

# ***The Letters and Journals of Reverend John Morgan***

**Reviewer: Allan Davidson**

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## **The Letters and Journals of Reverend John Morgan**

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The nineteenth century Protestant missionary movement generated a huge deposit of archival material. The Church Missionary Society (CMS), for example, required its missionaries to send regular reports to their headquarters in London outlining the work they were doing. This was an opportunity for the missionaries to recount successes and failures, to request additional support and to outline their hopes and plans. These reports and additional correspondence were used by the Society in their publications, usually in an edited form, to promote the work of the mission in order to gain the financial support necessary to sustain the Society's activities. There was something of a double bind in this as the missionaries wanted their work to be seen in the best possible light while they were aware that their writing could be read by an audience much wider than the administrative staff at the CMS office.

The publication of **The Letters and Journals of John Morgan** provides a valuable resource for accessing the primary writings of one of the largely forgotten CMS missionaries who worked in New Zealand. John Morgan (1806/7-1865) was a pioneering missionary in the Waikato who saw the transition from tribal fighting, through a period of peace and growing agricultural prosperity, to the disruptive conflicts of the New Zealand Wars. He gives a firsthand account of his engagement with Māori and the changing relationships among Māori and between Māori and Pakeha.

Morgan's writings give the reader direct access to the evangelical/theological worldview which shaped the way in which he responded to the numerous crises which he lived through. Sarah Dingle in her 2009 Adelaide PhD thesis, 'Gospel Power for Civilization: the CMS Missionary Perspective on Māori Culture, 1830-1860', has drawn attention to the way in which New Zealand historians have largely overlooked the essential Christian and theological motivation which shaped the missionaries' vocation and their attitudes towards civilisation and culture. Morgan's reports and letters are laden with scriptural references, request for prayer and a repeated confidence in God's overriding mercy. A typical example comes from the conclusion of a letter written in March 1839 while John and his wife Maria were in Tauranga waiting for a safe opportunity to travel to Rotorua: 'In the midst of all this gloom and darkness the work of God is going on, and that old serpent the devil cannot stay it. Remember us in your prayers.' (p.81)

After a very disruptive period working at mission stations such as Matamata and Rotorua, Morgan was the founding missionary at Otawhao, Te Awamutu, in 1841. His strong views on the way in which missionary work should be prosecuted included a robust rejection of the use of English as a medium for teaching, his advocacy of the importance of establishing schools, and his endorsement of wheat growing, the building of flour mills and agricultural development as ways to provide Māori with a new livelihood. In trying to hold together his strong evangelising commitment with a continuing emphasis on the civilising role of the mission, Morgan was at odds with some of his missionary colleagues. To the

governors, George Grey and Gore Browne, Morgan's industrial school was worthy of financial grants because it contributed to Māori pacification and development.

The insights provided by Morgan into his work are clearly written and narrowly focused although there is some repetition resulting from the lack of certainty whether the mail had got through to London. He argues robustly in support of grants to help him build a church at Otawhao, expand his school and farm and secure the help of a trained teacher, but struggled to gain the positive responses he looked for. His disappointment in his slow progress towards ordination (he was ordained deacon in 1849 and priest in 1853) was no reflection on his abilities but Bishop Selwyn's dispute with the CMS. Morgan's dedication to his missionary vocation was total with no such thing as vacations or furloughs during his thirty years of service.

Born in Ireland, Morgan reflects a strong Irish-Protestant antipathy towards his near Catholic neighbours at Rangiaowhia who were seen as rivals. His relationships with Methodists at Waipa were friendlier. Until his ordination his dependency on occasional visits from ordained clergy reinforced a sense of missionary inferiority. His isolation from other CMS and Anglican clergy meant that he needed to be self-reliant and that is reflected in his somewhat angular relationship with others.

Morgan's observations of Māori life, customs and beliefs are incidental and so his writings do not provide the kind of insights found in the work of someone like Richard Taylor. First and last Morgan was a missionary, with his own understanding of how that work should be undertaken. His early disillusionment with the King Movement was translated into his role as a government informant in the late 1850s and early 1860s. He saw Kingitanga as undermining missionary achievements and government policies. Despite his open hostility to the Māori he believed were supporting rebellion he nevertheless remained living in safety among them at Otawhao until 1863. His reluctant withdrawal to Auckland was at the behest of Bishop Selwyn and the New Zealand CMS Committee who felt that his actions had undermined his relationship with Māori. Morgan protested vehemently against those who opposed him. He resigned and died in 1865 before the matters were fully resolved.

Arriving in New Zealand in 1833, Morgan married Maria Coldham in 1835. Maria had come out to New Zealand in 1832 to assist her sister Marianne Williams (Henry's wife). John and Maria had eleven children. Apart from Morgan's concern about his son Edward, who at the age of eight still could not speak, and the reputation of his daughter Sarah who was raped, family matters seldom intrude into his reports and correspondence. Maria was the long-suffering missionary-wife who alongside bringing up her children contributed through her teaching as a missionary in her own right.

The Morgan letters and journals are well presented in two volumes with illustrations and maps. The introduction provides an overview of the CMS and Morgan's work for the general reader. The endnotes provide valuable biographical material on the leading Māori and Pakeha mentioned in Morgan's writings.

Primary writings are the basic source material for the historian. Whereas once a visit to the repository holding the archives was the only way to access this material, typescripts, microfilms, microfiche, books and now the internet are giving much wider currency to primary papers previously available only to a few. The accessibility of the Morgan letters and journals through these two volumes is a welcome addition to the printed missionary material. They have been published as part of the Early Waikato Series and further missionary texts will be welcome and contribute to the ongoing work of historians as they try and make sense of the past.