

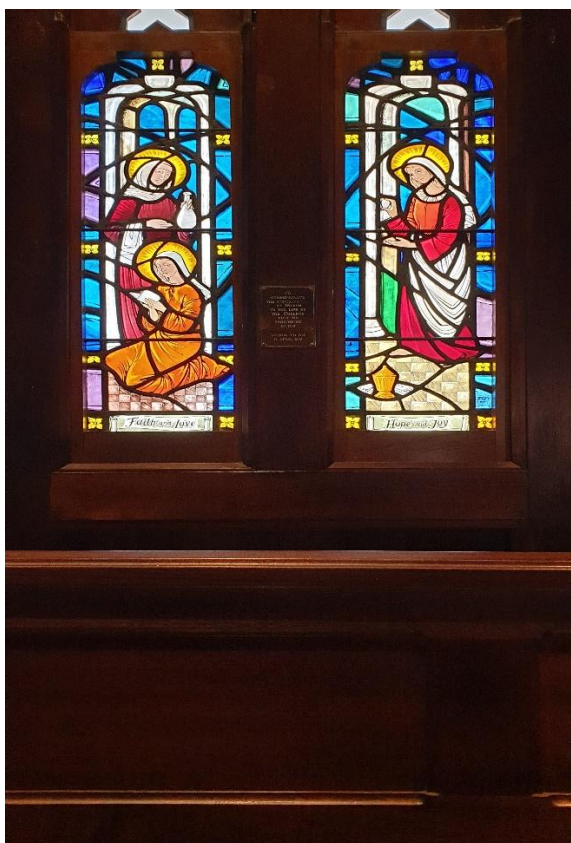
# *The Anglican Historical Society of New Zealand* *Te Rōpu Hītori o te Hāhi Mīhinare ki Aotearoa*

## *In Memory of Her*

Anna Matilda Nihill (nee Hector) and daughter Annie Elizabeth Still (nee Nihill)

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In April 1995, two new stained-glass windows were dedicated in the chapel of the College of Saint John the Evangelist, Auckland. These windows, designed by Wellington artist Beverley Shore Bennett, depict Mary Magdalene, and Mary and Martha of Bethany. A small plaque states that they commemorate the contribution made by women to the life of the College since its foundation in 1843.

Although the first women students were not admitted to Saint John's College until the 1970s, and the first full-time women faculty were not appointed till 1986, a number of women were associated with the College in its early days.

Prominent among them is of course Sarah Selwyn, while others who played a significant role were Mary Ann Martin, and for a shorter time, Caroline Abraham. The names of **Anna Nihill** and her daughter **Anna (Lizzie) Still** are less well-known, but each of these two women was associated both with the College and with the Melanesian Mission which had its beginnings at Saint John's, before it moved to Kohimarama (now Mission Bay) and then to Norfolk Island.

**Anna Nihill** was born in 1832 in Van Diemens Land (Tasmania) as **Anna Matilda Hector**. Little is known of her parents, but Bishop Selwyn apparently first met the family at Kororareka in March 1845, during Hone Heke's assault on the flagstaff, when Mrs Hector and her two daughters were taken on board Selwyn's boat, the Flying Fish. Her son George Nelson, known always as Nelson, a 'gallant lad' of fourteen refused this asylum and joined his father 'in the hottest part of the fire.'<sup>1</sup> The following year Nelson and his younger brother joined the students at Saint John's. The younger boy, Fred, evidently did not stay long, but Nelson remained until 1852, being regarded by George and Sarah Selwyn as 'our adopted son.'<sup>2</sup> Nelson assisted William Nihill in teaching English to Melanesian students at the College, and also went on a number of visits to the Melanesian islands before joining the P & O Company and becoming one of its best-known commanders.

In 1850, three Hector daughters, Anna and her sisters Caroline and Horatia, also came to Saint

John's, brought over from Sydney by Bishop Selwyn. Their mother had died, and their father was described as 'absent.'<sup>3</sup> According to Vicesimus Lush: 'the father has turned out exceeding eccentric and, the girls being left like orphans in Sydney, the Bishop has determined to receive them all into his own house and be unto them as a Father...'<sup>4</sup>

The Hector girls were virtually adopted by the Selwyns, and Saint John's became their permanent home. It was in the 1850s, according to Lush, quite a 'refuge of the afflicted' with a stream of visitors, convalescents and unfortunates of all kinds who 'shuttled through the College to be advised and consoled by the Bishop [and] his wife.'<sup>5</sup> There was quite a lively social life, and music, drawing and painting were encouraged as hobbies, as was use of the library in the Selwyn's house. The younger Hector girls were part of a circle which included Blanche (Blanney) and, until her death in 1854, Charlotte Lush; Mary Abraham; and Lizzie Maling, who also lived at the College for a time.

At Saint John's, **Anna Hector** met **William Nihill**. Nihill had come out from England with the Selwyns on the *Tomatin* in 1842, one of four candidates for holy orders. While officially a student at Saint John's College, 1842-1853, Nihill also acted as a teacher to Māori and Melanesian students, superintended the printing press and generally acted as an assistant to Bishop Selwyn. Sarah Selwyn described him as a gifted linguist with an ability for 'attaching natives' to himself, so he seemed to be marked out for the Melanesian Mission when that began.'<sup>6</sup> On 20th April 1852, Anna Hector and William Nihill were married by Selwyn in the Saint John's College chapel. Among the witnesses who signed the register were Charles and Caroline Abraham, Arthur Purchas, Frederick Thatcher, G. N. Hector, and Sarah Selwyn. A Māori couple was married on the same day and Sarah Selwyn recorded that: 'We did honour to the occasion by a holiday

ending with a general assembly in the Hall and much fun with a bullet pudding. At the wedding feast George was very funny on the Annihilation of Hector. The wedding feast was attended by a large party of Māori guests as well as 'the English'.<sup>7</sup>

William Nihill's health was poor, and for several months in 1853 the young couple lived at Kohimarama (now Mission Bay) which was more sheltered and warmer than the exposed and windy ridge on which Saint John's College was built.<sup>8</sup> On 4th July 1853, their first child, a daughter, was born. On 31st July **Anna Elizabeth Nihill**, later known as **Lizzie**, was baptised in the College chapel by C. J. Abraham, headmaster of Saint John's Collegiate Grammar. Her three godparents were Sarah Harriet Selwyn, Eliza Nihill, and George Nelson Hector. Nihill's health was evidently very precarious, but although Selwyn offered him the possibility of remaining 'in the warm nook at Kohimarama' he chose to go with his wife and infant daughter to Nengone (now Mare) in the Loyalty Islands. Prior to his marriage he had spent several months on Nengone with a Māori assistant, Henare Taratoa (later of Gate Pa fame), and most of the first Melanesian students at Saint John's came from the Loyalty Islands. In November 1853, William and Anna Nihill, with baby Lizzie, were left at Nengone by Selwyn, in the course of a Pacific voyage with Sir George Gray.

Anna Nihill thus became the first woman associated with the Melanesian Mission who actually lived in the islands. It was more than twenty years later (October 1876) that Helen Welchman (nee Rossiter) joined her husband at Siota in the Florida group and, following her tragic death early the next year, no more women members of the Melanesian Mission lived in the islands till the twentieth century.

Little is known of the Nihills' life on Nengone, although they evidently established both a school and a church. John Coleridge Patteson,

who soon after his arrival in New Zealand in 1855 thought that he might spend some time at Nengone, talked to Mrs Nihill and recorded that: 'Within three miles of Mr and Mrs Nihill's school and church, cannibalism went on and it is still customary to kill the children and eat them as food - and yet Mr and Mrs Nihill were perfectly safe; and I don't think that any serious anxiety on their account was entertained by anyone who knew anything about the character of these islanders.' <sup>9</sup>

Nihill's health however was cause for anxiety and 'universal sympathy' was expressed for their 'lonely situation.' <sup>10</sup>

In the event, William Nihill died at Nengone in April 1855, three weeks after his second child had been born and buried. Abraham had sent a vessel to bring the Nihills back, but it arrived too late and returned to Auckland bringing only Anna Nihill and Lizzie, now two years old. Patteson described the arrival of the boat on 21<sup>st</sup> July with news of Nihill's death, and how he went at once to Judge's Bay to inform Mrs Martin and Mrs Selwyn: 'Whilst there we saw a boat land a young lady and child on the beach just below the house, and they sent me down. Pouring with rain here on the beach, taking shelter in a boathouse with her brother, I found this poor young widow; and so, leaning on my arm, she walked up to the house. I just waited to see Mrs Selwyn throw her arms round her neck, and then walked straight off ...' <sup>11</sup>

Soon after their arrival, Vicesimus Lush met Mrs Nihill and her daughter Lizzie at Judge Martin's house: 'This little child, Lizzie, talks a little Nengone - a little Māori - a little Lifu - and so is called the Polyglot baby.' In a moment of prescience, Lush suggested to Mrs Selwyn that were Lizzie old enough 'she would make a valuable wife to any Melanesian Missionary.' <sup>12</sup>

The young widow and child evidently lived at Saint John's. Lush described Lizzie, who was a

friend of his daughter Annette, as 'quite a fragile little girl' while her mother 'looked in a rapid consumption.' Anna however, 'continued to work steadily for the cause for which her husband had died.'<sup>13</sup> In particular, she is recorded as having taken charge of Caroline and Sarah, two young women from Nengone who in 1856 were prepared for and admitted to Holy Communion.<sup>14</sup>

At the end of 1868 Lizzie, then aged fifteen, and her mother sailed with the Selwyns to England. In 1871 they were living with them at The Close, Lichfield. At some point Lizzie met **John Still**, a close friend of John Richardson Selwyn, the Selwyn's younger son. Still, who was ordained by Bishop Selwyn at Lichfield in 1870, worked as John Selwyn's curate at Saint George's, Wolverhampton 1871-72 and then in 1873 accompanied him to Melanesia. Before going to Melanesia, he proposed to Lizzie Nihill, who refused him. At Christmas 1875, Still was in Auckland and tried again, telegraphing to Lizzie in England, and this time she replied that she would come out to him at once. They were married on 19th October 1876 in the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, Auckland. The Bishop of Auckland, W. G. Cowie, performed the ceremony assisted by John Selwyn and the incumbent, Benjamin Dudley, a member of the Melanesian Mission Trust Board, whose daughters Amy and Anna were among the bridesmaids. Thus, the daughter of one of the first Melanesian missionaries married a member of the mission and no doubt her mother hoped this marriage would be more fortunate than hers had been. Soon after their marriage the newly-weds received a call from Vicesimus Lush and his daughter Annette who, he noted, 'was taken rather aback when in the tall, stately aristocratic lady she had to try to recognise her former friend, Lizzie.'<sup>15</sup>

Within weeks of their marriage, the Stills moved to the Melanesian Mission headquarters at Saint Barnabas on Norfolk Island where Lizzie joined a

tiny group of women. Susannah Bice, a daughter of CMS missionary Robert Maunsell, had been on Norfolk Island since her marriage to Charles Bice in 1871 and was the mother of three young children. Mary Palmer, the second wife of John Palmer (whose first wife Sarah had died at Saint Barnabas in 1874), had arrived about six months before the Stills, as had the much older Elizabeth Colenso, separated wife of disgraced CMS missionary William Colenso. Clara Selwyn, wife of John Selwyn, had been resident at Saint Barnabas for some three years but was away (when the Stills arrived) on an extended trip to England where she left her two little girls with their grandparents, George and Sarah Selwyn. Clara finally returned to Saint Barnabas in April 1877, following John Selwyn's consecration in Auckland as Bishop of Melanesia. By that time their son was not yet two years old, but Clara was pregnant again. Lizzie Still was pregnant too and her health was poor. Probably for that reason her mother, Anna Nihill, paid an extended visit to Norfolk Island.

The women at the mission, although not regarded as missionaries, were responsible for the care and education of female students, of whom there was a growing number. In 1876 there were approximately 200 Melanesian boys being educated at Saint Barnabas, and about sixty girls, 'the future wives of Christian Students.' Feeding and clothing the community, largely the responsibility of the women, was described as 'indeed a difficult undertaking' and although gifts of clothing were sent to the Mission by a number of women's groups, there was still much work for 'the ladies of the Mission and the female scholars,' both in sewing new clothes and in mending.<sup>16</sup> Elizabeth Colenso wrote in her diary soon after her arrival in 1876 that there was 'always more work to be done, or to see to, than the Staff were able to manage.'<sup>17</sup> Other tasks included hospitality to Melanesian students and European visitors, correspondence,

an annual Christmas spring-cleaning, and helping to pack for the island voyages undertaken each year by the male missionaries. There was also a regular routine of worship. Probably Lizzie Still, pregnant and unwell, did not in fact manage a great deal of work, but she and her mother would have participated as much as they were able. Their social life would have included picnics, sewing circles, horse-riding, attendance at weddings of Norfolk Islanders and Melanesians and at cricket matches, as well as the annual Bounty Day celebrations. Social contacts with the Norfolk Islanders (of whom there were only about 300) were however limited and, while the male missionaries spent at least part of each year at their 'Stations' in the islands, the women remained on Norfolk Island unless they undertook the cramped and uncomfortable voyage to Auckland or Sydney. Although there was a doctor for the Norfolk Island community, ill-health in general and childbirth in particular caused anxiety. Sarah Palmer had died in 1874 and Clara Selwyn would die at the end of 1877, barely two weeks after the birth of a daughter who herself lived only four months.

On 2nd June 1877, about six months after her arrival at Saint Barnabas, Lizzie Still gave birth to a daughter, Catherine Elizabeth. Her health continued to cause concern and in November of that year the Stills left Norfolk Island on account of her 'delicacy.' Vicesimus Lush however recorded in his journal that the reason for the Stills' departure was that Mrs Still 'could not get on with Mrs John Selwyn, in fact the two ladies had most sadly quarreled.'<sup>18</sup>

Anna Nihill remained on Norfolk Island where she cared for Clara Selwyn during her last illness. After that she may have joined Lizzie and John in England.

John Still returned to parish ministry and by 1879 was rector of a parish in Wiltshire. In January 1880 Lizzie Still gave birth to her second child, a son named John. Later that year the Church

Gazette recorded that 'Mrs Still, who had been reduced to a state of great prostration by the climate of Norfolk Island, is reported now to be in good health'.<sup>19</sup> Still remained in England till 1885 when he became incumbent of Saint Paul's pro-cathedral, Wellington. In October 1890 the Stills went to England for seven months on account of her health. They returned to Wellington for a short time but in July 1891 he resigned and they made a final return to England where he continued in parish ministry. Ann Elizabeth Still died in 1894 at The Rectory, Halstock, Dorset. She was 41 years old. (John Still was offered both the wardenship of Saint John's College and the incumbency of Saint Mary's,

Parnell, but declined both.)

Anna Nihill outlived her daughter, dying aged 69 in Salisbury in 1901.

The lives of **Anna Matilda Nihill** and **Anna Elizabeth Still** have left few traces. The glimpses which we catch of them are mostly in letters and diaries, not in official records. These glimpses, all too brief and tantalizing, are sufficient to reveal that each of them had a significant association with Saint John's College and with the Melanesian Mission. The new chapel windows commemorate their lives, and the lives of many other women whose faithful service to Christ and his Church has been over-looked or forgotten.

## Endnotes:

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<sup>1</sup> H.W. Tucker, *Memoir of the Life and Episcopate of George Augustus Selwyn, Vol. 1*, London: Wells Gardner, Darton & Co., [1879], 182.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 227.

<sup>3</sup> Sarah Selwyn, *Reminiscences by Mrs S. H. Selwyn, 1809-1867*, Auckland War Memorial Museum Library, 1961, Typescript 35.

<sup>4</sup> Alison Drummond (ed.), *The Auckland Journals of Vicesimus Lush, 1850-1863*, Christchurch: Pegasus Press, 1971, 43.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 271-2.

<sup>6</sup> John H. Evans, *Churchman Militant: George Augustus Selwyn, Bishop of New Zealand and Lichfield*, London: George Allen & Unwin, 1964, 108.

<sup>7</sup> Selwyn, *Reminiscences*, 42.

<sup>8</sup> According to Ruth Ross, Nihill was a consumptive who inadvertently gave the disease to a number of his Melanesian pupils, some of whom are commemorated by a plaque in the chapel. 'It was almost certainly the teacher who infected the taught.' R.M. Ross, *Melanesians at Mission Bay: A History of the Melanesian Mission in Auckland*, [Wellington]: New Zealand Historic Places Trust, 1983, 74.

<sup>9</sup> John Gutch, *Martyr of the Islands: The Life and Death of John Coleridge Patteson*, London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1971, 61

<sup>10</sup> Charlotte Mary Yonge, *Life of John Coleridge Patteson*, Vol 1, London: Macmillan & Co., 1888, 127

<sup>11</sup> *Loc.cit.*

<sup>12</sup> Lush, *The Auckland Journals*, 161.

<sup>13</sup> Alison Drummond (ed.), *The Thames Journals of Vicesimus Lush, 1868-82*, Christchurch, Pegasus Press, 1975, 181.

<sup>14</sup> E.S. Armstrong, *The History of the Melanesian Mission*, London: Isbister & Co., 1900, 147

<sup>15</sup> *The Thames Journals of Vicesimus Lush*, 181.

<sup>16</sup> *Report of the Melanesian Mission, 1873*, 6, 7.

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<sup>17</sup> Frances Edith Swabey, *Elizabeth Colenso: Her Work for the Melanesian Mission*. Typescript, 4. The diary entry is for 1877.

<sup>18</sup> *The Thames Journals of Vicesimus Lush*, 193. While this may have been true Lizzie's poor health continued and she died young.

<sup>19</sup> *Church Gazette*, October 1880, 91.