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## The Early Settlers

*Address delivered by the Rev. F. R. Belmer, Moderator of the Presbytery of Dunedin, on March 23rd, 1966.*

While we are living it, life does not seem to be history. Then a short time after it is lived, it is glamourised, romanticised and idealised. After that comes another generation which has few emotional ties and which looks searchingly and critically at all that happened, and new perspectives appear. One-time giants are cut down to life size, and men hardly noticed in their time, become profoundly significant.

Of course it is sometimes difficult to discover the truth. May I illustrate with Captain Cargill? Mrs. Godley, the wife of the leader of the Canterbury settlement, stayed with Captain Cargill for a few days. She had planned to stay at Port Chalmers but she says, "they turned out to be a very drunken set" and she was relieved to spend Easter in Dunedin at the invitation of the Captain.

She says he was a "very funny looking man, with a very large head, covered with thick upright white hair, that had been red, which also formed a white frill under his chin."

But when we read James Chisholm's "Fifty Years Syne," we find that "it was noteworthy to see a man whose ancestors fought so valiantly for civil and religious liberty, and died a brave martyr's death on the gallows tree in Edinburgh—a man who served with distinction under the Iron Duke, during the Peninsular War, and had been wounded while fighting his country's battles on the ridges of Basaco—moving about quietly in that little church with bowed head and solemn air, bearing to his fellow Christians the symbols of a Saviour's broken body and shed blood. The sight, it may well be imagined, stirred the pulses of the young and moved them...."

Which is the correct picture of Cargill?

I have been tremendously interested in the early period of the settlement of New Zealand, but not from the point of view of ancestor worship. I am interested in the people as they really were. In the stark tragedy of the abandoned Maori of the settlement period, in the struggles and agonies and rich humour of the men and women who fashioned this country out of a wilderness.

The sheer effort of their prodigious labour in carving farmlands out of the bush, in building the first roads, in boring the first tunnels, in quarrying for the first stone buildings, in dredging the first channels, is inspiring. So much depended on manual work, heavy lifting, and the endurance of winter snows, freezing and floods. There was an element of the heroic in those who left their homeland for the risk and poverty and hardship of the unknown. I said poverty. We often hear of the man whose ancestors landed here in the early ships and established a prosperous and successful family, but my researches have reminded me of many families who arrived in those days, who were honest and decent citizens who did not make fortunes, and whose descendants still live in very ordinary circumstances.

Not all the fortunes were made creditably. Some honest settlers knew only poverty, and some met disaster. It was a land of opportunity for most, but a place of misfortune for some. For instance, it is amazing how many were drowned in the early days, both at sea and in rivers and lakes. Drowning was called the New Zealand death, it was so prevalent. A brother of my own grandfather was drowned trying to help a coachload of people trapped in a swollen river. He went to their rescue on his horse and was swept away.

And the people themselves. We have been often misled into thinking of the pioneers in a kind of standard pattern. Godfearing people, from a common homeland, putting their hands to a common task. But what oddities there were. There was a leading figure in Port Chalmers, in charge of certain work on the shipping activities in the Port, who swore so loudly and vehemently that his voice could be heard all around the original town.

It was the great boast of the Southern States in the United States that they knew how to live graciously, which of course did not include their slaves. There was some gracious living in the later Victorian era in southern New Zealand, but many lived otherwise.

The Rev. John Christie, of Waikouaiti, went on a visit to a gold digging, and decided to stay at the only accommodation house. The landlady was at first reluctant to accommodate him, but finally agreed "if you are not very particular you can have a crib to sleep in." Later he returned for his night's rest. "I was shown into a room of the following dimensions : It was seven or eight feet in length, apparently about the same in width. There was a narrow passage barely three feet wide up the centre between the beds. There were single beds on either side, placed above each other, after the manner of bunks in a passenger ship. Thus the room would contain six sleepers. The floor was earth with an old chaff bag laid on it. The walls inside were lined with old sacks cut up and nailed to the frame, the outside was covered with corrugated iron.

"It was a very cold night, and the appearance of the bedroom did not contribute to one's sense of comfort. Having blown out the candle, which rested on a board that served for a Window sill, I stowed myself into one of the cribs. It had a plentiful supply of blue blankets so popular with swag-men. I then made an effort to compose myself to rest. In a brief space of time I discovered that the hope of rest or sleep was an entire illusion. As my body began to gather warmth along the bedclothes, an army of fleas began to march and countermarch over my skin. I have always been able to congratulate myself in escaping being bitten by these nimble creatures. They have some antipathy to my blood. I was thus able to bid them a kind of defiance, but oh, the racing and chasing my outer man afforded for their troops during that long night. I did eagerly wish for the morning light, and although the event happened many years ago, I still frequently recall its memories with the liveliest emotion." Beware of accepting contemporary Judgments. Again and again we find distorted pictures. In the very early days the records were mainly kept by people whose tasks and responsibilities made them very rigid in their views.

Our impression of the early whalers being a wild living lot is mainly due to the records of missionaries on which we depend almost completely for much information,

Mrs. Godley may have found some drunken people in Port Chalmers, but we have records of the splendid people who have lived there including at least one Prime Minister, professors, doctors, missionaries, an admiral and some of the leading businessmen of the country.

Many of the ministers of those days were far removed from the careful suburban orthodoxy of today. But they were mighty men. May I quote two of them. The Rev. William Johnstone used to saddle a big white horse and don a three-tiered greatcoat and leave for a tour of exploration and visitation of North Otago for three weeks at a time. Many a tale he could tell.

One year he came upon a group of men gathered around a cask of beer, with the obvious intention of finishing it. He bade them good-day and then went on his way. Next year he came by the same way, and to his astonishment saw exactly the same men sitting in the same place imbibing from what looked like the identical cask. As he left them he had wondering doubts whether they had been there for the whole year. Mr. Johnstone was a truly remarkable man. He was not strong in health yet he travelled extraordinary distances and founded so many churches that it is difficult to name them from memory.

Of the Rev. W. Bannerman, the pioneer Minister of the Clutha, Mr. Chisholm records in "Fifty Years Syne", that for the first ten months of his ministry he walked 3,600 miles. The early settlers were very thirsty people. Many years ago in a certain Otago community there was a police sergeant whose station also acted in part as the gaol. He had arrested a prisoner on some minor offence and locked him in a cell. Before long the prisoner was complaining bitterly of his head, and pleaded with the gaoler to let him go off for a few minutes to a nearby hotel for a drink to ease his suffering. The man had with him a most intelligent dog. The sergeant quite

properly refused, but while he was standing in the cell the prisoner suddenly commanded the animal to hold the sergeant who found himself looking into the bare fangs of a very menacing dog.

The animal held him there for some time while the prisoner wandered down to the hotel, secured his drink, and began to return to the cell, meeting the sergeant on the way shouting "Stop the prisoner".

What I am trying to tell you in all this is that the early settlers were in fact people just like ourselves, but were faced with the challenge of breaking in a new country. Some of them were godly people, others were not. There were vandals, alcoholics and criminals among them just as there are among us. This is true. When Miss Valpy sent home the money to bring out the first Salvation Army Officers, she did so because of the appalling behaviour of louts on the public streets, and the frightening increase of crime.

None of these people wanted to be heroes. Some of them were forced to be. Most of them wanted a living, greater freedom and security, a chance for their children, an opportunity to own something, for most of them had been through a nightmare in the hungry 'forties.

We need then, to restate our praise of pioneers, in a positive and honest way. To begin with we need to be honest about the earliest settlers of all. My admiration of the early whalers and sealers knows no bounds. These men came to a totally unknown land with no government, Church or law behind them. There was no surveyed land, the land they farmed had no secure title, their ordinary labour was dangerous and hard. Contact with home was almost non-existent, and parties might be left on a wind-swept island for months at a time and were sometimes forgotten and marooned for a year or two. They had no jetties, roads, permanent buildings and little equipment. Around them were hostile natives, who were capable of wiping them out. These were the people who found and developed the first tracks through the bush, cleared the first, land, cultivated the first farms, bred the first stock, created the first wealth, and above all made a basis of peace with the Maori. Before the Scottish settlers arrived their whaling had turned into agriculture. Of course many of them were rough and ready people. They had to be. What use would people of gentility have been catching and cutting up and boiling whales, or of facing the dangers of the natives. But they mellowed and their descendants are still with us, proud today of their forbears.

When I think of a man like Pilot Richard Driver I take my hat off—to a man of courage, initiative, humour and wisdom. He was the only man of a ship's boat who was not slaughtered by the local Maoris but today his descendants include an ex-Cabinet Minister, Sir Eruera Tirikatene, men prominent in business, social and public life, and a host of decent and excellent citizens in this province.

Then I glance to the 'forties and I am lost in admiration at the first surveyors, Tuckett and Kettle, whose every step was an adventure, and a service to this country. These were great and unselfish men.

The year 1848 brings the tide of Scottish immigration. While it is true that few of us would agree now with all their ideas, or their actions, our debt to them is enormous. They were men and women of their times. with the prejudices, virtues and faults of their times. If one was narrow-minded, it was only because it was the way of thought of his age. If one was a little unscrupulous in business, it was but a reflection of the hard conditions of the time. I remember feeling revolted when reading about a one-time Mayor of one of our towns in Otago who employed a large number of girls filling palliases with straw. On the ground that they were being trained in a trade he paid them nothing for the first year. But you see, few then felt that that was a vicious thing. People were used to such practices in the community and they largely accepted them. In their turn. they would have done the same.

Religion was taken seriously by the bulk of the community if only in lip service by some. When the Presbyterian Church declared a Fast Day in the 'sixties, no-one, I repeat no-one, would enter a shop. The Government used to ignore Otago's quirks and open Government offices, but one newspaper reported that observation showed that not one person would enter the Government office on

that day. Religion was a great and serious matter and even if there were extremes in prejudices and practices, and certainly not all belonged to churches, at least the people were not superficial and light in weight. All public matters were taken as if they were important and public meetings on public issues were a part of the normal community life. Men were willing to make sacrifices for the sake of something bigger than themselves. They offered for dangerous missionary work in cannibal Pacific islands. They gave money to build the first churches, they gave to, and supported the University, the first in New Zealand. An Otago man's word in business was his bond. If he hoarded money rather thriftily, he also gave it away lavishly. Today so often, men hoard things lavishly and give them away thriftily.

It is true that the Churches held to an extraordinarily restricted view of Sunday, the Sabbath as they would have called it, but they filled the churches. The first generation built the cities, broke in the land, built roads, founded great businesses, and established education. The University of Otago in particular should never forget them, for its beginning and growth was the result of these.

But I have forgotten one other important and magnificent thing about them. They threw up some of our earliest and most creative social reformers. Dr. Burns founded the eight-hour day, others, early orphanages and welfare work, and , established a caring tradition for people. Later Dr Waddell was to follow up this tradition by leading the fight against sweated labour and for justice for the working people.

It is not good to over praise these people. They were not supermen, saints or heroes. But they laid foundations; their creations far outweighed their faults. They were home loving, church loving, freedom loving. We honour such people, because we honour our own forefathers with them.

How hardly they had to work with their hands. How arduously women had to work to feed and clothe their children. Though they were made of the same kind of human material as ourselves, a mixture of good and evil, strength and weakness, vision and shortsightedness, many of them did become involuntary heroes, by the sheer necessity to survive. They came with harsh prejudices, and mellowed in their new land. Their sacrifices for education arose from their own need for it.

When I think of the herculean task of removing the top of Bell Hill, when I look at the dignity of Iona Church, Port Chalmers, and see behind it the grim quarry from which it was hewn, when I see the glory of the University of Otago and remember that this was the dream few of them lived to see, when I look at the loveliness of the green belt around the city, and consider the scope of the nationwide businesses which began in this city so long ago, in the booming 'sixties, I marvel.

Most of us spare a thought for the famous names, but I would ask you to remember too for a moment the unknown rank and file, the forgotten labourers, the whalers and sealers almost lost in the mists of the pre-settlement, the minorities who had to struggle here to find a place in the sun, the forgotten seamen who after all brought everyone here and so often perished in mysterious disasters.

As I look back, I see in the fading past gnarled hands, whitening hair, and slowing feet. I seem to hear their voices raised in the singing of an historic psalm, while they stand in the mud. I see doctors and ministers riding their horses on lonely trails to carry hope for the soul and the body in lonely places.

Remember them all, young and old, gay and troubled, devout and careless, sober or drouthy, ignorant or learned, and give thanks to God that these men and women made us a home, and built better than they could ever know.