



Raising the Bar – Samuel Williams and Maori Education



Samuel Williams

Samuel Williams made great sacrifices to break in the rugged land at Te Aute in Central Hawke's Bay and to establish a Christian-based schooling system that helped pave the way for a 20th century Maori renaissance.

Williams' impressive contribution to New Zealand's pioneering history stands proudly alongside that of his father, the often maligned Henry Williams, who for two decades headed the Church Missionary Society (CMS) mission in New Zealand.

Samuel grew up in the Bay of Islands with Maori as his first language. After being ordained at St John's College in Auckland in 1846, he and his wife Mary were sent to Otaki to assist Archdeacon Octavius Hadfield with his mission work and successful Maori school.

Following the sacking of Hawke's Bay missionary William Colenso in 1853 the government was concerned that peaceful relations be maintained between rival tribes and settlers as land acquisitions escalated.

Governor George Grey and Bishop Augustus Selwyn were convinced Samuel was the man for the job and he was reluctantly lured away from Otaki with the offer of funding and 7397 acres of Te Whatuiapiti land at Pukehou, half of it gifted by local chiefs in exchange for a school for their children.

In 1854, when Samuel, Mary and their new baby arrived on the bush clad land, about 40km south of present day Hastings, there was no welcoming party or accommodation, so they built their own flax house and temporary classrooms for the first students.

Trials and tribulation

Although Bishop Selwyn gave money to purchase sheep and cattle to help the mission school become self-sustaining, things did not go smoothly. When other funding failed to materialise and the CMS reduced its allowance to mission schools, Williams was forced to pay a teacher and workers from his own pocket.

He quickly doubled his sheep numbers, built up the farm and – to avoid any allegations of personal gain – placed both Crown and Maori land into an Anglican Church trust. However, when fire destroyed buildings and farm implements in 1859, Samuel closed the school until he could rebuild and place it on a firmer financial foundation.

A decade later, with support from an aunt who bequeathed money for Christian work, Samuel had made the farm profitable again, paid back all development loans and built permanent classrooms and boarding facilities.

In the meantime, he was required to minister to the spiritual needs of both Maori and settlers from Wairoa to the Wairarapa – almost a quarter of the North Island – as well as mediating between tribes arguing over who had the right to sell which land to the government.



He was also called on as a peacemaker in the Bay of Plenty where the radical Hauhau religious cult was causing havoc in the wake of the land wars, often resorting to violence in their attempt to gain converts.

Ultimately they attacked Archdeacon William Williams' school for Maori Christian teachers near Gisborne. When the Hauhau threat reached Hawke's Bay, Samuel's mediating skills were again in demand. Archdeacon Williams moved to Hawke's Bay in 1867 to head the Napier parish and Waiapu diocese and help his nephew Samuel re-open his school.

Pride in their heritage



Home of Samuel Williams at Te Aute

From 1872 Te Aute College began guiding a new generation – including the sons of many East Coast chiefs – into literacy and numeracy. Within three years Samuel and his uncle had opened Hukarere Girls College on Napier Hill to ensure young Maori women received the same opportunities.

In 1878 former Yorkshire missionary John Thornton became headmaster at Te Aute College. Along with Samuel he was determined not to turn Maori into 'brown-skinned pakeha' but to instil in them pride in their own heritage and equip them with the best education possible.

Self-discipline and service to others were the keys to success; the students were to "lead the lives of Christian gentlemen . . . and to regard themselves as, in a measure, responsible for the welfare of their race".

The Education Department wanted more focus on woodwork and agriculture but Samuel insisted there were already more than enough Maori boys excelling in those fields. In 1883, J.H. Pope, inspector of Maori schools, said Te Aute was producing work in mathematics and science that would do credit to any secondary school.

Within five years, four promising boys had passed their Latin examinations, including Te Rangi Hiroa (Peter Buck) who astounded the examiners by also mastering Greek and passing his medical exams.

In 1889, Samuel accepted the role of archdeacon and canon at St John's Cathedral, Napier, as long as it didn't interfere with his pastoral work among Maori villages or at Te Aute which now had 72 boys.

A number of senior boys began working to help improve the health and welfare of their own people and, through Te Aute College Students' Association (TACSA), began working on policies of change.

Beyond all expectations

The efforts of this group, alongside chiefs and elders, helped achieve sweeping reforms in Maori health, employment and education giving Maori a greater voice in the church, land legislation, and politics.

The on-going work was fully funded by Samuel Williams and headed up by Te Aute College old boy Apirana Ngata, the first Maori to graduate from university, achieving degrees in political science and law.



Samuel was made president for life and ultimately recognised “as the father of the movement” (ii) which in 1902 morphed into The Young Maori Party, with influential members including future MPs Maui Pomare and James Carroll, academic and anthropologist Peter Buck, and Frederick Bennett, the first Maori bishop.

As Professor I.G. Sutherland wrote, “One knows of no other instance of a native people, so largely dispossessed and destroyed, setting to work to regenerate itself and adjust itself to new demands.”

Although Samuel Williams was a wealthy man, he and his wife Mary lived a humble life and his riches were generously shared. He provided free medicine for Maori, helped pay for district nurses, clergy and teachers, built schools and churches, and supported missionary work across denominations, both locally and internationally.

Samuel Williams left an indelible mark on the lives of many through his practical and spiritual influence, doing his utmost to raise the bar and the hopes for Maori, many of whom gained impressive credentials in a wide range of professions, ultimately leading the way in social, political, cultural, economic and religious reform for their own people.



Samuel Williams and group at Papawai

Places of interest:

In 1859 Samuel Williams built Christ Church at Pukehou, on State Highway 1 across the road from Te Aute College, which was used by Te Aute students until a new chapel was built on the college grounds in 1891. Christ Church, built entirely of native totara in the Gothic Revival style, is the oldest church in Hawke's Bay, and indeed the entire Waiapu Diocese.

Along nearby Boundary Rd is the cemetery where Samuel and his family are buried. His older brother Edward, who helped translate the Treaty of Waitangi, is also buried there.

To view or use the church or arrange a tour of Te Aute College please make arrangements in advance with Hugh McBain, phone 06 856 8293.

Resources:

- Beyond Betrayal: Trouble in the Promised Land, Keith Newman (Penguin, 2013)
- Samuel Williams of Te Aute, Sybil Woods, (Pegasus, 1981)
- Web: www.teara.govt.nz, Samuel Williams by Mary Boyd (updated 30-Oct-2012)
- Web: Historic Places Trust: <http://www.historic.org.nz> (Search Register: Christ Church)

FOOTNOTES:

(i) A.E. Brougham & A.W. Reed, *The Reed Book of Maori Proverbs*, Reed Publishing, Auckland, 1999, p. 89

(ii) Report of the Eleventh Conference of Te Aute Students' Association, 1907, Auckland Public Library (APL)