

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

Carl Völkner: 'Please Release Me, Let Me Go'

Author: Earle Howe

(AHS Newsletter 58, March 2016)

Please release me, let me go': So, sang Engelbert Humperdinck in his 1986 hit song!

Carl Völkner, a North German Missionary Society worker in Taranaki, wrote with a similar theme in 1851, but for quite different reasons.



Carl found his circumstances to be very difficult. When he arrived in Taranaki as a new recruit fresh from training in Germany, he worked as assistant to Johannes Riemenschneider. But Riemenschneider told Völkner that there was no work for him. He wrote immediately to the North German Mission Society to find out what he should do. But he was not idle while awaiting their response: 'In the meanwhile I went to Waiua (sic) a little village in Taranaki to try if possible, to do something useful for the Natives and there I waited without means for an answer of the Society and noted that there were no Natives belonging to our Church.'¹

Notably, while working at Waiaua, on 2 September 1850 he acted as registrar for the wedding of Horopapera Te Ua and Erihapeta Hine Kou. Although Te Ua was a member of

Riemenschneider's church he began his own religious movement, Pai Marire, which is considered by Peter Oettli to have been developed in part from Riemenschneider's teachings.² Völkner probably made some contribution to Te Ua's spiritual progress as well.

It is a sad irony that Völkner's violent death on 2 March 1865, at Ōpötiki, was as a result of misguided zeal on the part of some of Te Ua's followers.

Life in Taranaki was hard for the German missionaries. The North German Missionary Society did very little to provide adequate support for them, and there was no doubt some tensions between the two men. Having waited two years for a response from the Society, Völkner took his own action for his missionary future.³

He was aware of the work of the Church Missionary Society (CMS), having been befriended by Richard Taylor, the CMS missionary based in Wanganui, whose territory included the southern part of Taranaki.

In April 1851, Völkner made contact with Bishop Selwyn, who was visiting New Plymouth. Selwyn offered him a free berth on his forthcoming trip to the South Pacific. Völkner travelled to Auckland to join Selwyn's ship but changed his mind and visited Robert and Susan Maunsell at the CMS station at the Waikato Heads.

Völkner impressed Robert Maunsell with his faith and commitment. Maunsell supported Völkner's interest in becoming a CMS worker. He was accepted, continuing to work at Kohanga. He

moved to the CMS station at Puriri, near Thames, where he married Emma Lanfear in 1854. Her brother Thomas was a missionary there. After service together at Te Papa from 1855-59 alongside Archdeacon A. N. Brown, the Völkners moved to Turanga, where Bishop William Williams ordained Völkner deacon in 1861. His priesting followed in 1862.

In August 1861 the Völkners moved to the CMS station at Ōpōtiki. Their time there included the building of a church, Hiona (about 20 km north-west of Otorohanga).

Their work came to a tragic end when Carl was executed on 2 March 1865.

Endnotes:

¹ Volkner to CMS Central Committee, 7 February 1852, MIC014/87.00/5, John Kinder Theological Library.

² Peter Oettli, *God's Messenger. J F Riemenschneider and racial Conflict in 19th century New Zealand*, Wellington, 2008, pp. 216ff.

³ The Völkner and Riemenschneider letters illustrated with this article are from the archives of Clifton Publishing.

Book Review

Reviewer: Peter Lineham

Title: *Völkner and Mokomoko: a 150-year quest for justice and reconciliation*

Author: *Earle Howe*

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Copies are available from the General Synod Office, P O Box 87188, Meadowbank, Auckland, 1742.

Earle Howe's engagement with the issues surrounding the death of Carl Sylvanus Völkner began many years ago while serving in the Bi-Cultural Education Unit of the Anglican Church. At that point feelings were running high about the execution of Mokomoko, found guilty by a jury in Auckland in 1866 along with three others of Völkner's murder, despite no evidence that he was present at the time. Moreover, Mokomoko chose to be baptised a Christian just before he was hung.

After his death, there were severe consequences for the people associated with Mokomoko in land loss. Meanwhile the Anglican Church was aware that he was the only missionary to New Zealand to be killed, and in 1972 his name was added and the ascription 'priest, martyr' was placed in the list approved in 1972 of local commemorations. The campaign to clear Mokomoko's name had a major success in 1989 when Mokomoko's body was disinterred from Mount Eden Gaol and reburied in the tribal cemetery. Meanwhile the death of Völkner was cast in new light when his correspondence with the governor was printed. The New Zealand Prayerbook of 1989 lists his name but does not describe him as a martyr.

Earle Howe produced his little book, *Bring Me Justice* on behalf of the Bicultural Education Unit, and his proposal that Mokomoko deserved recognition alongside Völkner was accepted by General Synod in 1994,

when they amended the list of commemorations and mentioned Mokomoko and Völkner together as symbols of reconciliation.

Earle Howe's new book has come about in order to help make that hoped-for reconciliation more genuine. It has been needed because the pendulum has not stopped swinging on the case. The powerful invective of Peter Wells, in his book *Journey to a Hanging* (2014), has dramatized the case of Kereopa te Rau, whom the government also held as responsible for Völkner's killing and was hung after being found guilty by a court in 1871. Wells wrote with passion and dramatic intensity and had nothing but contempt for Völkner. On the other hand, Mary Tagg set out to defend the reputation of Völkner in her brief 2006 biography named after the sermon of his she reproduced; *The Martyr's Crown*. Furthermore, Mokomoko's family was not content with his reburial and at their behest an act of parliament was passed in December 2013 in which Mokomoko was not just pardoned but rehabilitated.

Earle Howe's book is very well suited to the needs of the hour. It is an excellent exploration of the complexities of the evidence not just of Völkner's death but also its aftermath. The issue is not just Mokomoko's innocence but the need in today's climate to find ways to turn the tragedy into something that brings healing. Howe reproduces the letters that Völkner wrote to the governor, which clearly indicate him anxious to conceal his role as an informant. Howe argues that the letters were not known to local Māori, and Howe is cautious about the accusation that he was a 'spy', although clearly so embroiled in politics that he compromised his mission. Earle Howe looks at both sides with compassion and generosity. Howe holds still the position he maintained in 1991, that we need to appreciate both sides, and the strength of this book is that he shows sensitivity to the sheer complexity of the war period, by showing the struggles and uncertainties of both sides.

This book completes the work begun by Howe's short book of 1989, but it also reflects a continuing evolution of church approaches to bi-cultural issues. So much has changed since 1972, and even since 1994. Reconciliation has begun to make a difference in key local communities. This book is the result of an initiative by the vicar and vestry of the church in Opotiki and a positive response by Mokomoko's descendants. The church has as a result paired its original name Hiona with its later dedication to St Stephen, and a pare or headboard was installed at the entrance to the church at Easter in 2014, showing Völkner and Mokomoko in a hongi. This book is a further aspect of that rethinking. Earle Howe was asked to produce an updated and comprehensive record of the history of Hiona St Stephen's and this book shows how history can aid in steps of understanding and reconciliation.

We owe Earle a debt of gratitude for the tone of this book in which he steps back from either accusing or exonerating either party. Consequently, I am left wondering about the language and circumstances in which martyrdoms are claimed. The other martyr of the New Zealand church, Bishop J. C. Patteson, was always thought to have been killed in the Solomons because he had been mistaken for a blackbirder, although a recent article in the *Journal of Pacific History* has suggested that his mission was disliked by some islanders because it took young men to Norfolk Island to be trained as priests. In the cases, then, of both Völkner and Patteson, and in other cases of religious killings, there are generally other factors beyond anti-Christian violence. Given that the language of sanctity is entangled with the language of martyrdom, we may wonder whether the languages of martyrdom or sanctity are useful to us anymore. While this is too big a subject for this modest book, the case of Völkner surely is a superb example of these complexities, and Earle Howe's book, a fine tool as we move from defensiveness to reconciliation.