

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

A Daughter of the Church: an Introduction to the Life of Gwendoline Mason (nee Child)

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St Hilda's Collegiate School was founded in Dunedin by Bishop Nevill when, at his invitation, the **Community of the Sisters of the Church** in Kilburn, London, sent two sisters to set up a school for girls. Arriving in late 1895 Sisters Geraldine and Etheleen began their 'English school for the daughters of gentlemen' in February 1896 with eleven pupils.

The Community of the Sisters of the Church was one of the Anglican religious communities which came into being as a result of the Oxford Movement. Founded by Emily Ayckbown in 1870, the Community had a special interest in education and Mother Emily believed that she was called 'to start a new community devoted to the service of God and the spread of his church, especially by the teaching and training and throughout the British Dominions.' The Sisters of the Church were the first Anglican community to obtain the Government Certificate for Teachers and twenty years after their foundation had established schools in Canada, India, Australia and Burma, as well as in many parts of England. Bishop Nevill, who was committed to the church's role in education and a strong supporter of denominational schools, had been impressed by the work done in England by the Sisters of the Church and his adopted daughter Ethel had joined the Community, becoming Sister Etheleen, so it was not surprising that he invited the Sisters to begin a girls' school in Dunedin.

From the beginning, St Hilda's was very much a church school. It opened on February 2 on the Feast of the Purification with a celebration of the

Holy Eucharist in the little chapel. Next afternoon the bishop arrived with other clergy to bless the school and the boarding house. A school chaplain was appointed, and religious instruction was given to the girls every day, by a member of the clergy or by one of the Sisters. The Sisters conducted morning and evening prayers and there was church attendance on Sundays. As the school grew the Sisters looked for teachers who were committed church members. Great care was taken to teach the history of the church and the meaning of its rites and prayers and those girls who wanted it were prepared for confirmation. The chapel was central to the life of the school and there were regular Quiet Days, visits from clergy, and a S. Hilda's Guild of Prayer. The early issues of the school publication, *Chronicles of S. Hilda's*, contain messages from bishops and 'thoughts' of a devotional nature from Sister Geraldine. The Sisters encouraged charitable work and from about 1900 an annual bazaar was held to raise money for charities and missions (see below). The emphasis was on the careful training of the girls' characters and on the education of Christian churchwomen and ladies.

In February 1899, three years after St Hilda's opened, **Gwendoline Child** was admitted, becoming Number 96 on the school register. Her mother, a widow, gave her address as Dunedin so her daughter was probably a day girl but there is no other information about her family. Gwendoline, who had previously attended a state school, was placed in Form V but other than that nothing is known of her school career.

Presumably she spent several years there but no leaving date is noted in the register, only that the cause of leaving was 'finished.' The next mention of her is found in the Chronicles of S. Hilda's of Easter 1913, where there is reference to a visit to the school by Bishop Cecil Wood, missionary bishop of Melanesia. He told the school the good news 'that an ex S.Hilda's girl, Gwen Child, has been accepted for the Melanesian Mission and will sail from Auckland in the Southern Cross on April 7.' The writer added, 'We hope she will write to us often, and tell us all about her work.' This was not the first connection of the school with the Melanesian Mission and indeed it seems most likely that it was her experiences at the school which encouraged Gwen Child to offer herself for work in the Mission.

The Chronicles in August 1904 noted that the Bishop of Melanesia, Cecil Wilson, had been in Dunedin and had visited S. Hilda's. This was not his first visit, and he told the girls that a Melanesian girl for whom they had 'worked' was now married and suggested that they 'adopt' another one to replace her. This they agreed to do and those who belonged to 'Melanesia' (evidently a voluntary group within the school) were asked to add her name to their intercessions and 'pray that she may ... develop into a faithful Christian maiden.' Bishop Wilson asked for a half-holiday for the school and notice was given of a sale of work to be held later in the month, with the first objective being 'little Betenle, our Melanesian scholar, to be provided for.' The Melanesian Mission, always short of funds, had in fact developed an early form of child sponsorship by which individuals or groups raised funds for one of the Melanesian students being educated at the mission school on Norfolk Island. Women and girls also 'worked' i.e., sewed and made clothes for the mission.

The sale of work or bazaar, held annually in August, became a significant event in the school calendar. In 1904, £61 were raised, of which £21 went to support Betenle, £12 to the orphanage

run by the Sisters of the Church in Kilburn, £12 for a crippled girl at S. Mary's Home in Dunedin, with the remainder going towards new school buildings. The girls were reported as having worked 'like niggers' (sic) and there were stalls, a bran tub, competitions including a spelling test, and a comic act in the evening. For a number of years, the bazaar followed much the same pattern, with a sale of work in the afternoon and an entertainment in the evening. Proceeds were divided, with the Melanesian Mission, the Kilburn Orphanage, St. Mary's Home and the building fund being the recipients.

The charity bazaar or fancy sale was a feature of life in nineteenth century England and the concept was exported around the world by English women. These bazaars, which were pre-eminently female affairs, were frequently held in aid of missions, both foreign and domestic, and the children's bazaar, organized in aid of missionary work, became very popular particularly with girls. Compassion and benevolence were thought to be the special characteristics of the female sex and girls as well as women were encouraged to spend time sewing and making goods for sale. A bazaar also required a good deal of organizing; there was the preparation and decoration of the hall or rooms, the planning of the opening celebration, the recruitment of patrons and stall holders, the advertising, catering, the planning of an evening entertainment, sometimes special costumes to be designed and made. The Chronicles of S. Hilda's document the many efforts made by girls, staff, mothers, Old Girls, and others over the years in aid of the annual bazaar.

When Gwen Child became a member of the Melanesian Mission staff in 1913 the S. Hilda's girls had a new incentive to support the Mission. During Lent in 1914 some of the girls gave up half an hour of their recreation time every day to 'work' for the Mission, hoping to have 'a tangible result of their self-sacrifice in the shape of a parcel to send to Miss Child' after Easter. The

following year the school received a visit from Archdeacon Neild, Organising Secretary for the Melanesian Mission who had formerly taught at the school for a number of years. He gave an 'interesting' address and proposed that the annual contribution from the bazaar be given 'to help support our own special mission worker, Miss Child.' For over twenty years the school did contribute to the stipend of Miss Child, or Mrs Mason as she later became, although the actual amount varied. She, for her part, kept in touch with the school, writing letters which were often printed in full or in part in the Chronicles, and visiting the school when she was on furlough in New Zealand. Her son, John Neale Mason, was baptised in the school chapel in March 1925.

In 1915 Archdeacon Neild again addressed the school and a display 'of various Melanesian works of art and warlike weapons' was used to build up a sketch of the mission, the hardships of missionaries and their 'glorious rising above their trials' as they gradually freed the Melanesians from 'the terrors of heathenism and witchcraft.' The Archdeacon stressed the importance of prayer, encouraging the girls to join the Guild of Prayer for Melanesia, the only rule of which was to pray for the missionaries every day. Interest in the Mission was at a high point and many girls joined the Guild.

The 1930s brought changes to S. Hilda's as the Sisters were withdrawn by their community which was no longer able to supply members for all its overseas branches. There were resultant changes in the management structure, but S. Hilda's remained a church school with the Bishop of Dunedin as the chairman of the Board of Management. The new principal, Miss Dorothy Blackmore, an Englishwoman, was a staunch churchwoman, but she was not a professed religious and she was a professional educator. Religion no longer played such a significant role in the life of the school although chapel services continued to be important. S. Hilda's was also facing serious financial difficulties and the roll

was dropping as the depression worsened. In 1938, Mrs Mason visited the school and gave a lecture but the bazaar that year was in aid of school improvements and from then on its proceeds went to assist the school and financial support was no longer given to the Melanesian Mission. Mrs Mason continued to keep in touch with the school and on her last visit, in 1943, urged the girls to look on Missions as their life work. It seems however that interest had declined with the changing times.

When Miss Elizabeth Robertson became principal of S. Hilda's in 1961 interest in missions revived for a time. Miss Robertson was a New Zealander, a trained teacher with a MA degree who had also gained a Licentiate in Theology. Under her leadership collections for missions were almost trebled, a 'silver coin' replacing the traditional 'Mission Penny.' The school supported missions in New Guinea, Polynesia and Hong Kong as well as in Melanesia. The Bishop of Melanesia visited the school, as did other bishops from overseas churches. Miss Robertson was granted a term's leave in 1964 to begin a secondary department in Pawa Boys' School in the Solomon Islands. In 1965, 1966 and 1967 three S. Hilda's Old Girls did volunteer service at Tasia in Melanesia and S. Hilda's girls raised money for their support. Gwen Mason however remains the only S. Hilda's Old Girl to have devoted her life to the service of the Melanesian Mission.

When Gwendoline Child, as she then was, joined the Melanesian Mission in 1913, it was at a time when the Mission was anxious to expand its work among women. Bishop Cecil Wilson, who retired in 1911, believed that women's work was necessary in order to reach other women while his successor, Bishop Cecil John Wood wrote in the Melanesian Mission Report of 1913 that 'the development of ladies' work in the islands may help us to solve the problem of providing suitable wives for well-trained teachers and others.' In the past women's work had been confined to the mission station and school on Norfolk Island,

with four women's stations opened in the years for 1905 to 1913 in Christian districts in the islands where the women's safety would be assured. The decision to close the station on Norfolk Island and to move the headquarters of the Mission to the islands, a decision made in 1910, but not implemented until the end of 1919, gave an impetus to the development of this women's work which was reported to be 'very slow.'

It was to the station at Maravovo in the Solomon Islands that Gwen Child went in 1913. There is no record of her qualifications or training for the work she was about to begin but probably not much was required. Bishop Wilson considered character qualifications important: a big heart and a good head; sympathy and tact; thoroughness, patience, friendliness, unselfishness; a strong faith in God and a real love for Jesus Christ. Experience in ordinary school teaching, especially religious teaching, was desirable and a woman teacher should know how to sew well because she would have to teach others. She should be able to carry out medical work at an elementary level: bandaging, poulticing, fomenting, massaging, and a knowledge of midwifery would be helpful. He recommended that a girl wishing to qualify herself for missionary work should spend a year or more in a Church or public institution such as a school, hospital or sisterhood in order to learn such habits as thoroughness, punctuality and obedience. Presumably Gwen Child would have

learned these habits at S. Hilda's, where she would also have obtained the good religious training which the Bishop sought, knowledge of Scripture, including doctrine and Church history, and where she may also have done some study of mission work. She may have learned First Aid, how to cook, and how to make her own clothes but whether she learned the use of a saw and how to solder, as the Bishop desired, is not known.

Gwen Child worked at Maravovo and then in 1916 with Miss Ida Wench began a small girls' school at Boromoli in Gela. In 1920 she married the **Reverend Albert Mason**, an Englishman who had joined the Mission in 1914. She worked with him at his station of Fiu on the island of Malaita until the 1940s when, while on furlough in New Zealand, they were unable to return to the Solomons because of the outbreak of war. Albert Mason died before the end of the war and after it was over Gwen was anxious to return to the islands where she had spent so much of her life. After living in the tropics for years her health was not good and at the end of 1951, she had a stroke and died. The Secretary of the Melanesian Mission wrote that the Mission had never had 'a harder or a more devoted worker.' The full story of her work remains to be told but undoubtedly the education she had received at S. Hilda's was a foundation for the rest of her life. One hopes that Sisters Geraldine and Etheleen would have been pleased.