

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

Bishop Hobhouse visits Auckland, 1864

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(AHS Newsletter 8, July 1997)



In 1864, Edmund Hobhouse, Bishop of Nelson, faced a crisis. For the past two years he had struggled against the hostility of most of the Nelson laity, unhappy with his liturgical innovations and his inflexible interpretation of Prayer Book rules which seemed inappropriate in the freer atmosphere of colonial New Zealand.

His mental health was causing Bishop Selwyn so much anxiety that he sent his friend, Charles Abraham, Bishop of Wellington, over to Nelson to see for himself the real state of affairs and to counsel him to resign and return to England, but Hobhouse, devout and over-conscientious, refused to abandon what he believed was his God-given duty. As one of his own diocesan

clergy wrote: 'Bishop Hobhouse was a very excellent man, pious, kind, and liberal, though not in all respects adapted for a Colonial Bishop.'¹

On 12 October 1864, he suffered the final, devastating blow; his wife, Mary, died in childbirth.

On 7 November Sarah Selwyn wrote to her old friend, Eliza Hobhouse, the Bishop's sister: 'This mail will take home heavy tidings for you from Nelson and most unexpected ... The first thought was for Edmund and who should go to him, for that it should be either ourselves or Bishop Patteson was decided at once. It ended as you know by Bishop Patteson leaving by the next steamer. It was thought that his presence might be less provocative of anxious or business thoughts and in no one could he have a more loving or suitable companion.'

No doubt Selwyn also thought the change would be beneficial for Patteson himself, grieving over the recent tragic deaths of his two young recruits from Norfolk Island, Fisher Young and Edwin Nobbs.²

Patteson wrote from Nelson: 'It is very touching to see him (Edmund) with the two boys; fine fellows they are indeed, and Eddy is quite a little companion for him. He takes some Sunday duty and seems the better for a good walk or ride, is very collected and exercises a complete control over his feelings - as at the funeral, and in church.'

However, Patteson had no illusions about the Bishop's health and described him as looking very ill, with 'a worn almost haggard look' and Dr Cusack recommending he should not be left

alone in Nelson. In fact, at the urging of the Selwyns, Patteson took Hobhouse back with him to Auckland, but to Mrs Selwyn's disappointment, the children were left behind.

Eddy (Edmund's son) was apparently able to write to his father during his absence although he was only two months past his fourth birthday.

His father replied from the Waikato River on 24 November: 'My dearest Boy. I got your Letter before I left Auckland - and very glad I was to hear of you, and to see your Flowers. I am glad to think that you are enjoying yourself at Nelson. We have had beautiful weather here, every day since I reached Auckland. Bishop Selwyn has brought me to see this country, which has lately been taken from the Māories by war. This time last year there was a great deal of fighting here, and a great many poor men lost their Lives.³ I hope that there will be no more fighting. The soldiers are beginning to go away. I shall get back to Auckland on Wednesday next if all goes well - and on the Wednesday following get into the Airedale Steamer, and so to Nelson by Friday or Saturday to see my darling Eddy and Walter once more.'

A new close relationship with his children developed as a result of his grief, and his friends all reported what a real companion little Eddy became to his father. A new and appealing side of the Bishop was revealed by the warmth and tenderness he showed to his sons.

Caroline Abraham wrote a year later when they were all visiting Wellington: 'With the children I fancy his life is really much the same anywhere. He lives in them as far as any real enjoyment in this world goes. When Eddy is present, he needs no other society and hears no other voice when Eddy speaks. It is touching to see him acting as mother as well as father, in his care of the little companion who evidently thinks he has charge of Papa, as much as Papa has of him. He looks astonished now and then when 'Uncle,' as he calls Charles, suggests the story of the little boy

teaching his G.mother to suck eggs ...'⁴

Although he did not take the children to Auckland immediately after his wife's death, ('the mere thought of buying for them and arranging for them and Nurse was too much for him,' Mary Ann Martin commented) they were never out of his thoughts. As soon as he arrived back in Auckland he wrote: 'My very dear Eddy, I told you that I would write to you from this Place. I have not forgotten my Word. Firstly, I will tell you about my Voyage. Bishop Patteson and I got on board the Steamship (the Wellington) on Saturday afternoon whilst you were at Tea. There were a great many People on Board, Singers and Actors who filled up the Ship - but the Weather was very fine, and I rolled myself in some blankets at night and lay on the open Deck. On Sunday morning we were at Taranaki in time to go ashore for Church ... I saw a great many of the People who used to live in Nelson ... I was obliged to be on the Beach at 3 to take the Boat and go out to the Ship, which for want of a Wharf is forced to drop Anchor a long way out to Sea. As we were going out a great Wave broke against our Board and washed all over Bishop Patteson, filling His Shoes with salt water.

'On Monday early we landed at Auckland. I found the Bishop of New Zealand and Mrs Selwyn very well - Mrs. Selwyn knew Pappy when he was no bigger than Walter, and she was very sorry that I had not brought Walter and you to stay at her house - but when I was on board the crowded Ship I felt very glad that you were not there, though I should like to have my dear Boys to play with me here - and you would find a great many things here to amuse you, some of which I will tell you of.

The Harbour here is so large that it is more like Nelson Bay than Nelson Harbour. Bishop Selwyn's House is on such a high Hill that it looks all over the Harbour. There are now eight large Ships lying at Anchor besides those at the Wharf - and some of the Ships are so big that they would

not be able to get up to the Nelson Wharf.

'Bishop Selwyn has built a new House which will soon be ready to live in, and close to the House He has built a high Tower to put His Church Bells into - and next to the Tower is a Library, a Room nearly as big as Nelson Church and full of Books.

'There is also a great big Park called the Domain which is open to everyone to walk and run about in, only they must not take any Dogs. I should so like to take you and Walter with me (without

Catch). We could look at the 7 Black Swans which have a pond all to themselves, and the Alpacas which have lately been brought from South America but seem quite as happy as if they had been born there like the Calves which run about with them.

'I have been to see Bishop Patteson's Black Boys. They are all quite well, I am happy to say and merry ... You must write to me and tell me what you have been doing.'

These letters form part of a private collection in the possession of Mrs Joan Payne, in Dorset, the great-grand-daughter of Bishop Hobhouse.

Endnotes

¹ Bowden, Thomas, Reminiscences, 1898, Typescript in Nelson Provincial Museum Library.

² Gutch, John, Martyr of the Islands, London, 1971, p. 164.

³ The battles of Meremere and Rangiriri on the Waikato River had been fought on 1 November and 20 November 1863.

⁴ Caroline Abraham to Eliza Hobhouse, 13 November 1865