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A 'GOD-FORSAKEN' WILDERNESS? THE EFFECTS OF ISOLATION
ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF RURAL RELIGION IN THE
WANGANUI HINTERLAND, 1880-c1920

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of
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Bruce Tristan Attwell

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In memory of my Father, Charles Herbert Attwell, (1885-1972) and the two other "Charlies" - Charles Brush and Charles Sturzaker - all drivers of heavy road transport on the notorious Wanganui-Raetihi Parapara road of the 1930's. The Parapara claimed the other two. May they be remembered as pioneers.

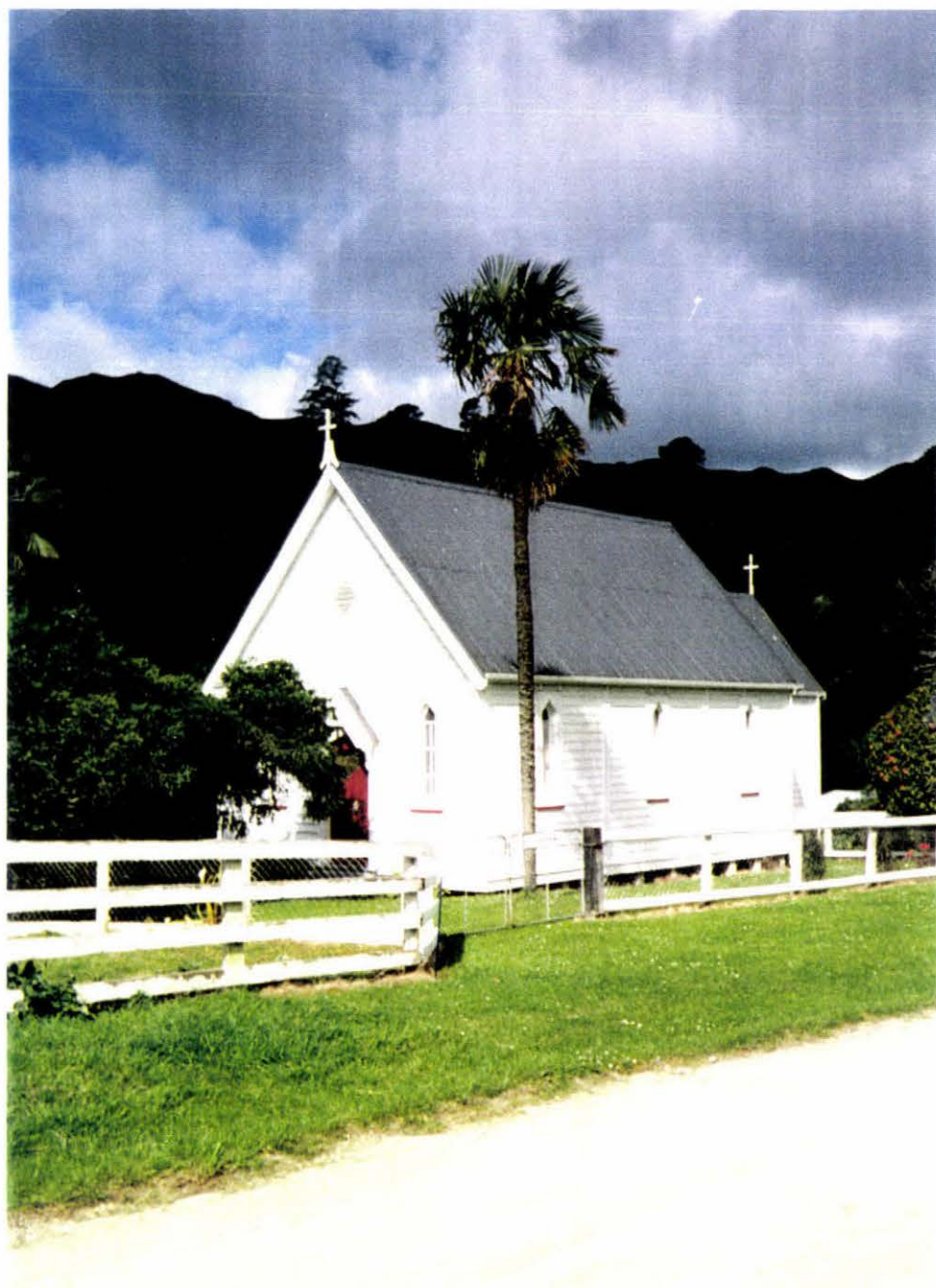
ABSTRACT

Government policy after 1880 was to open up the Wanganui hinterland for settlement. Building of the Main Trunk railway greatly facilitated this. New villages sprang up along the route. Settlement was encouraged and yeoman farmers moved into the interior as land was allocated.

Churches followed settlement. Most came from the Wanganui lowland area where "Wakefield" antecedents had bequeathed Anglican conservatism. Nevertheless, revivalist influence, and replication of English working-class chapel religion, ensured that hinterland townships gained strongly pro-active non-conformist churches. In reply to Government secular education, most churches operated Sabbath schools. Only the Catholics built their own primary schools.

Inter-denominational competition for membership and competitive church-building created financial stress, with consequently poor remuneration for hard-worked pastors. There was little time to carry the Gospel out into the back-blocks. Primitive roading and scattered population were combined handicaps. Inability of churches to take advantage of the "Nelson System" and take the Bible into country schools, also meant that back-country children grew up without religious input from clergy or Sunday schools.

Indications are that by the mid-1920's the churches had mostly lost the allegiance of a back-country generation. Improved communications had not improved congregations. Although the line was being held in the villages, the legendary, 'God-fearing pioneer' seems a rather chimerical figure. Whatever their beliefs, the back-blocks dwellers had reason to feel somewhat forsaken by their churches.



The Anglican Church of St Hilda-In-The-Wood (1904), at Ngamatapouri, some fifty kilometres up the the Waitotara River. The church is the only public building left in the lonely, narrow valley. There was once a store and a library, but today the Public Hall and School are several kilometres away down the valley. The church is the only one in the hinterland constructed apart from a township or village. St Hilda and the Presbyterian Church at Mangamahu on the Whangaehu River, were also the only hinterland churches built away from the Main Trunk Railway. Both are still in regular use. Photo, B.T.Attwell

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Bruce Attwell
Turakina Beach, November 1998

CONTENTS

INTRODUCTION.....	Page v
1 Developing Communications: The 1870's.....	Page 1
2 The New Frontier.....	Page 12
3 Faith In Their Futures.....	Page 25
4 Adversity And Adaptation.....	Page 38
5 Education.....	Page 51
6 The Changing Society.....	Page 65
7 The Settled Land.....	Page 80
SUMMARY.....	Page 92
BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	Page 102

APPENDICES

1 Origins & Previous Occupations of Ngamatapouri Settlers.....	Page 97
2 Main Trunk villagers' origins/occupations, 1897.. continued.....	Page 98 Page 99
MAP 1: The Wanganui District. Thesis Boundaries...	Page 100
MAP 2: Wanganui District County Boundaries.....	Page 101

ILLUSTRATIONS

FRONTISPIECE. Church of St Hilda In-The Wood, Ngamatapouri.

1 Track through burnt bushland.....	Between Pages 28-29
2 An early bush camp.....	" " .. 34-35
3 A developing bush farm.....	" " .. 34-35
4 Baptist church builders, Ohakune 1909....	" " .. 83-84
5 The Baptist church today.....	" " .. 83-84

INTRODUCTION

Anyone who has lived and worked in the back-blocks of the Wanganui hinterland, will certainly have had occasion on some depressing and rain-sad day, to dub their particular shut-in valley, a 'God-forsaken wilderness'. From the late nineteenth century until well past the mid-twentieth century years, that pejorative was certainly appropriate, in that religion had great difficulty meeting the challenges of settler isolation and the prescription of state-funded secular education in the back-blocks. This inability and the ways in which it influenced socio-religious development in the Wanganui hinterland, is the subject of this thesis.

Research has revealed unusual anomalies in religious practice in different areas of the hinterland. In the north-west, the isolated and avowedly God-fearing little community of Ngamatapouri constructed its own church in 1904 and enjoyed regular visits from travelling clergy. By comparison, settlers on the mid-section of the winding Parapara Road between Wanganui and Raetihi in 1918, regarded themselves as church-forsaken heathens,¹ isolated by mud and neglect. On the other hand, Raetihi and Ohakune, eleven kilometres apart, were well supplied with churches. Even Rangataua, just four kilometres south of Ohakune, opened an Anglican church by 1911. Yet Horopito, a growing milling and railway town about eight kilometres by rail north of Ohakune, and twelve kilometres north-east of Raetihi, was never to possess a church. Proximity to other churches over easy terrain probably accounted for this anomaly. Further south, in the Pohanui area west of Mangaweka, a Catholic priest visited parishioners just four times yearly.

Such diversity contradicts an often repeated shibboleth about the legendary piety and faith of back-blocks pioneers. Waimarino settlers, as recorded by one historian, displayed a faith, 'accepted without doubt or question'; and, '...all the early pioneers were God-fearing people. They all went

to church be it Anglican, Methodist, Presbyterian, Salvation Army or Baptist.'² Such modern statements sound nostalgic and apochryphal; the pioneers' world was rather less ideal.

It was from Wanganui that much material, educational and religious support was derived during the settlement of the hinterland; but comparison of the two areas reveals wide differences in the physical and social environments. They were unlike worlds, wherein churches played dissimilar roles. The religious conventions of the earlier Wanganui settlers were those of a pastoral land-owning establishment of the "Wakefield" model. Many of the yeoman farmers and village shopkeepers who occupied the hinterland held rather different beliefs. Their propensities toward more fraternal and nonconformist faiths were strongly reminiscent of those common in English working-class towns and villages of the mid-nineteenth century. Such ideals were probably introduced by later immigrants, or inherited by the New Zealand-born settlers. The influence of revivalists and colporteurs of the more proactive sects in the Wanganui-Manawatu lowlands in the 1870-80 period, was probably another source of this dissent.

Rollo Arnold's book on the Revolt of the Field,³ and consequent yeoman settlement of back-blocks areas of Taranaki, Wairarapa and Manawatu-Rangitikei, describes socio-religious attitudes that were common to both earlier Taranaki, and later Wanganui hinterland settlers. The English village communities with their high standards of sobriety, morality and familial piety, seem to have provided an inspiration for many a hinterland settler and villager. These attitudes among the labouring and artisan classes of late nineteenth century Britain appear to have been widespread, as both Hugh McLeod, Religion and the Working Class in Nineteenth Century Britain, and Allan Everitt, The Pattern of Rural Dissent: the Nineteenth Century, have recorded.

The highland settlers had quit an open and productive countryside, throughout which rapidly-improving rail, river and road transport, were complemented by developing postal and telegraph services. There were also numerous schools and churches serving country and town. From the lowlands, they had moved to penetrate and populate a roadless land that was heavily clothed in ancient rain forest. They had relinquished a society embracing modern industrialisation to create another, one that was initially dependent upon subsistence farming. They had been forced to adopt their educational and religious ideals to the exigency of lonely isolation and narrow means. There was little replication of the English models of society and religion so well established in the Wanganui lowlands.

The churches too, had been forced to embark upon a new mission. History has recorded that intense competition for members brought about an over-supply of churches and a shortage of parishioners in what one churchman, in 1902, described as '...this great mud-bound bush parish.' He was referring to Taihape, but the term would have fitted anywhere in the high country.⁴ Indeed, that word, 'mud', might have been carved upon the heart of many an overworked and underpaid clergyman, recalling his horse plunging and floundering belly deep on some bush-hung bridle-track. Mud and isolation were to become almost synonymous terms in the world of the yeoman farmers and their families.

A peculiar feature of much of the settlement of the Wanganui hinterland was its relationship to the construction of the central portion of the great Main Trunk Railway. The rails had reached Hunterville by 1885, and the final linking of the lines from north and south took place near Horopito in August 1908. During the intervening years the work brought life and commerce to many an isolated cluster of huts around a store and accommodation house. Such staging and supply points were important centres for settlers

engaged in clearing the bush from their allotted sections. Many grew into busy townships as the rails reached them. Without the railway work and its navvies, settlement would have proceeded much more slowly. Permanent populations would have been slower to come. The schools, halls, churches and their offices, would have been many more years away. Transport of wool and timber, and later, dairy produce, would have remained a decades-away dream for many settlers.

It is an indicative fact that away from the railway, European churches arose only at Ngamatapouri at the head of the Waitotara Valley, and at Mangamahu on the lower reaches of the Whangaehu River. Although Raetihi had its first church well before the railway branch reached it in 1917, it was close enough to both Ohakune and Horopito during the construction years to have derived benefit from such proximity. This implies that the successful churches were dependent upon village development and the presence of large construction or milling camps. Nevertheless, because the settlement pattern was one of small family holdings, with rapid familial growth, hinterland population was by no means scant - although it was scattered.

Did the churches then, fail those people in not taking religion to the rural back-blocks in a more pro-active sense, having lost much church input into education after the 1877 Education Act? It would seem so; particularly in the Anglican case, where much rhetoric and energy was diverted into efforts to persuade government to put the Bible back into public education but little toward provision of Anglican schools and Sunday schools. Other Protestant churches concentrated on developing their Sunday schools. The Catholics built their own schools, with a consequent financial burden on parishioners.

The history of settlement in the Wanganui hinterland is a story of the high and the low; in terrain, in religion,

and in society itself. Yet, it is hardly a story of animosity and social division; and it is not, as Miles Fairburn⁵ has it, one of social 'atomisation'. The railway navvies worked in co-operative gangs, and settlers and builders alike brought wives and families to the wilderness. Settlement of the hinterland was largely a family affair.

Because settlement of the Wanganui lowlands before 1870 had been largely of the "Wakefield" kind, it had been middle class, land-owning and mainly Protestant in religion. The new yeoman-farming laity of the hinterland, while also a land-owning (or leasing) class, was nevertheless prepared to relegate to history much of the European cultural baggage imported by the churches. So too, were many of the horde of egalitarian navvies, bushmen, road workers and tradesmen building or following the great Main Trunk Railway work; so churches were generally spartan and sometimes shared. Villages prospered, but congregations were variable, and some denominations failed for lack of steady support.

With the railway in operation, the government offered further land for settlement and eager settlers penetrated further into the rugged hinterland interior. Religion in the villages developed rapidly and somewhat competitively, as the various churches sought to service their followers and to gather new membership from the host of construction hands, timber millers, tradesmen and towns-people. For the outback settlers by comparison, religion was almost a luxury - perhaps a visit to a church once a month, assuming that weather and roading permitted the round journey of perhaps twenty miles or more by horse-back or buggy. There could be no regular Sunday school for children under such conditions.

In the villages, however, Sunday schools flourished, There the competing churches sought to counter state secular influence, and to encourage adult participation in religion.

The towns were thus provided with moral leadership, ritual and rites, while the back-blocks were largely unserved. One writer claims that the nature of land determines the kind of religion produced.⁶ Such an affinity quite probably resulted in eventual modification to back-blocks religion. Primary education and the relationship between religious and free secular education was another modifying factor. So too, was the eventual improvement in roading and the coming of the motor vehicle. Mobility and ease of access to larger towns would, in the end, deplete congregations.

The paucity of early records presented a problem in gathering material for this thesis. This was, especially, the case with turn-of-the-century newspapers. Some were not where they were reportedly cached, and had to be tracked down. One hoped-for source, an early settler's diary, had been eaten by rats in recent years! Some old, weekly journals kept in trunks and suitcases, were falling apart. Nevertheless, other sources such as the archives of the Rangitikei County Council, yielded large, well-preserved minute books. They were informative. So too, were a number of school and church centenary booklets. One school reunion provided numerous old photographs and newspaper clippings. To there meet again one veteran from childhood years, and to share reminiscences, was a highlight of that reunion.

Cemeteries were sometimes informative indicators of religious ideology. They were also moving reminders of the brevity of many a Victorian life - tragically often, that of a child. Although dynastic ranks and monuments indicated families numbering up to ten and more, the memorials to the youngest of infants were frequently lavish. In the 1880's, these monuments would have been shipped from Dunedin,⁷ and hauled over terrible, muddy roads. Such an obvious financial commitment declares deeply-felt grief and firm religious convictions. It might also indicate something of the social position of the bereft families.

No less than seven wonderful men and women, all well into their eighties, recaptured for the writer their school and back-blocks farming childhoods. Their depiction largely contradicted that projected by some later historians. Piety and religious education seemed not to have played any great part in their isolated rural upbringing.

The origin and extent of this discovered religious deficiency is an important issue in this study. The writer spent several late-childhood years in the back-blocks (Paparangi), and in later years lived and worked at Ruatiti, Paparangi, Raetihi, Waiouru and Taihape. Accordingly, some familiarity with the people of the high country is claimed. Knowing the Waimarino as a 'dry area' in the days of the alcohol embargo, and being the offspring of a pioneer driver of heavy road transport on the treacherous Parapara road of mud-and-metal days, it becomes possible, with the aid of reminiscences from old and new friends, to conjure up images of a vanished society and a world of contradictions.

It was a world of well-kept little churches; of silent Sabbaths, (except for the sound of church bells), and of Salvation Army bands on street corners.⁸ Yet, it was also a world of 'beer-trains'⁹ and sly-grogging; of hard-working and hard-swearing farmers struggling out of the Great Depression of the 1930's. It was a world of drab, unpainted mill houses and lonely farms; a world of bare-footed children and harassed mothers in sugar-bag aprons. It was frequently a world of struggle in an environment of desolate isolation - the 'back-of-beyond' - the Wanganui hinterland.

The sense of living in a forgotten world far from 'real' civilisation, was still most pervasive in the 1950's. The term, "God-forsaken wilderness", was a phrase that came readily to mind when living at the end of a forty-mile track in thinly-populated high country. Personal experience is that such back-blocks were generally church-forsaken.

Today, in some parts of the hinterland, it is possible to walk for many lonely kilometres over long-abandoned and overgrown roads - ways that once carried the hopes and dreams of a generation. Such roads were the curse and the despair of the Counties, devourers of rates and labour, and even in the 1950's, still easily rendered impassable by vagaries of the weather. The roadman with his shovel was perhaps, even more important to an isolated farmer than a clergyman. There is a history here that posterity has tended to ignore.

Except where necessary to illustrate a point, this thesis has not been concerned with the religious history of the Whanganui River. That is a well-worked field, and one basically concerned with Maori religious history. This thesis is about European settlement away from the river, although touching briefly on Maori (and Chinese) religion.

Because this study is being done under the auspices of the Department of Religious Studies at Massey University, the main focus will, as stated, be upon the religious attitudes of hinterland society. But such attitudes cannot be fully comprehended if they are abstracted from the matrix of history and environment. Therefore, this thesis is concerned as well with the historical and physiographical backgrounds to the period chosen. This is especially vital when considering relative aspects of the Wanganui coastal lowlands and the hinterland, and their relationship, each to the other.

Preserving objectivity in interpreting that history, was not always easy given the back-country experience of the writer. But it is felt that an examination of various influences, whether extended from Warwickshire or Wanganui, or from legislation on road and railway development, might provide some explanation of a perceived disparity. It is the contradiction between the older images of an allegedly

God-fearing and devout Victorian society, and the one that obtained by the early nineteen-thirties. Somewhere, between the two may be found a clearer picture of a settler society and its religious reaction to settlement and isolation on what has been called 'one of the last rural frontiers'¹⁰

NOTES

INTRODUCTION

- 1 Doris Wallace, The Generation Gap: Unimportant People And The Parapara, Tauranga, 1973. The term 'heathen' is Wallace's own, referring to the absolute lack of religious contact while living on what was virtually a mud track in 1918. p.271.
- 2 Elizabeth Allen, In The Hills Of The Waimarino, Wanganui, 1984. pp.37;92.
- 3 Rollo Arnold, The Farthest Promised Land, 1981. In this and other works (see bibliography), Arnold deals extensively with the environment of religious dissent in the English backgrounds of many of the assisted immigrants of the 1870's.
- 4 Journal of Rev Percy Wise Clarkson. Quoted in Duncan Green and John McCaul, St. Margaret's Anglican Church TAIHAPE: 75 Years 1902-1977, Taihape, 1977. p.20, Clarkson, who began as a Stipendiary Lay Reader in Taihape in 1901, is also quoted describing how a vestry order for 500 feet of timber required four men, 12 horses and 14 bullocks, a fortnight to transport eleven miles through mud three and four feet deep! p.22.
- 5 Miles Fairburn, The Ideal Society and its Enemies: The Foundations of Modern New Zealand Society 1850-1900, Auckland, 1989.
- 6 Vine Deloria, God Is Red, New York, 1973, pp.75-76.
- 7 Personal observation of production dates on monument bases in the Presbyterian cemetery on Jefferson's Line near Marton, indicate Dunedin as the production source until about the early 1890's, when Wanganui and Palmerston North monumental masons began supply.
- 8 Salvation Army bands were apparently popular enough for the Raetihi Town Council about 1930 to provide a corner street lamp to facilitate their renditions. Information supplied to the writer by Ross Journeaux, custodian of the Waimarino Museum, 1998.
- 9 The "Beer Train" was a phenomenon of the alcohol-restricted area of the King Country. European settlers were permitted to import their own alcohol for personal consumption, and at Christmas and New Year, many wagons on a goods train would be loaded with the eagerly-awaited cargo. Transport companies on the Wanganui-Raetihi run would put on extra trucks to cope with the liquor traffic leading up to the Christmas season. There was also a fair amount of illegal contraband and trading across the borders and with the Maori, who had no liquor entitlement. Information from R. Journeaux and personal knowledge gained as a New Zealand Railways employee.
- 10 Erik Olssen, 'Towards a New Society', in Part III, The Oxford History of New Zealand, edited W.H. Oliver with B.R. Williams, Oxford University Press, Auckland, 1981, p.274.

1: DEVELOPING COMMUNICATIONS: The 1870's

Wanganui, at the beginning of the decade of the 1870's, was a thriving regional communications centre and port, with an influence extending as far as Hawera in the north, and Palmerston North in the south. A twice-weekly coach service to Wellington via Turakina had begun in 1869, and the inaugural journey of a planned, regular service to Patea took place on 5 March 1870, '...over an excellent road, and through a country rich in memorable events.'¹ The roads, however, were generally unsurfaced and poor. Beach travel was often preferable to the muddy inland tracks. But as the easier and more accessible coastal land was settled, communications gradually improved. Travel became less tied to the beaches or coastal shipping, and by December 1873, work on the first section of the railway designed to link the ports of Foxton and Wanganui was proceeding well.² This would further encourage settlement of the broad, lowland acres of the Rangitikei and Manawatu, with settlers moving up the fertile valleys of the Whangaehu, Turakina and Rangitikei rivers as sections became available. The move into the hinterland was beginning.³

With the opening of the Wanganui Town Bridge in 1871, and completion of the railway link with Foxton in 1877, coupled with port development that began in 1878, the Wanganui district was well positioned to share in the expanding export trade in wool and meat that the advent of refrigerated shipping was to greatly promote in the 1880's. But, in the opening years of the decades from 1870 to 1880, the smaller rural villages were developing in comparative isolation, simply because slow and difficult communications imposed independence upon them. Small centres such as Turakina, Bulls, and the later-developing Marton, although not greatly separated by distance, were providers of many essential services to local settlers.

Turakina, for instance, was a thriving village in

the early 1870's, with Presbyterian and Roman Catholic churches. The Presbyterians built their first church there as early as 1857, replacing it with a more substantial building in 1865. The Catholics followed with their church in 1868. But in the busy coaching junction and staging point that was Turakina of the 'seventies, it was the pro-active Presbyterian Church that provided not only pastoral guidance for a parish of largely Scottish descent, but also Sunday Schools and 'libraries of edifying books for the young'⁴ in both the village and nearby Bonny Glen, where there was also a Presbyterian church.⁵

Bulls, by 1875, also had its Presbyterian Church and resident minister. The Rev James Doull was to remain in the growing communications junction for 34 years,⁶ seeing it grow into a sizeable village as the earlier-available and gentle terrain of the coastal lowlands was taken up by eager settlers.⁷

Settlement north of Wanganui was also proceeding well in the 1870's. The settlement of Maxwelltown on the former military road to Waitotara and Patea boasted a hotel, store and Post Office in 1872.⁸ A school was opened in 1874.⁹ Barely five years had elapsed since the skilful Maori leader and tactician, Titokowaru, had abandoned his almost impregnable fighting-pa, Tauranga-a-Ika, only a few miles north at Nukumaru. With the gradual winding down of hostilities the earlier-settled and war-relinquished lands between Kai Iwi and Waitotara were rapidly re-occupied by settlers. With improvements in coach transport, hotels and stores were soon erected at staging points and stops such as Kai Iwi, Maxwelltown, Nukumaru and Waitotara.

The surge of building that took place in the Taranaki-Rangitikei lowlands at this time, was a consequence of a rapidly-increasing population. Stores, hotels, schools and churches arose to serve new villages springing up around

the various road junctions and coach staging points. All required land. The Vogel-inspired immigration surge of the 1870's was also to bring a new tide of the land-hungry to Taranaki, Wanganui and Rangitikei. With the lowlands surveyed, purchased and occupied, the new settlers were left only one way to go; they turned to the mountains.

There were, however, problems hampering unrestricted expansion inland - especially from Maori resistance to further alienation of their lands following the wars of the 1860's.¹⁰ Equally as daunting, was the geological configuration of the area under consideration. For the purposes of this thesis, the margins of this area are as follows: In the north-west, a direct line encompassing the Waitotara valley and river, extends from the sea through Ngamatapouri at the head of the valley to the confluence of the Mangaparua Stream and the Whanganui River, thence to Erua on the Main Trunk Railway, the most northerly point of the block. A further line then reaches south-east through Taihape on the railway, to where it joins the Rangitikei River near Utiku, south of Taihape. From there the river marks the border with the Manawatu district, to where it meets the coast at Tangimoana. (Map 1). Geographically, the area takes in portions of the Lower and Upper Rangitikei County, most of the Waimarino and Waitotara Counties, part of Patea County, and all of the Wanganui County. (Map 2).

This area in the late 1870's looked almost entirely to Wanganui for supply, communications and local government. The town became the central office for Railways, and the district office controlling education. Therefore, the useful appellation of "Wanganui District" will be used in this study. The close relationship between lowland town and mountainous hinterland that later developed, was vital to both - economically, socially and even religiously. And the circumstances from which this relationship arose,

were generated by both geography and social history. The former largely dictated the time-scale and pattern of land settlement. The latter reflected the origins and aspirations of the settlers both before and after the so-called 'Vogel era' of land settlement. These factors were to have an important bearing on the shape and direction of religious development in the wild hinterland in the decades to come.

The physiography of the Wanganui Subdivision is described as comprising '...the coast, coastal dune complexes, the coastal lowland, and submaturely dissected upland.'¹¹ From the sea to the volcanic plateau, the land rises to almost one thousand metres, with numerous higher peaks. This, in winter, is snow country - as the Waimarino settlers were to learn.

The Geological Survey of New Zealand, (1959),¹² clearly shows how, from Bulls on the proper right bank of the Rangitikei River, to the lower Waitotara River valley on the western border of the area under consideration, the coastal dune area forms a long wedge tapering north-westward to the sea. Inland, this is overlooked by the higher, and mostly level terraces of the Brunswick and Rapanui formations. This 65 kilometre-long series of terraces is at its widest around Marton, and in turn tapers gradually past Wanganui to Waitotara in the north-west. In this, the settlers found an easy terrain, generally flat and drained by occasional shallow stream gullies fed by small lakes and shallow swamp areas. The only major breaks in this large and potentially productive expanse of lowland country, were the shallow valleys of the Turakina, Whangaehu and Whanganui Rivers, and the Kai Iwi Stream north of Wanganui. With only scattered manuka scrub, toe-toe and flax, and clumps of bush in the gullies and swampy areas, these gentle lowlands offered the earlier European settlers some of the richest pastoral farming lands in the southern North Island.¹³

The relative ease of communication over the Wanganui table-land, even in the early 1850's, is amusingly illustrated by the mode of transport of a Wanganui clergyman. Astride a bullock, he would travel some 21 kilometres from Wanganui to Turakina to preach in the growing settlement. As he went, the minister would not only read but also write his sermon as the docile beast ambled sedately along the muddy track!¹⁴ And English society was being surprisingly replicated in the benign and peaceful Rangitikei. A settler could write to England as early as 1857 that, '...Rangitikei is not the outlandish place it once was. You can hardly go out of sight of a house and the society is improving...'¹⁵

This then, was the Wanganui district of the early 1870's: A high, roadless hinterland populated only by Maori, soaring above a broad wedge of fertile terraces and sandy dune country, criss-crossed by a web of adequate, if often muddy, tracks. These served a wide scattering of villages and hamlets, linking them each to the other, and all to the vital port and centre of Wanganui. There, religion and education were being well served in the number of churches and schools built and being built.¹⁶ For, in the aftermath of the painful North Island land wars, the fervent missionary enterprise that once carried the Christian message afield from Wanganui to mid-Island Maori, was being replaced by a mission to Europeans.

Certainly, the land wars had done enormous damage to the religious affinity between Maori and Pakeha. The long highway of the Whanganui River had only recently been the safe road to the interior for Christian proselytization. Now, many of the lovingly-constructed Maori churches along that waterway were falling into ruin.¹⁷ Maori antipathy toward European religion was illustrated by the widespread influence of the Pai Marire (Hau Hau) movement. Rather than welcoming European missionaries into their isolated river communities, many frustrated and disenchanting Maori

now rejected the creed that had seemingly blessed the soldiers and land sellers. The up-river tribes withdrew into their isolation, erecting boundary aukati signs. The message was clear: "Pakeha! Stay out!"¹⁸ But a distant creak of spars, and the thudding of the steam engines in new immigrant ships was already sounding the knell to Maori isolation. A growing tide of immigrants and settlers from other parts of the colony, was about to end for all time the splendid isolation of the mountain lands known to the European population as the 'King Country'.

The new wave of settlers was to be quite different from the early comers. Wanganui had been a Wakefield settlement, and although initially hindered by land disputes with the Wanganui Maori, purchase and occupation of the Wanganui-Rangitikei area proceeded steadily after 1848-49. The easy lowland fields - or 'Feldon' in Rollo Arnold's Warwickshire terminology¹⁹ - had required hardly more than money to stock and fence. Thus, the settlement of the Wanganui Feldon generally followed the Hawke's Bay pattern, the land being taken up in large holdings by people of means. On the other hand, the 'Arden', (or forest land in the other half of the Warwickshire description), would later be taken up by yeoman freeholders, men who possessed little more than a small monetary deposit plus an axe and a few other hand tools with which to further a fervent will to succeed and prosper.

Indeed, the Warwickshire analogy is a fitting one. The religious development of the Wanganui hinterland settlements was to produce villages somewhat similar to those of late nineteenth-century Southern England, of which Rollo Arnold wrote. In his work, The Farthest Promised Land, (1981), Arnold described the so-called 'Revolt of the Field' of 1872, during which farm labourers in South Warwickshire organised into a union and withdrew their labour. New Zealand at that time, was, in Arnold's words,

'...hungry for men accustomed to hard labour, and gifted in rural skills.'²⁰ Such promising immigrants were actively recruited by the Vogel administration from amongst the striking farm labourers. They and their families were needed to populate and open up confiscated or newly-purchased lands in the two decades following the closing of the land wars. And while few of those immigrants settled in the Wanganui hinterland, (most were settled elsewhere by the early 1880's), many of the hinterland pioneers would later display a social morality and religious cohesion remarkably similar to that of the radicals of Warwickshire, Kent or Cornwall.

From these areas, perhaps via a kind of social osmosis during earlier years of colonial mobility, there came a sturdy nonconformity of religious and political thought. Such ideals had matched - perhaps even spurred - resistance to social oppression. In the Wychwood area of Oxfordshire, the villages of Burford and Charlbury had their Baptist, Quaker and Wesleyan chapels. Milton had three dissenting chapels, and Ascot two, while in Lyneham, '...it was the Wesleyan chapel, not the Anglican church which dominated the scene.'²¹

This nonconformity, which marked an influential proportion of the migrant host who abandoned the oppressed and poorly-paid farmlands of Southern England after 1872, has often been remarked upon. Alfred Simmons, for example, chronicled in 1879, the 'singular fact' that at a Sunday service aboard a New Zealand-bound immigrant ship, '...not fifty of the people possessed Prayer Books, most of them professing to be Dissenters...'²² Simmons, himself, was a radical union organiser and newspaper editor. And although his religious conviction is not known, his appointment as group leader aboard the steamship, Mongol, and his close association with farm union leaders who were also devout Methodist preachers, (such as Joseph Arch and

Christopher Holloway), illustrates the admixture of radical thought and religious dissent that immigration introduced into New Zealand after 1872.²³

This nonconformity would differ considerably from the Anglican form of worship already secure in the Wanganui Feldon. Apart from clusters of Presbyterians around Turakina and Bulls, the term 'rural church' in the mid-1870's meant Anglican churches at Matarawa or Maxwelltown. Central headquarters of Anglicanism, as with other denominations, was Wanganui itself. But within a few years, religion in the backblocks would reflect its dissenting origins in a different kind of settler society. It would be a society in which lay involvement in community and chapel would recreate forms of adherence and worship strongly reminiscent of the English country village. As P.J. Lineham observed in an article on Protestant piety in New Zealand:

The irregular and limited church attendance of England was reinforced in New Zealand by the greater lay initiative and commitment required to establish services....Lay initiative did not come naturally to lower-class Anglicans....²⁴

Lineham's observation on the rural origins of most New Zealanders and the relativity of their backgrounds to Methodism and Nonconformity, is supported by Hugh McLeod's study of working class religion in nineteenth-century Britain. McLeod considered that working class religion was '...strongly practical, and was concerned especially with mutual aid, and with maintaining standards of 'decent' behaviour.'²⁵

It seems obvious that the religious propensities of Arnold's Warwickshire farm workers were common to much of the British working class of the period. Although few Warwickshire farm revolt migrants came to settle in the Wanganui hinterland, the yeoman settlers who eventually conquered the forbidding Arden were to display the religious inclinations, (or lack of them!), that were common to wage-workers in both town and country Britain.

Peter Lineham, in a 1977 history of Brethren assemblies in New Zealand, commented on the popularity of revivalist and millenarian Christianity in bush settlements. The obvious impracticality of ecclesiastical structures calling for '...money, ministers and buildings which no-one could supply...', Lineham suggested, made the fellowship of simple assemblies an attractive and familiar alternative for the undenominational Christian.²⁶ And, as Lineham illustrates, there was already in the 1870's, a ferment of religious revival in the lowlands, expanding out from Foxton and Bulls as itinerant Brethren preachers carried their Gospel message throughout the Manawatu, Rangitikei and Wanganui districts.²⁷ Later, in the membership of the "small farm associations" formed between 1892 and 1895 to ballot for Waimarino lands offered under the Land Act of 1892, there would be many who must have heard that Gospel message, and who took it with them into the hinterland.²⁸

A small number of 'Vogel' immigrants did eventually settle in the Rangitikei in the 1870's, making their homes along the edges of the lowland flats where the Feldon meets the rising Arden country,²⁹ But the yeoman settlers of the 1880's were to turn inland. For there, amid the tumbled bush-clad hills of the Mangawekas and Upper Rangitikei, and on the Murimotu plateau, (or Waimarino as it was later to be known), cheap land and a new living awaited them.

So it was, that as the decade of the 1880's opened, new transport technology was speeding change in the Wanganui Feldon. Population was growing, and with the increased numbers came new and different philosophies. Trains and better roading helped their spread. The high Arden was not, however, to be quite such an easy conquest, and for the enthusiastic pioneers, the price of this wonderful, new opportunity for at least the first two decades, was to be a fearful isolation, greater than most of them had ever known, or would ever know again.

NOTES: Pages 1 to 9

1: DEVELOPING COMMUNICATIONS: THE 1870's

- 1 Wanganui Evening Herald, 7 February 1870.
- 2 Weekly Herald, Wanganui, 18 April 1873.
- 3 Although a Rangitikei Highways Board was formed in 1872, there was no settlement north of Silverhope in the Porewa Valley. Roads in the newly-auctioned Hunterville Block (1874), were still mere mud tracks. See S.G. Laurenson, Rangitikei: the day of striding out, Palmerston North, 1979. p.37. See also, D.M. Laing, Hunterville: The First Hundred Years, Wanganui, 1983 p.5.
- 4 The strong Presbyterian influence in Turakina is well described by Rev. Malcolm Wilson in Turakina: The Story of a Country Parish, 1952. See also Jessie M. Annabell, Caledonia Stern and Wild: Scottish Identity in Wanganui and Rangitikei 1880-1918, M.A. thesis, Massey University, 1995.
- 5 Wilson, 1952, p.33.
- 6 R.A. Wilson, (Major), Bulls: A History of the Township, Palmerston North, (no date). p.16.
- 7 Bulls was the only commercial centre between Wanganui and Wellington. It had a Post Master and Telegraph Office by 1871. See R.A. Wilson, p.25.
- 8 Laraine Sole, The Way We Were: The Settlement of Maxwell and Waitotara 1850-1930, Waverley, 1990. p.16.
- 9 Sole, p.136.
- 10 Keith Sinclair, A History of New Zealand, Penguin revised edn. Auckland, 1988. p.147.
- 11 C.A. Fleming, The Geology of The Wanganui Subdivision, Wellington, 1952. p.X.
- 12 Geological Map of New Zealand, Sheet 10. New Zealand Geological Survey, 1959.
- 13 A.H. McLintock, An Encyclopaedia Of New Zealand, Wellington, 1966. Vol.3, p.549.
- 14 This was the Rev. David Hogg of Wanganui, who conducted irregular services in Turakina in 1853. See Wilson, Turakina, pp.22-3.
- 15 F. Basil Marshall, Early Settlers in the Porewa Valley, Rangitikei, (no date), p.31.
- 16 The Anglican Christ Church in Wanganui had been built in 1866, and St John's at Matarawa, the same year. The Wanganui Parochial District covered Matarawa, and St Mary's, Upukongaro, (1879). St George's at Turakina, was built later in 1885. Also built in Wanganui in the 'seventies were; St Paul's Presbyterian Church (1872), St Mary's Roman Catholic Church (1876-1877), Trinity Wesleyan Church (1873), and a Wesleyan church at Aramoho in 1877. There were also a Mosstown Public School (1870), a Wanganui Boy's School (1879), and a Wanganui Girl's School by 1880. See 'Wanganui' in Cyclopaedia Of New Zealand, Vol 1, Wellington, 1897-1908.
- 17 A.D. Mead, Richard Taylor Missionary Tramp, Wellington, 1966. pp. 253-256.

NOTES: Pages 1 to 9 Contd.

- 17 A.D. Mead, Richard Taylor Missionary Trumper, Wellington, 1966, pp. 253-256.
- 18 In 1883 an English explorer, J.H. Kerry-Nicholls, defied the aukati ban on Pakeha entering the King Country, and made a traverse of the Waimarino. At Ruakaka pa on the lower reaches of the Manganui a Te Ao River, he was fortunate enough to meet with hospitality rather than enmity. An old chieftainess, replying to an enquiry about religious belief, laughingly declared; "We believe in nothing here and get fat on pork and potatoes." Kerry-Nicholls considered the pa-dwellers, '...wrapped in the darkness of heathenism...[and]...a superstitious species of Hauhauiism.' See J. H. Kerry-Nicholls, The King Country or Explorations In New Zealand, 1884, (Capper Press reprint), 1974, p.278.
- 19 Rollo Arnold, The Farthest Promised Land: English Villagers, New Zealand Immigrants Of The 1870's, Wellington, 1981, pp.166;261.
- 20 Arnold, p.35.
- 21 Arnold p.111.
- 22 Alfred Simmons, Old England And New Zealand: The Government, Laws, Churches, Public Institutions, And The Resources Of New Zealand, Popularly And Critically Compared With The Old Country, London, 1879, p.111.
- 23 Arnold, pp.22;49.
- 24 P.J. Lineham, 'How Institutionalised was Protestant Piety in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand', in Journal of Religious History, Vol.13, No.4, June 1985, p.375.
- 25 Hugh McLeod, Religion and the Working Class in Nineteenth-Century Britain, London, 1984, p.11.
- 26 Peter J. Lineham, There We Found Brethren: A History of Assemblies of Brethren in New Zealand, Palmerston North, 1977, pp.32-33.
- 27 Lineham, pp.60-61. The non-denominational Brethren preachers cast their salvation net widely. Gordon Forlong - trained as a Presbyterian minister - drew large crowds in Bulls. He preached for the Presbyterians in Marton, for the Primitive Methodists in Feilding and later in the 'eighties, for the Salvation Army in Wanganui.
- 28 Lineham, p.33. Lineham points out that the founders of Brethren assemblies were also pioneers in their districts. In the Wellington Province, '...the main denominations were slow to establish themselves..delayed by shortage of ministers and money.' The environment was ideal for nondenominational and non hierachical religious organisations.
- 29 One Marton settler was Walter Warren, who arrived in Wellington with his wife and son aboard the Conflict in May 1874. He came to Marton via Wanganui three days later and quickly found work. Arnold quotes from Warren's letter home to the Labourer's Union Chronicle in December 1874. Arnold, Farthest, pp.240-41;256. Jeanette Galpin, Tutaenui: Garden of Rangitikei, (undated), postulates Walter and Elizabeth Warren as settled in Marton by about 1865. (pp.180-181). Arnold's sources negate this.