

The Anglican Diocese of Dunedin, 1852-1919

By the Revd Michael Blain

The biographies of all the Anglican priests who served in the South Pacific form the basis for this introduction to the early life of the Anglican diocese of Dunedin. *The Blain Biographical Directory* may be found at http://anglicanhistory.org/nz/blain_directory/directory.pdf

1852 marks the licensing of John Fenton the first Anglican priest with pastoral responsibilities in the new town of Dunedin. 1919 marks the retirement of the first bishop of Dunedin, Samuel Tarratt Nevill. Between these two dates some 200 clergy came and went from Otago and Southland, the region served now by the Anglican diocese of Dunedin. All of them here receive attentive research. They prove to be a fascinating group of people, whose backgrounds, careers, and connections offer a unique insight into colonial Otago.

George Augustus Selwyn, the bishop of New Zealand (from his appointment on 10 October 1841 to his resignation in May 1869) was the epitome of a missionary—going everywhere fast, staying nowhere long in his efforts to reach everyone in every place. He met the leading colonists and church members in Dunedin in 1848, but had no priest to offer them until after the two dozen ships and chaplains of the Canterbury Association had arrived two years later in Canterbury.

From the beginning of January 1852 John Albert Fenton, one of the more able of these Canterbury Association priests (and with finances of his own to keep him afloat), was licensed as resident priest for the whole Otago settlement. The only other priest around then was Henry Graydon Johnston; he was beaten up by the famous whaler and business man Johnny Jones.

From the end of 1856 Henry John Chitty Harper a sturdy competent man was in office as bishop of Christchurch, a see which at first included the southern regions of the South Island. Harper's arrival relieved Selwyn of direct pastoral responsibility for clergy in Otago and Southland. However as senior bishop and as a man of high mana, Selwyn continued to be influential, and would be crucial twice in the search for a bishop for the diocese of Dunedin.

Harper made over a dozen pastoral visits from his see city, Christchurch, far to the north. He was effective in ensuring the growth of a network of parishes and successful in finding a supply of clergy to staff them. His first visits were more in the style of an itinerant parson, visiting farms and settlements for baptisms and marriages. Yet those annual visits made on horseback or by coach by a bishop nearly as old as the century itself could not provide sufficiently effective leadership.

Local leadership of clergy and laymen centred in a Rural Deanery Board for Otago and Southland. Harper urged them to raise £10 000, the sum necessary to fund the costs of a bishop's office. Only with that secured could the church appoint a bishop based in Dunedin to serve the pastoral expanses of Otago and Southland. While the unexpected discovery of gold in Central Otago brought a flow of migrant miners and quick money, Anglican sheep and land owners were unwilling to fund new pastoral work in the goldfields, and showed even less interest in funding a prelate.

Local money was little. While the bishop of Christchurch used his English connections to collect a few thousand pounds, the full endowment was never raised. That initial short-fall has been the source of innumerable problems in the diocese ever since.

In 1865 Selwyn came back for a couple of months of visitations and instructions for the lay leadership of the Anglican church. He convinced them (or convinced himself) that they were ready to make the decision to form a new diocese of Dunedin. His advice: first get the bishop, then the money will flow in for his support. Confident that they had asked him to do so, he wrote to the archbishop of Canterbury inviting him to select this bishop.

In January 1866 Selwyn wrote two fateful letters: to the Rural Deanery Board with the happy news that the archbishop of Canterbury had found them a bishop, to the man nominated congratulating him on his selection by the archbishop. Later in the year Selwyn travelled the Otago goldfields to raise money and enthusiasm for this new bishop, consecrated on 24 August 1866 by the archbishop of Canterbury, intending he be the bishop 'for Dunedin', Henry Lascelles Jenner.

Jenner was from a sound church family, well placed in church and state. As the diocese of Dunedin was not yet fully formed, and lacked the funds to pay for him, their new bishop preached the needs of Dunedin in churches across southern England. While this apologetic mendicant raised barely a couple of thousand pounds towards the endowment, he understood his appointment to be secure, and delayed nearly three years before sailing to New Zealand. A fateful error of judgement.

Those years of delay gave space for New Zealanders to come and look at him. From them word went back to the colony that Jenner had been sighted in Ritualist churches (such as S Alban's Holborn and S Matthias' Stoke Newington), clearly enjoying himself, looking and behaving alarmingly like a Roman Catholic prelate. Panic spread, fanned by anti-Catholic bigotry, Presbyterian resentment, and the easy negative emotions enjoyed by those with free chance to express them. With such controversy raging around the nominated bishop, the chances of raising funds for his support diminished.

Three years after his appointment, Jenner made an unhappy tour of the towns and farms of Otago and Southland, giving a few public addresses. Most of the clergy were happy enough with him, and probably the lay membership would have accepted him if he were already acknowledged as the bishop and in office. But this tour was too late and his impact too slight. Jenner's controversial reputation as a high churchman had blown away all funding hopes for the bishopric

endowment. The tide of uncertain complaint and hysterical hostility had risen over the heads of the moderates. Without taking his seat Jenner was rejected from the see, on procedural grounds.

Uneasy and embarrassed men were keen to fill that seat with another candidate and expunge the memory of Jenner as quickly as possible. With encouraging commendations from Selwyn (in Lichfield now, but still influencing the New Zealand church from the English Midlands), Samuel Tarratt Nevill sailed out on an extended visit to family members in the North Island. It had been hinted to him that at least one bishop was needed in New Zealand, for Wellington was vacant, and Dunedin was now officially vacant.

While he lacked the high connections of ill-fated Jenner, Nevill had an attribute of more use in the raw colony, money from his wealthy wife. If elected bishop by either diocesan synod, he could be expected to fund himself. Wellington was not interested, and made other arrangements. Dunedin was waiting to check him over, and liked the bargain. Nevill was elected and seated as the first bishop of Dunedin.

Once in that seat (on 4 June 1871) Nevill stayed in it. He retired in 1919, after consecrating the nave of the new cathedral, a crowning satisfaction of his forty eight years in the see. Yet for generations he had been a problem for his clergy and lay church people, and a frustrating despair across the leadership of the Anglican world. Even bishops had written in complaint to the archbishop of Canterbury, matter of factly stating that Nevill was mad. If God were gracious, so now God might kindly grace heaven with Nevill, and so relieve earth of the burden of having to deal longer with him.

When Nevill took up his office in 1871, a dozen priests had already come and gone of those licensed by Bishop Harper for Otago and Southland. Several others lasted well into the episcopate of Bishop Nevill. Notable examples are Edward Edwards in Dunedin, Algernon Gifford in Oamaru, and in Southland William Oldham and William Tanner. All but Tanner had major public rows with their bishop, with full details printed in the newspapers –and Tanner had too little personality to row with anyone.

Nevill even had rows with other people's clergy. William Cooper, the incumbent of Akaroa in Christchurch diocese, took in Nevill's dying brother and offered to raise money for the support of the orphans –Samuel Tarratt Nevill wrote in fierce complaint to the bishop of Christchurch, outraged at the impudence of the intrusive Cooper.

The initial pattern continued through all the years of his episcopate. With vision reaching high and deep, but promises outstripping possibilities, possibilities partially achieved with the inheritance of the bishop's first wife, possibilities often frustrated by the contrary and autocratic demands of the abrasive bishop himself.

All his ministry Nevill was committed to training clergy in Dunedin. In his party of 25 on arrival in 1872 came a couple of priests (Penny and Jackson Smith) to run a theological college, and three students to be trained in it. None persisted. No theological college was built or likely to be built. Indignant Penny went north to a more secure post in Christchurch, Jackson Smith returned

to England, and of the three imported ordinands, one (Dunkley) was rejected, Leeson and Withey lasted in the diocese but three years.

A generation later in 1892 Nevill tried again, and once again using his own money (supplemented with a grant from SPG) opened Selwyn College, a residential college at the University of Otago but principally a theological college. Attracted by the fine words and promises, the first warden John Prince Fallowes came out from England, with his wife (Agnes Catherine Vierville Champion de Crespigny); after just two years they returned acrimoniously to England. Nevill did some tutoring himself.

Yet from the abortive beginnings in 1872 and then more securely from 1892, Selwyn College produced a better run of local priests than the neighbouring mother diocese of Christchurch could achieve. The young men did come forward for training, they were ordained and placed in parishes, and then they left. For a softer climate, for more secure pay, possibly for an easier bishop.

Nevill appears to have been particularly snobbish, attracted by big names and offering them fine positions. The Revd William Jervis son of the governor of New Zealand was offered the non-existent position of dean, in the unavailable cathedral church of S Matthew (for the parishioners of this parish church rejected its elevation); after a few polite months in the diocese, Jervis went home to England to a major Ritualist church in London. Similarly the Revd William Purey Cust, with aristocratic connections and son of the dean of York, was marked out for great things in Dunedin, but after ten applauded months, he sailed on to Tasmania and home.

No colonial bishop had grounds to hope for big names to staff his diocese. Like other colonial prelates Nevill took on clergy with poor track records or low ability simply because he needed them to hold parish life together. It was not far to Australia. From Hobart and Melbourne sailed ships to Bluff and Port Chalmers, easily bringing priests anxious to leave Australia and disappear into the quieter reaches of rural Otago and Southland.

Despite the mutual need of bishop and priest, the chronic lack of finance meant that unless these wanderers were gifted as well as desperate, they were unlikely to stay long. The inadequate priest would not be paid by a critical congregation. Blaming the cold weather, or the health of the family, but often because unpaid for years, the priest would sail on again.

Examples of these wanderers include Thomas Ash, George Elton, Albert Edwards, Vivian Grey, James Knipe, Appleton, Falwasser, possibly Edward Granger. Keating clearly had gifts, but also problems; he accepted and resigned one appointment four times within a year. Some had serious moral breakdowns; the lack of extant correspondence or reports from the period make it hard to catch the facts. Platts may stand as an example of a competent trickster. And his successor at Port Chalmers, Thomas Kewley particularly asked God to be merciful to him a sinner - but as he set that on his tombstone and in latin, the facts are obscure.

Clearly only a wealthy bishop could have achieved so much for the diocese. Just as clearly, Nevill annoyed and distressed even those closest to him by his style and attitudes. In one year

(1878) half his parish clergy resigned. A loss the more crippling with the bishop out of the country, again looking for more clergy. He lost more than he found that year.

Every bishop was stuck with those priests he could get. Yet for all the misfits, a high proportion of the clergy show us a patient commitment to the community and the church. Many were lightly educated, but willing to work from poor housing in isolated townships, to travel regularly over broken roads, in fierce weather, and to stay among their communities. A number of priestly vocations emerged from the town and country families. One family, the Blathwayts, provided four priests in two generations; three Wingfields were priests. Long respected ministries by remarkable men like William Curzon-Siggers, George Beaumont, academic contributions of such as Frank Walter Churchill Simmons, Robert Henry Belcher, and later Louis Grenville Whitehead and Robert Augustus Woodthorpe anchor the identity of the era. Vivid low church priests like Lorenzo Moore and Charles Byng stirred up excitement. With notably wide and liberal sympathies the Fitchett family, women and men, made large contributions to Dunedin life over generations.

My own reading of the 200 clergy of his episcopate suggests that there is a higher proportion of markedly high church priests in Nevill's Dunedin than elsewhere in the contemporary New Zealand church. Yet Nevill came to Dunedin after the noisy rejection of the Ritualist Jenner. To sedate the ghosts, he had distanced himself very carefully from comment or action that might arouse similar resentment against himself. Thus he shows a particularly hostile unease about minor ceremonial gestures when Hubert Carlyon, a priest in Christchurch diocese, was put on trial for such offences. Among the judging bishops of New Zealand Nevill took a strongly hostile stand and ensured Carlyon's admonition and suspension in 1877. A high church prelate thus had used his position and undoubted intelligence to destroy the ministry of a high church priest. Yet, as the decades calmed prejudices, even a few years ahead and certainly by the end of his reign his diocese was taken to be the most high church diocese of New Zealand.

A full range of clergy was licensed under Nevill, extremists high and low with most in the mild middle. Among the older generation running on from Harper's years, Coffey, Dasent, Fenton senior, Edward Edwards, Gifford, Barton Parkes, Keating, Kerkham (protests threw him out of Mornington) and Penny were all known and named as high church. However it is in the next generation that the colour grows stronger. Edward Dering Evans, Harry Joseph Goldthorpe, John Lawrence Mortimer stand out among the early twentieth century clergy of New Zealand as markedly Anglo-Catholic. There were plenty more who called themselves Anglo-Catholic or aligned themselves in public with these youthful stirrers. (Examples include Whitehead, Fenton junior, Coates, Neale, Roberts, and Curzon-Siggers.) Perhaps no other bishop in New Zealand would take them at the time? Perhaps they settled to the bottom of the country grateful and forgotten for a while. One such from the end of Nevill's episcopate, Alfred Laurie Canter found another way out of the diocese—he became a Roman Catholic, and a radio sports and racing commentator.

A few were ordained from Methodist or Independent ministries (Alfred Robertson Fitchett, McKenzie Gibson, Francis White Martin, Henry John Davis). Two priests (Ewart, Jamieson) had been Presbyterian ministers, and indeed Jamieson may have become one again before his death.

His fellow bishops particularly the low church ones disliked and criticised Nevill, and often the *odium theologicum* (that is, the particular spiteful nastiness of theological disagreement) was a motive behind their attacks. Yet I now think the dominant issue in the controversies of his ministry was his arrogant imperialist nature and not his high church beliefs or ceremonies. By 1919 when Nevill retired, the golden years of the later nineteenth century had long closed. Otago was no longer the financial heartland of New Zealand. The close of his episcopate also meant the end of those generous subsidies which Nevill had provided for half a century. Now, church institutions cajoled into existence by a determined prelate but set up with inadequate financial bases weighed more heavily on the diocesan budget. The diocese needed to start again in reduced circumstances and to own its own issues for the first time on its own terms. The frustrating disappointments known by Bishop Harper, way back in the 1860s, squeezing blood from the stones of the Rural Deanery Board's penury, were fully present and now undisguised. Not two years into his retirement, Bishop Nevill died, still wealthy despite his munificence. His estate was valued at £38 000.

Technical terms for clergy serving in this period

The **incumbent** was the priest with responsibility for an established parish. (For instance, Alfred Robertson Fitchett was incumbent of the major parish of All Saints Dunedin.) Before 1894 the parish priest was technically known as the incumbent; after 1894 the parish priest was known as the vicar. The word 'parson' was often used informally.

A **cure** was the official word for a parish administered by a priest. Often a cure was a secondary parish, not so well established and without the power to nominate its own parish priest. The priest of such a parish was the **curate** until 1894; after 1894 the priest was then known as the vicar. (For instance, Richard Coffey was curate of Whakatipu and the goldfields.)

A **vicar** was the priest licensed by the bishop of the diocese (or in his absence by his commissary acting on his behalf) for pastoral responsibility of a parish or parochial district. This word was used officially only from 1894 across the church of the province of New Zealand. (For instance, Edward Dering Evans was vicar of the parish of S Peter Caversham.)

An **assistant (to a vicar) curate** was a priest or deacon in a position of subordinate responsibility in a parish. An assistant curate was licensed to another priest by the bishop. (For instance, George Edgar Moreton was licensed to George Fenton.)

A **lay reader** was chosen by the local priest and the local people to be a leader of services, particularly in the absence of the parish priest. A lay reader particularly in rural areas had significant pastoral responsibilities. (For example, John Dewe.) Later in the period, students in training for the priesthood at Selwyn College might be licensed for parish lay reader duties as part of their training. (For instance, Gerald Boucher Nanson.)

A **licence to officiate** or **permission to officiate** was given to a priest who though without parish responsibility was in good standing with the bishop and available for duties in a parish when invited.

A **locum tenens** (Latin: looking after the place) was a priest licensed for a short appointment during the absence of the parish priest from the cure. A **priest in charge** was one appointed for a limited period or while under the bishop's supervision.

A **commissary** was a priest officially appointed by the bishop during his absence to be the acting leader of the diocese. (For instance Edward George Edwards served as the senior priest and then commissary for the bishop.) Or, a priest in England appointed by the bishop to act as his recruiting agent when clergy in England applied to come to New Zealand. (For instance, William Arthur Purey Cust was a commissary for many years for Bishop Nevill.)

In the church of England: a **rector** was the priest of a parish, often of medieval foundation, where he had control of the local endowments. The term (albeit without such endowments) is commonly used in the Anglican church of Australia.

A **vicar** was the priest of a parish, often of more recent foundation, who did not have control of the endowments of the parish. In New Zealand from 1894 this became the usual term for the parish priest.

A **perpetual curate** was commonly styled a vicar, but technically his was a less secure or significant a position. A new parish or mission district might once have had a perpetual curate.