

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

## *The Episcopate of Edmund Hobhouse, First Bishop of Nelson*

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Bishop Edmund Hobhouse

By 1855, even the indefatigable Bishop Selwyn was finding his huge diocese unmanageable and went to England to further his plans for devolution. He had originally hoped to make one large diocese of Wellington and to include Nelson but had not counted on Nelson's vociferous objection to being united with Wellington in a single See. He was forced to change his plan. An endowment fund of over £10,000 from the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel gave Nelson a claim for a diocese of its own,<sup>1</sup> and Selwyn therefore approached an old friend, **Edmund Hobhouse**, to become the first Bishop of Nelson. With Charles Abraham, also an old Etonian friend of Selwyn, Hobhouse was consecrated bishop on 29 September 1858, at

Lambeth by the Archbishop of Canterbury. And so it was that the small town of Nelson with 5000 inhabitants was suddenly elevated to the status of a city by Royal Charter as the seat of a bishop. It was a status the little settlement had scarcely matured into after only sixteen years and with a provincial population of a mere 10,000.

Selwyn's high Anglican view of the Church had been unpopular in Nelson, 'a paradise of dissent', from the beginning, but at least his hearty acceptance of the rougher colonial living conditions had won him admiration. His astonishing journeys either through the bush or at sea, with his tent and his frying pan, had earned him respect from Māori and settler alike, but not all Victorian Etonians were as adaptable. Hobhouse arrived in the summer of 1859, undeterred by the realities of life in the colonies, to create in Nelson a miniature English cathedral city like Wells and Oxford which he loved, where a Close would be the centre for a cathedral, theological college and a library, and the colonial equivalent of an episcopal palace - a little anti-podean Barchester.

The new bishop lost no time in organizing his diocese, travelling extensively from Collingwood in the west to the Wairau in the east and south through the Awatere to the Amuri, as the boundaries of the new diocese stretched from the Hurunui in the east to the Grey in the west, covering the whole top half of the South Island. He threw himself into his work with zeal, working without sparing himself and endangering his health which had been a cause of concern for

most of his life.

Shocked by the lack of clergy to staff his idealistic plans for the Nelson diocese, the bishop recruited from England his former curate from his Oxford parish, a fellow of Wadham College, Robert Henry Codrington. who volunteered his services for three years without a stipend, and also the bishop's cousin, the Rev. Meysey Turton. They were both unmarried and brought with them the elegance of Oxford collegiate life as well as personal menservants! The scholarly Codrington made the transition with apparent ease from Wadham to the rough existence of resident missionary at the Collingwood goldfield. The bishop's wife reported: 'Mr. Codrington himself is acquiring a degree of practical skill and knowledge which ought to make him the terror of all College servants when he returns home. It is certainly difficult for anyone who sees him adapting himself to the circumstances of his present life to believe he spent so many years in all the lazy comfort of a College.' Of Turton she wrote with her characteristic perspicacity, even while he was still at sea on his way to New Zealand, 'I wish I could hail the addition of poor Meysey Turton to our society more cordially than I do, but certainly I have never heard anything that gave me the idea of him being a sensible man, however good, and I have not Edmund's confidence in the efficacy of good, foolish people.' <sup>2</sup> The bishop, however, may well have hoped that his own lonely position in Nelson would have been ameliorated by his cousin's support. Turton took responsibility for the parish of Christ Church freeing the bishop for diocesan administration.

Like the bishop's, Turton's churchmanship reflected the high Anglican practices of Oxford, and there was much criticism among the Nelson parishioners of new innovations. One pious young woman, Clara Durley, fiancée of William Beatson, the architect of Nelson College, wrote in her diary, 'Went to hear Mr. Turten (sic) preach ... much disappointed in him. More and more

high church.' And later after several references to 'Mr. Turten's preaching and administering the sacrament' she adds 'too high church! Fear instead of love. Law instead of mercy.' <sup>3</sup> A visitor to Nelson, quoted in the Nelson Examiner in April 1863, was full of praise for the beauty of the little 'Episcopal Church' but ends with criticism of the conduct of worship there. 'One of its observances somewhat tickled my fancy. It was the collection of the offertory in embroidered bags of crimson velvet in lieu of salvers commonly employed elsewhere. Bishop Hobhouse performed the service and preached. There was, I thought, too much of the sing-song in the one, and no great amount of matter in the other.' <sup>4</sup>

Although no one doubted the bishop's piety and devotion to duty, by the third year of his episcopate, it is clear from correspondence in the newspapers and hints in letters and diaries that a good deal of dissatisfaction was making itself felt in Nelson with his administration.

Conscientious to a fault, Hobhouse was imbued with the ideas of the Church as established in England and interpreted ecclesiastical rules in a narrow and legalistic fashion, inappropriate to the conditions of the new colonial society. Already in his first year, his refusal to allow the burial service to be read at the funeral of a young man who was suspected of committing suicide, his refusal to minister to anyone not confirmed in the Anglican church even when dying, and his suspension of services at the hospital because the inmates did not attend, had caused unfavourable comment in the press.

Then in March 1862, he remonstrated with the Provincial Government about the appointment to a public school of an Infant Mistress, who had married the brother of her deceased husband, thus breaking a Prayer Book Rule (a Rule by then largely disregarded in the colonies and increasingly being questioned even in England). The Bishop went as far as describing the unfortunate woman as 'stained with the crane of

incest', whose effect upon the education of the next generation would be to poison it at its source.<sup>5</sup>

During the last months of 1862, conflict arose over the establishment of a second parish for Nelson. Ever since the influx of the Taranaki refugees, the little wooden church on the hill had been far too small for the enlarged congregation. The crowd of 'the labouring class' cannot have been altogether welcome among the seat-paying members of the Christ Church congregation. Services had been started for the overflow in the Odd Fellows Hall and the bishop began to plan for the building of a second church for this 'western parish.' He obtained the services from England of the Rev. C. L. Maclean as incumbent of this proposed new church, but Turton was unwilling to relinquish half his parish and several stormy meetings with the vestry gave rise to an acrimonious correspondence in the Examiner. It would seem that much of the hostility directed against Turton was only partly on his own account and very largely because he was seen as a spokesman for the bishop. It must have appeared to church members that Christ Church had been taken over by the Hobhouse dynasty, with the bishop's cousin as incumbent, his wife supervising the Sunday school, his sister-in-law training the choir and her husband as church warden!

Mary had warned friends in England against sending gifts that could prejudice the bishop's work by antagonizing the strongly evangelical Nelsonians: 'But moderation cannot be too strongly impressed on people I think in the ornaments they send here. There was a hubbub lately when two plain iron crosses intended to finish the gables of the Church porches were put up outside, and in a few hours a petition sent to the Church wardens to remove them. So, you may judge of the antipopyery feeling of the place.'

She revealed the common sense that was so much more characteristic of Mary than of her

husband, or of Meysey Turton: 'When there is no principle at stake in these things it seems a pity to close people's hearts against Edmund's ministrations by running counter to prejudices be they ever so narrow-minded, for the sake of a gaily-flowered altar cloth, or any other new fashioned device. But this is my own p.s. to his [Edmund's] message to which you need only pay what attention you please. There really is a very handsome plain altar cloth here given by Ld. Powis, of crimson velvet and I. H. S. with a cross fleury in gold embroidery on it, but I think if a green or white one bedecked with many colours were to appear, nothing else would be talked of for weeks to come.'<sup>6</sup>

During the Diocesan Synod of 1862, even the editor of the Nelson Examiner expressed his view that if the heads of the clergy really desired to build a colonial church, they 'must accept the facts as they are ... and trust rather to the geniality and radical good sense of the laity, than to the mechanism of vetoes, separate houses, or any form of sacerdotal authority.'<sup>7</sup> A vitriolic correspondence raged for weeks. A 'Communicant of the Church of England' replied to the editorial. 'Your leading article of the 8th inst. has broken the ice on the subject of Church government in the Diocese of Nelson, and it is to be hoped that the question will now be well ventilated, in a temperate dispassionate manner.' Another 'Churchman' appealed to historical precedents: 'Mr. Turton has regarded the present movement as a struggle of the 'Low Church party' against the 'High Church party' in Nelson. If the principles of the latter are those of Archbishop Laud, it is the conviction of your present correspondent that every true Churchman, who constructs his Churchism on the basis of the liturgy, and on the articles and homilies of the founders of the Reformed Christian Apostolic Church of England, and who loves civil and Christian liberty, must oppose any Nelson Laudism.'<sup>8</sup>

The following week the 'Investigator' claimed to

defend the bishop: 'I am confident that our devoted and most disinterested Bishop will never be beguiled into any despotic act ... nevertheless his successor may be a Hildebrand or Gregory.' And he concluded with a clear indication of the opposition to the forms of worship the bishop and Turton had introduced which were dividing the parish. 'If the Church shepherds do not feed the flock with the wholesome aliment of Christian pure gospel ... if, while aesthetic tastes are gratified by choral music and rhetorical discourses, the understandings of the congregation be not informed.'<sup>9</sup>

The campaign to modify the practices of worship and for greater lay participation in the Church was unavailing. The loyal Codrington was called on to defend his long-time friend in the press, and the correspondence columns reflect the animosities of churchmen till the end of the year. Early in 1863, the Bishop's plans for building the new church for the western parish provoked an outright revolt among church members who determined they would not accept any clergyman for this new parish unless the laity had a share in choosing him, nor would they provide a stipend for any incumbent chosen solely by the bishop. The result was the organizing of 'the most numerous attended meeting on Church matters ever held in Nelson.'

There a resolution was passed unanimously stating firmly that the parishioners objected to the existing method of choosing parish clergy and refused to contribute to a stipend unless they had the right to select the incumbent. Henry Adams, a prominent lawyer, and the Provincial Prosecutor, objected to the bishop having the appointment of diocesan clergy entirely in his power. He considered that the bishop, clergy and church wardens 'had been accustomed to do pretty well as they liked, and the members of the Church interfered but little until they were called upon to put their hands in their pockets. He considered that the nominations should rest entirely with the parishioners who contributed to

the stipend. In particular Adams claimed that the laws made at General Synod in 1859, were disapproved of by the majority of laymen and they were determined to amend them. Another speaker feared that unless the parishioners acted to control clergy appointments the result would be 'to flood the place with young men just ordained, whom few family men would care to encourage as visiting pastors or teachers. The Vestry, nearly twelve months ago, in most decided and unmistakable terms, told the Bishop that such men were not, and never would be, acceptable to the people of Nelson.'<sup>10</sup>

Three days after this stormy meeting, which must have horrified Hobhouse with his Divine Right view of episcopacy, a startling article in the Examiner brought the opposition to a head. A year before the bishop had most injudiciously written to his friends and supporters in Oxford, giving an account of the incident involving his opposition to the appointment of the public-school mistress, and describing with horror the low state of morals among Nelsonians and especially their disregard for the sanctity of marriage. This letter, read to a public meeting in Oxford, was published there in November and then reprinted in the Examiner as soon as the English mail came in.<sup>11</sup>

J.C Richmond wrote to his wife: 'You will see in the Exr how foolishly the Bishop has been writing about an affair here, the appointing of a woman who married her late husband's brother, to the charge of one of the schools. It grieves me to think of so much goodness and self-devotion wasting itself as it seems, by alliance with such narrow indiscriminating views ... It is natural to be full of regret and pain at having your tendencies to venerate and sympathise with a man like Bishop Hobhouse so frequently chilled, if not quenched, by his narrowness.'<sup>12</sup>

Mary wrote to the family alluding to the state of things. 'We have had a tune of great anxiety since last mail ... There have been various parochial

annoyances and to crown all, the ferment occasioned by the publication the newspapers here of all that was in the Oxford Herald, which should never have been printed.' She had earlier told her sister-in-law who was always demanding details of Edmund's work that it was much too risky to send any accounts which could in any way be misrepresented and sent back to Nelson, because 'everything comes back here ... This state of things has been very miserable for poor Edmund ... I saw how much it had told on him ... I was most uneasy at the great depression which this has occasioned him, and the state of his nerves ... he became sleepless, and unable to throw annoying subjects off his mind – and the state of his head produced pain in his spine which is always a serious thing.' <sup>13</sup> If the Bishop were already showing signs of depression, he was soon to have much greater stress to bear. A fortnight after she wrote that letter the city was electrified by the news that a warrant had been issued for the arrest of the incumbent of Christ Church on a charge of sodomy, and to make matters worse, that Turton had fled from Nelson.

The horror and excitement which such a bizarre occurrence caused in the little town may be imagined. A noisy public meeting, held in the Oddfellows Hall on 27 April, revealed such a depth of animosity towards Turton, that his friends feared he would not be able to get a fair hearing. Consequently, it was decided that Turton should be tried by a Special Jury in Nelson, although Judge Johnston had advised the trial be held in Christchurch or Wellington as feelings were running so high. This process led to as much opposition as the original charge had provoked outrage. The ordinary citizens of Nelson were convinced that Turton was being accorded a special privilege by being tried by his own social set and not by 'common jurors.' Thus, the trial further exacerbated the hostility already existing against Turton and the local 'ecclesiastical establishment.'

Meanwhile poor, panic-stricken Turton had used

the delay in issuing the warrant for his arrest to take a passage to Port Chalmers where he was arrested and brought back to Nelson for trial.<sup>14</sup> The case was quickly dismissed on the grounds that the charge was unsubstantiated and the sole witness unreliable.<sup>15</sup> Turton returned to England immediately, but Hobhouse never recovered from the shock.

Turton's departure left the city parish without an incumbent, the bishop undertaking the services and pastoral duties himself. The Rev. Thomas Bowden, headmaster of the Bishop's School, having had his attempts to help rebuffed as a breach of discipline by the bishop, resigned and went to Wellington where, first as First Master of Wellington College and then as a school inspector, he had a distinguished career in education. The Rev. C. L. Maclean, who had come to New Zealand the previous year expressly to take over the new western parish, gave up in despair as the parishioners refused to guarantee his stipend, and accepted the position of Second Master at Nelson College where he soon after became Head. Then in October the bishop's old friend from Oxford, R. H. Codrington, accepted a call from Bishop Patteson and served in the Melanesian Mission for the rest of his life.

Bishop Hobhouse must have felt deserted. It seems painfully evident that the clergy had been finding it increasingly difficult to work with him, owing to his unrealistically high standards and inflexible attitude which his own letters reveal, added to which was his total inability to delegate the smallest task, about which his wife often expressed concern.

Subject as he had been to migraine headaches from his youth, with an over-sensitive temperament, unleavened by the sense of humour which sustained his wife, the bishop was overwhelmed by a sense of failure of all the aspirations he had worked so hard to fulfil. The defection (as he perceived it) of his clergy, the overt hostility of the laity, their refusal of funds

for the new church, and the sheer impossibility of carrying out all the administrative and pastoral duties single-handed, precipitated a severe depression and a state of paranoia. His deteriorating health caused Bishop Selwyn such concern that he sent Charles Abraham over to Nelson during the winter of 1864 to assess the situation, and on 3 August Hobhouse tendered his resignation. The depth of his pain and humiliation is reflected in his charge to his Diocesan Synod: 'these are probably the last words that will pass between us. The seven years' episcopate which I am now closing have been the most barren of my whole official life, barren, I mean of visible fruit to the Church: and our parting must be in sorrow.'<sup>16</sup>

His sorrow was to become almost unbearable

only two months later when his wife died in childbirth. However, he struggled on until June 1866 when his departure for home was greeted with an outpouring of appreciation from the community which had been so lacking earlier. In fact, the city proposed to erect a memorial for 'a self-denying and laborious minister, who spared neither his personal exertions nor his private property, and who was, in the estimation of all, a truly good man, and a thorough English gentleman.'<sup>17</sup>

It is Thomas Bowden, who served the bishop faithfully in various capacities for three years, whose assessment remains the fairest and most realistic: 'Bishop Hobhouse was a very excellent man, pious, kind and liberal, though not in all respects adapted for a Colonial Bishop.'<sup>18</sup>

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> W.P Morrell, *The Anglican Church in New Zealand*. (Dunedin, 1973), p.62.

<sup>2</sup> Mary Hobhouse, *Circular Letter to Her Family*, 10 April 1860.

<sup>3</sup> Clara Durley, *Diary*, 5 July, and 2 August 1860.

<sup>4</sup> Article reprinted from *New Zealander* in the *Nelson Examiner*, 18 April 1863.

<sup>5</sup> *Nelson Examiner*, 21 March 1863.

<sup>6</sup> Undated fragment apparently written about 1860, ATL 414 1/4.

<sup>7</sup> Editorial, *Nelson Examiner*, 8 October 1862.

<sup>8</sup> William Laud, 1573-1645, Archbishop of Canterbury during the reign of Charles I. He was impeached by Long Parliament in 1640 and executed in 1645.

<sup>9</sup> *Nelson Examiner*, 22 October 1862

<sup>10</sup> *Nelson Examiner*, 21 March 1863

<sup>11</sup> *Nelson Examiner*, 21 March 1863, reprinted from the *Oxford Herald*, 8 November 1862.

<sup>12</sup> J. C. Richmond to her wife Mary, 1 April 1863. *Richmond Atkinson Papers*.

<sup>13</sup> Mary Hobhouse to Eliza, the Bishop's sister, 13 April 1863.

<sup>14</sup> *Otago Daily Times*, 7 May 1863.

<sup>15</sup> *Nelson Examiner*, 23 May 1863

<sup>16</sup> Bishop's Charge to Synod, 3 August 1864. ATL 414/7

<sup>17</sup> *Nelson Examiner*, 19 June 1866.

<sup>18</sup> Bowden, Thomas Adolphus, *Reminiscences*, Typescript, 1898. Nelson Provincial Museum Library