing in a further letter to Matthias his barely disguised anger and disappointment: '... am again busy writing against Darwin's Pangenesis, a full account of which was shown me a few days ago and which I hope to be able to prove arithmetically to be impossible ... I cannot boast of many converts here. Indeed, most seem to think that Darwin is rather an apostle sent from heaven to reveal science, than what I fully believe him to be - the most dangerous emissary from Satan that has appeared for many years, though I have no doubt he himself is utterly unconscious of it.' ²²

What is even more remarkable than the stand Barker took on this issue was his interest in and ability as a layman to critically respond to the writings of Darwin, even when he found little support from his ordained brothers in the diocese. It suggests a faith that was held with both unusually deep conviction and intellectual integrity. Twelve months later he was dead. ²³

Interests beyond Pure Theology

His interests were by no means narrowly religious. Barker also had a deep and visionary

interest in aeronautics. As early as 1871 he was writing to Matthias: 'There is one thing I hope I may live to see - that is the completion of aerial navigation - as that will, I take it, be the practical beginning of the Reign of Peace, when war will cease because it will be simply impracticable.' ²⁴

Little could he have foreseen what air transport would bring in the way of both acts of terrorism and their reprisals 130 years later! The following year, he thanks his brother for supplying a contact address for the British Aeronautical Society. He asks Matthias to see if their transactions are published, and if so to send him copies, concluding: 'I fully believe the time for aerial navigation is close at hand, and look for its advent with the same certainty that I do for that of our Lord in glory! May he hasten his coming and may I be privileged to see it!' ²⁵

Barker died in Christchurch on 20th March 1873. One of his passionate concerns over the preceding 23 years had been to ensure a steady supply of the right kind of clergy for the fledgling Diocese of Christchurch. In 1858 he had written: 'At present the country districts are lapsing into total neglect for want of suitable clergy ... this to yourself.' ²⁶ Ten years later he was writing: 'It would appear that they have found out at last that young Puseyite parsons don't make good working clergy. A whole lot who have been imported fresh from Oxford having turned out no better than they should be - and dissent having distanced the church in most of the outlying districts - this however between ourselves ... Colonial life has greatly worn down the edges of High Churchism, and so long as a clergyman honestly does his duty, very little attention is paid to his peculiarities of Doctrine.'²⁷ The following year he makes the point even more strongly, clearly hoping that his unmarried brother Matthias might consider emigrating to Canterbury to accept a clerical appointment in the young colony: ²⁸ 'Seriously, I believe there is a good opening for a steady evangelical clergyman here - the high church have been tried

and found wanting though you must not breathe such an opinion here - true though it be.’²⁹

These extracts from his correspondence reveal a man who read widely, thought deeply, conversed eclectically, and engaged the ideas of that day vigorously, yet who had a personal faith that was rooted in the Bible and worked out in daily living. His biographer says of him in this regard: ‘When a synod was chosen to control the business of the Church, the Doctor was able to indulge the evangelical streak in his nature by making it in some respects his special hobby.’³⁰

Evidence that Barker's faith was a governing principle of his life rather than a mere leisure appendage, and affected his professional conduct as a physician, is provided by Jane Deans³¹ in a letter describing the kind of medical care A.C. Barker provided for her and her son in a time of illness. She writes: ‘I sent for the doctor [A.C. Barker] ... How he blessed and prayed for blessings on your father and myself, and how abundantly these prayers have been answered, for goodness and mercy have followed us ever since.’³²

Endnotes

¹ Dr A C Barker 1819-1873, ‘Photographer, Farmer, Physician’, C. C. Burdon (1972) John McIndoe, p. 48.

² In fact, the Rev. (later Archdeacon) John Barker in 1965 succeeded the writer of this paper as Vicar of Hororata.

³ Burdon (p. 11) describes Alfred Barker’s home background in this way: His father, Thomas Gibbs Barker, ‘was dedicated to the cause of converting the Jews to Christianity ... he brought up his family in the strictest evangelical piety.’

⁴ A. C. Barker, 10 August., 1858, Outward Letters & Papers, Box 1, Canterbury Museum Library (CML).

⁵ Ibid. 1 May 1859, folder 1.

⁶ Ibid. 13 August 1865, folder 7.

⁷ Ibid. 12 January 1864, folder 6.

⁸ Ibid...

⁹ Ibid. 13 August 1862, folder 4.

¹⁰ Ibid. 5 November 1866, folder 8. ‘Ecce Homo’ was an anonymous work by John Robert Seeley, a Professor of Latin, published in 1865 at a time when destructive liberalism was being reinforced by an unchallenged succession of writers such as Darwin, Huxley, Spencer, Lecky and George Eliot. William Gladstone gave the book ‘a cautious welcome’, and this brought the work to public notice. It portrayed Christ as King of the spiritual kingdom, laid emphasis on the humanity of Christ, and depreciated the likelihood of miracles. Yet ‘Ecce Homo’ also concluded that the resurrection and appearance of Jesus to Paul could not be accounted for in any other way than that they were true. In the end it served as a counter to the secularising forces of unrestrained liberalism that had been whittling away the heart of religious conviction since the French Revolution. Compare this comment with that of Lord Shaftesbury who considered ‘Ecce Homo’ the ‘most pestilential book ever vomited from the jaws of hell.’ (Geoffrey Finlayson, ‘The Seventh Earl of Shaftesbury’, (1981) p.387).

¹¹ Ibid. 16 February 1872, folder 14.

¹² Ibid. 27 August 1869, folder 11

¹³ Ibid. 27 October 1871, folder 18. For copies of letters to these papers and articles published in The Press, also see CML Box 1, folder 18.

Elsewhere Barker also drew a distinction between his own and his brother Matthias’ much ‘higher’ view of the inspiration and infallibility of scripture. For example, in a letter of 13 August 1865, to his brother he writes: ‘I will content myself with saying that I cannot find anywhere that the writers of the Bible

claim the verbal infallibility you are ready to grant them. For the message they have to deliver – they do claim most emphatically the Divine instruction – or rather assert that it is not their’s at all but God’s ...’

¹⁴ Ibid. 28 September 1871, folder 13; also, 21 November 1871, and 2 March 1872, folder 14.

¹⁵ In a tribute to A C Barker after his death, James Fitzgerald, in a letter to Richard Alfred Baker, A C B’s eldest son wrote: ‘For nearly twenty-three years your father was one of those I loved and respected above all others. He was a thoroughly upright and good man. And there are very few like him left behind. His very eccentricities and endeared him to us the more – by making him always fresh and new ... I hope and believe you will all fulfil his dearest wish which was to plant in NZ a family – whose members might in after time display by their life and character the spirit in which the first colonists of Canterbury landed and which he largely and enthusiastically shared ...’. (Burdon op.cit. p.86).

¹⁶ CML Box 1, folder 18.

¹⁷ Alfred Barker ‘corresponded with scientists the world over – he was in touch with Huxley, Darwin and Owen ... He conversed with Anthony Trollope ...’ His books included Bickersteth’s ‘On a Prayer’ and Fox’s ‘Book of Martyrs’. His house was a meeting place for men such as geologist Julius von Haast, politician William Rolleston, future NZ Premier Henry Sewell, James Edward Fitzgerald, first editor of the The Lyttelton Times (later, The Press), G. S. Sale, first editor of The Press, Judge Gresson, and ‘an almost daily’ visitor, Dean Jacobs. His daughter Elizabeth recalls ‘how these men would ‘surround him talking and arguing on everything on earth and beyond it by the hour.’ (Burdon, op. cit. pp. 70-74).

¹⁸ 26 October 1871.

¹⁹ 21 November 1871.

²⁰ 21 December 1871.

²¹ 14 February 1872.

²² 2 March 1872.

²³ CML Box 1, folder 18, contains an exercise book with cuttings of articles by A.C.B. published in The Press (Chch), handwritten notes by A.C.B. on the issues involved, copies of letters sent (e.g., to the Editor of the British Guardian), and copies of letters received, together with full notes of addresses given to the Philosophical Institute in Christchurch., etc.

His introduction to the tightly packed exercise book, handwritten on the inside cover, states: ‘No one can more readily admit than I do the vast debt the world of science owes to Darwin ... But it often happens that the wisest philosophers, in contributing their glittering chain of arguments, neglect the first link of their theory, upon the stability of which of course the whole value of their argument depends. This appear to me to have been the case with Darwin’s ‘Theory of Natural Selection’.’

²⁴ Ibid. 7 July 1871, folder 13.

²⁵ Ibid. 29 August 1872, folder 14.

²⁶ Ibid. 10 August, 1869, folder 1.

²⁷ Ibid. 27 August 1869, folder 11.

²⁸ Ibid. 10 August 1858, folder 1, (to Matthias): ‘I wish to goodness you were here just now – I believe if you had a mind to preach up a congregation there are several places where one could be got together.’

²⁹ Ibid. 20 January 1870, folder 11.

³⁰ Burdon op.cit. p. 53

³¹ Of Riccarton, later Homebush. Her husband, John Deans, died in 1854.

³² From ‘Letters to My Grandchildren’, - Jan Deans, 1923, p. 15. A letter written 16.12.1885 on the anniversary of the arrival of the First Four Ships.