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Te Rōpu Hītori o te Hāhi Mīhinare ki Aotearoa

Brain Explosion or Act of Grace?

Samuel Nevill and the redemption of Frederick Platts

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Abstract

Samuel Nevill is a colossus in the history of the Diocese of Dunedin, to a lesser extent in the histories of the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, and perhaps lesser still, in the wider history of Southland and Otago. He is a complex web of contradictions. Somewhere in the interstices of good, bad and utterly ambivalent are glimpses of ... enigma. For this reader at least, few of the countless enigmas are more poignant than Nevill's interaction with Frederick Platts, erstwhile vicar of Port Chalmers, erstwhile bane of bishops across two Australian ecclesiastical provinces. To read the story of these two men and their interaction is dwell in a query. Nevill: urbane, pompous even, and powerful in his own realm. Platts: duplicitous perhaps, pugnacious apparently, and, at least when the two meet, broken. But is their confluence prolonged deception or powerful redemption? I attempt to open the envelope.

Late in the nineteenth century the Diocese of Dunedin was struggling with almost every facet of survival. The struggle was a polar contrast to the grandiose vision of the indefatigable first bishop, Samuel Nevill. Symptomatic of the cognitive dissonance between the realities of Nevill's vision and the realities of the diocesan predicament was a seemingly routine enlistment of a vicar for the then strategic parish of Holy Trinity, Port Chalmers.

While this is not ultimately a tale of Port Chalmers,¹ that perhaps idiosyncratic

community and parish are the bookends of a tale that is either cautionary or inspirational.

Nevill, it may be recalled, was fiercely determined to establish a majestic theological college in a grand diocese. His original bishop's palace, now the main building of Columba College, stands as a testament to the size of his dreams: it was to be a bishop's palace and a theological hall. Two later houses served as replicas of that original broken dream, one, Dale House, long since lost to history, the other now a stately private home in Patmos Road, Woodhaugh. A journey through Nevill's memoirs shows him travelling about his diocese from stately home to stately home, albeit with occasional uncomfortable sojourns in a woolshed or nights spent stumbling over mountain passes. He considered the imposing vicarages of Kurow and Oamaru to be suitable dwellings for his clergy and for episcopal visits.

Selwyn College was essential to his vision. But as with many of his schemes he was gazumped, on this occasion by the Diocese of Lichfield. Nevill battled on with his vision of a Selwyn College in Dunedin. By 1880 Dunedin's Selwyn was operating on about 5% of the financial basis of the Cambridge college. Synod Papers recorded a balance of £1727 in the Theological College Fund, with a further asset of £300 owed by the Port Chalmers vestry.² To address this awkward aspect of Selwyn College's survival, Nevill made arrangements with the Rev'd Frederick Platts, the Vicar of Holy Trinity Port Chalmers, to oversee the theological students.

These arrangements survived only briefly, and Platts stepped aside from that role within his first year. Nevill apparently had a soft spot for Platts, who he farewelled in 1899 in a synod address as having borne his final illness 'with exemplary fortitude and Christian resignation for more than twelve months.' Stoicism was that most Victorian of manly attributes and melded well with what Nevill called 'the brave, patient, and faithful manner' with which Platts had 'ever fulfilled those duties,' as vicar of Port Chalmers, 'so long as he was physically able to do so.' This, Nevill pronounced, 'has commanded the respect of all, as the learning and ability he displayed has called forth their admiration.'³

This was not the complete story of Platt's *curriculum vitae*. Nevill had brought Platts to Dunedin after a largely unsuccessful recruiting drive in Melbourne, but that is only a hint of the complexities. Platts' life poses challenging questions of faith, protocol, propriety, and of the tarnished human beings that are Christ's people. To take a closer scrutiny of the events that transpired in Platts' Australian life is to explore questions around fall and redemption, or perhaps manipulation, exploitation and restitution, questions of the flawed DNA of being human, and therefore as an institution of humans, the flawed DNA of being Body of Christ.

Platts' appointment by Nevill and the high regard with which the bishop held him raise many questions, not least about Nevill's own outlook and focus. On Platts' claim to hold his M.A. with first class honours, Kenneth Cable noted, 'this is very doubtful, for Platts in 1848 failed a scholarship examination.'⁴ This is a characteristic *oeuvre* into the complexities of Platts.

Platts was not the most immediately obvious candidate to import to the diocese, or to be entrusted with oversight of theological students. Ray Hargreaves notes that Nevill journeyed 'across the Tasman to Victoria and New South Wales in search of clergy,' and that he 'failed' in

the task.⁵ But Nevill found Platts and enticed him eastward.

Bishops in the nineteenth century were not bound by protocols of 'safe to receive' that emerged following Royal Commissions on both sides of the Tasman in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century. Nevill accepted Platts on little less than a desperate whim, despite his 1889 request to synod that clergy take note of General Synod's stipulation that Letters Commendatory should be received when church officials were transferring location. 'It is almost as much required for persons passing merely out of one parish into another as for those who go into some other country,' Nevill advised his synod.⁶

The past is a different country. Bishops were more cavalier about shipping a problem priest from their diocese to that of a gullible episcopal colleague. Platts at the time of his appointment to Port Chalmers had only recently been involved in extremely public difficulties, reported on both sides of the Tasman. It is hard to know whether, when in 1889 Nevill was laying down the law regarding Letters Commendatory, he was regretting or forgetting his appointment of Frederick Platts nearly a decade earlier; later in his 1889 address he appears to return to the question:

*'A clergyman will be brought from a distance sufficient to ensure that only the broad outlines of his life are known, and the picture can be filled in by the imagination, to occupy an advantageous position of which a clergyman of the diocese may be no less worthy. Perhaps my own opinion is that diocesan nominators were intended to check these hardships; but if they do not operate in that direction some system of alternate presentations should enable a bishop to reward good work and keep for the service of his diocese men who have proved their value therein.'*⁷

In that context Nevill was defending his right to hold on to clergy who had proved their worth in his diocese – he was alluding to the resignation

of John Hobbs from Matura and Tapanui and Algernon Kerkham from Roslyn.⁸ Hobbs' and Kerkham's resignations were levered by malicious parties, on the basis of what Nevill called 'trumpery.'⁹ The ritually-inclined Hobbs and Kerkham, not (probably equally ritualist) Frederick Platts, are in 1889 the recipient of the malicious attention that Nevill laments.

In Hobbs' case the malice was precursor to a breakdown in Hobbs' mental health which occurred after he departed for Hastings. For Kerkham the horror had been his blatant papalism in the use of a processional cross.¹⁰ As Nevill obscurely defended his right to have appointed the two high and highly effective churchmen now departing, the ramifications for his procurement of Platts' services from Melbourne seems to have been equally on his mind as he made veiled reference in his charge, deploring inconsistencies in appointment procedures. The thinly veiled subtext of the strange digression in the 1889 Address to Synod was that Nevill would appoint whoever Nevill wanted.

Platts was born and grew up in India, He studied and taught both in India and England, but decided to emigrate to Australia. He was made deacon and ordained priest in the Diocese of Adelaide, under the auspices of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel. He is listed in Cable and in Blain¹¹ as assistant curate, then incumbent in the salubrious Parish of St Andrew's, Walkerville,¹² as deacon from December 1851 to March 1853, and as priest incumbent from September 1853 to 1860 (perhaps February), when he undertook a curacy in Castlemaine, Victoria for eighteen months.

Matters are far more complex than this listing suggests. In an extraordinary¹³ address to his synod the Bishop of Adelaide, Augustus Short, delivered a dedicated exposé of concerns regarding Frederick Platts.¹⁴ Apart from anything else, Short maintained that Platts 'never *legally*

was instituted Incumbent of St. Andrew's (Walkerville).¹⁵ Short highlighted serious irregularities, at best, in Platts' behaviour, and potentially outright deceit in the oaths and declarations Platts made prior to his ordination as a priest and transition to the priestly oversight of St. Andrew's.

Platts' early proclivity for disingenuous behaviour did him no favours when he descended into further turmoil in the courts. It is technically true that, prior to his priesting Platts was the deacon in charge at St. Andrew's Walkerville (1851 to 1853). From 1854 Platts' record becomes more complex than merely his bishop's suggestion that his orders were invalid. Parenthetically, but not without significance in his subsequent journey, Platts held appointment while refusing to be a part of the diocesan synod.

Platts apparently resigned the cure of St Andrew's, on good terms with the congregation, as a result of ill-health.¹⁶ During what appears to have been a period of recuperation he made influential connections within the nascent Parish of Glen Osmond. Platts established a relationship with the influential first Colonial Treasurer of the South Australian Company, Osmond Gilles, 'a widower without family,'¹⁷ and resided with the older man, and a family named Bulls, from the beginning of June to the beginning of October 1854.¹⁸ Platts accepted Gilles' offer to endow a place at Glen Osmond, became a trustee of the gift of land for church and investment, and a beneficiary insofar as he was named first incumbent of the parish. It is probable that Gilles was aware of Platts' talents as a priest from some association with nearby St. Andrew's Walkerville.

It is impossible from the perspective of 125+ years to ascertain either man's motives in the friendship, but boundaries of professional propriety were crossed not least in Platts' position as trustee and beneficiary. Clearly some form of dangerous co-dependency was established. Gilles, approaching the end of his

life, and perhaps lonely in his post-marital state,¹⁹ was transfixed by what he considered to be Platts' outstanding qualities as a priest and pastor. Platts' saw the benefits, altruistically or otherwise.

It is possible that Platts' motives were entirely pure as the relationship developed. It is equally possible that he saw an opportunity for self-advancement, for gains both fiscal and vocational. Either way, matters soon soured severely.

The Trust Deed for the gift from Osmond Gilles, of land and stone for a church and rectory at Glen Osmond, was drawn up in 1854. At least four Trustees were appointed to ensure that the rector and his two wardens observed the conditions of the Trust Deed ... The Reverend F. C. Platts was appointed as the first Incumbent. The first meeting of prospective donors to the Building Fund (the congregation already formed had occasionally come up to 150) was on 2nd November 1854. At the meeting, a rumour concerning surreptitious dealings by Platts with Osmond Gilles was raised. He explained, to the satisfaction of the meeting, that not only had it been possible to receive the original grant of 3 acres but also an additional 2 acres for a cemetery.²⁰

This last was a claim far removed from subsequent allegations that reached the Bishop and Synod of Adelaide, that 'the delay in erecting the church at Glen Osmond arose from an attempt made by the trustees, but mainly by one of them, meaning Mr. Platts, to alter the site of the Church and the trusts relating thereto, to such as were not intended by the donor, Mr. Gilles.'²¹ Platts' success in persuading the prospective donors to the Glen Osmond Building Fund of his virtues put off attacks on his interests for a while, but it seems that progress in developing Mr. Gilles' vision stalled. Those delays brought matters to the attention of the diocesan

authorities, and eventually a letter was written to those authorities making the serious allegations against Platts' professional, sexual and spiritual integrity. There were clearly irreconcilable breakdowns in professional relations between Gilles and Platts, in domiciliary arrangements between Platts on the one hand and the Bulls family and Gilles on the other, and between Platts and a powerful group of prospective donors.

Consequently, matters reached the Bishop Short and his synod, and the bishop made an extraordinary address to synod:

*'Mr. Platts, in spite of my withdrawal of his licence, continues to officiate at Glen Osmond and to enjoy the endowment. This contumacy would seem to justify ulterior proceedings; such for example as citing him to appear before me in Synod; and in case of refusal to appear, deposition from the office of Presbyter in the Church.'*²²

This response of the bishop however, brought Platts to a civil sitting of the Supreme Court. *Inter alia* Mr. and Mrs. Bull had made personal accusations against Platts which included the suggestion that he had failed to say grace at meals.²³ More damaging was the accusation that he was procuring young women either for prostitution or otherwise as sexual partners. In a civil trial in the Supreme Court in 1858²⁴ several matters were discussed at considerable length, and no doubt expense. The impasse was in the end such that, after two days and a night's sequestration, the jury failed to reach a verdict and the trial was declared a non-suit. Platts now considered that he had serious basis for grievance: he maintained that the claims against him that had resulted in his being deprived of his licence were false.

Platts was capable of chicanery. His argument that he was not technically a member of the diocesan synod was a strategic claim. His point was that synod had no jurisdiction over him,

therefore he could now assert that his deposition and deprivation were invalid. He insisted that the 'Synod did not proceed according to its own constituted rules or modes of proceeding.' Certainly, the fact that Short had established an investigation into Platts' behaviour without notifying him as defendant was a breach of natural justice. The Bulls' and Gilles' allegations of sexual impropriety were dubious; made with reference to the period June to early October 1854, when Platts was living in the shared home, they need to be set alongside the fact that he married his first wife, Emma Walton, in July 1855. While not impossible, the conjugal arrangements must have followed rapidly on the heels of a somewhat public dalliance if the allegations were true. Miss Walton and her family would have to have been very long-suffering to have welcomed Platts into their lives in these circumstances. Yet this alleged impropriety was in part the matter reported on by Bishop Short at synod.

The fact that a letter had been written to Short maligning Platts generated a court case, determining whether claims made in the letter were classifiable as privileged information. If they were privileged the claims were quarantined from libel action by Platts (either at the time they were written or fifteen months later when they were cited).²⁵ But Platts had miscalculated the risks of calling for legal action. Legal subtleties around confidentiality and privileged communication sank Platts' first case, and his hearing was declared a non-trial. He brought another case, naming a Mr. Stocks (secretary of the synod) as a representative defendant; Platts argued that the myriad accusations made against him were calumny. These now were primarily that he had delayed the erection of St. Saviour's, the Glen Osmond church Gilles had originally commissioned. The diocesan committee had found that Platts 'had been guilty of blameable and disgraceful conduct, and thereby had prevented the erection of the Church.'²⁶ Platts argued that the

committee were *ultra vires*, with no right to investigate or make such a finding. The Supreme Court disagreed with Platts.

He was not finished. By 1859 he had brought a libel case against Gilles, arguing that Gilles' actions had deprived him of income when the bishop deposed him, that he was left only 'some other emoluments' being 'receipt of £100 a year from the Leigh Fund,'²⁷ and some income as he 'had authority as surrogate to issue marriage licences.'²⁸ The court engaged in laborious argument before the judge ruled that the case needed to be tried again. Platts had in financial terms been deeply disadvantaged by his delicensing, and the judge referred the matter forward, as being suitable for trial by a 'Special Jury.'²⁹ Realistically though Platts could not go on. The financial cost was inevitably building, and in March 1859 he was declared insolvent:

*'After some further remarks, the Commissioner said he could hardly grant a first-class certificate, for without meaning anything unkind, he could hardly suppose that his (Mr. Platts') insolvency was wholly unavoidable. He could not say it was wrong to bring actions for 'libel.' That was left at every man's own discretion; but as the insolvency in that case was partly attributable to the loss of those actions, he (the Commissioner) could not affirm that it was altogether unavoidable. He would, however, readily grant an immediate second-class certificate.'*³⁰

As Platt's counsel observed, Gilles and others were well-resourced. Gilles was 'a gentleman well known as a person of great opulence, a proof of which could be seen in the array of professional talent he had secured, and which nothing but great wealth could command.'³¹ There was no way forward for the wayward clergyman, at least in South Australia. He moved, therefore, to Castlemaine, in Victoria, then Sandridge (now Port Melbourne).

In 1868 he appears in newspapers again when a large group of frustrated parishioners, who had

not been able to gain a hearing with the Bishop of Melbourne,³² Charles Perry, published a Public Notice in *The Age*, Melbourne's primary broadsheet. It was addressed to 'Rev. F. C. Platts, M.A., Incumbent of Trinity Church, Sandridge':
*'We, the undersigned, members of the Church of England, residing at Sandridge, feeling deeply grieved at the deplorable state of Trinity Church, and seeing no prospect of any improvement, deem it our duty respectfully to suggest the desirability of your removing to some other sphere of labor, for we are of opinion that the personal differences existing between yourself and former supporters of the church prevent any union amongst its members and seriously cripple its resources.'*³³

As it happened the notice appeared at the same time as a notice observing that the priest in charge of the neighbouring parish, St. Kilda, was being investigated for inappropriate behaviour towards a young woman – possibly a child, as she was a confirmation candidate – in his care. Regarding Platts, the notice read:

'The trustees of Trinity Church, Sandridge, hereby caution all persons owing money to or on behalf of said church, against paying the same to the Rev. F. C. Platts, or anyone acting on his behalf, the said F. C. Platts having no authority from us for collecting, receiving, or disbursing any moneys whatever on behalf of the church.'

The notices were picked up and juxtaposed by the satirical paper *Melbourne Punch*, with acerbic observation 'Either these reverend gentlemen are being sadly persecuted, or else they must be unfit for their holy office. If persecuted, what is the Bishop about? If they are wolves in sheep's clothing, how is it that our Diocesan permits such a disgrace to his Church to exist in his diocese?'³⁴

Platts responded to the claims with indignation. Reading between the lines of his response and ignoring the fact that his ministry was generating disproportionate levels of controversy, he

revealed something of his own short fallings at least as much of the wrongs of those whose claims he seeks to counter. In the background, as *Punch* hinted, there is an issue of Bishop Perry failing to hear the grievances of congregation members. There seem in Platts' defence to be hints that that the complaints were driven by the inadequacies of a poorly designed and executed ecumenism. Platts had 'a troublous time' when he took on the charge of the parish, and the authors of the public letter, 'who have been nursing their malevolence ever since,' were 'prominent members, as well as the rank and file, of the Presbyterian and other Dissenting establishments in this parish.' Perhaps by 'parish' he meant the geographical rather than congregational use, but it is very clear that Platts was not in edifying relationship with those he labelled 'Dissenters.'³⁵ Platts was however adamant that he was 'at peace with my congregation, which is composed in the main of *bona-fide* church people,' and indicated that he oversaw a vibrant and financially secure church, notwithstanding and tellingly 'no longer a mixed Anglican and Presbyterian one as of yore.'³⁶

The controversy was never going to abate easily: the trustees of the church returned to print. They vehemently refuted Platts' claims, citing a barrage of numerical attendance records³⁷ and, with some detail, financial statements³⁸ to do so. Platts went to print again and argued that the signatories had long since ceased to have anything to do with the parish,³⁹ that three of them no longer resided in the district, none attended, and that they had not consulted with officials from his church. While it is surprising that the correspondents would risk such detailed claims if Platts' last allegation were correct, that appears to have been the case. Both Platts (at some length) and the current Church Committee (or representatives of it) refuted the claims made by the absentee critics. Platts argued that these critics' attendance records were the reverse of the actual case, that they had argued on the basis

of an incorrect start year for his incumbency,⁴⁰ and that their financial claims were highly spurious (with the exception of an overdraft of which their public announcement was his first knowledge).⁴¹ The editor wisely declared the correspondence closed.

Platts was not able to keep below the parapet, however. By February 1869 there were suggestions that he had misappropriated funds directed to 'a Seaman's Mission,' presumably the Port Melbourne branch of the then Missions to Seamen, though the bishop referred to 'the Parochial Seamen's Mission Society.'⁴² After a commission appointed by the synod investigated the matter, the Bishop of Melbourne informed his synod:

*'I do not blame the incumbent of Sandridge for visiting the ships at the pier, and, if his parochial duties permit those in the bay also, nor do I blame the Church Committee for applying to the captains and officers of such ship for contributions towards the expenses of the church at Sandridge; but I say distinctly and emphatically that the incumbent has no claim to be regarded as a missionary to the seamen, and that the amount so collected ought to be regarded by the committee in the character of parochial contributions, and entered in the account accordingly.'*⁴³

Platts simply responded by emphasising that 'he was perfectly entitled to regard his work as missionary work, and to speak of it under that name, and in that light. He had always in applying to officers of ships been careful to explain the exact state of the case.' His bishop acquiesced.⁴⁴ The bishop had however previously strained relationships with Platts and his parish by refusing to allocate a portion of a government grant to the parish, perhaps precipitating Platts' cap in hand approach to vessels as he, to give him the benefit of the doubt, continued to exercise his private mission. The reporter in *The Age*, who had already taken a set against the bishop,⁴⁵ raised the issue of the funds withheld from

Platts' parish, and put the question 'Why not candidly state that he desires to get rid of the Rev. Mr. Platts?'⁴⁶

If such were Perry's aim, he did not succeed. Nor did Platts' name disappear from either the newspapers or the court records. In 1868, about the same time that Platts was entangled in the financial questions regarding the Seaman's Mission, the parents of two girls at a local school informed him that the headmaster of a local school in his parish, a Mr. Lomax, had 'taken indecent liberties'⁴⁷ with the girls. While it is to be hoped that the atrocities of 125 years since have finally taught church authorities correct responses to such complaints, Platts' response was lax even by the standards of his time. Relying perhaps on the spurious assumption that Holy Orders had imbued him with some kind of judicial wisdom, he chose to prefer the account of Mr Lomax over that of the girls' mothers; 'It was not possible that Lomax could behave as was reported in the face of the whole school and in the presence of two female assistants.'⁴⁸ He declined to investigate further. As Lomax was already intending to resign, Platts permitted him an arrangement of leave on full pay.

A Mr. Bayston was appointed as acting principal, but Platts, who *ex officio* was 'correspondent,' effectively manager, of the school board, soon fell out with him, and arranged for his sacking for 'contemptuous conduct to the local committee, and of using gross and offensive epithets to Mr. Platts.'⁴⁹ Members of the church committee, some of whom may have previously been hostile to Platts, complained to the diocese regarding Platts' handling of the Lomax and Bayston matters, but the diocesan authorities declined to investigate further. At this point Platts, who at the very least appears to have acted imprudently, may have been able to let the matter rest, but he decided to return to previous form, and took the elected chair of the church committee, Walter Wright, to the Supreme Court for libel.

The case brought by Platts failed on all counts, 'and some rather severe remarks were made as to the case being taken into court at all.' Costs were awarded against Platts, and Platts was more than willing, he said in a letter to his bishop, to repay Wright's costs. He advised his bishop that the repayments would, on the basis of Platts' having 'a narrow and precarious income and a large family,' take some time. He told the bishop that he had inadvertently brought the case to court 'under a misapprehension of a most important fact,' and deeply regretted the 'pecuniary injury' he had caused Mr Wright. He was obsequiously apologetic to the bishop for causing distress to 'the church at large in this colony,' but had 'the honor to remain your lordship's most obedient, faithful servant.'⁵⁰ As it happens, he failed to make any repayment to Wright.

By 1880 there was irrepressible dissatisfaction with Platts' ministry at Sandridge, and offers of a payout were made to him, on the proviso he resigned. His position became untenable, though he still had a small number of supporters. Accounts of the next series of events differ, but the basic sequence was that on some basis Platts accepted the proposition of a pay-out in the vicinity of £600 in return for the immediate cessation of his role as incumbent of the Parish of Sandridge, and his evacuation of the premises by 6:00 p.m. on the night of the settlement. The moneys he requested were quickly raised by members of the church, past and present. A meeting was called of interested parties, and inspection was made of the premises to ensure the Platts family's evacuation was complete and in order. Following that the parties re-assembled to conduct formal exchange of the money and a letter of resignation. After ensuring all was in order Platts handed over his letter and received just over £600. Unfortunately for him however, amongst a handful of faces present that he had nor recognized was Mr. Mays, officer acting on behalf of the Sherriff, who immediately seized

the cash (Platts had refused to accept a cheque).⁵¹ A short-lived but apparently, if *The Herald's* somewhat tabloid reporter is to be believed, quite vigorous tussle ensued⁵² before Platts gave up and the incumbency was ended: '*His resignation was duly forwarded to the Bishop of Melbourne who, without any delay, accepted it, and sent an acknowledgement to that effect.*'⁵³

There was a small denouement for each side of the altercation. The Dean of Melbourne – the bishop was away at Lorne on the south coast – met with the parishioners of Trinity Church, elected a new committee, and moved not to receive a letter of complaint from Platts. Captain Wright also wrote, returning some money given to him by parishioners horrified at the way Platts had left him out of pocket. A series of papers that 'purported to be a statement of accounts which were unaccompanied by vouchers' were also received from Platts, but the meeting declined to pass them.⁵⁴

Separately, Platts advertised for a meeting of his supporters at a nearby hotel, called 'for the purpose of considering the circumstances under which the resignation of Mr. Platts of the incumbency of the church at Sandridge was obtained.' Platts predictably claimed his resignation was 'obtained by chicanery,' and that, therefore the Bishop of Melbourne, by then Dr. John Moorhouse, should refuse to accept it. Some suggested that Platts should establish an independent, non-aligned church, but it was considered too difficult. In the end a motion was unanimously passed 'that a deputation of the anti-resignation committee wait upon the Bishop and explain the circumstances under which the resignation was obtained and ask him to be good enough to appoint Mr. Platts to some cure whereby he could earn a living for himself and family.' It was also decided to canvass the district for support of a petition to the bishop, 'in favor of Mr. Platts being appointed to some cure.' The petitioners were probably not thinking of Port

Chalmers. By late May 1880 Platts was ensconced as incumbent of that church.

What was Nevill thinking? The story of Platts' crises had crossed the Tasman into New Zealand newspapers on several occasions,⁵⁵ so it is not as if his misfortunes or misdemeanours were unknown. His churchmanship, which can to a degree be gleaned from his dislike of 'Dissenters,' may have suited those aspects of Nevill's vision that had already caused some outrage in New Zealand church circles. But was that enough to pluck him from unemployment in Melbourne and place him in a cure in Otago? Or did Nevill remain wholly unaware of the reports about this man, and accept a spurious recommendation from his counterpart in Melbourne, Dr. Moorhouse? The question might also be put whether the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel's withdrawal of funding to the Diocese of Dunedin at the time of Platts' appointment was an expression of dissatisfaction at the appointment of their wayward protegee.⁵⁶

Was Nevill's perhaps an act of grace, offering a flawed human being yet another fresh start in ministry and life? Nevill's motives are lost, but it was a remarkably brave appointment, as Sir Humphrey Appelby might say. By June 29th Mrs Platts and her large family of children and stepchildren⁵⁷ were overnighing in Bluff, *en route* for Port Chalmers and a new home. Platts' daughter by his first marriage, who enjoyed a close bond with her stepmother, went on to a remarkable career as one of New Zealand's pioneer female doctors, Dr. Daisy Platts-Mills.⁵⁸ A son, Frederick William Platts, was a district coroner, magistrate, and erstwhile Commissioner to Rarotonga.⁵⁹ Another, Herbert, was a sea captain and novelist.⁶⁰ Whatever happened as the Rev'd Frederick Platts crossed the Tasman appears to have initiated a long-lasting redemption of the family mana. Platts appears, if his occasional mentions in diocesan papers and press reports are indicative, to have gone on to enjoy an almost unblemished and trusted career.

He surfaced from time to time to champion orthodox causes, arguing for example in the *Evening Star* for Christian input to state education.⁶¹ He continued to conduct fruitful ministry at both diocesan and parish levels, until laid low by liver disease late in his life.

Almost unblemished: he surfaced briefly in correspondence with the Archbishop of Canterbury, Edward Benson, seeking permission to raise funds in Britain for his Port Chalmers parish. Rather than permission he received something of a cease and desist in his use of Benson's name and title to aid his effort. The moment passes, but it is of interest that Platts appears to have used a letter of commendation from Nevill to enhance his reputation. The brief appearance in Benson's correspondence ended and Platts presumably discontinued his ploy.⁶² He is buried in the old section of the New Port Chalmers Cemetery, where he shares a grave with an Ivy Beatrice Platts (buried in 1967).⁶³ The lettering on the grave is almost indecipherable now, but a plain cement cross stands firm above it. Perhaps that is a fitting tribute to a complex life journey.

Mrs Platts moved on to widowhood, later living with her stepdaughter Daisy Platts-Mills in Wellington. She died on Holy Saturday, Easter weekend 1932, and is buried in the churchyard of St. Mary's, Karori.⁶⁴ One of her sons, John Faithful Fortescue Platts-Mills, QC (1906–2001) in turn became a noted lawyer and left-wing politician in London, and the name Platts-Mills continues in legal circles in that city.

Conclusion

The story of Platts' life, until he crossed the Tasman, is hardly the stuff of holiness and integrity. The decision of Nevill to appoint him to nurture a struggling theological college and pastor a strategic parish was either inspired or foolhardy. Yet neither of those adjectives is altogether unusual in a reflection on the life of Samuel Nevill.

Ultimately the hints of redemption outweigh the saga of chicanery. Or do they? Platts' brief interaction with the Archbishop of Canterbury delivers a hint about leopards and their spots. Or maybe it doesn't. Maybe Platts was simply striving for the best for his faith community and its mission. Ultimately, if the story of the interaction of these two men is a cautionary tale, the moral of the tale remains frustratingly elusive.

Still: the Parish of Port Chalmers and the Diocese of Dunedin still stumble on and are bigger than the individual players in their history.

In a more cautious world Platts' redemption could never have occurred, yet the strange questions, should it have occurred, should it have occurred in this way, remain.

Endnotes

¹ In which parish this writer officially resides, although I am rarely able to be present amongst its faithful band of worshippers.

² Synod Papers 1880, 74.

³ 'Funeral of the Late F. C. Platts,' *Otago Daily Times*, June 6th, 1900, 7.

⁴ Cable, 'Platts, Frederick Charles.' *Anglican History*, 2006.

⁵ Hargreaves, *Selwyn College's First Century*, 11.

⁶ Nevill, Address to the Second Session of the Eighth Synod, November 6th, 1889. Synod Papers 1889, 11.

⁷ Nevill, Address to the Second Session of the Eighth Synod, November 6th, 1889. Synod Papers 1889, 14.

⁸ 'I do not think it necessary to refer more specifically to the circumstances which have brought about Mr Kerkham's withdrawal than to say that our church system is not to be held responsible for action which was very largely an abuse of it; and that I felt it to be my duty when, upon my return to this diocese, I was officially informed by the Vestry of St. John's of what had taken place, to express to them as strongly as possible that in my judgment their action was in entire contravention of the specific purposes for which a vestry is called into existence. I am not without hope that many now regret sincerely the action into which they were led in a time of excitement by the influence of others, and I earnestly pray that God may not visit upon this diocese, or upon individuals within it, the sin of driving forth one of his most devoted servants.' Nevill, Address to the Second Session of the Eighth Synod, November 6th, 1889. Synod Papers 1889, 14.

⁹ Nevill, Address to the Second Session of the Eighth Synod, November 6th, 1889. Synod Papers 1889, 14.

¹⁰ James Smith, 'Episcopal Autocracy.' Letter to the Editor, *Otago Daily Times*, November 23rd, 1892, 4.

¹¹ Blain Biographical Directory.

¹² Where the present author served as *locum* in 1997/8.

¹³ In both the popular and procedural sense of the word.

¹⁴ I wish to express my thanks to Dr. Sarah Black, Diocesan Archivist for the Diocese of Adelaide, for drawing my attention to and providing me with material regarding Platts' controversial history in that diocese.

¹⁵ Synod Papers of the Diocese of Adelaide, 1858, Appendix E, 28. St Andrew's Walkerville however is one of a handful of parishes in the diocese whose deed of establishment do not rely on the bishop (later designated Archbishop) for appointment.

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- ¹⁶ 'Supreme Court, Civil Side.' *South Australian Register*, June 30th, 1858, 3. Even the question of his resignation appears complex, and there appear to be suggestions he maintained two licenses through the next few years.
- ¹⁷ 'Supreme Court, Civil Sittings.' *South Australian Advertiser*, October 5th, 1858, 3.
- ¹⁸ 'Platts v. Stocks,' *The South Australian Weekly Chronicle*, October 9th, 1858, 5.
- ¹⁹ 'It is, however, very inconvenient for me at my time of life to leave my own parish to attend another church, especially as I have provided for a minister in my own neighbourhood, hoping thereby to receive to myself spiritual benefit.' 'Platts v. Gilles,' *The Adelaide Observer*, March 26th, 1859, 3. The quotation is from a letter of Osmond Gilles to the committee of synod reporting on delays in the development of the Glen Osmond parish and church, and addressed to Stocks as secretary of that committee.
- ²⁰ Roedinger and Littleton, (eds.), *Spiritual Presence*, 13.
- ²¹ 'Platts v. Stocks,' *South Australian Weekly Chronicle* October 9th, 1858, 5.
- ²² Augustus Short, 'Address Regarding Glen Osmond,' Extraordinary Address to Synod. Synod Papers of the Diocese of Adelaide, 1858, Appendix E, 28.
- ²³ 'Platts v., Gilles,' *South Australian Register*, November 18th, 1858, 3.
- ²⁴ South Australian Supreme Court, *Platts v. Stocks*, 1858.
- ²⁵ 'Platts v. Gilles,' *Adelaide Observer*, March 26th, 1859, 3.
- ²⁶ 'Platts v. Stocks,' *South Australian Advertiser*, December 23rd, 1858, 3.
- ²⁷ The financial wing of SPG, Platts' original sponsor.
- ²⁸ 'Platts v. Gilles,' *Adelaide Observer*, March 26th, 1859, 3.
- ²⁹ Effectively a 'specialist' jury, appointed to hear civil cases, and not dissimilar to a specialist tribunal today. The practice was established in the 17th and abolished in the 20th century.
- ³⁰ 'Insolvency Court,' *South Australian Advertiser*, May 4th, 1859, 3.
- ³¹ 'Platts v. Gilles,' *Adelaide Observer*, March 26th, 1859, 3.
- ³² The Melbourne Diocesan Bishop was not designated Archbishop until 1905.
- ³³ Public Notices,' 'To the Rev. F. C. Platts,' *The Age* May 16th, 1868, 1.
- ³⁴ 'Stains on the 'Cloth,' *Melbourne Punch* May 28th, 1868, 7.
- ³⁵ The term was never applicable in Australia – or New Zealand – where there was no state church structure from which to dissent.
- ³⁶ Quotations in this paragraph are from Platts' Letter to the Editor published in *The Argus*, May 18th, 1868, 7. Though *The Argus* and *The Age* were competitors, the controversy was covered by both publications.
- ³⁷ 'Until shortly after Mr. Platts' appointment the congregation seldom numbered less than 200, whereas now it is but seldom there are more than thirty adults assemble in the church.' *The Argus*, May 25th, 1868, 7.
- ³⁸ 'The printed balance-sheet, duly audited by competent persons, for the year 1860 being the year previous to Mr. Platts' appointment shows that in that year the trustees received from pew-rents £102 13s., and offertories £168 14s.; while for 1867 only £46 were received from the former, and £89 6s. 11 ½d. from the latter: together, being less than one half the revenue for 1860. In 1860 a small balance of some £6 was due to the then treasurer, and a bank overdraft of about £70. The balance-sheet for 1867 shows that there are owing to Mr. Platts himself about £230, organist £16; and we have received notice from the bank that the overdraft now amounts to nearly £140. Letter to the Editor, The Rev Mr. Platts, of Sandridge, *The Argus*, May 25th, 1868, 7.
- ³⁹ 'The first three of these gentlemen live miles away from Sandridge, and have most sacredly kept themselves out of sight for more than six years. The fourth, Mr. Swallow, who is a parishioner, has ceased

for the last eighteen months, either to attend, or support, or in any way to identify himself with the church here; and I only know him now as an active promoter of the very disingenuous address which I recently commented upon in your columns.' Letter to the Editor, The Rev. F. C. Platts,' *The Argus*, June 2nd, 1868, 5.

⁴⁰ He began in the parish in 1862, following, he emphasises, a year of bitter dispute in which the correspondents were key protagonists.

⁴¹ Platts, Letter to the Editor, *The Argus*, June 2nd, 1868, 5.

⁴² 'Church Assembly of Victoria: Notices of Motion: Sandridge Church,' *The Argus*, February 9th, 1869, 6.

⁴³ 'Church Assembly of Victoria: Fifth Day,' *The Argus*, February 9th, 1869, 6.

⁴⁴ 'Church Assembly of Victoria: Fifth Day,' *The Argus*, February 9th, 1869, 6. Platts, perhaps deliberately, 'spoke so inaudibly that only a portion of his remarks could be heard.'

⁴⁵ 'We are sorry to say that the address of the bishop is not so interesting as it should be.' Leading Article, *The Age*, February 4th, 2. The author noted, too that the Church of England was failing to exercise beneficial influence on society. *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ Leading Article, *The Age*, February 4th, 2.

⁴⁷ 'Libel Case, Platts v Wright,' *Leader* (Melbourne) March 16th, 1872, 15.

⁴⁸ 'Law Report: Supreme Court. Platts v. Wright.' *The Argus*, March 16th, 1872, 1.

⁴⁹ 'Law Report: Supreme Court. Platts v. Wright.' *The Argus*, March 16th, 1872, 1.

⁵⁰ All quotations in this paragraph are from coverage of the events cited, including a letter to Bishop Perry. See 'The Parson and the Sheriff's Officer,' *The Herald*, January 13th, 1880, 2-3.

⁵¹ 'The Parson and the Sheriff's Officer,' *The Herald*, January 13th, 1880, 3.

⁵² 'The Parson and the Sheriff's Officer,' *The Herald*, January 13th, 1880, 3.

⁵³ 'The Parson and the Sheriff's Officer,' *The Herald*, January 13th, 1880, 3.

⁵⁴ 'Holy Trinity Church, Sandridge,' *The Argus*, January 28th, 1880, 6.

⁵⁵ See e.g. 'Our Melbourne Letter,' *Temuka Leader*, January 22nd, 1880, 2, or 'Australian News,' *New Zealand Herald*, February 2nd, 1880, 5.

⁵⁶ Synod Papers 1880, 72.

⁵⁷ Mrs. Platts is reported as transiting through Hobart with her infant daughter Miss Lloyd, Daughters Daisy and Myrtle, and sons W. and H. Platts.

⁵⁸ Daisy Platts-Mills was a graduate of Otago Girls High and Otago Medical School, 'one of the group of four women who followed the pioneers Emily Siedeberg and Margaret Cruickshank.' *TeAra*, 'Platts-Mills, Daisy Elizabeth.' <https://teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/3p29/platts-mills-daisy-elizabeth>. Accessed October 27th, 2021. She graduated from medical school in 1900, and practiced in Kurow before moving to an outstanding career in Wellington.

⁵⁹ Obituary, *New Zealand Herald*, May 26th, 1941, 9.

⁶⁰ Obituary, *Hokitika Guardian*, February 22nd, 1940, 4.

⁶¹ 'Church and State,' *Evening Star*, January 24th, 1895, 2.

⁶² See Frappells et al., *Anglicans in the Antipodes*, 85.

⁶³ <https://tiny.url.com/4fffcjzz>. I was able to visit the grave in person, as it is less than a kilometre from my home.

⁶⁴ Obituary, *Otago Daily Times*, April 2nd, 1932, 9.