

# *The Anglican Historical Society of New Zealand*

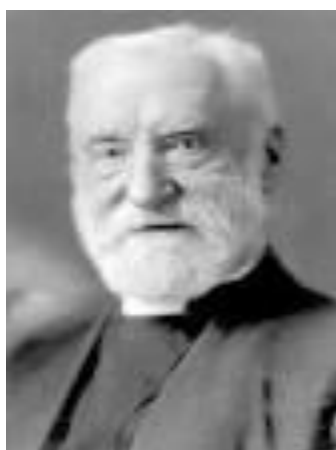
## *Te Rōpu Hītori o te Hāhi Mīhinare ki Aotearoa*

### ***Against Discrimination: Bishop Samuel Tarratt Nevill's Outreach to the Chinese Community in Dunedin***

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This paper explores the outreach of Samuel Tarratt Nevill, the bishop of Dunedin from 1871 to 1919, to the Chinese community in the city. It highlights that in the 1870s and 1880s, Nevill was a noteworthy – and, until now, neglected – friend of local Chinese. In part, the paper argues, a desire to evangelize them underscored his motives. However, it emphasises that he was also an uncommonly vocal critic of the anti-Chinese racism prevalent in New Zealand at the time. The paper notes how contemporary Anglicans might draw on Nevill's example to fight against prejudice in today's world.



Archbishop S.T. Nevill

#### **Nevill and the Chinese**

Samuel Tarratt Nevill was one of the most remarkable early leaders of the Anglican Church of Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia. He served as bishop of Dunedin for an astonishing forty-eight years, from 1871 to 1919, and later as primate of the New Zealand Church from 1904 to 1919. By the outbreak of the First World War, he was the most senior bishop by consecration in the British Empire and a grand old man of the Anglican Communion.<sup>1</sup> A cantankerous character, he alienated many people.

Nevertheless, he was also widely admired for his pastoral outlook, his scholarly abilities, and his indefatigable energy. It was his efforts that transformed Dunedin from a rural backwater into a fully-fledged diocese, complete with a stunning cathedral and an internationally accredited theological college.

Despite his significance, Nevill is nowadays little known outside of Dunedin, and has yet to receive a book-length biography. This is tragic, for Nevill, in addition to being a noteworthy theologian and pastor, ranks among the New Zealand Church's greatest social campaigners. Some of these initiatives, such as his advocacy of religious instruction in state schools, are well known. In this short paper, I highlight one his lesser-known campaigns: his desire to engage with and support the local Chinese community.

This aspect of Nevill's life is comparatively little known because it took place primarily in the 1870s and 1880s, before he became a figure of national and international prominence. Although historians have referred in passing to certain aspects of the topic (see below), this paper represents the first systematic account.

## **The Imperative of Evangelisation**

Unsurprisingly, evangelization underscored Nevill's relationship with the Chinese. Most Chinese who emigrated to Otago and Southland in the late nineteenth century were non-Christian. They faced substantial racial prejudice, to the point that some Pakeha New Zealanders considered many of them incapable of becoming proper Christians.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, because Presbyterianism was strong in Otago and Southland, missionaries to the Chinese tended to be Presbyterians.<sup>3</sup>

As a staunch Anglo-Catholic, Nevill regarded Presbyterian initiatives as inadequate. Soon after his arrival in Dunedin, he worked to win the Chinese over to Anglicanism instead. In 1876, for example, he emphasised the need to evangelise 'the 4,000 Chinese dwelling in our midst'.<sup>4</sup> Owing to the poverty of the Diocese of Dunedin and its commitment to the evangelisation of Māori and Melanesians, the Anglicans could not establish a full-blown mission to rival that of the Presbyterians.

Nevertheless, Nevill did his best to attract Chinese people to Anglicanism and to make them feel at home once inside. In early 1874, he made a pastoral visit to Leung Chung, the diocese's first Chinese convert, who became a prosperous merchant.<sup>5</sup> Not long afterwards, the diocese established a school for Dunedin-based Chinese people, and Nevill began taking biweekly Chinese lessons (I have been unable to discover which dialect he was learning).<sup>6</sup> He also publicly declared his desire that the diocese would soon have at least one priest or lay missionary specifically tasked with and trained for evangelising the Chinese.<sup>7</sup>

The results of his efforts were far less auspicious than planned: the lack of references to Cantonese lessons and the Chinese school after 1875 suggest that neither was particularly successful. The diocese also never seems to have produced a bone fide missionary to the Chinese,

though Leung Chung was said to be in training for some time.<sup>8</sup>

## **Combatting Anti-Chinese Discrimination**

Had these early efforts represented the extent of Nevill's relations with the Chinese, they would merit little more than a brief mention in the annals of Anglican Church history. However, it is crucial to recognise that Nevill did not perceive the Chinese only as potential converts, but rather as victims of a cruel and vicious prejudice. In 1870, while travelling across the United States on his way to New Zealand, Nevill encountered the extent of anti-Chinese feeling among white settlers, who loathed the Chinese as racially inferior beings who undercut their wages. Notably, Nevill had the misfortune of meeting a white worker who radiated 'an intense hatred' for the Chinese and regarded their slaughter as 'a good thing'.<sup>9</sup>

This experience drew Nevill's attention to the dangers of anti-Chinese racism. In 1880, his belief in fair treatment for Chinese immigrants in the West famously compelled him to advocate for Ah Lee, a Chinese man implicated in the murder of a white woman in Kyeburn, Otago. The subject has been explored at length in two publications,<sup>10</sup> but although they mention Nevill's defence of Ah Lee, they do not satisfactorily explain his motives. In this short paper, I cannot explore the Kyeburn Case in full detail. Suffice it to say that even at the time, it was clear that the arrest and trial of Ah Lee was absurdly biased. Ah Lee – who could not speak English well – allegedly gave a detailed statement, without an interpreter, that implicated him in the act. Furthermore, the initial interpreter used by the police to communicate with Ah Lee did not speak the same Chinese dialect, and the forensic evidence was embarrassingly thin. Despite these irregularities, a sensationalist trial ensued at the end of which Ah Lee was declared guilty and sentenced to death.

The condemned man desperately tried to communicate his innocence. However, most New Zealanders were all too willing to blame a Chinese man for the murder, and prominent Chinese New Zealanders such as Sew Hoy were reluctant to get involved lest they endanger themselves. Nevill was the only leading personage in Dunedin tirelessly to advocate for Ah Lee. Appalled by the prospect of a miscarriage of justice, Nevill visited the prison with the local chaplain and, using the convert Leung Chung as an interpreter, heard Ah Lee's raw testimony. Recognising the extent to which Ah Lee's testimony differed from the official version, and also seemed more plausible, Nevill sought to delay the execution. He also helped rally several medical professionals – among them the Anglican physician and historian Thomas Hocken – to point out the flimsiness of the forensic evidence.<sup>11</sup>

The general public lambasted Nevill for his diligence, suggesting that Ah Lee and Leung Chung were deviously taking advantage of his good nature.<sup>12</sup> With great courage, Nevill

persevered in his desire to secure justice for Ah Lee. However, he was unsuccessful, and Ah Lee was executed on 5 November 1880. Nevill and the prison chaplain visited Ah Lee the night before his death to provide religious consolation. Although not a Christian, Ah Lee thanked them for their efforts.<sup>13</sup>

### Conclusion

After the Kyeburn Case, Nevill's ecclesial responsibilities increased, and he became invested in other activist campaigns. He remained interested in the Chinese, which is why he reminisced on the tragedy of anti-Chinese racism in his autobiography. But his outreach to them faded into the background.

Nevertheless, I think that his efforts are worthy of remembrance. In an era of intense racism, he reached out to the Chinese, and when one of their number was sentenced to death in suspicious circumstances, he braved public opinion to see justice done. He may have failed to save Ah Lee, but he succeeded in reflecting the virtues that Anglicans hold dear and set a moral standard to which we should all aspire.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> H. T. Purchas, *A History of the English Church in New Zealand* (Christchurch: Simpson and Williams, 1914), 228.

<sup>2</sup> Untitled column, *Dunstan Times*, 8 October 1875, 2. Note that all newspaper articles were accessed via the National Library of New Zealand's Papers Past.

<sup>3</sup> For further discussion of Nevill's relationship to the Presbyterian mission, see Susan Chivers, 'Religion, Ethnicity and Race: The Mission of the Otago Church to the Chinese 1860–1950' (MA diss., University of Otago, 1992), 29–30.

<sup>4</sup> *Proceedings of Second Session of the Third Synod 1874* (Dunedin: Daily Times Office, 1875), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Samuel Tarratt Nevill, *Diocesan Notebook No. 1 (1870–1875)*, MS-0915, Hocken Library, Dunedin.

<sup>6</sup> Untitled column, 2.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> 'The Kyeburn Murder,' *Evening Star*, 1 November 1880, 2.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Tarratt Nevill, *Samuel Tarratt Nevill, First Bishop of Dunedin, 1871–1919. Primate of N.Z., 1904–1919 with a Short History of S. Paul's Cathedral, Dunedin* (Dunedin: Otago Daily Times and Witness Newspapers Company, 1922), 13. See also Samuel Tarratt Nevill, *Journal of a Journey to New Zealand (1870)*, MS-0166, Hocken Library, Dunedin.

<sup>10</sup> For an in-depth account, see James Ng, *Windows on a Chinese Past: Larrikinism and Violence: Immigration Issues 20th Century Assimilation: Biographies* (Dunedin: Otago Heritage Books, 1999), 39–56. See also Hazel Harrison, *Ah Lee Guilty or Not Guilty: The Story of a Brutal Murder on an Otago Goldfield* (Otago: Hazel Harrison, 2019).

<sup>11</sup> 'The Kyeburn Murder,' 2.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid; 'The Sentence of Ah Lee,' *Mount Ida Chronicle*, 4 November 1880, 2.

<sup>13</sup> 'The Execution of Ah Lee,' *Evening Post*, 8 November 1880, 3.