





A
CHRISTMAS
WISH.

With purest
influence
benign
Upon thee may
Old Christmas
shine.

The Colenso conference

On 10 and 11 November ninety colensosophiles gathered in Napier to celebrate the 200th anniversary of the birth of the Hawke's Bay Sage at the Hawke's Bay Museum and Art Gallery's (HBMAAG) William Colenso Bicentenary Conference.

It was an unusually enjoyable and successful conference. The combination of knowledgeable speakers, each experts in their own fields, explaining Colenso's contributions in non-esoteric language, the emotionally rewarding presence of several Colenso family members, faultless organisation and attention to detail by the Museum staff, a venue with a spectacular panoramic view of Hawke Bay, good food, good wine, tight control by chairs, and several wonderfully evocative talks by Peter Wells kept all of the delegates in great good humour.

There emerged a sense of camaraderie, a sense of achievement, but also a sense of purposeful endeavour, to continue (not to make too much of it) the rehabilitation of this extraordinary man in our national history.

The opening event saw Minister for the Arts Chris Finlayson unveiling a new portrait of Colenso by artist Gavin Hurley at the elegant Hawke's Bay Club. The new portrait (a version of which graces the cover of Peter Wells' *The hungry heart*) will hang prominently in the refurbished HBMAAG.

The Waiapu Cathedral held an evensong for Elizabeth Colenso on Friday, and a service for William Colenso on Sunday. Other events included a highly original exhibition by Hastings artist Terrie Reddish ("Billie K and me") tracing similarities in her and Colenso's lives and interests; a tour of significant Colenso sites was led by Peter Wells, and a tramp up the Makaroro river to Colenso Spur by Mike Lusk.

Members of the Colenso Society met for their AGM and in general expressed approval of the current activities and plans; the present executive (Ian St George convenor, Peter Wells secretary, Gordon Sylvester treasurer) was re-elected with indecent alacrity; a subscription of \$20 was set for the 2011-2022 financial year.

We extend our sincere thanks to Douglas Lloyd Jenkins and his staff at HBMAAG for mounting this extraordinary event.

The best of the following images are courtesy of Hawke's Bay Museum & Art Gallery, photographer, David Frost.



William Colenso— “Bearer of Knowledge”

By Gillian Bell

I met this William while in Napier recently at Te Kura Reo Rua o Maraenui (school). He stands as a two metre tall, intricately-carved pou (pole), passed by pupils on their way to classes. The imposing carving in a golden wood, was created some years ago & resembles the Lindauer portrait in that

this is the benign elder Colenso with hair to his shoulders, a broad brow, kindly blue eyes & a gentle mouth. There is a hint of jacket lapels, creases in cuffed sleeves, a finely-patterned stave, & carved on one leg, an open book. The skill & care that has gone into this depiction is truly amazing.

Gwilym Colenso & I stood awestruck until urged to touch him, stroke him & finger the carvings whilst unbeknown to us, we were being watched by a group of 10 to 13 year olds. Their kaiako (teacher) came out of their whare (classroom) & invited us in.

She told the class of our connection to William Colenso & invited us to talk about where we came from so Gwilym explained his Welsh name & London base while I told of growing up in Otaki opposite Rangiatea Church. The kaiako said the children would sing for us &, as she picked up a guitar, the children quickly stepped into lines, girls in front, boys at the back.

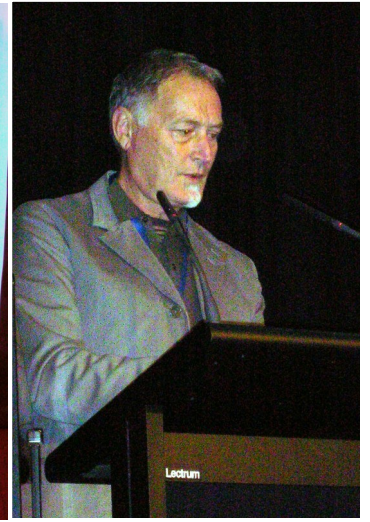
Suddenly, miraculously, voices burst forth strongly in a waiata, bodies swayed, hands fluttered, feet moved. I saw before me the descendants of Colenso’s pupils— &, without embarrassment, large quiet tears slid from the corners of my eyes. At the conclusion, my small very sincere voice said “Thank you. Thank you SO much, that was beautiful.”

We left Maraenui School quiet & reflective. Surely, to honour this “Bearer of Knowledge” with his passion for education & the written word—this, THIS is where it starts, in a school in Te Awapuni.

And the response from these children to our visit, “that little old lady, she was beautiful, she cried for her tupuna” (ancestors).









The Sunday walk to Colenso Spur was led by Mike Lusk (at right in both pictures). We began by paying suitable homage to the Lindauer print given to Ian St George by Peter Wells, and ended (almost imperceptibly more dishevelled but rather pleased) at the plaque and cairn above the Makaroro river.











AGM of the Colenso Society

10 November 2011, The Napier War Memorial Conference Room, Napier.

The meeting began 3.15pm.

Present: Gail Pope, David Galloway, Mike Lusk, Colin Ashby, Sydney Shep, Dianne Bardsley, Sue Schelle, Gillian Bell, Terrie Reddish, Simon Nathan, Gwilym Colenso, Kay Morris Matthews, Ann Collins, Sarah Carter, Stuart Webster, Michael Fowler, Beryl Eagle, Kelvin Day, Shirley Collins, Jim Colenso, John Holley, Christine Hardie, Peter Wells (secretary), Gordon Sylvester (treasurer) and Ian St George (convener.)

Apologies Pat Brownsey, Brian Molloy, Peter de Lange.

Convener's report

eColenso had had 20 issues and the 21st issue was ready to go. Prior to the conference it has been monthly but in future it might be bimonthly.

Koroneho, an epic poem by the late Rev. Leicester Kyle about 14 orchids described by Colenso, has been published by the Society in conjunction with the Leicester Kyle Literary Estate.

The Colenso Project. The proposal is to digitise everything Colenso wrote and published, as in 'The Darwin Project'. This would require serious funding and in the past year the Colenso Society was unsuccessful in its application for funds to the Lotteries Commission. However with the evidence of the Colenso Conference, the record of the *eColensos*, the proposal would look more weighty in future. Dianne Bardsley said she had several students funded by Victoria University to look at language uses in Colenso and this of itself would lend additional credibility to the proposal.

Ian St George raised the question of the deplorable state of the ruins of the building where Colenso had had his printing press at Paihia, comparing it to the splendid restoration of Pompallier's press at Russell. Is this an objective we could pursue?

Ian StG asked what did members want of a society?

A proposal was made to keep a Colenso conference going regularly.

Gwilym Colenso asked if it were possible to get papers integrated into a 'conference proceedings'. Would HBMA be producing such a document? This was answered in the affirmative.

David Galloway asked if the Royal Society of NZ or even London as well as the Linnaeus Society could be approached for funding for publication of Proceedings.

David Galloway suggested affiliation with the Society for the Promotion of Natural History, the British Council could also be approached for funding. He suggested we should have a prominent patron, and brought forward a name.

Was there the possibility in future of the society working towards funding a Colenso scholar?

Sydney Shep said a Victoria University student was working on a bibliography of existing Colenso material, including unpublished and te reo material. This will help with working towards digitizing.

It would also be useful for adding weight to our application for further funding re digitising.

Treasurer's report.

We now have charitable status, with a grand bank balance of \$13.00. The accounts had been audited. The meeting agreed a future subscription of \$20 for membership 2011-2012. This would help provide traction for further funding. Proposed by David Galloway and seconded by D Bardsley. Financial year ended on 31 August 2011.

A question was raised: would Col Soc's credibility be higher if it had a stronger financial base?

What were the ways in which appropriate funding could be raised? Dianne Bardsley suggested the possibility of a Colenso cultivar for an apple tree, for example. A % to go to fund raising.

Could we approach someone notable to become patron of the society? D. Galloway suggested Peter Raven, and was happy to write to him.

Who would be a good fund raiser?

Was there a clear postal box for subs?

Sydney Shep raised the issue of whether HBMAG would be agreeable to be a portal for Colenso studies, it had a recognizable brand and a domain name already identified with Colenso.

Sydney Shep suggested a sister city relationship between Napier and Penzance, given their similarities in Colenso's oeuvre.

Officers: existing people were re-elected to existing offices.

Other business: Ann Collins asked for a vote of thanks to Ian St George for his remarkable work in producing such regular and fascinating *eColensos*. This was met with acclamation.

The meeting closed at 3.30pm.

Peter Wells, secretary.





Subscriptions

At the Annual General Meeting at the Colenso Bicentenary Conference, it was decided to set a subscription of \$20.00 until the next AGM

As a result of the conference several more aspects of Colenso were brought to life. There are aspects of those we would like to explore further. We do however need funds to consider those projects. Accordingly your subscription is now due.

Please forward the amount of \$20 to

**The ColSoc Treasurer, Otira Highway 609,
Kumara 7832, West Coast.**

or direct debit into the Society account at
060 507 0200714 00.

Please state your name and add the words subs in the next field of your internet banking payments to box.

Your continued membership will help us toward the goal of making William Colenso accessible to history.

Gordon Sylvester Treasurer.



Bethunes at Webb's is proud to be offering the C L Thomas Collection of rare books and related materials. The Collection was begun by Thomas, a Napier pharmacist, at the beginning of the twentieth century.

The Collection includes an important group of items relating to William Colenso, including books and pamphlets, manuscript diaries and papers, a collecting tin, and a handsome botanical microscope, almost certainly that ordered by Colenso from JD Hooker in 1884.

The C L Thomas Collection will be offered for sale on Wednesday 21 March 2012.



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Everybody has their own Colenso

*Peter Wells' opening address,
given at the Colenso Bicentenary Conference Thursday 9 November 2011.*

I have been wrestling with presenting this paper ever since I dreamt up the title '*Everybody has their own Colenso*' which is self evident, I feel, in the brilliant expanse of papers we have before us in the following two days....I know I'm looking forward to sitting down and listening...knowing I will inevitably suffer that moment of author's remorse, when one thinks, *oh if only I had known that when I was writing the book*....but the fact is, like a ship sailed, the book is written.....

Anyway, in an attempt to be a conscientious contributor, I sat down and huffed and puffed and created half a paper which I read through and then threw away in disgust. I couldn't work out what the problem was. Then I realised what was troubling me. I'd just written a book which took four - pleasurable - years out of my life and I seemed to have run out of energy to re-spin the yarn. So I decided to go back to basics and frame my talk by **looking at how the book came about**. Because in some ways, it seems to me, I had to make the dangerous leap from being a writer of fiction - someone who dreams up things which aren't strictly true - to being a writer of what is called 'creative nonfiction' which is **a way of speaking about things which are true**. **That's to say, one takes a fact for a ride, a drive, a spin, a walk.**

I had had some experience with this in writing a memoir in 2001. This was comparatively easy in that I knew all the 'facts'. Or did I? The territory of a person's own life isn't necessarily straight forward. Certain aspects which one may wish to forget about dim down into darkness and obscurity. **One forgets for a reason**. There's also the question of 'treatment': how does one go about looking at phenomena so that it is best explained and illuminated.

What is essential is grasping a way of talking, of speaking, what one might call the 'true ring of a voice'. This seems so obvious it hardly needs stating yet writing isn't talking, it is something much more consciously made and fashioned. But with '*The Hungry Heart*' - and I was fortunate the title came early - I wasn't writing about the territory of my own life. The landscape was radically different. The landscape was the distant past and it could only be evoked through words which had been recorded over time. Whereas the landscape of my own life seemed (trackable) - although even here at times it felt infinite in depth because I believe our own experience of time and place isn't finite or even fixed but has a numinous frontier which shimmers with impermanence - but at least in looking at one's own life you can rely on familiarity with characters, places: associations are immediately clear.

My walk alongside William Colenso was immediately different. Obvious fact: we were not contemporaries. We weren't even citizens of the same country. He came from Cornwall and was born at the beginning of the nineteenth century. I was born mid-twentieth century in a country to which he came and which he adopted, it seems, very

early on in an act of passionate engagement.

I suppose the notion of landscape and movement through a landscape - a walk, a trek, a voyage - is inescapable with both Colenso and the subject of biography. My own understanding of my project was, at the beginning, dim. I knew I could rely on my long apprenticeship as a writer to believe I could bring the project to completion. (I also knew I could rely, I think, on the same obsessiveness which Colenso had about so many things, to spur me on over the vast territory which lay before me.) Because I have to admit, at the beginning, the territory - I can only use these physical terms - seemed exhaustingly enormous.

I'm not talking here so much of physical space as psychic travel. It was as if, at the beginning of my quest, I glanced into the future and saw an endless tunnel - this tunnel was made up of black lines moving along a white page - my journey was along a narrow path made up of letters formed into words - an endless snake leading me along through document after document, pamphlet after pamphlet, thesis to thesis, essay to essay, journal to journal, letter to letter. The trail of words seemed endless.

At the beginning I had a frank lack of knowledge. Talking to experts, they would sprinkle the conversation with names which meant nothing to me. I was hearing them for the first time. They had no resonance, no inner biography. I would sit there, nodding and dumb, feeling both bleak and resolute. Bleak, in that the landscape ahead of me seemed to represent impossible odds. Resolute in that I knew I would, in time, become more knowledgeable. But very early on, almost unwittingly, I lucked onto a way of talking - or walking, since the two seem interrelated. Because it seems to me now that my book is finished and published, I have finally found out what I was writing my book about. This is the truth with all authors, You write the book to find out why you were writing the book. The riddle lies in the middle of the maze and you have to get there in order to find the key which will allow you to get out....

I found I was writing the book as a way of a conversation *with* William Colenso. I wasn't writing a book so much about the inimitable controversialist, as writing a book alongside, in tandem, with this questing, strange, barbed and highly emotional man: hence the subtitle - journeys *with* WC - the original title of *The Hungry Heart & The Enquiring Mind* losing its last half for reasons of brevity.

I believe this sense of accompaniment is why we are all here...It is not only to celebrate and test his achievement, which I am sure this conference will clarify - exactly why should Colenso be a living presence in 21st century culture, why does he still have important things to say to us, why do we need to listen and discuss his ideas- but also there is something more - something he himself called 'the strange occult power of personality'. For the fascinating fact is with William Colenso he was not neutral, he was a man who attracted ambivalence, anger, dispute and disquiet. Even in the Dominion Post on Monday, Bob Brockie in the science column described Colenso as variously 'haughty and intolerant' and 'a figure of ridicule'. These adjectives are as honey to the biographer. If Colenso had been described as calm, humble, accepting and benign, most of us, let's face it, would have passed him by with a polite yawn. Instead here is a character full of chasms. Here is a brightly opinionated man

who lives up to the epithet often ruefully awarded at funerals, with a slight shake of the head and a bitter-sweet smile- he or she was '*certainly a character*'.

What fiction writer can resist such a lure? A character is just what a writer most desires - someone with emphatic, even better - *contradictory* - impulses, a man or woman with some kind of mystery embedded in their life. Colenso himself, looking back at his life, said to his confidante, the marvellously understanding Coupland Harding, that his had been 'a strangely chequered journey'. It is the chequering, the sudden dapping, the dive into darkness, the strangely flecked nature of Colenso's journey which is so deeply fascinating.

On one level, it is all about person and personality: the uncomfortable marriage, the questions of sexuality, of fatherhood, of family, of ego, of love and refused and refuted love, of power and patriarchy, of wounded feelings, of, finally, that most compelling of all pictures, 'the Old Solitary' as he came to call himself, sitting on Napier Hill, endlessly spinning out his web of words, as if he himself knew he would end when the pen ran dry of ink. (One thinks of him on that Christmas Eve in the 1880s when he knew he would spend the time alone so he set out to do a piece of writing on memory and Cornwall and so he wrote himself into the night, and into the dawn, writing, endlessly writing, as if the sheer act of self creation, of feeling the company of words and thought, would of itself disarm the brutal facts of time: he was part of a family but his family was absent. He was alone. But not alone, for he had for company words, a swarm of thoughts and that restless ever enquiring mind.

It is one very powerful story on one level, and in some ways, an entirely contemporary story: the abandoned male, the father who tries to buy love, the human who only latterly comes to comprehend the foibles of his own personality - comes to some essential self-understanding.

But when one looks at Colenso in a broader context, of the enquiring mind, there is so much more. He was not merely a contradictory personality or, as the Dom Post science writer said, along with many others, 'a haughty or intolerant' human.

He was also endlessly intellectually curious. Essentially self taught, he was a polymath in the best sense - his interests spread out tentacular-wise into such diverse areas as language, religion, education, biology, print-as-a-medium, history, anthropology - most of which areas we have fascinating papers on in this conference. I always felt when Colenso evoked a tohunga as '*a living cylopedia*' in the sense that the person carried the knowledge of all ages within, having the widest index of various pieces of information, both scraps and densities of knowledge, from the seeming trivial to the deepest and most profound - he was in fact describing himself. For along the journey through those endless sentences, one constantly came across fascinating insights. In sending his marathon locutions to the Hookers at Kew, he often sandwiched in amazing information about Maori life and customs which were, effectively, raw pieces of information, much as a journalist might reveal when something startled him and which he felt compelled to include as basically 'news' - meaning the 'new', the unknown, the extraordinary - to a European mind. This is not to say these pieces of infor-

mation were received with gratitude at the other end - one often sensed an almost brutal impatience on the part of Sir William or Joseph Hooker whose thought bubble might read - *For God's sake cut to the chase*. As Jim Endersby says in his fascinating book, JD Hooker preferred what he called 'curt diagnoses.' Colenso preferred the shaggy dog tale of an almost biblical length.

Yet it is these seeming lapses or diversions - these sudden and abrupt change of focus - of focal depth one might almost call it - when one came in touch with a powerful other, a reality Colenso himself needed to register. Often it seemed to me there were several levels of discourse happening - (and often, given his journals were addressed, essentially back to a corporate headquarters who only wanted to know what they wanted to promulgate - mirror answering mirror) he also kept including information which often stood in a strange contradictory position, even though he himself might attempt to dress the information up in disapproving rhetoric.

Yet the fact is, for we contemporaries alive in the banal and brightly overlit present, his reportage - his endless nonstop written banter, chat, bilge and rage, poetic plight and patter, his guttural moans and nightmarish cleaving, his toenail shavings and moustache clippings, his dried sweat and semen stains, his sighs and absent-minded whistlings, his angry denunciations and calmer reflections, his ponderings and imaginings - **this is a wonderful landscape of the imaginative past which any reader can enter and, as a foreign landscape, explore.**

It seems to me this is what this conference is all about: we are all here as explorers of the strange continent known as *William Colenso*. There is something about him which is so gigantic, so vast, so enormous that no *one* person can encompass the continent which is William. Hence my view that everybody has their own Colenso - the maligned husband, the adulterer, the prince of humbugs, the seer, the Pakeha tohunga, the over-eager splitter of species or the man whose botanical traces allow us to recreate entire regions which today are stripped of their indigenous fauna. There is the intrepid explorer and the man who kept close to home and gardened intensely. There is the angry prophet and the man who is an eternal outsider. The passionate educator and the elderly man who offered fruit from his orchard to hungry children on their way home from school.

What we can say about William Colenso is that he was never an impartial witness: you can always reply on him for an emphatic opinion. He was all light and shade, all contrast, all emphasis, all passion. There are worse things to be.

I felt, during my own wanderings around and through some of the secret corridors of his psyche that I did feel, indeed, his 'occult' power. He came, after all, from Cornwall, the land of Lancelot and the ancient Druid. Possibly his own passionate interest in Maori history and thought was activated by his own feelings for similarly prophetic strains in the culture in his Celtic past. He was unusual, extraordinary, eccentric. As a biographical companion, I can only say: I felt lucky that we met. I talked earlier about how I approached the vast continent which is William. How did I make my own voyage and return to stand before you here, at least notionally sane?

Well, as I said, I developed a way of walking, or talking. This was finding a small subject and ‘going for a walk with it’ as I called it to myself. So, if you will, I would like to include here some gentle rambles of my own. Very early on in the process of conceptualising the book - while I was trying to work out a way *in* to the subject - I began a blog, which helped me locate ‘a way of talking’. That is, by taking a fact, an aspect for a spin. It is a kind of personal take, and it is about a relationship with information as much as anything else. So, with your by and leave, I would like to ask you to loosen your academic stays and settle down for a tiki tour through my own journey towards an understanding of the vast continent known as William Colenso: think of this as a 21st century slide show....

((in here I used some earlier blogs I did on the writing of the Colenso book, querying the nature of memory and how it interlocks - or doesn't - with landscape))

To recapitulate - I think William Colenso is a wonderfully broad landscape which we can all in our own ways explore. I think it is the delight of this conference that we are, over the next few days, going to explore his nooks and crannies, his high points and deep buried valleys. It seems a timely moment for William Colenso who spent so much of his life and future under a dark cloud that he should emerge at this time in our culture. We need everything we can to survive as humans. He locked away information which nobody else actually has. Amid the exclamations, the detours, the borrowings and quotations, there are gems.

If I can close by saying this: all through his later life Colenso eagerly sought to add letters to his name. He was, after all, a lad who left school at fifteen. He looked around him and saw many other contemporaries garnering letters. He led a determined campaign to obtain these glittering prizes, all the more important to a man who had been so blatantly written out of historical records - as for example with William William's record of the Anglican church in Hawke's Bay which startlingly managed to elide Colenso completely from the record - so recognition meant to a lot to a man with a hungry and battered heart. But early on when I began my researches I came across a fellow pilgrim, if I can so use such a charged term.

This was Ian St George and fittingly we met in the tiny archive room of the old Hawke's Bay Museum and Art Gallery. This seemed fitting because it was an echo of an institution Colenso himself was so important in creating. Soon enough we were in email contact, sometimes on a daily and often on a many email a day when we had a mystery we wished to chew over. But very soon William Colenso got, what I feel would have been the most pleasant letters he could obtain. This was O.M.F. Our Mutual Friend. With these kind letters I would like to end my keynote talk by hoping this conference will further extend the act of friendship so this eternal outsider is finally welcomed back.

end

The most unlikely of God's servants—

*John Bluck's sermon,
preached in the Waiapu Cathedral on Sunday 12 November 2011.*

With the greatest respect to any of his relatives present, I'm not sure, even if I had the chance, that I would enjoy actually meeting William Colenso.

There are few figures in our New Zealand history that have been recorded in such unflattering terms as William.

Normally, the historians tread carefully with personality profiles, giving the benefit of the doubt. Not so with our man. The usually constrained NZ Dictionary of Biography calls him bitter, vindictive, judgemental, intolerant, haughty, overbearing and humourless.

And that's just for starters.

I'm fascinated with this man and his enormous achievement. But I'm not sure I'd like to meet Mr Colenso.

But I did, in a manner of speaking, one wet Sunday morning in Woodville, back in the days when I was your bishop, a lifetime ago, and in one retrospective sense his bishop, I suppose. Thank God I never had to be Mr Colenso's bishop face to face.

There we were standing in the rain outside the church, blessing a stone cairn that had been erected on the lawn to honour William's ministry in the parish of Woodville.

After 40 years of exile from the church he loved, Bishop Leonard Williams had given him a job, after Bishop Stuart before him had restored a licence to William. Brave men, both of them, to reinstate a firebrand as incendiary as William.

I blessed the stone and said a few words about how sad it was that none of William's family were present. His wife Elizabeth and son Ridley Latimer left the diocese after the scandal of William's affair with the housekeeper Ripeka, and never returned. And Wiremu, his child with Ripeka, also disappeared from the record, or so I said innocently, but rather stupidly as it turned out.

Because out of the sodden congregation, stepped Mike Pehi, a funeral director from Ashhurst. Well, as a matter of fact, he told us, "I'm William Colenso's great great grandson."

Suddenly Colenso the man was right there with us. We'd spent a year of pilgrimage bumping into him, and walking through his story at every stage, including wading in his footsteps up the river bed of the Ngaruroro from where he made his epic journeys over the Ruahine ranges.

We'd given stones from that river bed to confirmation and baptismal candidates, Colenso the missionary, the evangelist, the man of faith was reclaiming a place to stand in Waiapu, but on that wet Woodville morning, through his grandson's living, breathing

intervention, William Colenso was uncomfortably present in our midst.

I shouldn't have been surprised. The whole lesson of the Waiapu Pilgrimage Year was that the stories that made us who we are as a diocese don't go away. They live on, even when we lose track of them. When we went to Rangitukia at the start of the year, the elders said well it's about time you came back and reconnected with your history. And when we went to Maungapohatu, and stood outside Rua Kenana's house, the elders said the mountain is smiling because you've come back. Time and again the stories came alive when we rediscovered and retold them, and the people of those stories, our forebears in the faith, surrounded us on every side, a cloud of witnesses watching as we stood in bush clearings and marae and churches, some of them unlit and overgrown and neglected. And in one place, on the edge of a village that once held 2000 people where William Williams regularly held services, and taught and baptised and confirmed, we stood on the edge of the road, looking out at an empty hillside, but knowing we were not alone, as surely as we knew on that Woodville morning that William was still around.

Not everyone would agree of course, that he is worth remembering. The compilers of "For All The Saints", our official Anglican dictionary of saints to honour each day of the church's year, don't have a listing for Colenso. There is Clement of Alexandria, just before the space he should fill, and Columba of Iona, just after, but no word of William.

Is that because of his extra marital infidelity, or his bad manners. What kept him exiled for 40 years, and saw him slide from being the church's most zealous and committed missionary, to the cleric that bishops loved to avoid?

We will never know, but luckily you don't have to be a nice guy to join the communion of saints. The cloud of witnesses is full of people who you wouldn't want to marry, or even have dinner with, but who lived out the faith of Jesus Christ with such intensity, such passion, such courage, such bloody minded endurance that their legacy endures forever.

William Colenso is one of those, especially the bloody minded endurance part. He walked the length and breadth of the North Island, on journeys that took up to five months at a time, enduring impossible hardships, achieving feats of exploration, botanical discovery, and always gospel preaching and teaching that have never been equalled since. One Colenso travelling on foot would make ten contemporary clergy in four wheel drives redundant overnight.

But he made it hard for the church to appreciate him. Not only because of his improper and unbecoming conduct, and his often offensive manner.

William was an unlovely bundle of contradiction – the volatile man who was also the careful master printer, the dogmatic exaggerator who was also the meticulous scientific researcher and recorder, the judgemental puritan who was also the passionate lover, the harsh critic of Maori who was also their champion for justice, the isolated recluse who wrote 700 or 800 letters a year to an international circle of admirers.

Out of the muddle of all that, no wonder it took the diocese 40 years to forgive him,

and another 100 years to honour him.

As we should, however belatedly.

Because Colenso was in fact forging a legacy of huge importance for this church and this nation. He was working out a theology, a way of understanding how God works in the world, that he never got around to articulating. He simply lived it, and left it for us to make sense of it and value it. The scientific community especially those with botanic interests has done that ahead of the church, the academic community of historic, literary, typographic, political and geographic interests is getting on board. Hopefully the church community, especially now that we respect Maori and Pakeha tikanga to each make their own valuations, is hopefully catching up on Colenso's legacy.

And just what is this theology that Colenso quarried through his lifetime? I haven't seen it written down anywhere yet, certainly not in his own religious writing which is overloaded with sin and guilt, damnation and personal redemption language. Ironically, he sounded otherworldly in his preaching, but his preoccupation was with the things of this world in their smallest and most precise detail. He stuffed botanical specimens down his shirt front so he catalogue them for the world, he detailed the intricacies of Maori vocabulary and grammar, he audited the accounts of province and nation and argued over the last penny, he fought the runholders and speculators over the legal details of their land purchases from Maori. In all these crusades he was driven by a passion for justice and truth and transparency, and a reverence for creation in all its awesome complexity and beauty.

Listen to these words from Bagnall's biography of Colenso, describing the last days of his life: "So in the evening (of his life) the memories became shadows... with the brown sheen of kakas shaking the snow from the kowhai as they swung under the yellow flowers, the shingle tugging surf grating against the boom of its fall at Palliser (Bay)... the sweep of the hard fans of piupiu against his legs in the open beech (forest), the earthy smell of a red trodden tarn edge on a hot summer afternoon; the call of the sea mocking him home.."

This is a man who knew that God had been crafting the creation from the first morning and seeing that it was good. A man who saw and treasured its beauty, loved and savoured its every detail, every nuance, and spent his life trying to record and measure and understand it and make it work as God intended.

He did that as the most unlikely of God's servants. Afflicted, perplexed, outcast and persecuted (however deserved you might think that exile might have been), struck down, always dying so that the life of Jesus might be made more visible in his mortal flesh. This most miserable and broken of men is the one whose memory endures long after so many good and decent people whose lives of restraint and caution are long forgotten. It's Colenso the outrageous, the ambitious, the man of impossible expectations that we remember.

Paul tells us that God puts his treasures in clay jars, fragile, often dropped, easily broken. No one more so than William Colenso.

And no one who better demonstrates the gospel invitation, when all is lost and broken,

when you have exhausted your worthiness and usefulness, even your self respect, to start all over again.

The story of our church is full of disappointment and failures, people who let us down, plans that come to nothing, relationships that turned sour and curdled.

But it is equally full of stories of people who dig themselves out of that despair and make a new start and claim a new future because they believe God will empower us to do that, if we dare to ask.

Colenso asked, and turned the ruin of a life into a whole series of great achievements. That's the best part of the legacy he leaves us.

He didn't plan it that way. He'd be surprised to see us embracing him tonight. He didn't, couldn't see the way God continued to use his life and still continues to do so. Colenso would be the last to know that the seed he sowed finally fell on good ground and bore fruit. He'd be amazed to think we are part of his harvest as the people of God called Waipapu.

Colenso's harvest. God's harvest. A hundred-fold.



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The editor invites contributions on any matter relating to the life and work of the
Rev. William Colenso FLS FRS.

Such contributions should be emailed to Ian St George (istge@yahoo.co.nz).

The cover is an 1898 watercolour by Charles Rennie Mackintosh.

