

First Church Sermon: Otago Anniversary Day 2015

‘Remembering our Christian past.’

I’d like to thank you all, especially your ministers, Tokerau and Anne, for inviting me to speak this morning.

With Otago Anniversary Day in mind, I thought it might be timely to reflect on how we remember our past, especially our Christian past.

It matters. Control over the way we remember our past is a crucial form of power in the modern world. One of the first things that radically secular communist regimes did on taking power in Russia and China was to rewrite their history. <!--more-->

A French scholar has argued that one of the reasons that religions often struggle in the modern Western world is that modern societies tend to forget the past, to cut us off from tradition, from our ancestors, from where we’ve come. Modern societies are amnesic, she argues, built on forgetting, on leaving the past behind. They are present-centred and future-oriented. But if it’s dangerous for an individual to lose her memory, how safe is it for a society to do so?

Communities of faith, by contrast, are not only communities of the living but also communities of memory. As well as bringing people of all colours and classes together, here and now, as we do in First Church this morning, they also link us with the past, with there and then. Reading the Bible, as we have done this morning, links us, if we listen, to our Jewish and Christian ancestors: Abraham, Sarah, Jeremiah, David, Mary, Joseph, Jesus, Paul. Our churches also connect us with the people and places from which we have come: Tonga, Samoa, Niue, Fiji, the Cook Islands, England, Ireland, Scotland, and so on. My mother was born and raised in Tapanui in a Presbyterian farming family of Scottish descent, and she was baptized by Jack Somerville. My interest in these questions is personal as well as academic. This is my history too.

Here’s the problem I want to address, put simply. Influential historians of New Zealand have for many years now been forgetting our past, particularly our Christian past.

It began with the most influential New Zealand historian of the nineteenth century, William Pember Reeves. A powerful politician, he was Minister of Justice, Education and Labour in the Liberal government of the 1890s. A Fabian socialist, he saw church divisions—especially between Catholic and Protestant—and class divisions—between rich and poor—as Old World evils that New Zealand

should leave behind. Many Christian settlers sympathized with his vision of building a fairer and more equal society. They called it, in the words of Anglican premier Richard 'King Dick' Seddon, God's Own Country.

Reeves claimed that he wrote history 'to give information and not to make converts.' Was he simply telling truth about the past, presenting the facts without any spin? As a powerful politician and influential historian, did he treat all faith communities equally, with the same fairness, sympathy and understanding?

What did he say about the Scottish Free Church Presbyterians, led by the Reverend Thomas Burns and Captain Cargill, who founded the Otago settlement in 1848? That's worth asking on anniversary day. Let's look back briefly. The first winter after the arrival of the John Wickliffe and Philip Laing was hard. In 1849, on the first anniversary, Burns called the whole community together for a solemn day of prayer and thanksgiving. English Anglicans, refusing to kowtow to the kirk, celebrated instead with horse races, water sports and a ball. Tensions between the Scottish Free Church founders, the 'Old Identities,' as they came to be called, and the English Anglican 'Little Enemy' persisted for decades.

Reeves' 1898 history of New Zealand, *The Long White Cloud*, reflected the English Anglican values he did not leave entirely behind. He depicted Otago's 'plodding, brave, clannish and cantankerous little community' of 'stiff-backed Free Churchmen' less favourably than the 'Canterbury Pilgrims,' who 'bade farewell to Old England by dancing at a ball.' Reeves preferred the 'cheery adaptiveness' of Canterbury Anglicans to the dour 'Puritans' of Otago.

Although he and his wife and daughters supported votes for women, Reeves disliked the evangelical Protestants who dominated the suffrage campaign, especially in Dunedin, its national powerbase. The Presbyterian, Baptist, and Methodist women who dominated in the south also supported causes such as prohibition and Bible in Schools that Reeves disliked. Giving 'male politicians' virtually all the credit for passing suffrage in 1893, he wrote that women activists could, at best, 'mount the platform and make fluttering, half-audible little speeches' which audiences greeted with 'the kindly curiosity and amused suspension of the critical faculties which are bestowed on clever children nervously reciting poems at school gatherings.' This condescending caricature tells us more about Reeves than about the evangelical women he consigned to oblivion. Nobody familiar with Dunedin suffragists such as Harriet Morison, a trade unionist and lay preacher for the Bible Christian church, or Rachel Reynolds, from St Andrew's Presbyterian, could possibly accept it as accurate.

Similarly, in the six pages Reeves devoted to New Zealand's anti-sweating campaign of the late-1880s, he never so much as mentioned the Dunedin Presbyterian minister, Rutherford Waddell of St Andrews, who led and orchestrated the campaign. Snowballing into a national reform movement, the great anti-sweating crusade helped Reeves' Liberal party to win the 1889 election. As well as unions, a fair go for workers, and female suffrage, Waddell supported prohibition and Bible in Schools—which helps to explain why Reeves ignored him.

Waddell supported prohibition for the same reasons he supported votes for women and worker's rights. He believed that poorer people, especially women and children, suffered most from alcohol abuse, which required radical change. Presbyterians, Methodists, Baptists, Congregationalists and the Salvation Army dominated the Dunedin temperance movement, with the women of the WCTU particularly prominent. During the early 1890s, Waddell led the 'temperance party' in a series of battles with the so-called 'moderate party'—local politicians with strong links to the Licensed Victuallers Association, the drink trade and the city council. Its leaders—Henry Smith Fish, William Dawson, and Charles Greenslade—had links not only with Speights brewery but also with the Anglican church, which mostly did not support prohibition. Fish served on the City Council for 20 years, serving as Mayor for six years after promising voters to halve the price of gas. Popular with the ordinary bloke, Fish, who sent his wife and children to the Anglican church, became the chief parliamentary champion of the liquor trade, and the fiercest critic of prohibition and women's suffrage. In 1892 his supporters hawked two anti-suffrage petitions around Dunedin, sometimes paying people to sign. When suffragists such as Helen Nichol, a Presbyterian, exposed this in the Otago Daily Times, Dunedin women, incensed, signed the 1892 suffrage petition in record numbers. Fifty seven per cent of women in working class southern Dunedin signed, many of them churchgoers. Fish and his mates had inadvertently helped turn Dunedin into a world-leading first wave feminist community. Women voters helped tip Fish out of the Mayoral race in 1892 and, newly enfranchised, out of parliament in 1893.

Sam Lister, radical editor of the Otago Workman newspaper, claimed during these years to be defending working men from what he called the 'male women' and 'female men' campaigning for temperance and suffrage. But ordinary blokes divided over these issues. Working class men affiliated with evangelical churches often supported suffrage and temperance. These tensions did not disappear as the twentieth century dawned.

From the 1930s, a rising generation of male poets and fiction writers—led by Allen Curnow, Frank Sargeson, Denis Glover, and A.R.D. Fairburn—attacked the literary establishment of the day as outdated, British-oriented, conservative, churchy and puritanical. Many of the older writers had strong church connections, notably talented women authors such as Jessie Mackay, a Presbyterian, Ursula Bethell, an Anglican, and Eileen Duggan, a Roman Catholic. The young male nationalists, determined to 'stand upright here,' attacked the older writers as 'a bunch of bores in stuffy drawers,' or the 'menstrual school' of poetry. By the 1950s, they led a new literary establishment focused on New Zealand.

During the 1950s and '60s, two Auckland poet-historians—Robert M. Chapman and Keith Sinclair—translated the antipuritan crusade of the literary nationalists into history and the social sciences. In an influential Landfall article published in Dunedin in 1953, Chapman claimed that the British churches' main legacy to New Zealand was puritanism, which allegedly saddled this country with most of its problems. His long list included 'bitterness and hatred,' homicidal and suicidal 'violence,' patriarchy, the 'dominant mother' (i.e. matriarchy), 'loneliness and lack of love,' adolescent rebellion, 'marital defeat,' family conflict, female 'frigidity,' and 'latent homosexuality.' Writers and artists must save us from the puritan poison brought by the churches, Chapman thundered.

Sinclair's description of the Reverend Thomas Burns in his 1959 History of New Zealand illustrates how powerfully antipuritan and antichurch currents were shaping mid-century histories. Whereas

Reeves had praised Burns as 'a minister of sterling worth,' Sinclair, by contrast, called him a 'censorious old bigot.' The Auckland historian gave later evangelicals equally short shrift: 'Many a "Kiwi" drinker must look into his nine-ounce glass only to discover there the disapproving face of his Primitive Methodist ancestor.' But a 'simple materialism' had supplanted Christianity as the 'prevailing' religion of New Zealanders, and now—I quote— 'sunbathing and surfing, uninhibited striptease shows' and 'vast numbers of drinkers listening to singers or bands in suburban bars,' illustrated the modern kiwi's 'love of varied pleasures.' As pioneering researchers and teachers of New Zealand history and politics at the University of Auckland, Chapman and Sinclair influenced generations of students, and became influential public intellectuals. Helen Clark, raised Presbyterian, learned New Zealand history from Sinclair and politics from Chapman.

No subsequent historian, including James Belich and Michael King, has rectified the secular blinkers and blind spots that Reeves and Sinclair wrote into our history books. If anything, they have reinforced them. But the red-blooded secular bloke's view of our past has dominated the field too long. It has written out or denigrated too many people of faith from our history.

Today, when the Christendom era is over, and the churches are no longer in charge of our culture, it's time to rescue those people—women and men, girls and boys, Maori, Pakeha and Pasifika—from the enormous condescension of posterity. Not because they were perfect or flawless. Some were indeed a bit quick to point the finger, to judge and condemn those who didn't believe and behave as they did—a tendency which, of course, we have completely overcome today.... No, we remember because, as Psalm 51 reminds us, God loves, forgives and never forgets frail, fallible, fractious and—dare I say it—sinful human beings.

Today, as the gap between rich and poor widens faster than ever, as our drinking culture continues to trouble us, and as robust shared public conceptions of the common good wane, perhaps it's time we remembered ancestors such as Rutherford Waddell, Harriet Morison, Rachel Reynolds and Thomas Burns. On Otago anniversary day, they might have something to say to us.

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