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'Some to be Teachers ...': two pākehā women in native schools

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From 1816, when the first CMS mission school was established by Thomas Kendall at Rangihoua, education of Māori children was carried out primarily by church-run day and boarding schools. From 1847, Anglican, Wesleyan and Roman Catholic schools received government funding to provide religious training, industrial training, and instruction in the English language. Provincial governments also funded schools, almost exclusively for Pākehā, during much of this period. The withdrawal from schools by Māori during the warfare of the 1860s, along with widespread criticism of the system of funding church-run boarding schools, resulted in significant reform. Through the Native Education Act 1867 the State encouraged Māori communities to establish primary schools in which English was the language of instruction. Under the supervision of the Native Department these schools were funded largely by the government, but local Māori had to request a school, give the necessary land and fulfil a number of other requirements. This separate system of Native Schools was seen as a short-term solution to the need to teach Māori children English and to 'civilise' them. Ten years later the Education Act 1877 established a separate system of free, secular and compulsory primary schools administered by ten education boards and a central Department of Education. Children of European settlers were able to attend Native Schools while some Māori children attended boarding schools. In 1879, control of the Native Education Schools was transferred from the Native Department to the new Department of

Education. In 1894, the compulsory attendance clause of the 1887 Act was extended to include Māori. Official policy increasingly emphasised the use of English language in Native Schools and discouraged the use of te reo Māori.

In 1947, the Native Schools were renamed Māori Schools and in 1955 the Department of Education for the first time sought the views of Māori leaders on issues relating to the education of their children. The Committee on Māori Education recommended the long-term development of a uniform system of administration of primary schools in which Māori Schools would be handed over to education boards. At the beginning of 1969 this process was completed when the remaining 105 Māori Schools were transferred to education board control.

Native Schools were situated in Māori communities which were usually remote from European settlement. Children often travelled long distances on foot, on horseback and by boat or canoe. Buildings were frequently in poor condition. Sickness and death were common in remote rural areas where there was no organised official provision for health care and by the 1880s it was expected that teachers, although untrained in medical matters, would dispense basic medical supplies and advice to the sick as well as teaching hygiene to the children. In many cases they also acted as registrar of births, deaths and marriages and postmaster/mistress.

The staffing of the schools was haphazard. It was often difficult to find teachers and though some were excellent, others were incompetent. They

were expected to act as role models for what was then assumed to be the superior Pākehā and English way of life and to exercise a good influence over the whole community. James Pope, appointed as first Organising Inspector of Native Schools in 1880, wrote in his annual report of 1891 that 'the example set by the daily life of a well-ordered family is one of the greatest benefits conferred on the people of a Native settlement by the establishment and maintenance of a Native School.'¹

Pope also wrote that 'A Native School in a lonely place must not be intrusted to a junior teacher or to a bachelor, and it is not a fitting sphere for a single woman.'² In fact a number of single women did teach in Native Schools though always accompanied by a female companion – mother, sister, other female relative or friend. Young unmarried Māori women frequently acted as assistants. One of their roles was to interpret the English of the teacher to the younger children who knew only te reo. Pākehā teachers were neither required nor expected to know the language of their pupils.

Agnes Lillian Grant

In spite of the challenges and difficulties of teaching in Native Schools a number of unmarried Pākehā women took this up, often as a form of Christian service. One such woman was **Agnes Lillian Grant**, a woman who spent her life educating Māori. The daughter of an Otago sheep farmer, Agnes Grant was born in 1873 into a family strongly connected to the Anglican Church. She enrolled in Canterbury University College in 1892 and graduated with a BA in 1897. She could have obtained a position in a number of schools, but her mother wrote on her behalf to James Pope, Inspector of Native Schools. Grant spent a brief period at Hukarere Girls' School where she studied Māori language and school management. On 28 February 1898, on the understanding that she was chaperoned by her aunt, she was appointed as sole teacher at

Karioi Native School in the central North Island, eight miles from Mt Ruapehu. The climate was harsh with severe snowstorms in winter.

The one-classroom school at Karioi was not operational until June 1898 and while waiting for the school to open Grant received some training at the Pipiriki Native School. Karioi school opened with an initial roll of twenty children and during the six years Grant was there the roll averaged twenty-five. Māori parents showed great interest in the school - so much so that in September 1898 Miss Grant wrote to the Department asking whether it was a good thing to have the parents sitting in on the classes when there was so little space available.

In October 1898 there was a measles epidemic at Karioi and Grant, assisted by her mother, aunt, and sisters, dispensed medicines and nursed at least ten children.

By March 1899 Grant and her chaperone had identified several problems with the buildings and promptly set about remedying them. Their improvements included a well, which would ensure a continuous, clean water supply; a rat-proof pātaka to enable bulk buying of produce; and the construction of a scullery, and bathroom. Most of this was at Grant's own expense and in 1901 she paid for a further bedroom and sitting room.

The Karioi Native School received its first official inspection on 21 March 1899. There were thirty-two pupils enrolled, including three Europeans. James Pope noted that 'the Natives are showing great interest in the school and its work, and the teachers are in various ways doing their very best to help the Natives - we have in fact mutual esteem and respect.'³ From July that year the function of the building was expanded when, in response to a public petition, a public lending library was established at the school. Discipline was often a problem and Grant recorded punishing children for disobedience, sulkiness, impudence, and carelessness in pen and ink

writing. Punishments included shutting in a cupboard and striking with a strap or cane on the hand or calf.

In 1904 Agnes Grant and her chaperone left Karioi. Agnes later worked at the Wharewarewa Mission House and at Hukarere Girls' School. She died in Napier in 1944, aged seventy-one.

Agnes Grant was replaced at Karioi by Bertha Baigent.

Frances Bertha Baigent

Frances Bertha Baigent was born in Wakefield in May 1864, one of the ten children of Arthur and Sarah Baigent. Her father, a member of a prominent pioneering family, worked in the family timber business as a sawmillier. Her mother was a strong churchwoman and as a young woman Bertha was very involved in parochial work, including as organist, Sunday School teacher and secretary of the local Gleaners' Union and Sewers' Band. In March 1900, she was farewelled from the Wakefield parish as she was leaving to take up the position of teacher at the Ohoka Native School in Pelorus Sound. In one of a number of speeches, the vicar of Brightwater spoke of her as just as much a missionary as those who served in distant lands with her duties just as arduous.⁴ Baigent then spent six weeks gaining some experience at Whangarae Native School in Tasman Bay. This was evidently the only training she received.

Ohoka School was opened in 1900 on land given by the government to the very poor local iwi in Anakoha Bay in Pelorus Sound. The school was unusual in that it was partly funded by the diocese of Nelson, allegedly out of concern about the activity of Mormon missionaries in the Marlborough Sounds. Bertha went to teach in the newly opened school, accompanied by **Miss Esther Byles**, the former Sunday School superintendent for the Wakefield parish, as her chaperone and assistant teacher.

Anakoha Bay was very remote, the only access being by sea until a road was built in 1979. Carrier

pigeons took news of the safe arrival of the two women four days after they left Nelson. Soon after their arrival, Bertha wrote that the school had eleven pupils, all bright and intelligent, and four more were expected.

In June 1903 the two teachers held a 'mid-winter Christmas' at which Father Christmas gave the children clothes. Of 106 garments, 85 were made by Baigent and Byles. Bertha commented on the hard work involved 'but the result is neatly and warmly clad children'.⁵ In August she reported that a marriage had been held in the schoolroom which functioned as 'our Church'. She wrote that 'This being the first marriage of pupils who have passed through this little school we feel it is worth being chronicled, especially as the first Christian marriage amongst these Māoris.'⁶

The next month there was a measles epidemic during which Baigent and Byles had sole responsibility for dispensing medical care to the sick. Bertha reported that she had turned the schoolroom into a hospital ward for a number of sick children (against specific instructions in the 1880 Native Schools Code) and closed the school for three weeks. In a letter to the Education Department, she wrote that she also instructed parents on how to care for their sick children and all made a good recovery.

Baigent and Byles left Ohoka in April 1904. In her final entry in the Logbook Bertha wrote: 'I must not moralize, but one cannot help wondering to what extent these boys and girls have benefitted during our four years residence among them. Their social and temporal improvement is very apparent, but what about their morals? Time alone will tell, our work amongst them is done, not so perfectly as it might have been, we know, but 'wisdom is bought by experience' and our endeavour to benefit them temporally, morally, socially, physically, and spiritually, has, at least, been honest.'⁷

Bertha Baigent, again accompanied by Esther Byles, replaced Agnes Grant at Karioi in 1904.

This meant that she was now employed by the Department of Education instead of the diocese of Nelson, a step she took only after being assured by the Bishop that in so doing she could continue the work of the Church. After less than a year however, Baigent wrote to the Secretary of Education requesting a transfer for them both on the grounds of health. A medical certificate stated that to stay would probably endanger her health for years and that she needed to live in a dry, warm climate, preferably by the sea.

Whareponga Native School was situated north of Waipiro Bay on the East Coast of the North Island. The teacher left at the beginning of 1904 and was not replaced until April 1905 when Bertha Baigent was appointed, although she did not start work until June. Once again Esther Byles was with her. There are few records of this period. In 1907 Bertha introduced a sewing machine to assist the teaching of needlework and the girls used it to make clothes for themselves. She took several months leave in 1908 to nurse her dangerously ill sister until she died. During her absence the school was continued by her assistant **Miss Waitoa** and her mother. (It is not clear where Miss Byles was.) Later, in November 1908, Baigent held a bazaar to raise funds for the furnishing of the Whareponga Native Church. The Education Department gave her permission to close the school for three days: one to prepare, one for the sale, and one to clean up. She reported that the children had made a large number of clothes for sale and that they had held sewing meetings with the Māori women.

In November 1910 Baigent tendered her resignation on account of her approaching marriage but returned the next year, unmarried. Possibly on account of the planned marriage, Miss Byles had left the school and had been appointed by the diocese of Waiapu as mission worker amongst the Māori in the districts of Waipiro, Whareponga, and Hiruharama. It was at Hiruharama that an outbreak of typhoid began, spreading up the coast, causing much sickness

and some deaths. Baigent and Byles were about to leave, Baigent having been appointed to Taharoa Native School, but they stayed for six months nursing the Māori community at their own expense. In 1912, the Hon. Apirana Ngata, the local MP, approached Heaton Rhodes, Minister of Public Health, seeking government compensation for the two women as they had not been paid by the Education Department and had spent all their own savings. Rhodes promised to reimburse them by matching whatever sum could be raised by local subscription up to £25.

Taharoa Native School opened 2 October 1911 with twenty-eight pupils. Situated to the south of Kawhia harbour the school was in a very isolated area. Until a road opened in 1966, the only access was by boat and/or horse. Bertha Baigent was the sole-charge teacher. (There is no mention of her having a companion or chaperone.) By July 1912 the school roll had grown to forty, and an assistant teacher, **Sarah Mauriohooho**, was employed. She taught the junior classes while Baigent taught the seniors. This situation changed when Bertha married.

On 13 January 1913 Bertha Baigent and **Archibald Hume Watt** were married in Ngaruawahia, at the home of her brother. It is likely that Watt was the man she had intended to marry earlier. She may have hesitated because of a significant age difference: he was twenty-six and she was forty-eight.

Archie Watts, or Te Wati, was born in Glasgow in 1887. Bertha described him as 'a thorough gentleman and though my junior in years, is not so, in wisdom and experience.'⁸ Watt had no experience in teaching and as a single man could not have entered the Native School service. Following his marriage, he was accepted as assistant teacher at Taharoa and Miss Mauriohooho was transferred. Both the 1880 Native Schools Code and Regulations of 1909 stated that when two teachers were married the male was to be the head teacher and the female

his assistant. This did not happen with the Watts but, in a reversal of the previous situation, he taught the senior classes while she, vastly more experienced, taught the juniors.

Taharoa Māori were keen supporters of the King movement and in November 1914 Mrs Watt requested permission to close the school for a day to celebrate the anniversary of the Māori King's coronation. This was refused but only six children came that day, so she sent them home and closed the school. The Secretary of Education wrote that she should have kept it open.

In 1915 the couple were transferred to the Native School at Te Kao on the Aupouri Peninsula of Northland, 46km. from Cape Reinga. To reach the impoverished gum-digging settlement they travelled by boat from Auckland to the Houhora harbour and then by horse and buggy over 15 miles of unformed roads. For the first time Bertha was head teacher at a well-established school, opened in 1881. Although head teacher she taught the junior classes while Archie, her assistant, taught the seniors. In 1916 this was reversed, and he became head teacher. Clearly although she had much more experience the regulations were being enforced so that they now represented a conventional Pākehā relationship with the male in authority. For her this made a significant reduction in salary. In 1915 she was paid £180, Archie £85. In 1916 he received £180, she £105. The Report on the school in 1915 noted that sewing and knitting were well-taught while instruction in domestic duties was a very important part of the curriculum. Cooking was also taught though there was no cookery room.

Archie had to resign in 1919 due to ill health so Bertha resumed the role of head teacher until his return in 1922. After four years he left again in order to supervise a dairying scheme with assistance from Te Tai Tokerau Māori Land Board and the Native Affairs Department. The aim was to improve Māori social and economic welfare. Bertha was once again head teacher, with two female assistants, until ill health forced her to retire in September 1930. Archie then replaced her as head teacher till he retired in 1937.

After retirement both Bertha and Archie remained active in the community. He was particularly involved in the development of dairy farming. He was also recognised as a fluent speaker of te reo. Bertha on the other hand never learned the language.

Bertha Watt celebrated her 100th birthday in May 1964. Two hundred and fifty Māori attended a hāngī held in her honour at the marae in Te Kao. She was honoured by being classed with their great ancestress after whom the Waimirangi meeting house is named and hailed as an elder of the Aupouri iwi. Four months later, on 17 September, she died. Her body lay at the Parengarenga meeting house for a day before her funeral which was conducted by the local Māori priest. Before the service she received the tributes of a tangi, an unusual honour for a Pākehā. She was buried in the Te Kao Anglican Church cemetery where she was joined by Archie in November 1980. At the graveside one of the Māori elders paid her tribute by misquoting a famous quotation: 'Never in the back-blocks history of New Zealand have so many owed so much for so long to one person.'⁹

Endnotes

¹ James H. Pope, 'Education: Native Schools' in *Appendices to the Journal of the House of Representatives, 1891*, E.2, p.2.

² Ibid.

³ James H. Pope, '1899 Annual Report on Native Schools' Inspection'.

⁴ 'Farewell to Miss Baigent', *Colonist*, 29 March, 1900.

⁵ Quoted in E. Dobson, *Women in Charge: Women Teachers in the New Zealand Native Schools System 1898-1930*, MA Thesis in Education, University of Auckland, 1997. p.153.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p.162

⁷ *Ibid.*, p.169.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.96.

⁹ 'Maoris bury centenarian with honours of an elder', *Church and People*, November 1964, p.3.

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