

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

## **Mariner and Bishop: George Augustus Selwyn**

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George Augustus Selwyn was born at Hampstead in 1809, the son of a constitutional lawyer, and was educated at Eton College where he developed a great love of the river Thames.

He became a strong swimmer and rower and later, when at St John's College, Cambridge, he rowed for Cambridge in the first-ever Boat Race against Oxford University. His reverence for the river Thames could not abide its possible contamination. With our contemporary sensitivity for the environment, we can appreciate the comment he once made to his fellow oarsmen: 'If you must spit,' he reprimanded his crew, 'spit in the punt!' He had a healthy respect for the river, and, after an accidental drowning, he persuaded the school authorities to hold compulsory swimming tests for boys wishing to row.

Selwyn became known as the epitome of the 'muscular Christian', so much so that Charles Kingsley dedicated his well-known novel *Westward Ho* (1855) to this bishop whose reputation reached heroic proportions after he

came to this country.

As an outgoing activist, Selwyn broke many of the conventional English stereotypes. When Governor Hobson heard of his coming, he thought it nonsensical, exclaiming that it was useless to send out a bishop 'when there were no roads for his coach to travel on!'

But that would not deter Bishop Selwyn. In his first visitation tour (to Māori mission stations and sparse settler hamlets) which he began only ten days after arriving in the colony, he was absent from his wife Sarah for six months. He covered 2,300 miles of which he walked a third, and travelled the balance by boat, canoe and on horseback.

Selwyn became a competent sailor. He had studied Mathematics at Cambridge but had little love of the subject. Its chief use he later found to be in teaching himself celestial navigation on board the ship *Tomatin* en-route to New Zealand. He wrote on the passage out: 'I am studying practical navigation under our captain in order that I may be my own master in my visitation voyages. It gives me great pleasure to find that I am quite at my ease at sea, which makes me look forward to the maritime character of my future life with more comfort and hope. My chronometer and sextant are in constant use. Last night I learned a new observation, viz. to find the angular distance between the moon and a fixed star. William gave me at Plymouth a logbook and chart, in which I keep the ship's reckoning ... I always know the ship's place exactly, and the probable time of her reaching any given point.'

When the Tomatin took the ground in Sydney Harbour, and had to be slipped for repairs, the bishop showed his impatience and hitched a passage on the little brigantine Bristolian, together with his chaplain William Cotton, and arrived in Auckland, 30 May 1842. He was only 33 years of age.

Shortly after his arrival, Selwyn commissioned the building of the Undine, a small 22-ton schooner. His coastal and extended passages in this vessel brought universal admiration, and one hardened sailor commented that 'to see the Bishop handle a boat was almost enough to make a man a Christian.'

When the extent of the Diocese of New Zealand was defined, a clerical error registered the boundary as 34° North Latitude, rather than 34° South. The bishop took this as a challenge - what sailor would not wish to include the Melanesian Islands in his responsibilities? Later in life, he even argued that it was always intended!

So began the bishop's many voyages to Melanesia and his personal involvement with the Islands, both in establishing the Melanesian Mission and endeavoring to protect the Melanesians from the rapacity of traders and evil 'blackbirders.' His first reconnoitre was on board H.M.S. Dido in the summer of 1847-8, but in 1849 he bent the sails on the Undine and set forth for New Caledonia and the New Hebrides, quite confident in his vessel after having already made several lengthy coastal and offshore passages as far east as the Chatham Islands and south to Otago and Stewart Island.

His little schooner pleased him greatly. One such cruise took him to the Bay of Islands, then around North Cape to New Plymouth, thence to Nelson and Queen Charlotte Sound, back to visit the mission at Otaki, then from Wellington to the Chathams, Otago, Akaroa, Hicks Bay and Auckland. On his return to the Waitemata he wrote: '.. the good little Undine worked up to her

anchorage, after a voyage of fourteen weeks, with sails, ropes and spars uninjured, having sailed 3,000 miles, and visited thirteen places ... By the good providence of God, we were so pleased, that no illness occurred either among the passengers or the crew during the whole voyage.'

Selwyn's passages in uncharted waters, both in this country and the islands of the South Pacific, were quite remarkable by any standards of his day, or our own. And many of today's recreational sailors would thoroughly agree with his comment in a letter to England, penned on board the Undine in August 1849 at Aneityum in the New Hebrides: 'Few men are so entirely at their ease at sea, or so able to use every moment of time, perhaps more effectually, because with less distraction than on shore.'

And again: 'I must acknowledge that seafaring is to me a source of enjoyment and benefit, from the vigorous health which it imparts, and the leisure which it affords for reading and thought. It is not that I dislike society but that the incessant interruptions of a new community, requiring constant superintendence, leave me scarcely any time for myself.'

Even then, such was the discipline of the man, that a routine day on such a passage would include the 'usual employments' of morning and evening prayers, shipboard school for his Māori or Islander passengers and crew, navigation, and 'reading and writing in undisturbed luxury.' But not so engrossed, it seems, that he could not manage a typical day's run of 170 nautical miles.

Selwyn found release and solace from the conflicts in which he was involved both as advocate and mediator. He beat a path to the door of the colonial politicians, whose interests seldom rose much above those of land-hungry settlers, and he corresponded at length with British Ministers of the Crown, always seeking peace with justice. These 'trials of the day' over

land policy and Māori rights assailed him while engrossed in 'normal' pastoral care of the scattered church, and in trying to reform the structures of the Church of England to fit the new colonial context (reforms which the English establishment opposed). In the midst of all this, it is clear that the Undine gave him a restorative sense of balance: 'My little vessel rides quietly over the waves with New Caledonia and the isles of the Pacific under my lee.'

Selwyn's toughness was equal to most crises at sea. When in 1859 his new, bigger Melanesian Mission ship, the Southern Cross, sustained damage in a coral reef in the New Hebrides and put into Port-de-France for inspection, it was the bishop himself who dived repeatedly to inspect the vessel's keel and forefoot. The feat earned him such respect by the crew of the French man-of-war Bayonnais that they made him guest of honour at a dinner and sent him off with an eleven-gun salute.

While this testifies to the truth of a contemporary judgement that Selwyn was 'sublimely indifferent to conventional ideas of official dignity,' on the other hand he had a rather overbearing streak in his nature.

When the Undine lay alongside H.M.S. Acheron in Port Preservation in 1851, John Greenwood, one of his young crew and a St John's College student, wrote in his diary: 'The Bishop had

service on board the Acheron this morning, and we attended. I heard the Articles of War read today for the first time. Though very severe, I think they are more tolerable than the Bishop's rule.'

Yet one of Captain Stokes' crew on the Acheron wrote: 'I've never forgotten that service ... There we were in a wild outlandish place, on the deck of a ship, on which church service was being conducted for us by a bishop in full canonicals ... Ah! He was a fine type of man was the Bishop. Besides being a good man, he held a captain's ticket, and could handle his pretty little yacht, the Undine, with the best of them.'

The most daunting cruising grounds in our waters did not intimidate Selwyn - Stewart Island, Ruapuke (where he conducted baptisms and weddings for the sealers who had taken local wives in 'common law' marriages), and the Chatham Islands. He even attempted the Auckland Islands(!) but was driven back to Akaroa by gales and a broken boom. In all, the mariner bishop was seldom deterred. His fastidious logbook, his profile sketches of headlands and harbour entrances, all testify to a bishop who had salt in his veins and possessed that enviable omniscience of so many of our Victorian predecessors. We do well to remember not only his skills as a mariner, but also the motivation that drove him to attempt so much.

This article first appeared in '*Bearings*',  
the former magazine of the **Auckland Maritime Museum** (Volume 4, No 3).

## Further Reading

Port Preservation, by A.C. and N.C. Begg. (Christchurch, 1973)

Churchman Militant, by J. Evans. (London & Wellington, 1964)

Bishop Selwyn in New Zealand, by W.E. Limbrick (ed). (Palmerston North, 1983)

The Life and Episcopate of G.A. Selwyn, D.D. by H.W. Tucker. (2 vols, London, 1879)