

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

Mary Atkin

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This is the text of a talk given by Margaret Baker, of Kohimarama, Auckland,
to the AHS, Auckland, 26 September 1999.

When I was first approached to give a talk about **Mary Atkin**, it seemed quite simple. Hadn't I been hearing about her ever since I moved to this district (Kohimarama, Auckland) over 40 years ago? Didn't I know people who had known her personally?

However, the reality has proved somewhat different. Yes, I do know several people, including my husband, who knew Mary Atkin personally; I knew how to contact two relations; but the people I know, and who knew her, had been young children when she was 80 years old, and the cousins are both keen to find out what I can find out because they know so little of her life.

So, this is what I've learned:

Mary was the elder child of William Atkin and his wife Ann (nee Newman). William was born at Toynton in Lincolnshire in 1814 and arrived in Kohimarama in November 1842. His fiancée, Ann Newman, who came from Willoughby in Lincolnshire, arrived shortly before William, and joined her brother Joseph Newman and sister Elizabeth on the land he had purchased from the Crown for £1 per acre, at Kohimarama at the land auction in June 1842. (The Crown had bought the land from the Ngati Paoa for subdivision.) A third sister, Jane, lived around Auckland. This land extended from Pipimea Point to what is now Kepa Rd and included part of Kohimarama Road and all of Selwyn Avenue. William brought with him the first 2 wooden ploughs used in the Auckland district. The wedding took place at St

Paul's Church on 11th December 1842, and they commenced married life in a raupo hut on the farm, where he worked with his brother-in-law. They were still living in the raupo hut when Mary was born on 7 October 1843. She was christened at St Paul's. Joseph Atkin was born about a year later. He was called Joe, possibly to distinguish him from his uncle Joseph Newman.

We do not know whether Joseph and William started off as partners, but in 1844 Joseph sold 21 acres to William for £4 per acre, 5 acres to Robert Hayward, and 6 acres to Thomas Kemp. Joseph later sold a further 42.5 acres to William for £200 and 3 acres to his neighbour, Captain Porter of Kohimarama.

We know very little of Mary's life, but there are tantalising glimpses. Today Kohimarama is only a 10-minute drive from town along the waterfront. In 1842, access was by boat or up the farm track to what is now Kepa Rd, on to St John's College, and thence to town via Remuera. One of the highlights of Mary's childhood was the occasion when she and Joe accompanied their mother to the first Auckland Show, which was at Mechanics Bay. The horse-drawn dray, driven by a Māori, became hopelessly bogged among the flax roots on Remuera Rd at the foot of Mt Hobson. However, they eventually arrived at the Show, and their efforts were rewarded as Mrs Atkin received first prizes for her Orleans plums, and her white beeswax. Mary mentions in her reminiscences that in those early days, her parents often bartered farm produce for other

goods. There was not much ready cash around.

There were no other children in the vicinity and so Mary and Joe relied on each other for company. Mary records that they spent a lot of their free time playing on Kohimarama Beach, but that there was not a lot of free time because during the week they had lessons and helping on the farm, and on Sundays there was Sunday School and church.

Early in the settlement of the district, the settlers of all denominations got together and built St Thomas's Church. (Joseph Newman was a Congregationalist) Joe's was the first Baptism, on 2nd March 1845 in the new church, and Elizabeth Newman's the first marriage. Mary's father was one of the original Sunday School teachers and is described as 'the farmer who supplied the butter to St John's College.' That is where Mary and Joe attended church and Sunday School. Settlers came long distances to attend church. Initially the staff and pupils at St John's College worshipped at St Thomas' (and took the services). Later, after St Thomas' church became structurally unsafe, the whole district moved its centre of worship to the St John's College Chapel.

Mrs Selwyn and Mrs Abraham conducted a school at St John's College for the children of the local settlers, so this may be where Mary and Joseph were taught, or they may have been given lessons at home. There was also a private school in the vicinity of St Thomas' church for a few years. When he was old enough, Joseph was sent as a boarder to a church school in Taranaki and thus Mary lost her companion. Later still he went to the Grammar School in Auckland and then got a scholarship to St John's College.

We know that Mary played music as she was given a copy of Hymns, Ancient and Modern in June 1885, in recognition of her services as organist at St John's Chapel. We also know that she had lessons from C. J. Hoyte, the painter. Her father had French blood - did he teach her French? She certainly had a well-developed

mind, but we do not know what her formal education was. Typically, in the Victorian era, it was considered more important to educate a girl in the arts of housekeeping and domesticity, than in books.

Once William had replaced the original whare with a wooden house, Ann made a garden which she loved. A number of fruit trees were also planted in what became known as the 'orchard' - the above-mentioned plums, at least two pear trees, quinces, and an apple tree among them.

Although there were no other children to play with, there would have been quite a lot of contact with people, especially those coming and going between the Melanesian settlement at Mission Bay and St John's College. William had made a track along the eastern boundary of his farm, and this was used as a short-cut. So, all the members of the Melanesian Mission would have been familiar to Mary. William Atkin was a Warden at St Thomas' church for many years, and also Synod rep, but he also served on the St John's College and Melanesian Mission Trust Boards, and the local Road Board, and for some time wrote articles for the press on the Māori perspectives of various issues.

He was a personal friend of Chief Paora Tuhaere of Orakei and employed Māori on the farm. No doubt Mary would have overheard the adults talking and was informed on the issues of the day.

Life would have changed dramatically after the death of Joe along with Bishop Patteson in 1871. William leased part of his farm to William Speakman, who had previously worked for him, and in 1881 he sold all but 4 acres of the land, though he continued to be involved in his outside activities.

In 1880 Mary travelled to Norfolk Island with a group to attend the dedication of the Memorial Chapel at Norfolk Island. She continued all her life to have a great interest in the Melanesian Mission. She took on the role of 'Mother' to

Joseph Wate, who had been a protege of Joe's, and this relationship continued until she died - he is remembered in her will.

Mary was a typical Victorian daughter, with her life centred on the comfort and wellbeing of her ageing parents, the life of the church, and the Mission. Ann died in 1891, at the age of 80, after a prolonged illness, and her father died 10 years later, in 1901, at the age of 86. By that time Mary was aged 57.

After William's death, and in accordance with his wishes, Mary travelled to England to visit relatives. While she was away the house was rebuilt, but to a very similar design. Back in Kohimarama, we are told that Mary was frequently seen riding her pony, that she took a keen interest in the doings of the neighbourhood and the Road Board and kept up a copious correspondence. We know she allowed people to take a short cut between Kohimarama Road and Selwyn Avenue through her property. She was fond of children, took Sunday School for some years, and she kept a barrel of sweets available for when children visited.

Before he died, William told Mary that he had left his estate to her, and he asked what she would do with it. Her reply was that she would build a church. He approved of this plan and suggested that the orchard would be a good site. She never lost sight of this goal. When the subdivision of Selwyn Avenue took place in 1912, she decided to buy back one of the sites, as Selwyn Avenue would provide a better access for a church than the orchard. To make this purchase she had to obtain a loan from the Bank - no easy task for a woman. In 1921 she gifted the site for a church and vicarage to the Standing Committee of the Diocese. St Heliers Bay had been the worship centre of the district since 1898, but for some years services were held in the Mission Building on a Sunday by the Vicar of Tamaki West or a Lay Reader, but by 1916 we read that the Bishop had dedicated furniture for the services at

Kohimarama. By 1921, Mary decided that the population of the Kohimarama /Mission Bay area was sufficient to justify a church. She had a stone church in mind, similar to the one at Paihia, and costing about £2000 - a lot of money in those days - and nothing happened. By 1925 we read that the Mission Buildings had become very dilapidated: 'The roof at St Andrew's provides very little shelter in the rain -something must be done before winter!' Some months later it was decided that it would be better to build a church hall with a sanctuary on the land Mary had given, rather than repair the old building. £200 was the sum required, and it took about a year to raise. By the end of 1926 they were just waiting for the weather to improve before the building was erected. Services commenced in January 1927. How pleased Mary Atkin must have been that something had been done at last - but disappointed too. She never lost her vision of the stone church being erected someday and had hoped that it would be commenced in her lifetime. She wished the East End to be as close as possible to the oak tree, which had a special significance for her. You may be interested that the choice of St Andrew as the patron saint of the Mission chapel, and therefore ultimately our church, was apparently on account of it being the name given the church that was built in Charlotte Younge's novel 'The Daisy Chain.' Charlotte was a cousin of Bishop Patteson. It was the proceeds from the sale of this book that financed a great deal of the early development of the Melanesian Mission in those initial years.

By 1927 my husband and his contemporaries knew Mary Atkin, but their memories of her are chiefly of a little old lady, dressed in black, who spent most of her time sitting on her porch, with her companion, Miss Brigham at the other end of the porch. Later I realised that by then she would have been 84, and fully entitled to spend most of her time sitting down! Because Miss Brigham's name is almost synonymous with Miss Atkin's in their memories, I checked the electoral rolls, and

found that Jane Brigham was living with Mary Atkin by 1919, and she remained with her at least until near the end. Mary died on 14 July 1938 at the age of 94. Jane died two years later, at the age of 84.

The Sunday School had been in the habit for some years of visiting Mary Atkin on her birthday, taking bunches of flowers. On her 90th birthday there were special celebrations, and we have a photograph of her surrounded by the teachers and pupils of the Sunday School.

Picture some of the changes that took place here. The Kohimarama Wharf wasn't built until about 1909. The Waterfront Road didn't go through until 1931. Before that she had seen the Flying School in operation at Mission Bay. Transport was by horse and trap, pony, or by walking, and people walked enormous distances. Home-made candles provided lighting, and cooking would originally have been done over an outdoors open fire. One of the changes would have been in toilets. I am assured that the Atkin outhouse was a larger than normal structure, and that it contained 4 seats, on 2 different levels. My informant was told that this was because the Atkins were afraid of attack by the Māori and so all went to the toilet at the same time! I wonder what the real reason was. By the 1920's the area had grown from a few isolated farms, into a suburb, complete with shops and delivery vans.

There are huge gaps in our knowledge of Mary Atkin's life, However, all we need to do is to look around us and we see what was important to her. It was Mary Atkin's vision in gifting the original land to the Diocese that enabled the first Vestry to build the Melanesian Martyrs' Memorial Church of St Andrew, followed by this Centre and the Vicarage. In her will she gifted the right-of-way between Selwyn Avenue and Kohimarama Roads to the City of Auckland, as well as the reserve to the north of it, an acre to the south of her home to the Auckland Hospital for a cottage hospital, and the homestead and surrounding

grounds for a Home of Rest for missionaries on furlough or aged or in bad health, and money to St Johns College for bursaries for Melanesian and Māori students. She gifted £1000 to the Melanesian Mission to fund 2 cots in the Mission Hospital and provide an income for her protegee and his descendants. She also left £10 per annum for the upkeep of the family graves at Purewa - a very practical person.

Previously she had gifted land in Selwyn Avenue to the General Trust Board, to be used for the benefit of The Native Pastorate Fund.

So here we have a woman who was a devoted daughter, strong in her faith and in her love of God and her fellows, single-minded, and with an attention to detail, who became something of an icon in the parish. When the Guild was formed in 1924, she was its first President - at 80! Garden parties and Fairs were often held in her grounds.

Her name is still respected and honoured 60 years after her death.

We thank God for Mary Atkin and her vision.