The Incredible Mr Colenso

By Keith Newman

After printing the first New Zealand books and recording the only eyewitness account of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, William Colenso continued to make history in Hawke’s Bay as a man of science and faith.

Colenso, born in 1811 in Penzance, Cornwall, struggled with a nervous stammer, avoided ‘worldly’ friendships and was determined to serve God from an early age.

He courted controversy by attending Anglican, Methodist, Baptist and Quaker services. During his apprenticeship as a printer, he experienced a spiritual awakening: “… the candle of the Lord shone upon my head and I rejoiced in its beauty”.

While his failure to commit to one denomination hampered his desire to be ordained, while working for the British and Foreign Bible Society printers in London he was inspired by the stories of returning missionaries.

Colenso’s desire to serve in mission aligned perfectly with the need of the Church Missionary Society (CMS) to have a printer and bookbinder located in New Zealand.

The 24-year-old arrived at Paihia in the Bay of Islands on 30 December 1834 with the CMS Stanhope press only to discover essentials of his trade were missing – including paper!

He improvised and within seven weeks had produced Maori language copies of Philippians and Ephesians using paper from the missionaries’ private supplies.

Within a year he had printed 1000 copies of the Gospel of Luke, and by December 1837 5000 copies of the Kawenata Hou or New Testament.

Forgiveness and equality

Under the guidance of the scholarly William Williams, Colenso’s efforts contributed to New Zealand’s ‘great awakening’. This was largely facilitated by Maori teachers who brought literacy and the Gospel message of forgiveness and equality under one God to their own people.

Colenso – known to Maori as Koroneho – worked for eight solid years churning out a range of publications, including the 1835 Declaration of Independence and the Treaty of Waitangi in February 1840.

His eyewitness account of who said what to whom during the signing of the Treaty is still considered the most accurate.
Colenso was finally accepted in 1842 as a candidate for ordination on the conditions he had to live at St John’s College in Waimate with his adversary Bishop Selwyn and get married.

Selwyn strongly advised Colenso to marry fluent Maori speaker and teacher, Elizabeth Fairburn, who could assist him with his Maori Girls Boarding School and scripture translations. Although the magic wasn’t there, Selwyn insisted the marriage proceed.

Following his ordination, William and Elizabeth Colenso and their new daughter, along with several assistants including respected Māori teacher Renata Kawepo, arrived in Hawkes Bay on 29 December 1844.

The Colensos were the first white settlers in the area and were stationed in a neutral location agreed upon by the five principal chiefs – a swampy flood plain between the Waitangi Stream and the mouth of the Ngaruroro River at East Clive, south of Ahuriri (Napier).

**Legendary explorations**

Their home was a raupo whare (hut) with a mud floor and a hole for a chimney; a school and chapel were built across the river. Elizabeth had to paddle a canoe over the Ngaruroro each day to teach, act as community nurse and manage the mission during William’s frequent absences.

Colenso worked with Kawepo and five other Māori teachers, previously sent by Archdeacon William Williams. His vast parish stretched as far south as Palliser Bay in the Wairarapa, and his record of conversions was as impressive as his exploration of territory previously unseen by any white man.

During his legendary crossings of the Ruahine Ranges to meet remote tribes he collected and detailed new botanical specimens for Kew Gardens in London.

He remained a strong advocate for Maori, refusing to assist the government in land deals, urging tribal leaders to keep their land or at least insist on large reserves. They mostly ignored his advice.

While he often railed against those who fell short of his moral expectations, his own sins found him out when Ripeka Meretene, one of the family’s house girls, gave birth to a child named Wiremu.

When he confessed to Bishop Selwyn in June 1853, his preaching licence was revoked and the CMS severed its ties. Elizabeth took her two children and young Wiremu back to Auckland.

Tormented internally and facing the ridicule of those who knew he had failed, Colenso became a virtual recluse for four years, moving to Napier where he initially survived by trading.

**A broader mission field**

From 1858, when colonists eventually outnumbered Maori, Colenso, having examined his inner life and found the forgiveness he had so often preached about, re-entered the public domain.

He became a politician, publisher, outspoken columnist and journalist, advocate for dispossessed Maori and for small farmers being squeezed by larger landholders, then served 37-years as a teacher and school inspector.

In a reflective mood, Colenso declared the only reason he had come to New Zealand was “to serve God in the great mission field....” He spoke of the great mystery, where the God who made the heavens and the earth looks not on the outward form but on the inner man.
Colenso continued to preach in various country churches and at a non-sectarian church he helped found in Napier. He was eventually accepted back into Anglican ministry in 1894.

Colenso was a difficult man, headstrong and opinionated, yet generous and known for his kindness to those less fortunate. He was well respected as a man of science, a teacher and a politician and for his unerring Christian commitment.

He remained in Hawke’s Bay until his death in 1899. While many turned out to farewell him, he remained alienated from his own family. His friend Henry Hill described his funeral: “The scene was sad (and yet) beautiful...An old man full of years and honours was borne to his last resting place. Yet no wife, no child, no relative was there to mourn his passing.”

Places of Interest

Hawke’s Bay has many memorials to William Colenso. About 50km west of Waipukurau, up the Makororo stream just before the steep incline known as the Colenso Spur there is a moss covered monument to mark the first of his six crossings of the Ruahine Ranges in February 1845. In the middle of those ranges is Lake Colenso.

William Colenso College in Napier, as also a two-metre wooden statue of Colenso called ‘The bearer of knowledge’ at Maraenui Bilingual School, are testament to his passion for education. His old cottage on Colenso Avenue, Napier Hill, has been restored and his grave is at Napier Hill cemetery. The most accessible memorial is the stone unveiled in 1959 at Waitangi on State Highway 2 just north of Clive, near the site of his old mission station.

Resources

- The Colenso Project: www.williamcolenso.co.nz
- The Controversial Colensos, Alfred Leslie Rowse, Dyllansow Truran, Cornwall, 1989

Footnotes:

1 Colenso, *The authentic and genuine history of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi* (1890)