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Te Hiima: Reverend A. J. Seamer and His  
Māori Mission

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in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the University of Otago for the degree of  
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## Abstract

This is a thematic biography of the Reverend A. J. Seamer and his Māori mission. Arthur John Seamer was a Methodist missionary in the first half of the twentieth century, who began his work with a three year period in the Salvation Army. This biography sets out to discover who the man was and why he was significant. It also seeks to understand why Seamer was so passionate about his work with Māori people, and in turn why he was so trusted amongst them, known as Te Hiima. The first chapter examines the importance of Seamer's experience in the Salvation Army, which was to influence him for the rest of his life. Chapter two then moves on to analyse Seamer's significance in the Methodist Church's relationship with the Rātana movement. As representative of the Methodist mission, Seamer was very important in his silence on doctrinal deviations within the Rātana movement, preventing its alienation, and allowing the Methodists to be the only European church to retain links with the movement. He encouraged Rātana, along with Te Puea in the King Country, away from becoming what James Belich calls 'disengager' movements, and toward a shared life with Pākehā. The third chapter examines the idea of Seamer's 'conversion' by the people he set out to convert, as he became intimate with Māori life and adopted many of their customs and traditions. Finally, chapter four questions previous interpretations of racial understanding in the first half of twentieth century. Seamer, as a case study, does not fit with James Belich's argument that Māori as 'brown Britons' were to be assimilated into Pākehā society (in the sense of the adoption of one culture's customs as the norm, coupled with the rejection of traditional ways of the other culture). With reference to Seamer's own adoption of Māori language and customs, as well as his promotion of Māori culture through Māori choirs, it can be seen that New Zealanders celebrated Māori culture as part of New Zealandness. Seamer's case suggests then, that it would be better to incorporate great room for Māori culture in our understandings of race relations in early-twentieth century New Zealand.

## Acknowledgments

This work would not have been possible without the valued assistance and support of several people. First is my supervisor, John Stenhouse, who patiently guided the development of this project and facilitated its transformation from the early drafts to the finished product. His time and effort is greatly appreciated. I am thankful to Barbara Brookes for helping me decide on this topic. Also from the History Department at the University of Otago is Angela Wanhalla, who helped establish the issues and themes which this biography followed. Discussion with her, and Lachie Paterson were of great guidance to this project. Michelle Willyams, a master's student writing her thesis on the Waiata Māori Choir, has also been very helpful in clarifying issues surrounding aspects of Seamer's work. Staff from the Methodist Archives have been supportive and helpful throughout this project. Jo Smith of the Christchurch archives assisted in finding preliminary information about Reverend Seamer, as well as continued assistance to my queries. Jill Weeks of the Auckland archives was also helpful, coming in on her days off to assist in my research. Various authors have given their insight into this topic, and their assistance is greatly valued. Keith Newman aided with Rātana sources, and Peter Lineham's suggested bibliography and timeline of Seamer was immensely helpful in guiding my initial research. The interest and support shown by such people is much appreciated. Finally, my friends and family must be thanked for their continued patience and support.

## Note

Due to the nature of Seamer's work, some Māori terms have been necessary for this text. Most of these are considered part of New Zealand English, and so no glossary has been given to translate such words. If a word has been judged to be less widely known, the most common translation has been given within the text.

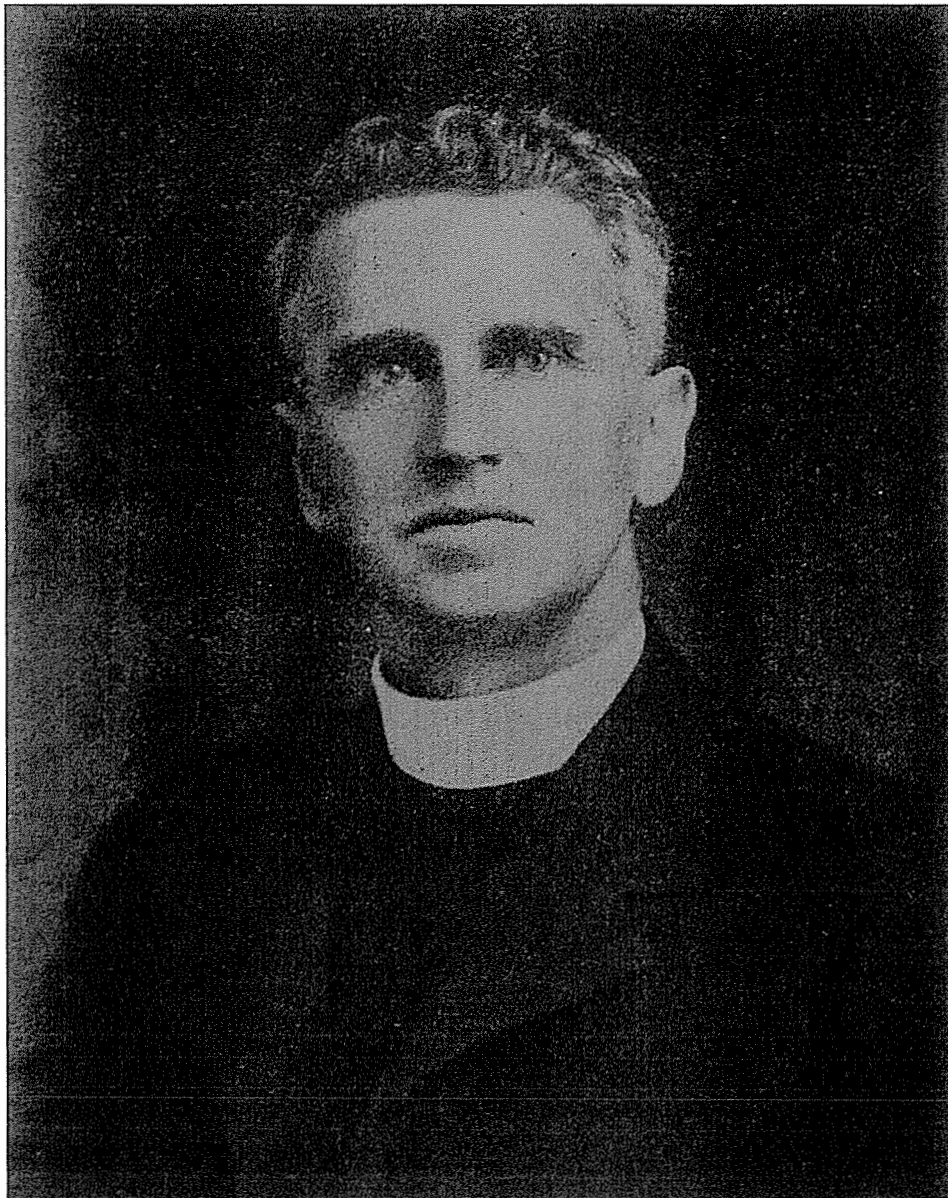


Figure 1: Portrait of A. J. Seamer.

Source: *The New Zealand Methodist Times*, February 18 1933.



## Introduction

Although he was rarely in the limelight, Reverend A. J. Seamer was an important figure in New Zealand history as he stood beside significant and celebrated Māori figures that were. He was an important advocate for Māori culture and the improvement of Māori status in society. He always took a diplomatic approach, never drastic and always understanding. This work aims to establish who the Reverend Seamer was, and why he was significant. It also seeks to discover why Seamer took such a strong interest in Māori affairs. Furthermore, this biography can shed new light on New Zealand race relations in the first half of the twentieth century.

The Reverend Arthur John Seamer, C.M.G., was a Methodist missionary who worked across New Zealand from 1897 until his passing in 1963. He made significant contributions to the Methodist Church's relationship with Māori, as well as offering guidance and counsel to independent Māori groups. He began his work after moving to New Zealand from Australia as part of the Salvation Army mission. When their mission was discontinued, Seamer was approached by Methodist leaders, and was recruited for their Māori mission. He served in the Home and Māori Mission, ministering to the Māori and Pākehā of his Circuit, Kaeo-Whangaroa. It was here that Seamer first met Ida Marion Nisbet, whom he would marry in 1907, and have three children with (although the first would die in infancy). Toward the end of 1903, after nearly a year of service, Reverend C. H. Garland encouraged Seamer to become a candidate for full ordination. He passed his exam near the top of the class, and, due to a lack of ministers, was appointed to his circuit without receiving further training. Over the next decade Seamer was appointed to several circuits around New Zealand including Rotorua, Petone, Cargill Road, Saint Kilda, and Addington.

With the outbreak of the First World War, Seamer believed that older men should contribute a significant number of men to each force sent to the front. For this reason he enlisted in the ranks. However, due to a wait of at least six months to process his captain-chaplaincy for a commission as lieutenant, he enlisted in the expeditionary force as a private.<sup>1</sup> He served in Egypt in 1915 and 16, as a non-commissioned officer in the Otago Infantry.

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<sup>1</sup> "Town Edition," *Poverty Bay Herald*, 25 June 1915.

Ruawai D. Rakena, "Seamer, Arthur John – Biography," Ministry of Culture and Heritage, <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/4s18/1>.

However by February 1916 he had to return home due to a stomach ulcer which had left him in need of an operation.<sup>2</sup> Seamer recovered in the military hospital before re-enlisting as a Chaplain in early 1917. After spending some time at the Trentham Base he served on the Western Front from 1917 to 1918.

When he serving as a chaplain on the front in France, Seamer was wounded, and hospitalised. As he was in his room in hospital, a German shell burst and he was hit by the shrapnel, causing significant inner ear damage. He was the only one to escape this explosion.<sup>3</sup> He was incapacitated for six months in hospital in France, then sent home to New Zealand just before the armistice in August 1918. There remained pieces of shrapnel in his head that caused him suffering for the rest of his life. He was plagued with severe physical discomfort and practically never free from head noises, as well as frequently suffering blackouts from lack of blood to the brain. He was awarded the British War Medal and the Victory Medal, and was formally discharged from service on the 20<sup>th</sup> of May 1919. The War also left Seamer with shell-shock and severe neurasthenia, which coupled with a form of anaemia, saw his health constantly at risk for the rest of his life.<sup>4</sup> He was almost never free from pain, but nevertheless continued to work as best he could, even through his retirement. One of his colleagues, George Laurensen, observed: “He put off mortality for life.”<sup>5</sup>

In 1919 Reverend Seamer was sent to Auckland to return to his preferred field once again, the Māori Mission. He was soon appointed as Superintendent of the Māori Mission by the Conference, replacing the Reverend T. G. Hammond when he retired in 1920. He served in this capacity until 1924, when he was appointed General Superintendent (replacing the retiring Reverend T. G. Brooke). Seamer was appointed for the purpose of hastening the integration of Māori and European work, bringing the Home and Māori Mission together under unified leadership.<sup>6</sup> Seamer served in this position until his retirement in 1939. He gave outstanding leadership during one of the most difficult periods in this work, which saw the

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<sup>2</sup> “Seamer, Arthur John - WW1 8/3158 - Army (R7815529),” *New Zealand Defence Force Personnel Records*, Archives New Zealand, 1914 - 1918.

There is a conflicting report of Seamer having to return home because of a fall: “Personal Matters,” *Evening Post*, 3 June 1916. However, the official military file is more likely to be the correct account.

<sup>3</sup> New Zealand Defence Force Personnel Records.

<sup>4</sup> Rakena, “Seamer, Arthur John - Biography.”

<sup>5</sup> “Memorial Notes,” 1963, in *Rev. A. J. Seamer Papers: Box 2*. (Auckland: Methodist Church of New Zealand Archives). The author is probably George Laurensen.

<sup>6</sup> E. W. Hames, *Coming of Age: New Zealand Methodism 1913 – 1972*, (Auckland: Institute Press, 1974), 58.

rise of the Rātana movement. Meanwhile in the Waikato King Country area he won the confidence of Princess Te Puea. He was a strong supporter of Māori culture, which he publicised through his Māori choir tours, accompanied by special talks on the Māori people.

Despite having retired in 1939, Seamer began work once again in 1943, serving in Hamilton as Superintendent of the Waikato King Country District for the next 16 years. There he played an important role in the establishment of the Bryce Street Hostel, for Māori girls in Hamilton seeking employment or attending the high schools.<sup>7</sup> As his health weakened, visitors “from all walks of life, far and near” came to visit him, seeking his friendship and guidance.<sup>8</sup> In 1949 Seamer was rewarded for his tireless efforts, awarded a C.M.G. for services to Māori and the community in general.

There is little written directly concerning Seamer. Although, there are several works in which he figures. Firstly, and of direct relevance, is Seamer’s entry in the *Who’s Who in New Zealand*. Written by the Reverend Ruawai D. Rakena, it is an expanded version of his entry by the same author in the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*. This outline of Seamer’s life and work is an excellent overview of the man, and covers the significant moments of his career. This biography builds upon Rakena’s work, aiming to add more detail and analysis. Considerable information on Seamer’s involvement with the Salvation Army can be found in Harold Hill’s *Te Ope Whakaora*. This source has been very useful, as it contains primary documents including reports and diary extracts from the Salvation Army’s Māori mission. George Launson, a Methodist colleague of Seamer’s in the Home and Māori Mission wrote *Te Habi Weteriana*, which has been important in following Seamer’s important moments in the Māori Mission. There are two important works that have helped place Seamer in Māori context, as they focus on two significant people to whom Seamer was a great friend. The first of these is James Henderson’s *Ratana: the Man, the Church, the Political Movement*. This traces the development of the Rātana movement and discusses Seamer’s friendship and guidance to its leaders. The second work devotes several pages to an outline of Seamer’s biography, and that is Michael King’s *Te Puea*. Like *Ratana: the Man, the Church, the Political Movement*, King’s work concerns an important Māori figure for whom Seamer was a significant influence. Literature on the conversion of missionaries in China has also been helpful. Some missionaries were in some ways converted by the people they set out to

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<sup>7</sup> George I. Launson, *Te Habi Weteriana: three half centuries of Methodist Maori Missions 1822 - 1972*, (Wesley Historical Society, 1972), 238.

<sup>8</sup> George Launson, “Rev. A. J. Seamer, C.M.G.: An Appreciation by G. I. Launson,” *The New Zealand Methodist Times*, July 2 1949.

convert, and this notion can be applied to Seamer's case. Such texts include Andrew Walls' essay "The Multiple Conversions of Timothy Richard" in *The Cross Cultural Process in Christian History*, as well as Lian Xi's *The Conversion of Missionaries*. Finally, James Belich's *Paradise Reforged* has offered contextual views on racial understanding during the first half of the twentieth century. However, some of his arguments concerning Māori as 'brown Britons' and a subsequent policy of assimilation do not quite fit with Seamer's celebration of Māori culture. Seamer's case, then raises questions about Belich's arguments.

Due to the long time period Seamer's life covers, as well as his many achievements, I have had to establish several, perhaps blurry, parameters. Firstly, this biography is intended to be a thematic biography, focusing on Seamer's work with Māori. Indeed, this is where the title gets its name. The possessive article in the title may be noted, as it has intentionally been used to imply that he had his own mission and motives for his work with Māori. Indeed, it is these which this biography aims to explore. Secondly there are temporal limitations to this work, covering several time periods. First is his Salvation Army period and entry into Methodism, which covers the years 1897 to circa 1903. Then he moved away from Māori mission and was also involved in the First World War, so the biography jumps to his reappointment into the Māori Mission in 1920. Over the decade 1920 to 1930 Seamer was responsible for forging important relationships with Māori such as Te Puea and Rātana. For this reason this decade is the focus of this biography. However, it must be noted that these limits are flexible. Some of this work extends into the 1930s. Seamer retired in the late-1930s, however recommenced work in the 1940s, and his establishment of hostels during this period need be touched upon. So it is best to think of this biography as a thematic one concerning Seamer and his Māori mission, with flexible temporal parameters.

Seamer's papers at the Methodist Church of New Zealand Archives have been an excellent source for this work, offering Seamer's own opinions, as well as other's opinions concerning Seamer. The Minute Books of the Methodist Church of New Zealand Conferences, as well as the Home Mission Board meetings have also been of great value in understanding Seamer's approach toward Māori. Newspaper articles have also been very helpful. They are scattered and sometimes only have one useful line, but it is often an illuminating one. The Methodist Church's newspaper *The Methodist Times* has also been informative. Finally, there is the secondary material concerning the groups and people that Seamer was involved with, which have been very helpful in discovering who Seamer was.

There are several limitations which this biography faces. First, there are limitations in terms of the Methodist Archives. The main archives in Christchurch were damaged during the 2010 earthquake and have since remained closed. However, the Head Archivist, Jo Smith, assures me that the most relevant material can be found in the Auckland Archives which contain the documents pertaining to the Home and Māori Mission. Nevertheless, the catalogue system and misplacement of certain documents at those archives means that it is quite possible – in fact quite likely – that certain sources of value to this work have been missed.

The second major limitation of this work lies in the very nature of biography. Robert Gittings discusses this in his work, *The Nature of Biography*, arguing that despite information being increasingly accessible, there is much the biographer will never know, especially when removed from the subject by generations. Gittings also argues that biographical subjects have often worked to protect their private thoughts and motivations, adding to the difficulty of writing a fair biography.<sup>9</sup> Furthermore, in justifying the validity of the biographical subject, an author risks become sympathetic to his or her subject as the author must stress the subject's importance. With this in mind, I have tried to portray Seamer from a neutral perspective, although it has been difficult to find critical source material.

Chapter one focuses on Seamer's time in the Salvation Army, because it provided his grounding in Māoridom, and was to influence his work for the rest of his life. Seamer was "always grateful for that 3.5 years, for it meant a really sound introduction to the undercurrent of Māori life".<sup>10</sup> He lived amongst Māori, ate their food, learned their customs, and their language. The lessons he learned in the Salvation Army carried through his life, and, as such, are referred to in the subsequent chapters.

In chapter two, the relationship between the Methodists and Rātana is explored. Rātana is taken to mean here both the man and the religious movement. Seamer was the Methodists' early representative in relations with Rātana, and later he was the one who drove Methodist policy and offered advice to the movement and its leader. He was important in guiding the movement away from deviations from orthodox Christian doctrine, as well as

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<sup>9</sup> Robert Gittings, *The Nature of Biography*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1978).

<sup>10</sup> Arthur John Seamer, "Seamer Family History," (unpublished manuscript) in *Rev. A. J. Seamer Papers: Box 2*. (Auckland: Methodist Church of New Zealand Archives).

away from Pākehā life, helping to prevent it from becoming what Belich calls a ‘disengager’ movement.<sup>11</sup>

Chapter three is entitled “Missionary conversions” and this is intended to have a double meaning. It can refer to conversions by missionaries, as well as the conversions of missionaries. This chapter examines ways in which Seamer was converted by Māori. The chapter also makes use of photographic evidence of Seamer’s immersion in Māoridom, which suggests his willingness to be part of it, as well as Māori acceptance of him. He adopted some Māori ways, traditions, customs, and thought, and it is argued that this is representative of his partial conversion.

Finally, chapter four will use Seamer as a case study to look at racial understandings in early-twentieth century New Zealand. It discusses ideas such as the Aryan Māori and what this meant for race relations, especially in terms of how Māori were viewed by Pākehā. James Belich argued that viewing Māori as ‘brown Britons’, Pākehā sought to assimilate them into European society. In this sense assimilation is taken to mean the adoption of one culture’s customs as the norm, which in this case means the replacement of Māori culture, with Pākehā culture. However, Seamer’s promotion and celebration of Māori culture, as well as the positive reception of this points more towards a sentiment of integration, which would denote a bicultural vision for the country. This chapter then discusses the idea that people like Seamer saw Māori culture playing a greater role in New Zealand culture than historians such as Belich recognise in their arguments.

With his understanding and promotion of Māori culture (and his adoption of Māori language and some Māori customs) Seamer is an important figure in reassessing New Zealand’s race relations in the early-twentieth century. This research, however, aims to serve as a grounding. It is a base from which questions about Seamer, missionaries, Māori, and New Zealand race relations can begin to be asked, and previous conceptions challenged.

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<sup>11</sup> James Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, (North Shore: Penguin Books, 2001).

## Chapter One:

### Te Ope Whakaora: The Salvation Army

In June 1877, Tongala, Victoria, William Seamer and Jane Townley awaited the birth of their fourth child. William Seamer had emigrated from England to the East Coast of North America. There, he followed westward expansion to the California Gold Rush, where he spent a year or two. During this time there were many new religious groups forming which captured his imagination as he set about studying them. The rest of the Seamer family had moved from England to Victoria, Australia and William soon left California to join them. He remained there until the Otago Gold Rush, which saw him and a friend known only as Buck, venture into the hills at Cardrona, before eventually returning to Victoria. There, at age fifty, he met and married the nineteen year old Jane Townley, with whom he had four children.<sup>1</sup> Arthur John Seamer was to be the last.

The Seamers' years in the developing Victorian Golden Valley (later called Tongala) were difficult for the family. In the driest seasons they would have to travel twenty miles to Ichoka to search out water. When William had moved to Tongala, the community there set about establishing their primitive huts. William started gathering the children from the neighbours in reach for Sunday school. Some of farmers then united in building a church a mile away from their home. William helped with this, although having seen too much dissent among the denominations in America, he never identified with a particular denomination. When William Seamer died just two and a half years later, Arthur John Seamer had spent only his infancy with his father. Jane Townley and her four children looked after the farm and each other over the next decades.

William Seamer had always impressed upon his wife the importance of a good education for their children, and she had not forgotten this in his passing. Arthur's older siblings each saw seven years of primary schooling and his oldest brother won a scholarship entitling him to three years at Melbourne College. Arthur's two older brothers, William and Samuel, would both later become prominent in Methodist circles in Australia. William

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<sup>1</sup> Arthur John Seamer, "Seamer Family History," (unpublished manuscript) in *Rev. A. J. Seamer Papers: Box 2*. (Auckland: Methodist Church of New Zealand Archives).

became a minister in the Victorian Conference and a leader in social reform movements. Samuel was Sunday School Superintendent for fifteen years and a valued local preacher at Maryborough, in Queensland.<sup>2</sup>

However, seeing the family farm being ruined by the man it was being leased to, the three boys begged their mother to allow them to return to work the farm. The oldest Seamer returned home to the farm, while the second oldest left with the permission of their mother to learn a trade. Arthur Seamer was nine at this time and continued his education, walking three miles to and from school each day. He noted the intellectual and musical abilities of his older sister, “who was responsible for a good deal of his later education and guidance.”<sup>3</sup> Indeed, it was his sister who first brought Arthur to school with her when he was only three years old. However, this venture was not approved by the headmistress and had to be postponed another year. At age eleven, the young Arthur “felt it his duty to take his share of the home responsibility and he put in five years of almost daylight to dark work on the farm.”<sup>4</sup> Leaving school, his aforementioned sister, Edith, continued his education, being his tutor at home in the evenings. Despite his youth, he managed to run the farm with the counsel of his father’s old friends when his older brothers had moved on. Seamer noted that this responsibility at a young age, combined with his tall stature, led him to be looked upon as older than he really was.

By the time Arthur had reached the age of sixteen he and those supporting him agreed that it was time he sought his own destiny. He went to Melbourne to live with his mother’s sister, and found employment in a harness factory. The time spent with his aunt and uncle in South Melbourne were certainly quite influential to the young Seamer. His uncle was a leading Methodist local preacher and the church caretaker, and their house had been in the church grounds. It was at this time that Arthur was born again during the Methodist Revival in Victoria in 1892.<sup>5</sup> He had probably been raised without a particular denomination due his father’s aforementioned caution concerning denominations and dissention, although the family obviously had connections with Methodism. However, the walk to work was long and took too much time from Seamer’s day. So when the proprietor of the factory and his family moved out of the rooms on the premises, Seamer agreed to move in to keep watch

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<sup>2</sup> “Our Home Missions: Rev. A. J. Seamer,” *The New Zealand Methodist Times*, 5 July 1924.

<sup>3</sup> Seamer, “Seamer Family History.”

<sup>4</sup> Seamer, “Seamer Family History.”

<sup>5</sup> “Our Home Missions: Rev. A. J. Seamer.”



over the factory at night. After moving, Seamer resided on the factory premises for one and a half years, living in a furnished room with cooking arrangements and gas, free of charge. Arthur was content with this, as it gave him time to work on his studies which he was “following up diligently,” but noted he was “a lonely hermit at night.”<sup>6</sup> Nevertheless, from these early years of his life it can be seen that it was very important to Seamer that he gain an education, and it was during these years that he had his first taste of Methodism.

During this time the Salvation Army had been making urgent appeals for missionaries in the daily press, with a course of training provided for those who offered. Seamer was impressed by the earnestness, enthusiasm and practical social work of the Salvation Army, and saw exciting opportunities for himself should he join.<sup>7</sup> “As I had always felt I should do missionary work and this seemed the most likely door leading to it, I sent in my application, was accepted, and was allocated to a group who were to open Salvation Army work in Borneo, and then the destination of the group was altered to Java later on.”<sup>8</sup>

At this time, Seamer was only eighteen years old, and the medical board refused to endorse his travelling to Java for work. Instead, Seamer was transferred to a group of three who were destined for Māori missions in New Zealand. This was initially a blow to Seamer. However, upon learning of his father’s own experiences in New Zealand and his interest in Māori, Arthur was reinvigorated and showed renewed interest in this mission work. The idea of following in his father’s footsteps and carrying on his work was evidently attractive to Seamer. Having lived without the man for most of his life, he sought to piece together what he could about the father he had barely known. “I was disappointed at the first moment, but I was very happy about it when I realised that my father had been deeply interested in the Māori race and I would be following up one of his studies in mission work if I came to New Zealand.”<sup>9</sup>

In early 1897 Arthur Seamer journeyed across the Tasman to begin his Salvation Army service throughout New Zealand. Seamer worked under Mr and Mrs Holdaway with their group of officers destined for Māori missions in Te Ope Whakaora, the Army that

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<sup>6</sup> Seamer, “Seamer Family History.”

<sup>7</sup> “Our Home Missions: Rev. A. J. Seamer.”

<sup>8</sup> Seamer, “Seamer Family History.”

<sup>9</sup> Seamer, “Seamer Family History.”

brings life.<sup>10</sup> A large house in Gisborne had been purchased by the Salvation Army as a training home for the Māori officers who included James Marshall, David Hunter, Sylvester Keen and Arthur Seamer.<sup>11</sup> After completing his training with the Holdaways in June 1897, Seamer served in the Taranaki, Urewera, Rahotu and Taupo districts. In 1898, the Holdaways led their team on a tour of the South Island which raised funds for the continuation of their work.<sup>12</sup> By 1898 the mission had established new corps in Opotiki, Rotorua, Whakatane, and Wairoa, and it seemed these successes foretold the continuance of this work.

Extracts from the journals and reports of Lieutenant Seamer and his colleagues provide insight into the nature of the work being done at the time. The most useful source for this has been Harold Hill's *Te Ope Whakaora*, a Salvation Army publication on their Māori mission from 1884 – 2007. The book exhibits a collection of primary documents previously only available at the archives. This includes *Canoe on the River*, Brigadier Ivy Cresswell's story of Ernest Holdaway, the founder of the Māori mission, which appeared in instalments in the *War Cry*. The book also details the history of the Salvation Army, enabling historians to place the articles, letters and other documents into context. From this selection a fair number of documents pertain to Seamer's time in the Salvation Army, including reports by Seamer and his colleagues. These have been useful in determining the nature of his work. Combined with Seamer's autobiographical account of these years in his family history, a clear picture begins to form of Seamer's work in the Salvation Army.

In extracts from Lieutenant Seamer's reports, he writes excitedly of his work. In Opotiki, he, along with his companion Marshall, was to make himself generally useful until the opening of a corps at Whakatane in 1898. They assisted in the harvest festival in Tauranga and Seamer's report reads that "willing hands transformed the bare-looking hall into the most beautiful spot in Opotiki," while others note Seamer's cornet being quite the open-air attraction.<sup>13</sup> In the Salvation Army, Seamer's musical talent was certainly an asset for him. He carried this musical interest with his work through to the Methodist Church, when he later ran various Māori Choirs.

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<sup>10</sup> Harold Hill, (ed.), *Te Ope Whakaora: The Army That Brings Life: A Collection of Documents on the Salvation Army and Maori 1884 – 2007* (Wellington: Flag Publications, 2007), 28.

<sup>11</sup> Cyril R. Bradwell, *Fight the Good Fight: The Story of the Salvation Army in New Zealand 1883 – 1983* (Wellington: A. H. & A. W. Reed Ltd, 1982), 85.

<sup>12</sup> Hill, *Te Ope Whakaora*, 40.

<sup>13</sup> Hill, *Te Ope Whakaora*, 187.

Mission work at the end of Seamer's career starkly contrasts with his early years in the Salvation Army. When Seamer began his mission work he was still travelling on horseback, often over uncharted land. The work of these early years was primitive compared to how he would finish his career some forty years later travelling by car over constructed roads to established towns and settlements. The early years presented more danger and adventure which is best captured in the journal entries of the group Seamer travelled with. First is an extract from an account of August Kells, Seamer's travel companion., which demonstrates the comparatively primitive nature of this his mission work:

Soon after we got out of the bush, night came on. We had been going downhill for some miles, and at last we reached a scrub-covered flat where it was hard to find the track. My horse stopped suddenly and gave a snort. I tried to make her step over what looked like a small ditch, but as she refused to go on I got off and struck a march - and found that we were on the edge of a chasm between ten and fifteen feet deep.<sup>14</sup>

In June 1898 at Matata, Seamer's companion Captain Evans wrote a more dramatic account of the perils they experienced travelling on horseback across uncharted land:

Lieutenant Seamer poled the canoe across, the horses swimming alongside. Away again through mud-holes, swamps and river-beds, our horses slipping and stumbling in all directions. Lieutenant Seamer attempted to cross the next river on horseback to get a canoe, but his horse got stuck and he had to dismount, up to his armpits in water, and drag his horse ashore. So we had to find some other way across.<sup>15</sup>

It was not just missionary work that they were doing for the Salvation Army, but pioneering missionary work, often covering land uncrossed by Pākehā before.

During these years Seamer lived completely among Māori, learning their language, their thought, and their customs. Perhaps what made Seamer such a great missionary from such a young age, and so respected by Māori, was that he realised he was not superior, and was not the only person in his relationships with Māori who had something to teach. He realised that knowledge flowed both ways in his encounters, and was prepared to learn all he could from his Māori acquaintances. Many who knew him reported that he was widely respected in

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<sup>14</sup> Hill, *Te Ope Whakaora*, 190.

<sup>15</sup> Hill, *Te Ope Whakaora*, 202.

Māori circles, and won the confidence of their leaders in every district he worked in during these early years.<sup>16</sup>

I taught them something of the Christian truth and of the great civilised world, while they taught me of their Māori customs and traditions and some of them were in training as tohungas at the time. I listened quite as carefully to them as they listened to me. We were brothers together in spirit. I'll put it this way, I sat at their feet while we were discussing Māori things and they sat at my feet while we were discussing Christian civilisation.<sup>17</sup>

Seamer's surviving reports from this time celebrate the hospitality he found amongst Māori. They also record Māori interest in what he had to say as much as his own interest in them. These chronicles are full of Seamer's excitement in his work and future prospects. "We are getting more sympathy, and that of a practical kind, and the Māoris give us the best of attention... One of the chief men told us that although he did not feel much like becoming a Salvationist at present, but if we sowed the seed now, perhaps we would reap some day."<sup>18</sup> His journal extracts record the joy he found in his work with Māori, not just in successful conversions, but in meeting these people. In May 1898 Seamer arrived at Whakatane, and at the end of June he wrote: "...God came very near to us. Māoris of all sizes and descriptions turned up well, and the children are especially interested. I praise God continually for sending me into the Māori work."<sup>19</sup> Even in these early years, Seamer had already found his passion for mission work and Māori people.

In his Salvation Army experience Seamer found his talent for missionary work, quickly moving to the position of Captain. It was during his time in the corps that he gained an intimate knowledge of the Māori life and language. Within a year Seamer was fluent in te reo Māori and this language ability remained with him to the end of his days. Te reo Māori came to him as naturally as English. Even fifty years later when many Māori could no longer speak their language, Seamer still thought in Māori at least as much as in English. In a memorandum from Reverend Seamer in Hamilton Seamer asks an unknown recipient to

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<sup>16</sup> "Memorial Notes," 1963, in *Rev. A. J. Seamer Papers: Box 2*. (Auckland: Methodist Church of New Zealand Archives). The author is probably George Laurenson.

<sup>17</sup> Seamer, "Seamer Family History."

<sup>18</sup> Hill, *Te Ope Whakaora*, 190.

<sup>19</sup> Hill, *Te Ope Whakaora*, 189.

proof-read a statement of his for publication, noting that it may not read well because he had been thinking in Māori yet writing in English.<sup>20</sup>

At 21 years of age his hard work was rewarded when he was appointed officer in charge of the Salvation Army mission in Taranaki. Seamer always firmly maintained that his experiences of slum work and Māori work with the Salvation Army were of immense value to him and added to his passion for Māori work. He fondly reminisced on those busy years with scarcely a regret.<sup>21</sup> His Salvation Army experience saw him live alongside Māori, eating their food, sleeping on their mats and learning their customs. An extract from August Kells' report again gives an idea of the way he and Seamer encountered and were welcomed by Māori. In this case they were travelling between Whakatane and Ruatoki.

After going a long way back, looking for a place to camp out, we found a track which soon became broader; then we heard half-a-dozen dogs barking and saw the welcome light of a whare. There wasn't room for us there, but the Māori told us of another whare three miles away, with a paddock for the horses. A youth was stirred up; seizing a firebrand and a light, he waded cheerfully through mud and water, although it was very cold, and set us on the road.

We roused the folk at this whare, and getting the door partly open we dropped down into their midst - for the door was in the roof! Great was their astonishment to see Salvationists! They immediately set to work to prepare food. Lieutenant Seamer was heard to exclaim, "I have never felt Māori mats so soft before!" and he was soon asleep. After a hearty meal the Māoris said, "Now that you have fed your bodies, how about our souls?" so we held a meeting. We were then given a tent to roll ourselves up in, and we slept for the first time in a "whare rīwai" (potato house). Another meeting next morning, then we set out again.<sup>22</sup>

These years living amongst Māori also deepened Seamer's understanding of the race, which further stimulated his passion for these people, and this forever influenced his approach to Māori missions. Furthermore, it was during this time that Seamer met and

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<sup>20</sup> Memorandum from A. J. Seamer probably to George Laurenson, in *Rev. A. J. Seamer Papers: Box 2*. (Auckland: Methodist Church of New Zealand Archives).

<sup>21</sup> "Our Home Missions: Rev. A. J. Seamer."

<sup>22</sup> Hill, *Te Ope Whakaora*, 191.

became friends with young Māori his age who would later become leaders in Māori circles just as Seamer became a leader in the Methodist Church. Seamer does not elaborate further on who these people might be, although he does mention some that he was “important to them. In fact, Te Whiti told his son in law, Charlie Waitara to always have room for me when I called and I remember him best with his Bible”.<sup>23</sup> Seamer’s time in the Salvation Army saw a solid grounding in networking and religious and cultural understanding that would significantly direct Seamer’s life thereafter. It is revealing to note that Seamer himself recognised the importance of his time spent in the Salvation Army, and all that he learned there. Writing of his time in the Salvation Army, Seamer made the following remarks:

I have always been grateful for that 3.5 years, for it meant a really sound introduction to the undercurrent of Māori life, for most of the time I had slept on Māori mats and eaten with fingers from a flax basket, as was the custom in those days, and made friends with those of my own age who became the leaders in Māori circles as the time went on... We were brothers together in spirit.<sup>24</sup>

In 1899 the Holdaways were transferred to the Salvation Army training college in Melbourne.<sup>25</sup> The Salvation Army Māori mission then came under the work of an Irishman, Adjutant Samuel Sadanand.<sup>26</sup> Sadanand had served in India and Australia but had no knowledge of New Zealand or te reo Māori. The Holdaways’ leadership and drive were sorely missed among their former colleagues. Frustrated and disappointed, many of the Māori missionaries resigned from the Salvation Army. Arthur Seamer and John Nicholls left for the Methodist Church.<sup>27</sup> Explaining his departure from the Salvation Army Seamer wrote:

...after three and a half years service in various parts of New Zealand, the Salvation Army authority had changed both in personnel and in views and they decided to discontinue separate Māori work. And I, finding myself without the motive that had prompted me earlier, was disinclined to go on in ordinary Salvation Army work,

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<sup>23</sup> Seamer, “Seamer Family History.”

<sup>24</sup> Seamer, “Seamer Family History.”

<sup>25</sup> Hill, *Te Ope Whakaora*, 40.

<sup>26</sup> Hill, *Te Ope Whakaora*, 41.

<sup>27</sup> Bradwell, *Fight the Good Fight*, 86.

although at that time I held rank as Captain and as a Lieutenant was in charge of the Salvation Work from Opunake almost to New Plymouth...<sup>28</sup>

This confirms that Seamer's passion lay in working with Māori. This was initially due to sharing his late father's interest, before finding his own love in that field. The opportunity for continuation of this work presented itself in the Methodist Church. The Salvationist author Bradwell wistfully observed "it is perhaps a little ironical to see him described by a competent modern historian as 'in Māori eyes... perhaps the last European missionary to acquire heroic status.' He could have been the successor the Army needed to build on Holdaway's foundations."<sup>29</sup> As Seamer's successes with the Methodists grew, so did the Salvation Army's remorse over his departure.

The young Methodist's transfer to the Salvation Army raises the question of Seamer's own theology. However, the Salvation Army was in fact an outgrowth of Methodism. Its founder, William Booth was a staunch Methodist, who served as a minister in the New Connexion in London for several years. The Salvation Army was formed because of concern over the existing churches' lack of evangelisation. They ignored what would become the Salvation Army's target groups: the homeless, hungry and destitute. Originally Booth aimed to convert such people and have them attend regular churches. However, feeling unwelcome amongst the upper classes, this was unsuccessful. It was then that the East London Christian Mission was formed, later to be called the Salvation Army.<sup>30</sup> Despite his formation of this new church, William Booth remained a Methodist and loved Methodism until his dying day. Considering the history of the Salvation Army, its birth from Methodism and continued connection with the Methodist Church, it is less surprising that a Methodist would have joined the Salvationists, and later returned to Methodism. They were not big jumps to make, and reflected little disloyalty to either church. With their close links and similar beliefs it can be argued that Seamer's work with both the Salvation Army and the Methodists was mainly a means to an end. He wished to spread the gospel, do social service and humanitarian work, and continue to work with Māori.

Seamer's widely recognised musical talents may also have played a part in his interest in the Salvation Army, offering an aspect of his work that he would not find with other

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<sup>28</sup> Seamer, "Seamer Family History."

<sup>29</sup> Bradwell, *Fight the Good Fight*, 86.

<sup>30</sup> "Salvation Army International – History," The Salvation Army, accessed September 8, 2011, [http://www.salvationarmy.org/ihq/www\\_sa.nsf/vw-dynamic-arrays/5622F771BD70A75A80256D4E003AE0A3?openDocument](http://www.salvationarmy.org/ihq/www_sa.nsf/vw-dynamic-arrays/5622F771BD70A75A80256D4E003AE0A3?openDocument).

denominations. Indeed the Salvation Army's performance aspect, with brass bands and concerts may certainly have influenced Seamer's later work with Māori choirs through the Methodist mission. Seamer was also involved in Māori concert choirs during his time in the Salvation Army.

The Methodist Reverend Hammond, along with other ministers such as Reverend S. W. White knew the young Seamer quite well, and upon his resignation from the Salvation Army at once encouraged him to enter into Methodist Māori mission work. "I applied one week and I took up my appointment next week without any tests..."<sup>31</sup> From 1901 to 1903 Seamer worked for the Methodist Church as a Home missionary. He was sent to Kaeo-Whangaroa; the first Methodist mission port in New Zealand, to minister to Māori and Pākehā of that district, extending from Kerikeri to Kaitaia. (It was during his time at the church in Kaeo that he met Ida Marion Nisbet who also worked at the church, and whom he would marry some years later). As with his time in the Salvation Army, the only means of conveyance at this time was by horseback, and it was difficult to reach many areas of this great circuit. At this time Seamer had no intention of going into ordinary ministry, but near the end of his first year at Kaeo, Reverend C. H. Garland, chairman of the district, strongly advised him to become a candidate for ordination.

Garland felt that Seamer would miss many opportunities for full service if he was not ranked with other ministers. Seamer agreed, but refused to simply apply for acceptance for ordination, instead applying for full training, insisting "I should take the full course or I wouldn't feel happy just 'getting in by the back door'."<sup>32</sup> In preparing for the entrance examination, Seamer would begin his studies at four in the morning, having to balance his preparation with being in charge of the Bay of Islands Home Mission station. Upon taking the candidates' examination Seamer found his marks among the highest of the applicants. The 1902 Conference received Seamer for training commencing in 1903. He expressed his wish to complete his three years training at Queens in Melbourne, so he might rejoin his brother who was also studying for the ministry. The Conference in Christchurch agreed to this, and Seamer promptly left for Auckland to prepare to depart. However, before the Conference rose they found the Church was urgently short of men and as the chairman thought Seamer was the most suitable candidate who had been accepted that year, they decided he should go immediately to appointment. So, without his knowledge, Seamer was

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<sup>31</sup> Seamer, "Seamer Family History."

<sup>32</sup> Seamer, "Seamer Family History."



appointed to the Canterbury circuit of Weedons, Springston and Addington. Seamer admitted he came very close to withdrawing from the Methodist Church when Garland wired Seamer to notify him of this decision. This again supports the notion that Seamer's motivations and beliefs were in the work he was doing, rather than in a specific church. Seamer decided to remain with the Methodists due to a visit from Garland upon his return from the conference. Garland explained the church's position personally and confirmed his faith that Seamer would not have any trouble getting through his probationary studies without any training. Seamer was talked around and found Garland's advice prophetic and wise. In 1907, the end of the ordinary term of probation at that time, Arthur John Seamer was ordained as the Reverend A. J. Seamer.<sup>33</sup> Only a year later Seamer was appointed an examiner of candidates for the mission. However, that same year he left the Māori Mission to join the Home mission, working in Wellington and Dunedin.

Seamer worked in the Methodist Māori Mission until 1907 as assistant to the Reverend W. M. Gittos. This early experience in the Māori Mission would come to be of great significance to Seamer's career. Gittos was a devoted worker for Māori welfare and no doubt some of this passion and influence was projected on to Seamer. Gittos spoke appreciatively of his young assistant who threw himself into his work. Seamer was received in many places with open arms and warm hearts, with the name Gittos opening doors that would have otherwise remained closed. And it was the connections Seamer was making during this time (as well as some years earlier in the Salvation Army), that would contribute to the achievements of Seamer's time in the Māori Mission from 1920 onwards.

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<sup>33</sup> Seamer, "Seamer Family History."



Figure 2: Portrait of A. J. Seamer.

Source: *The New Zealand Methodist Times*, May 1 1915.



Figure 3: Portrait of A. J. Seamer

Source: *The New Zealand Methodist Times*, May 27 1933.

Figures 2 and 3 are the earliest two available of A. J. Seamer. Neither are dated, but considering the publications in which they were found and the relatively youthful appearance of Seamer, these give a good indication of Seamer's appearance sometime in the first twenty years of the twentieth century.

## Chapter Two:

### The Reverend A. J. Seamer and Rātana

During the 1920s the Rātana movement (a Māori religious and political movement) emerged and began to gain momentum. It was a controversial movement, as it was a Māori reinterpretation of Christianity, claimed faith healing and miracles, and was involved in politics. This is further discussed below. Reverend A. J. Seamer was to play an important role in guiding the religious development of this group. Despite the protests of many, Seamer's policy (representing the Methodist Church) was one of silence on theological differences. He did this to prevent alienation of the movement from the Pākehā churches, and to remain involved and able to influence the new religion. The Methodists worked quietly at Rātana Pā and some later became apostles when the Rātana Church was registered in 1925. This chapter on Seamer's relationship with Rātana will focus not so much on the political aspect of the movement as on Rātana as a religious movement. As part of this, the personal relationship between Seamer and Rātana the man must also be examined in order to explain how events transpired. Rātana had been raised a Methodist, and was to become a good friend of Seamer's. He often sought the Reverend's counsel and it was largely due to Seamer's wise advice that the two groups were able to retain links. This friendship led to Seamer's hand in writing the Rātana Church's creed, and the Methodists' continued welcome reception at Rātana Pā. The chapter will then look at Seamer's and the Methodist Church's policy toward Rātana and its relationship with the movement's leaders and at the township. It will analyse Seamer's own beliefs and motivations to illuminate how far he was responsible for the Methodist Church's policy toward Rātana. This can also shed light on Seamer's own theology.

The majority of sources used in this chapter come from the minutes of the annual Methodist Conference of New Zealand as well as minutes of the meetings of the Home Mission Board. This research would be strengthened by uncovering further sources, especially outside the Methodist Church. However, the most detailed information has come from official manuscripts and publications of the Methodist Church, so it is those which I have primarily worked with (complemented by other sources where possible). This, however, raises the question however of how far these publications represent the thoughts, beliefs and

actions of A. J. Seamer. It is often not specified that a given passage was written by him or reported about him. How far can these be interpreted as Seamer's? As Superintendent, then General Superintendent of the Home and Māori Mission, Seamer was in the highest ranked position of the Home and Māori Mission and pulled considerable weight in his department. All accounts agree in depicting Seamer as a wise and tolerant man who was well-respected and whose opinions mattered. As such, it can be said that the majority of Home Mission resolutions and policies would not have come to pass had it not been for the eventual endorsement of Seamer. And if this was not the case, and there had been opposition from Seamer, this would have been mentioned in the minutes. Thus, considering his status in the Home and Māori Mission, most of the decisions and policies of the Home Mission meetings can be taken as being endorsed by, if not coming directly from, Seamer. Indeed, each report to the Conference is signed by A. J. Seamer, the General Superintendent, on behalf of the Board. Thus they can be regarded as reflective of his view of the Rātana movement and its relationship with the Methodist Church, unless otherwise indicated.

The emergence of the Rātana movement came as no surprise to A. J. Seamer. Upon his return from the War, he became aware of the dissatisfied and disillusioned atmosphere in Māori society which he believed may lead to a new religious movement, as discussed in the previous chapter. As Seamer re-entered the Māori Mission he realised the tense and frustrated sentiments amongst Māori groups. This led him to believe that "some form of Māori racialist movement with religious emphasis was bound to develop".<sup>1</sup> Seamer noted this restless state at a Methodist Conference in the twenties: "Then came the Great War when, to Māori, the air was full of thought storms, and semi-heathen superstitions developed alarmingly... feverish religious and at times fanatical activity dominated whole districts... a critical and markedly transitional period."<sup>2</sup>

The Rātana movement emerged after 1918. The believers' story holds that in 1918, standing on his veranda gazing out into the sky, a cloud on the horizon spoke to Tahupōtiki Wiremu Rātana. It told Rātana it was the Holy Spirit, informing him he had been chosen to lead the Māori people to salvation through Jehovah, as he was appointed *te māngai*: the

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<sup>1</sup> Letter from G. I. Laurensen to H.L.J. Halliday, 11 June 1966 in H.L.J. Halliday, "The Reverend A. J. Seamer and the Attitude of the Methodists to the Rātana Movement," (Auckland: Methodist Church of New Zealand Archives, 1966).

<sup>2</sup> Rev. A. J. Seamer, Minutes of Conference of the Australasian Methodist Churches 1921-25, in James Henderson, *Rātana: the Man, the Church, the Political Movement*, (Wellington: A.H & A. W. Reed, 1963), 16.

mouthpiece (of God) for the Multitudes of this land. The Holy Spirit instructed him to unite the Māori people, and turn them to Jehovah. With the help of Archangel Gabriel, the Holy Spirit began to teach Rātana of the Heavens and the Earth, Creation, and healing. Rātana's mission was to unite the Māori people, turn them away from tohungaism, and teach them of the one true God.<sup>3</sup> Rātana gained a following touring Aotearoa preaching the gospel, and became well known for his faith-healing. A township was established at his farm, becoming Rātana Pā, as thousands flocked to his home seeking his guidance toward enlightenment, and spiritual and physical healing. This was a form of faith healing, which Rātana performed on patients. They would be healed through prayer and acceptance of Jehovah. Seamer witnessed Rātana's miracles and gave testimony to his healing work, calling him "the most practical faith-healer I ever knew".<sup>4</sup> Even Seamer's witnessing Rātana's healing for some reason "created quite a stir among many Māori and Pākehā during the early years of the movement".<sup>5</sup>

Significantly, Rātana's movement was open to all tribes and religions. Followers could remain members of other churches as well as being a part of the Rātana movement (before it became a separate church). In its beginning the movement did not favour a particular church but embraced them all. Initially his movement was seen as a Christian Revival, and especially a Māori embrace of Christianity. While cautious of the movement, the Anglicans, Methodists and Roman Catholics were excited about this renewed Māori interest in Christianity, and were quick to get their missions involved. The movement was also politically significant, as it carried Treaty of Waitangi grievances to King George V and the League of Nations. Later, Rātana allied with Labour, and subsequently Rātana's first candidate became a Member of Parliament in 1932. From the 1940s until 1996, Rātana candidates held all four Māori electorates.<sup>6</sup>

In the 1920 Home Mission Review it was already clear that Rātana was attracting much interest from Māori followers. The Methodists regarded the movement cautiously, but were also excited at the work of Tahupōtiki Wiremu Rātana, which could be helpful to their mission. In its early stages it seemed Rātana had really taken on board the Christian message and was working for the same goals as the Methodist mission. He was preaching from the

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<sup>3</sup> Arahi .R. Hagger, "Te Haahi Ratana: History," The Ratana Church, 2003, <http://www.theratanachurch.org.nz/history.html>.

<sup>4</sup> Henderson, *Ratana: The Man, the Church, the Political Movement*, 35.

<sup>5</sup> Hagger, "Te Haahi Ratana: History."

<sup>6</sup> Hagger, "Te Haahi Ratana: History."

Bible and rejecting tohungaism, which the missionaries for decades had sought to eliminate. At the end of 1920 Seamer offered his opinion of the movement and this continued to define the Methodist policy towards it over the following decade:

Wiremu Rātana, the Māori teacher of Divine Healing has created quite a stir among some of the tribes during the year. In general, his influence is helpful to our work, and his relationship to our Mission is of the happiest character... Exaggerated references to Rātana and his work which are published in the secular and religious press are most detrimental. Rātana is an earnest man, with his own particular work to do. And as he is less mercurial than the average Māori, he may yet avoid the many pitfalls that are hidden along his path.<sup>7</sup>

These 'exaggerated references' are likely the unsavoury reports concerning Rātana found in the press. As a controversial movement it was not presented positively in the media, and was unfairly represented.

From this time onwards, Rātana and his movement were a constant interest and concern to Reverend Seamer. He paternally watched the movement and attempted to guide it toward proper Christian interpretation for the rest of his life. During the turbulent time of its emergence, Seamer frequently consulted his retired predecessor Reverend T. G. Hammond, who fully endorsed Seamer's policy toward Rātana.<sup>8</sup> With faith-healing well established, the Home Mission Board asked Reverend Seamer what the Methodist Church should do. He recommended that Hammond (who had been responsible for the conversion of several members of Rātana's family) be sent to stay with the family for a week to assess the situation. Following Hammond's report and recommendation, the Board decided the movement should be assisted rather than opposed.<sup>9</sup>

In the 1921 Home Mission Review reported:

Most of our staff have been able to turn the spiritual influence of Rātana's work to good account. He is a son of our Church, and though not in full membership with us, because of earlier isolation from our Mission centres, he has very rightly looked to

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<sup>7</sup> George I. Laurenson, *Te Hahi Weteriana: three half centuries of Methodist Maori Missions 1822 - 1972*, (Wesley Historical Society, 1972), 210.

<sup>8</sup> Laurenson, *Te Hahi Weteriana*, 210.

<sup>9</sup> Henderson, *Ratana: The Man, the Church, the Political Movement*, 51.

us for advice and assistance, and we have not failed him. His crusade against corrupt Māori superstition has had far-reaching effects, and is very opportune.<sup>10</sup>

Again, the Methodist Church saw the Rātana movement in line with their work, evangelising and converting Māori to Christianity, while uniting them as one, rather than their previous separateness through tribal culture. “Rātana is aiming definitely at a Union of the Māori people in the true Faith. His Agents are busy canvassing in every part of New Zealand for signatures to the ‘Covenant’.”<sup>11</sup> Thus, the Methodists supported the movement and worked alongside it toward the same aim. However, they also noted that “we have never sought to make any denominational capital out of the Movement, but no Church has been as closely and consistently in touch with it from its inception, or has received much confidential information and has heartily supported the policy followed”.<sup>12</sup> The final striking quotation from the minutes of this Conference bears warning to the future of the movement, and advised caution: “Powerful influences of an unsatisfactory type have been at work, and the real test of strength is still to come”.<sup>13</sup> This was referring to the factions developing within the Rātana movement, seeking to push it in different directions. Both Seamer and Hammond were aware of the possibility of the movement closing its doors and looking inward, falling into greater deviations from Christian doctrine. Of the Methodists at this stage, Seamer had had the most interaction with the movement and its key players, so it is a fair presumption that most of these quotations and policy suggestions come from Seamer himself. The report from this early year demonstrates Seamer’s and the Methodist mission’s excitement at the prospects of the movement, but also their wariness at its potential problems.

Unfortunately, lacking sources from Tahupōtiki Wiremu Rātana or A. J. Seamer it is hard to determine much about their friendship. What is certain, though, is that the two maintained a strong friendship. This is often cited for the way the relationship between the Methodists and Rātana played out. Despite Seamer’s earlier work near Rātana in his Salvation Army and early Methodist mission days, no accounts of the two having met have been found. It is known that Seamer was friends with Te Whiti, and Rātana’s aunt had been with Te Whiti at Parihaka so there is a chance that Seamer had come across the family. From Seamer’s writing it appears that Seamer and Rātana first met sometime after the War.

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<sup>10</sup> The Home Mission Board, “The Home Mission Review 1921,” 31 in *Home Mission Reports 1920 – 1930*.

<sup>11</sup> “The Home Mission Review 1921,” 31.

<sup>12</sup> “The Home Mission Review 1921,” 31.

<sup>13</sup> “The Home Mission Review 1921,” 31.



Through his mission work Seamer became a personal friend and confidante of T. W. Rātana, who frequently sought Seamer's advice.<sup>14</sup> And Seamer gave his full support to Rātana. With his great understanding of Māori thought from having lived amongst them for many years, he was sympathetic to Rātana's movement.

In Seamer's early days of involvement with Rātana he was often accommodated in the māngai's own room, before the Methodists established their own residence at the Pā. Their closeness was illustrated in the Rātana family's request that Seamer speak at the funeral of T. W. Rātana in 1939. James Henderson, who had the opportunity to interview Seamer for his book *Ratana: the Man, the Church, the Political Movement*, said Reverend A. J. Seamer "had known Rātana better than any other European".<sup>15</sup> At the funeral Seamer conducted a small service in the mission church at the Pā as well as speaking to the people. His view of T. W. Rātana was clear as he spoke with respect of the man and his movement, at the same time giving warning to the future of the movement.

He was called by many a great saint; by others he was classed as a great sinner. Which was he? From one point of view he was a very great saint, but if he were to stand by my side now, he would say that he had been a great sinner. The outcome of his work depends on us who follow him, particularly those who have wandered far from his teachings. His work will succeed only where it is built on truth.<sup>16</sup>

It is interesting to note that Seamer included himself as one of Rātana's followers in this statement, giving further support to the argument (discussed in chapter three) that it was not only missionaries who did the converting.

In analysing what may have given the Methodists this apparent edge in relations with Rātana, it must largely come down to the people representing the churches, and the relationships they formed with Rātana and its leaders. Seamer was a friend of Rātana, and widely trusted among those at the Pā. Even this success can be attributed to two sources: one Seamer's tolerance and understanding reported by all who encountered the man; and Seamer's great experience with traditional Māori thought, custom, and religious life from his time in the Salvation Army and his early days in the Methodist Church. This time not only allowed Seamer to meet those who were to become leaders in Māori circles, but it also gave

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<sup>14</sup> George Laurenson, "Rev. A. J. Seamer, C.M.G.: An Appreciation by G. I. Laurenson," *The New Zealand Methodist Times*, July 2 1949.

<sup>15</sup> Henderson, *Ratana: The Man, the Church, the Political Movement*, 102.

<sup>16</sup> Henderson, *Ratana: The Man, the Church, the Political Movement*, 102.

him understanding of Māori way of life, thought, and culture, which allowed him to empathise with Rātana and understand Christianity as it was seen by Māori. Seamer's empathy and understanding evidently led to the respect and trust that Māori were to show the Reverend, and thus to the establishment of Seamer's fair relationship with the Rātana movement, on behalf of the Methodists. The 1921 Home Mission Board meeting reported: "This executive endorses the policy of Reverend A. J. Seamer and express entire confidence in his relationship to the Rātana movement."<sup>17</sup>

The report of the Home and Māori Mission for 1924 shows Seamer's insight into the reasons for the emergence of the movement, as well as reflecting positively on the work done by the mission thus far. This report may have been written by others too, but certainly Seamer's own writings on the emergence of native religious movements in New Zealand as well as North America indicate his excellent understanding of the causes of their surfacing.

The Rātana Movement is, viewed from different angles, both a product of, and a reaction from, the excitement of those days, and it has been of incalculable benefit to many tribes. During the early post-war days, feverish religious, and at times fanatical, activity dominated the whole districts, creating both the opportunity and the necessity for vigorous and sympathetic work on our part. By the acceptance of this challenge, our Church has succeeded in establishing itself more firmly than ever in the hearts of our Māori people.<sup>18</sup>

Despite Seamer's influence at Rātana, problems of doctrine still arose. Originally the movement operated without a defined body of teaching, which led to inconsistency and confusion. When such problems arose, Rātana would often consult his inner circle, which included several Methodist ministers and lay-people, to resolve them.<sup>19</sup> The leaders at Rātana

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<sup>17</sup> The Home Mission Board, "Minutes of the Meeting of the Home Mission Board 1921," August 25 1921, 179.

The Home Mission Board, "The Report of the Home Mission Board on the Maori Work," in Methodist Church of New Zealand, *Minutes of the Annual Conference held at Dunedin, 1926*, (Lyttleton Times: Christchurch, 1926), 116.

<sup>18</sup> "Maori Mission Report," in Methodist Church of New Zealand, *Minutes of the Thirteenth Annual Conference of New Zealand held at Wellington, 1925*, (Lyttleton Times: Christchurch, 1925), 115.

<sup>19</sup> Henderson, *Ratana: The Man, the Church, the Political Movement*, 52. The Methodists of this inner circle include Reverend A. J. Seamer, Hoani Hakaraia Te Uawiri and Paraire Paikea.

came from different traditions and backgrounds, and indeed this was one of the most significant aspects of the movement: it traversed traditional tribal boundaries, unifying Māori. However, their understanding and preaching depended on the background from which they had come. When leaders went back to their homes to preach and began their official duties for the Rātana Church, they taught different interpretations of beliefs and practices. The way they preached Rātana thought and practice was determined through the lens of their various traditions.<sup>20</sup>

In 1924, with Rātana touring overseas, the movement for a separate church was gaining momentum. Some of the recognised leaders of the separation movement were conducting marriages without legal authority. Chaos was threatening, and the movement was slipping away from what the European churches saw as true Christianity. “[Seamer] saw the need for guidance and was welcomed among [those at Rātana] as an understanding and trusted friend.”<sup>21</sup> He opposed them forming a separate church and advised those at Rātana so. However with the momentum already in place Seamer was forced to change tack, in order to maintain relations with the movement. Seamer encouraged the movement to remain faithful to Christianity. He set about helping them to prepare a Statement of Faith to submit to authorities for their application for registration under the Marriage Act. He consulted continually with the leaders at Rātana, exerting significant influence over the development of the Rātana Creed. This was then lodged with authorities, enacting the establishment of the Rātana Church.<sup>22</sup> Seamer continued to guide the movement as best he could away from Angel worship and veneration of the māngai over the following decades.

The tipping point for the Rātana movement came in 1924 at the Christmas Hui. Some followers of the movement were beginning to worship the angels and even Rātana himself. This caused concern among members of the three European churches as well as Rātana himself. Ministers of the Anglican and Methodist Churches were present at the hui, and over the week they engaged in debates between people and clergy on the nature of the angels. A conference was held where Rātana, the Anglicans and the Methodists agreed that Seamer would address the followers on the subject of worship of the angels and the māngai at the Christmas Hui celebrations, followed immediately by an address from Rātana. Seamer was to clarify the concept of angels according to orthodox Christian doctrine, elucidating the

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<sup>20</sup> Laurenson, *Te Hahi Weteriana*, 218.

<sup>21</sup> Laurenson, *Te Hahi Weteriana*, 218.

<sup>22</sup> Laurenson, *Te Hahi Weteriana*, 218.

polytheistic misinterpretation derived from the Māori term *atua*, meaning god or spirit. Rātana was to speak immediately following Seamer in support of this interpretation. However, events did not follow this plan. Seamer's address was well received, and, sensing this atmosphere, an Anglican minister stood up to add his own interpretation. Various other figures present felt compelled to add their interpretations to the congregation and soon the assembly grew restless. Rātana refused to address the crowd in such an atmosphere. When Seamer quietly joined him on the side of the platform, Rātana told him "we must now go our own way".<sup>23</sup> A year later, after the official establishment of Te Hahi Rātana as an independent church, the Anglican Church annulled its involvement with the movement. The Methodist Church chose to retain contact. The constitution of the Rātana Church was accepted by the registrar general and on Seamer's advice the Rātana Church was legally registered in 1925.

Despite Seamer's efforts, the theology of the movement continued deviating from what the European Churches wanted. Originally the movement regarded T. W. Rātana as *a* mouthpiece of God. However it soon became common to refer to him as *the* mouthpiece of God, worshipping the man equally. This was to become one of the major problems the European churches had with Rātana, causing both Anglicans and Catholics to sever their links with the movement. Seamer's actions on behalf of the Methodist Church were supported by the former Superintendent of the Māori Mission, Reverend T. G. Hammond as well as the Home Mission Board.

The Home Mission Board minutes of a special meeting of 1925 report that T. W. Rātana suggested to Seamer that the Methodists should appoint agents to work among the people at Rātana Pā in order to guide the doctrine.<sup>24</sup> The Board agreed with Seamer and felt Rātana's teaching did not justify opposition from the Christian churches, so authorised Seamer to appoint Māori Methodist Ministers to Rātana. When the Rātana Church was registered, these three ministers (Hone Taotahi, Hoani Harakaraia and Paraire Paikea) were recorded as apostles of the faith.<sup>25</sup> It was this, especially, which caused some to accuse Seamer of sponsoring the creation of the Rātana Church. However, that was not the case. The following passage from the meeting of the Home Mission Board in 1925 states that:

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<sup>23</sup> Henderson, *Ratana: The Man, the Church, the Political Movement*, 46.

<sup>24</sup> The Home Mission Board, "Minutes of the Meeting of the Home Mission Board April 15 1925," 1925, 8.

<sup>25</sup> "Minutes of the Meeting of the Home Mission Board April 15 1925," 8.

[Rev. A. J. Seamer] stressed the strong desire of leading men in the [Rātana] Movement to form a separate Native Church. He expressed a fear that such a step would react most injuriously upon the Christian position among the Māoris. Mr. Seamer said that after many long and earnest consultations with Rātana, he considered the wisest course to take in the very delicate situation which had arisen, would be for the Board to give him authority at once to appoint Māori Agents to take up work amongst any Māoris who were at present without Church oversight because of their loyalty to the Rātana movement. Mr Seamer informed the Board that these agents would be supported by the movement, but that, if the Church paid to each of them £10 annually, *it would strengthen our control*. He did not claim this as an ideal development, but *as a compromise that might save the situation for our own church* and partially also for the other Mission Churches.<sup>26</sup>

Despite the support of the Home Mission Board in his policy toward Rātana, Seamer had some critics. They accused Seamer of facilitating the establishment of the Rātana Church. They criticised his involvement in the writing of the Rātana Creed, and his advice that the Church be legally registered. As discussed above, it is true Seamer did both of these things. However, these were a last resort which Seamer only encouraged when it was inevitable that the Rātana movement would break away. Indeed it had already begun to break away when Seamer took this action. Although it was not ideal, Seamer was trying to make the best of the situation. It was an effort to restore stability to the movement and to prevent departure from orthodox Christian belief. The course he recommended enabled the Methodists to continue to be able to influence and guide the movement, rather than abandoning it altogether. Seamer was taking the precautionary measures he thought would be most effective to prevent further distance from orthodoxy. His appointment of Methodist workers to Rātana was an effort to re-establish influence from European Christianity. Thus, rather than criticising Seamer for facilitating the establishment of an independent Rātana Church, it should rather be said that he did all he could to *prevent* the separation of Rātana. In advising the formal registration of the Church, Seamer was still doing all he could to keep it from further deviations of Christian doctrine. Moreover, he opposed the formation of Te Hahi

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<sup>26</sup> I have italicized the notable sections. “Minutes of the Meeting of the Home Mission Board April 15 1925,” 8.

Rātana, but as it had already happened, he insisted it be formally and officially registered.<sup>27</sup> In the June and July Home Mission Board Meetings of 1925, the Board re-affirmed its confidence in Reverend Seamer's approach to the Rātana movement.<sup>28</sup> Later Methodist authors would praise Seamer for his far-sighted policy at this time. "He did not encourage any attempts to form a separate Māori Church life, but he did welcome the signs of Māori self-respect and self-reliance, as long as they were not aimed at isolation."<sup>29</sup> James Henderson described Seamer's position well: "Without committing himself, the Reverend A. J. Seamer stood by the māngai exerting as much influence as was consistent with diplomacy."<sup>30</sup>

Another reason for Seamer's approach to Rātana was his awareness that rejection of the movement by the Methodist Church could potentially give the extremists in its ranks even more sway. To avoid this Seamer wished for a greater Methodist presence in Rātana, and so called upon the Reverend T. G. Hammond, who was sent to live for a longer period at Rātana Pā. Hammond's report confirmed Seamer's beliefs, and the Māori Workers' Conference of June 15th 1925 unanimously supported the following policy, which was endorsed by the Home Mission on June 16<sup>th</sup>.

1. That we got straight on with our work without making any unnecessary comments concerning the new organisation
2. That the 'Methodist church' (journal) be freely circulated among our own Māori people so that they may have clear guidance concerning Methodist doctrines
3. That no opposition to the movement be shown by our workers, as such a method would serve no good purpose but would probably drive the new movement to extremes, and also create bitterness that would last for generations. At the same time it is understood that our workers will, in Christian love and charity, make our own teaching clear to the people, and will be loyal to our church and her standards and that any association with the new movement will

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<sup>27</sup> Henderson, *Ratana: The Man, the Church, the Political Movement*, 53.

<sup>28</sup> The Home Mission Board, "Minutes of the Meeting of the Home Mission Board June 16 1925," 1925, 12, and The Home Mission Board, "Minutes of the Meeting of the Home Mission Board July 28 1925," 1925, 18.

<sup>29</sup> Laurenson, *Te Hahi Weteriana*, 258.

<sup>30</sup> Henderson, *Ratana: The Man, the Church, the Political Movement*, 50.

be for the purpose of assisting to keep its teaching in harmony with the New Testament teaching.<sup>31</sup>

The 1926 report clarifies the reason for this policy: “We prefer not to oppose Māori movements as such, but to oppose only those features of them that are likely to be detrimental to the kingdom of Christ, and, on the other hand, to encourage those features of them that are in the interests of that Kingdom.”<sup>32</sup> Methodist workers were to show no opposition to the movement, for fear of driving the movement to further extremes and alienating those involved, as resentment would last generations. At the same time, Methodist beliefs were also to be made clear. Seamer appointed the Reverend Tahupōtiki Haddon as Senior Māori Superintendent of the Methodist Church’s Māori Mission. It was through Haddon’s work as well as Reverend Seamer’s frequent visits to the Pā that the Methodists were able to wield their influence on the movement and prevent deviation into polytheism. The same report also supports the policy of the Methodist Church to continue its work without breaking any ties to Rātana. “It is quite imperative that, to avoid misunderstandings, we should work quietly and patiently... We are strenuously, but not unostentatiously, emphasising the great Christian principles for which our Mission stands, and, while patient with extremists of all types, we are in no way slackening our own witness.”<sup>33</sup>

By 1927 the Methodist policy toward Te Hahi Rātana was solidified in its tolerant and guiding tone:

The marvellous awakening of racial consciousness and the desire of the people to organise and control their own religious activities is, rightly understood and guided, a real asset to our work. But its undue assertion at time creates delicate problems that can only be handled by the exercise of great tact and patience.

The Board is still emphatically in favour of our Māori people having the fullest possible freedom of action in their Church organisation, but the people themselves are only now beginning to realise that if they are to exercise authority they must also

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<sup>31</sup> The Home Mission Board, “The Report of the Home Mission Board on the Maori Work,” in Methodist Church of New Zealand, *Minutes of the Annual Conference held at Dunedin, 1926*, (Lyttleton Times: Christchurch, 1926), 115.

<sup>32</sup> *Minutes of the Annual Conference held at Dunedin, 1926*, 114.

<sup>33</sup> *Minutes of the Annual Conference held at Dunedin, 1926*, 115.

shoulder corresponding responsibilities. The various attempts made to organise independent Māori Churches all have a real educative value. The Board years ago unanimously and very emphatically decided that the interests of the Kingdom of God and the development of the Māori race must ever be put before purely denominational considerations.<sup>34</sup>

The nature of Methodism as a relatively liberal Protestant church may also be important in understanding its approach toward Rātana. The Methodists had a more tolerant and flexible approach to Christian mission that probably best enabled their maintenance of relations with Rātana when other Churches could not do so. The Methodist mission always sought to influence and guide, rather than to impose or control. A passage from the 1924 Home and Māori Mission report identifies the mission's sympathetic and tolerant approach to the Rātana movement, with its emphasis on influencing it toward what it would call a correct interpretation of Christianity.

We have sought to be sympathetic with every good and helpful thought in the many Māori Movements afoot, and have supported all such Movements that are on the upward curve, for *we recognise that our duty is not the forcing of our own ideas upon the people, but simply the bringing of the people nearer to the Christ and to the Christ life.* Thus we have had the privilege of seeing our influences more than keeping pace with the general development, and the prestige of our Mission steadily grows.<sup>35</sup>

Certainly, Seamer interpreted Methodism as more tolerant than other churches. In an article in *the New Zealand Methodist Times* of 1924, Seamer declared his views on what Methodism entails, and its open-minded view is in line with the Church's approach to the Rātana movement. "Methodism does not approve of sensationalism or the working up of undue excitement in religious services, revival or otherwise, but she is distinctly opposed to merely formal and lifeless religion." For Seamer, the teachings of Scripture were foremost.

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<sup>34</sup> The Home Mission Board, "The Report of the Home Mission Board concerning the Maori Work," in Methodist Church of New Zealand, *Minutes of the Annual Conference held at Auckland, 1927*, (Lyttleton Times: Christchurch, 1927), 130.

<sup>35</sup> I have italicised the most striking part of this quotation. *Minutes of the Thirteenth Annual Conference of New Zealand held at Wellington, 1925*, 116.



“The Methodist Church is... a fellowship of experimental Christians who, while differing widely in opinions and theories hold tenaciously to the great central Truths of the Gospel...”<sup>36</sup> In this context Seamer’s actions toward the Rātana movement are understandable. As long as the movement was in accordance with the fundamental teachings of the Bible, a Māori interpretation of it should not be feared, but rather embraced as a Māori understanding and form of Christianity. As such, the Methodist approach was more liberal than that of the Anglican and Catholic Churches who turned their backs on the movement. Seamer reiterated this belief in his 1933 Presidential Address to the annual Conference: “We believe that Christ, not the Church is the vine, that all believers are branches and should draw their life direct from the vine.”<sup>37</sup> It was Seamer’s and the Methodist Church’s responsibility to guide Christianity through this Māori lens on the correct path. As General Superintendent of the Māori Mission, it was his leadership, (which was influenced by his views of Methodism) that dictated their policy toward Rātana. Seamer was described as “...often a lone voice in Conference. He was far-seeing, and did not always show his hand in early stages of his plans, knowing that some people with insufficient facts before them, could endanger or destroy the whole project.”<sup>38</sup>

In relations with Rātana, Seamer, as General Superintendent of the Māori Mission and a close friend of T. W. Rātana was representative of the Methodist Church at Rātana, and the Methodist ministers and laypeople there represented A. J. Seamer. The Methodist Church was allocated a freehold section at the Pā upon which they built a cottage for their mission. It was due to Seamer’s links at Rātana, and the subsequent Methodist workers who had been placed there, that the Methodists had been privileged this land. It was to house a mission cottage for Methodist workers, allowing the Methodist Church to continue their presence and influence at Rātana. It was in this cottage next to the railway station (that had been built by Rātana’s father) that Methodist deaconesses created a centre for their work in religion and education. As the settlement grew, there soon became need for such institutions to be formalised. T. W. Rātana personally asked Seamer to take care of the children of the movement. By 1927 a day school was established, and Rātana insisted that this be under the

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<sup>36</sup> A. J. Seamer, “Where Methodism Stands,” *The New Zealand Methodist Times*, April 12 1924.

<sup>37</sup> A. J. Seamer, “President's Address to the Methodist Conference 1933,” pp. 12, in *Rev. A. J. Seamer Box 1*, (Auckland: Methodist Church of New Zealand Archives, 1933).

<sup>38</sup> George Laurenson MSS, in H.L.J. Halliday, “The Reverend A. J. Seamer and the Attitude of the Methodists to the Ratana Movement.”

charge of the Methodist Church.<sup>39</sup> The Methodist Church was happy to oblige in this manner, and it soon became the largest Māori school in the country before responsibility was assumed by the government's education department. Meanwhile, Reverend Seamer's continued support to the movement, and enduring friendship with T.W. Rātana (which lasted right until the latter's death in 1939) was honoured in a street being named after him in the Rātana township.<sup>40</sup>

The telegrams sent from those at Rātana upon the death of Reverend Seamer in 1963 bear witness to the esteem in which they held A. J. Seamer, and the great appreciation they had of the man. Below are some examples demonstrating the significance of Seamer's work with Rātana. They date from the weeks following Seamer's death in September 1963. The President of the Rātana Church at the time said:

I am deeply grieved to hear the sad loss of Rev. Father Seamer. Undoubtedly his passing is indeed a loss to Christendom, although for the significant assistance he has given in the birth and growth of this maramatanga, Te Hiima will be ever remembered. It is symbolic indeed, that as we celebrate today the passing of the māngai we should also share the sad loss of Te Hiima. Haere e Pa. Haere Kite Toronga o Thoura.

Mrs I. M. Rātana, Rātana's second wife and a Member of Parliament wrote:

Sorry to hear of the passing of a great man. He is a great loss to all peoples of this country - a great New Zealander. Haere e Pa-Ki te Atu. Na te Kotiro.

Sir Eruera Tihema Te Aika Tirikatene, the first Rātana Member of Parliament also sent his best wishes and sympathy over Seamer's death:

Please accept our deepest sympathy in the passing of dear Father Seamer. Haere e Koro Kī tatou kaitianga. Haere ki te kainga tuturu.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>39</sup> Laurenson, *Te Hahi Weteriana*, 218.

<sup>40</sup> Arahi .R. Hagger, "Te Haahi Ratana: History."

<sup>41</sup> Halliday, "The Reverend A. J. Seamer and the Attitude of the Methodists to the Ratana Movement."

Seamer hoped for full integration between Māori and Pākehā in New Zealand society.<sup>42</sup> He was conscious that the Rātana movement was disposed to racial separation, but Seamer believed that “...even when one could not condone the misconceptions of a deviationist sect, it was the duty of a Christian minister to apply himself to doing what was possible in the guidance of that sect away from further aberrations.”<sup>43</sup> He understood the movement due to his intimacy with Māori thought, custom and spiritual life. This put him in an excellent position to guide his friend’s movement through its emergence. The following line from Halliday’s interview with A. J. Seamer’s daughter Leila gives excellent insight into the viewpoint and motivations of the Reverend in his dealings with Rātana, and justifies his approach to the movement on behalf of the Methodist Church. “...The interests of the Kingdom of God and the development of the Māori race must be put before purely denominational considerations.”<sup>44</sup> Seamer worked for the greater good of Māori and this was the underlying factor in his policy toward Rātana.

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<sup>42</sup> See chapter four for in depth discussion of this.

<sup>43</sup> Interview between Mrs. Leila Seamer Howie and H. L. J. Halliday, May 1966 in H.L.J. Halliday, “The Reverend A. J. Seamer and the Attitude of the Methodists to the Ratana Movement,” pp. 6, in *Rev. A. J. Seamer Box 2*, (Auckland: Methodist Church of New Zealand Archives, 1966).

<sup>44</sup> *Minutes of the Annual Conference held at Auckland, 1927*, 130.

## Chapter Three:

### Missionary Conversions

The title of this chapter has two interpretations, and was deliberately chosen for this reason. “Missionary Conversions” can mean the converting that missionaries set out to do: converting indigenous people to Christianity, (sometimes this included converting them to European ways). However, “Missionary Conversions” can also refer to indigenous people converting missionaries. ‘Converted’ here does not necessarily entail religious conversion (although that sometimes happened as in the case of the Church Missionary Society missionary Thomas Kendall), but rather, the conversion of missionaries to deeper understandings and appreciation of native thought, practices and customs. This chapter will outline the history of the two meanings of ‘missionary conversions’, before reassessing Seamer in light of this discussion. I shall argue that Seamer was, in certain respects converted by the people he set out to convert.

The missionary movement had a considerable impact on European Christianity. It introduced Christian faith to cultures that traditionally thought, conceptualised and categorised in different ways to Europeans. Non-Westerners also lived in different ways. This brought new questions for European Christians, as they had to reinterpret their faith for different worlds. In order to communicate, missionaries had to understand the culture they were trying to reach. This would then give them the capacity to preach the gospel in a way which would be meaningful to the culture in question. To convey their message, missionaries had to engage at a fundamental level with local languages, cultures and traditions. “The fact that so many people within these cultures showed no inclination to respond to the gospel forced open new areas of Christian thinking.”<sup>1</sup> In immersing themselves in the culture in order to preach, some missionaries became converted to a deeper understanding and respect for native cultures. That is not necessarily to say that they were converted to indigenous religions, (although this happened in some cases), so much as to understandings of indigenous thoughts, traditions and customs. This process did not necessarily entail rejecting the missionary’s own culture. Rather, it entailed including significant aspects of the

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<sup>1</sup> Andrew F. Walls, “The Multiple Conversions of Timothy Richard,” in *The Cross Cultural Process in Christian History*, (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2002), 238.

indigenous culture in the missionary's way of life, resulting in a cultural melange. Did the Māori with whom Seamer worked throughout his missionary career convert him?

As discussed in chapter one, Seamer's time in the Salvation Army saw him live amongst Māori, sleeping on their mats, eating their food, and living as one of them. His quotations from these days convey a sense of interest and excitement at being part of this world. "...for most of the time I had slept on Māori mats and eaten with fingers from a flax basket, as was the custom in those days..."<sup>2</sup> He acquired an intimate understanding of Māori life. Before long he became fluent in te reo, and he retained this fluency for the remainder of his life. He would think in Māori as often as he thought in English. An audience member at one of his Māori choir performances remarked in 1928 that Seamer was "altogether too protracted in his [closing] remarks." This was explained as being due to Seamer choosing to spend all his time amongst Māori and having consequently developed a Māori oratorical style.<sup>3</sup> His language ability and adoption of Māori speech demonstrate a way in which Seamer was converted. Furthermore, this conversion was also apparent, evidently, to those who did not know him personally.

Visible evidence of Seamer's adoption of Māori ways can be seen in figures four and five. Seamer's willingness to be photographed actively participating in Māori culture is important. He was not embarrassed or reluctant to be seen as one of them. His adoption of Māori clothing symbolised his willingness to embrace Māori culture, as well as Māori acceptance of him. To properly interpret these photographs, it is necessary to dissect them individually.

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<sup>2</sup> Arthur John Seamer, "Seamer Family History," (unpublished manuscript) in *Rev. A. J. Seamer Papers: Box 2*. (Auckland: Methodist Church of New Zealand Archives).

<sup>3</sup> "Rodney and Otamatea Times," *Waitemata and Kaipara Gazette*, 9 May 1928.



Figure 4: Portrait of A. J. Seamer, Sister Nicholls and a Māori Choir, circa 1927 – 1929. Sister Nicholls was one of the choir's main organisers. Taka Ropata is on the right at front, and her soon to be husband Joe Moss is the third man from the left. The smallest member at the front is probably Hinerangi Hikuroa.

Source: *Methodist Church of New Zealand Archives: Auckland: Home and Maori Mission Department.*



Figure 5: Portrait of A. J. Seamer and a Māori Choir, circa 1925. The man at the left back is Aho-o-Te-Rangi Pihama.

Source: *Methodist Church of New Zealand Archives: Auckland: Home and Maori Mission Department.*

All the Māori in the photograph in figure 4 have with them their mere and spears. It was common practice to pose for photographs with prize possessions, and these are items of value that portrayed their cultural identity. The women also have laid out in front of them their poi, which they used for traditional Māori dance in their concerts. The poi lie about the European guitars which they used to accompany their singing. This can be seen as representative of the melange of cultures. It is notable that only the three non-Māori of the photograph (A. J. Seamer, Sister Nicholls, and the man second from the left) do not carry such prized taonga.

It is useful to examine the dress of those in this photograph. Everybody is clad in traditional Māori clothing, including the two Methodist workers, Seamer and Sister Nicholls, as well as the darker man second from the left. These three have worn traditional European clothing underneath. For Seamer and Nicholls, the adoption of Māori attire represents not only their acceptance into the Māori world, but their willingness to be a part of it. They see themselves fitting into both European and Māori culture and this is reflected in their choice of clothing. That both have been given Māori attire like that being worn by the Māori demonstrates Māori acceptance of them into Māoridom. The cloaks worn by the two Europeans (and the darker man) are the same as those worn by the Māori of their gender in this picture.

In figure 5, Seamer poses for a photograph with some members of the Māori Choir. Once more he is adorned in a Māori cloak as the others are, and his shows little difference from that of one of the other men (on the right). In contrast with figure 4, in this photograph Seamer is not wearing European garb underneath, but is completely clad in Māori clothing, the same as the other Māori men in the picture. Moreover, he is holding a taiaha (spear) – a traditional Māori weapon, representing his acceptance into Māori culture and a symbol of his mana. He is the only person in the picture to hold an object. Finally, his stance must be noted, as he informally lies in front of the other sitting members of the photograph which suggests his comfort amongst Māori, engaging with their customs, and being photographed doing so.

These photographs demonstrate Seamer's willingness to embrace aspects of Māori culture. Moreover, they give evidence of the conversion of missionaries. While Seamer worked to convert Māori to Christianity and improve their living standards, Māori converted him in certain respects. He thought in Māori, and it was noted when he spoke that he did so in a way influenced by his experience taking to Māori, rather than Pākehā oratory. He



understood and adopted many of their thoughts, ideas and customs. These photographs are a visible manifestation of Seamer's conversion.

Not only was Seamer willing to publicise his readiness to participate in Māori life, as evidenced by the preceding photographs, but Māori were also willing to accept him into their sphere. When he had been freshly reappointed to the Māori Mission, Seamer had already by 1921 won the allegiance of many Māori. Those from the north and elsewhere were ready to welcome Seamer into their communities as a *kaumatua*, a respected elder of the Church.<sup>4</sup> He was referred to as 'father' by many Māori. He was widely known by the name Māori gave to him: Te Hiima. 'Te Hiima' is a transliteration of Seamer, with a particle equivalent to mister or sir, denoting respect.

At a Māori Choir concert Seamer stated that 'the Māoris were the finest type of brown-skinned people on the face of the earth. They had very fine customs, and the introduction of the European into the country had robbed them of many of these... They were a people not to be despised.' An extract from Seamer's diary when he was General Superintendent of Māori Missions illuminates his motivations, his passion and the reason for his success. "One can not help but love these large hearted Māori people. They are both the burden and the delight of my life."<sup>5</sup>

A final quotation reveals Seamer's awareness of a degree of conversion. He noted Te Puea's belief in the Christian God, but also her honouring of many of the traditions and beliefs of her ancestors. "We discussed these subjects in my study, for I myself honour those traditions and concepts."<sup>6</sup> This may be seen as testimony from Seamer himself, of important aspects of his own conversion. The following chapter, covering racial understandings in New Zealand during the first half of the twentieth century, demonstrates his engagement with and promotion of Māori culture, and reinforces this chapter's argument about Seamer's conversion.

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<sup>4</sup> George I. Laurenson, *Te Hahi Weteriana: three half centuries of Methodist Maori Missions 1822 - 1972*, (Wesley Historical Society, 1972), 211.

<sup>5</sup> A. J. Seamer, "The Ministry of Home Missions," *The New Zealand Methodist Times*, September 29 1923.

<sup>6</sup> A. J. Seamer, "Princess Te Puea, C.B.E. J.P.: An Appreciation by Her Father in God, the Rev. A.J. Seamer, C.M.G.," in *Rev. A. J. Seamer Papers Box 1*, (Auckland: Methodist Church of New Zealand Archives, 1952).

## Chapter Four:

### Seamer as a Case Study of Racial Understanding in the Early-Twentieth Century

New Zealand has long had a reputation for relatively harmonious race relations. Seamer makes an excellent case study for understandings of race relations during the early-twentieth century, raising questions about received wisdom. This is an area in which biographies of both Pākehā and Māori New Zealanders as well as other missionaries should prove useful. To gain a clearer picture of race relations in twentieth century New Zealand, further research is needed on such people. I hope that Seamer's case will shed new light on this area. It is important to gain an understanding of the relevant historiographical context as well as the racial context of New Zealand during the first half of the twentieth century. It will then be possible to analyse evidence concerning Seamer which may allow new interpretations of racial attitudes.

During the early-twentieth century many writers believed that Māori had descended from an Aryan race. A significant work from which this theory gained momentum was *The Aryan Maori* by Edward Tregear.<sup>1</sup> The main thesis of this book was, unsurprisingly, that Māori descended from an Aryan race from the north of India; the same Aryan race from which Western Europeans also descended. Some of this 'master race' wandered to Britain, while those who were to become the Māori people found their way to New Zealand. Tregear's argument was based on such evidence as linguistic similarities between Māori and Sanskrit, and vague memories of India. He used the examples of memories of animals from the Asian subcontinent, as well as a piece of rock art in Weka Pass being reminiscent of the Hindu God Vishnu in his first avatar. The thesis was not accepted by everyone, and some laughed, but the idea steadily grew. Sometimes the term Aryan was replaced with "Caucasian". Tregear had (along with Stephenson Percy Smith) founded the Polynesian Society three years before the publication of this book. It is interesting to note that A. J.

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<sup>1</sup> Edward Tregear, *The Aryan Maori*, (Wellington: G. Didsbury, Government Printer, 1885).

Seamer would become a member of this society in 1930, remaining so until his death.<sup>2</sup> Gradually Pākehā scholars accepted and propagated the idea, and it became a part of what James Belich calls “a homogenised and Europeanised ‘Smithed’ version of Māori history”.<sup>3</sup> Proponents saw Māori as a “branch of the Caucasian race”.<sup>4</sup> Some Māori also promoted this idea, hoping it would lead to greater respect and equality if they were seen as less inferior. Even if Māori did not necessarily believe in this alleged ancestry, the Pākehā desire to boast of good race relations, due in part to shared blood, gave Māori leverage in working towards equality.

Belich’s *Paradise Reforged* details the academic and public propagation of this idea:

Aucklanders in 1927 were treated to lectures on ‘the reunion of two branches of the Caucasian race’. Of all the other races in the world,’ announced leading anthropologists in a centenary publication in 1940, ‘the Maori most closely resembles in physical type the Caucasian race to which the white man belongs.’ In 1949, Prime Minister Peter Fraser was reported to be favourably impressed by the view that Maori and Celt ‘both sprang from the same Caucasian stock’.<sup>5</sup>

As late as 1974 a revised edition of A. H. Reed’s popular *Story of New Zealand* claimed that Māori had descended from ‘a people called Aryans’, as was ‘our own Anglo-Saxon race’.<sup>6</sup> Thus the idea of the Aryan Māori, or, at least, the shared heritage of Māori and Anglo-Saxons, persisted in the public mind for much of the twentieth century and thus informed Pākehā-Māori race relations.

As much as *Paradise Reforged* has informed this chapter, Belich’s arguments concerning race relations in terms of the ‘Aryan Māori’ need to be reassessed and reinterpreted. Using Seamer as a case study can challenge some of his interpretations. Belich argues that ideas such as the Aryan Māori formed part of an ideology of racial homogeneity. In a chapter entitled “Racial Harmony: Merging Maori?,” Belich argues that Māori became “‘brown Britons’ through intermarriage, individualisation, modernisation and assimilation”.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> “Proceedings of the Polynesian Society: Council Meeting, 14 March 1930,” *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 39, no. 153 (1930): 74 - 75.

<sup>3</sup> James Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, (North Shore: Penguin Books, 2001), 208.

<sup>4</sup> Keith Sinclair, *A destiny apart: New Zealand's search for national identity*, (Wellington: Allen & Unwin in association with the Port Nicholson Press, 1986), 99.

<sup>5</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, 208.

<sup>6</sup> A. H. Reed, *Story of New Zealand*, (Wellington: A. H. and A. W. Reed, 1974), 25 – 26.

<sup>7</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, 189.

He contends that the notion of ‘brown Britons’ entailed cultural assimilation, “...the remarkable process of ‘whitening’ Māori, of reinventing them into a European-descended race of honorary whites.”<sup>8</sup> However, as Tony Ballantyne noted when tracing the idea of Aryanism throughout the British Empire in *Orientalism and Race*, this does not stand. “Such an argument was neither ‘whitening’ nor ‘assimilationist’ for Tregear believed that, as fellow Aryans, Maori (or South Asians) were part of the same racial stock as Britons.”<sup>9</sup> Rather than implying the transformation of Māori into ‘brown Britons’, the term lacks the cultural implications Belich gives to it. There was no homogenizing cultural agenda necessarily entangled in this idea. The idea of ‘brown Britons’ did not necessitate assimilation. Like many historians, Belich takes assimilation to mean the adoption of one culture’s customs as the norm, coupled with the rejection of traditional ways of the other culture.

It is more appropriate, I contend, to recognise those Pākehā who by no means totally rejected traditional Māori culture. They advocated adopting aspects of both cultures, favouring a more bicultural society than Belich’s ‘brown Briton’ thesis recognises. Seamer highlights the need for such distinctions, and for reinterpreting racial understandings. He aimed for a bicultural future for Māori and Pākehā through the integration of the two cultures.

Further evidence questioning the conventional wisdom that assimilation overwhelmingly dominated mainstream racial ideology can be found in the adoption of Māori symbols and Māori culture as representative of New Zealand culture. At the beginning of the twentieth century some New Zealander were searching for a national identity, distinct from Old Britain and her other colonies. What was distinctive about New Zealand was her Māori people and her race relations. It was far from unusual to embrace aspects of Māoritanga as Māori were commonly seen as different but of the same stock.<sup>10</sup> Māori were involved in the First World War, and their heroic haka on the battlefields became legendary in New Zealand, celebrated by Pākehā and Māori alike. Māori were talented rugby players, an asset to our national team for our national sport. New Zealanders performed haka before international rugby games. Sports teams were given Māori names. Some Pākehā children were given Māori names. We treated important visitors with traditional Māori welcomes and gave them Māori carvings as gifts. New Zealand sent her ‘Māoriness’ on tour, with concert

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<sup>8</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, 189.

<sup>9</sup> Tony Ballantyne, *Orientalism and Race: Aryanism in the British Empire*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 77.

<sup>10</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, 209.

choirs and exhibitions overseas, representing Māoritanga as New Zealand-ness.<sup>11</sup> Māori were what made New Zealand distinctive and this is reflected in the increasing tendency of using Māori symbols to represent the nation, both Pākehā and Māori. This illustrates the importance of Māori culture to New Zealand. It played a large part in creating the identity of New Zealand. So it makes little sense to claim that Pākehā aimed to eradicate this culture.

Given this context, we can begin to explore the beliefs and behaviour of the Reverend Seamer. His celebration and promotion of Māori culture can be seen in the various ways he sought to publicise it. He was prominent among those who sought “to preserve and interpret the haunting and the weird types of Māori music and other social arts”.<sup>12</sup> He formed various Māori choirs which toured the country, some even touring internationally. Most famous is his leadership of the Waiata Māori Choir. These groups, whose composition changed over time, toured the country and the Commonwealth during the 1920s and 1930s. They performed a variety of traditional Māori waiata, as well as poi dances and haka. The stories of the songs sung in Māori were then explained by Seamer, as he addressed the audience on the Māori people and the Methodist mission. Seamer would speak of the problems facing Māori, raising awareness of their troubles and what could be done to help them face “the evils which were brought to this country by the white race”.<sup>13</sup>

These choirs began by touring Methodist Churches in New Zealand to fundraise for the Māori Mission. In 1922 the *New Zealand Methodist Times* attributed the new interest in Māori Missions to Seamer’s work using the choir, which brought in larger crowds than seen in years.<sup>14</sup> An issue of the 1924 *New Zealand Methodist Times* wrote in praise of the first form of this group and Seamer’s idea for it: “It was an inspiration that came to the Reverend A. J. Seamer when we decided to have a talented Māori Party accompany him on reputational visits to the circuits this year. It brought crowds to the churches... So far collections have been record ones for Home Missions in most places visited”.<sup>15</sup> In the same article Seamer outlined the objectives of his Māori choirs. These were further Christian evangelisation, the transmission of the correct interpretation of Christian beliefs and practices that Methodism

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<sup>11</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, 210.

<sup>12</sup> “Entertainments,” *Evening Post*, 5 August 1933.

<sup>13</sup> “Methodist Church,” *Hawera & Normanby Star*, 7 October 1924.

<sup>14</sup> “The New Interest in Home Missions,” *The New Zealand Methodist Times*, May 27 1922.

<sup>15</sup> “Maori and Home Mission Party,” *The New Zealand Methodist Times*, April 12 1924.

represented, the support and expansion of Māori spiritual life in the Māori Mission, as well as evangelism and support where needed for European society through the Home Mission.

The similarity between the musical aspect of the Salvation Army and Seamer's idea for his Māori choirs must be noted. The above extracts from *The New Zealand Methodist Times* give the sense that it was an original idea that Seamer had, and one that proved successful in raising funds, augmenting church attendance, raising awareness of Māori culture, and transcending tribal boundaries. Yet, brass bands and public performances had been one of the defining features of Salvation Army evangelism, responsible for a large amount of their fundraising and increasing their numbers. This appears to have been a Salvation Army practice that Seamer brought into Methodism. Plainly, it proved popular with Māori Methodists and Pākehā audiences.

Seamer's involvement in Māori choirs is significant as it demonstrates his promotion and celebration of Māori culture, and his desire to bring this to the public. The positive reception the choirs had is also telling of the general sentiment toward Māori and Māori culture. It was valued and celebrated. Assimilation in the sense of 'getting rid of Māori culture simply does not explain this evidence. Important aspects of Māori culture were being incorporated into New Zealand culture.

Seamer retired in 1939, moving to Hamilton in 1943 to become acting Superintendent of the Waikato-King Country Circuit, continuing his service in this capacity until 1959. His diplomatic, understanding approach was exactly what the Māori Mission in the district needed, as Seamer quietly tolerated the Pai Marire rituals that had been resurfacing, without alienating or provoking resistance from Māori. With such a love for his work, and with his field greatly in need of his passion and talent, Seamer continued to work through his retirement. He played an important role in the establishment of the Bryce Street Hostel for Māori girls in Hamilton seeking employment or attending the high schools.<sup>16</sup> He lived in the hostel and was supported by Sister Heeni, who trained the girls to do things to relieve Seamer's pain when she could not be there.<sup>17</sup> His work with hostels helped bring Māori into the Pākehā public sphere. As his health weakened, visitors "from all walks of life,

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<sup>16</sup> George I. Laurenson, *Te Hahi Weteriana: three half centuries of Methodist Maori Missions 1822 - 1972*, (Wesley Historical Society, 1972), 238.

<sup>17</sup> "Sister Fannie Irene Hobbs," in *Personal Papers and Historical Records Collection*, (Christchurch: Methodist Church of New Zealand Archives), 1902 – 1992.

far and near” came to visit him, seeking his friendship and guidance.<sup>18</sup> In 1949 Seamer was rewarded for his tireless efforts by being presented with a C.M.G. for services to Māori and the community in general. The Governor-General conducted the investiture in Seamer’s own room where he was living at the Hostel in Hamilton, still in ill-health.<sup>19</sup> He continued to work from his bed for many years, and his bedside was frequented by both Māori and Pākehā seeking advice. “Scores of young people acknowledge a great debt to him and his fatherly counsel and encouragement.”<sup>20</sup>

Seamer did not encourage efforts to form a separate Māori church life, but did endorse Māori self-reliance and assertion, as long as they were not aimed at isolation. He saw the need for a distinctive approach to the Māori side of the work to ensure they found a means of worship and fellowship that could be understood in terms of their traditional thought and culture, but not so distinctive as to become exclusive or separate. He did not reject other’s beliefs and for this reason was able to maintain links with Rātana when many others could not have. When appointed General Superintendent of the Home and Māori Missions it was already known that Seamer’s approach to policies was to take ‘the long view’, with his supporters noting he “would doubtless have oftener gained greater immediate success if he had followed short-sighted, and sometimes more popular policies.”<sup>21</sup> With such a wider view in forming his policies he followed the path that was to work for the best in the long run. It may have been more popular at the time to sever ties with Rātana, but for decades after that turbulent time Seamer’s work has been praised by many within the Methodist Church as well as outsiders. He always emphasised “We need each other. Māori and Pākehā are to become one nation of two peoples. Each must contribute the best of its culture to the common pattern that will develop as a New Zealand culture.”<sup>22</sup> This is an important and revealing quotation from Seamer. It clearly shows that he always aimed to build a bicultural future. A diplomat, he valued both Māori and Pākehā customs. Furthermore, he influenced both Te Puea’s and Rātana’s movements away from becoming what Belich calls ‘disengager’ movements, (retreating from Pākehā society into isolation).

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<sup>18</sup> George Launson, “Rev. A. J. Seamer, C.M.G.: An Appreciation by G. I. Launson,” *The New Zealand Methodist Times*, July 2 1949.

<sup>19</sup> Launson, *Te Hahi Weteriana*, 243.

<sup>20</sup> Launson, “Rev. A. J. Seamer, C.M.G.: An Appreciation by G. I. Launson.”

<sup>21</sup> “Our Home Missions: Rev. A. J. Seamer,” *The New Zealand Methodist Times*, 5 July 1924.

<sup>22</sup> Launson, *Te Hahi Weteriana*, 258.

Instead, he encouraged them to engage with Pākehā society to become ‘one nation of two peoples’.

Seamer’s passion lay with Māori work, and this is where he succeeded best. Indeed he became further involved in the Māori side of work and less involved in preaching to the Pākehā church-goers as his career went on. “Almost a generation of the Pākehā church has arisen who have not known him except as a name - yet to the Māori side of the church a living presence whose influence went out through leaders who sought his counsel.”<sup>23</sup> Seamer’s talent and success within his field can largely be attributed to his passion for the work he was doing, and his love of Māori. He evidently sought to promote this and share it with others, hoping they too could appreciate what was special about these people. In this way, he stressed the importance of Māoritanga.

James Belich argued that missionaries wanted the eradication of Māori culture, and desired to transform them Māori into ‘brown Britons’. “They were subjected to an official policy of assimilation, which proclaimed them to be ‘better blacks’, but was explicitly intended to reduce them to a ‘golden tinge’ on the faces of New Zealanders.”<sup>24</sup> “...Europeans wove an image of Māori as the most convertible of ‘savages’, the most prone to ‘civilise’ or Europeanise. Māori were ‘better blacks’, so good that they could become almost white – with the help of European teachers.”<sup>25</sup> However, Seamer provides an excellent case study questioning this argument. Seamer did not aim for Māori assimilation as understood in this way. This would entail the wholesale rejection of the Māori culture that he celebrated and promoted. Assimilation would eliminate the Māori cultural values that made them distinctive. Rather, Seamer’s promotion of Māori culture through his Māori choirs, as well as his missionary work which encouraged Māori to engage with Pākehā culture, aimed for Māori integration with Pākehā society. Integration entailed the inclusion of the best of both cultures working together. Seamer had taken the time to learn te reo, and retained fluency throughout his life. He had a deep understanding of Māori thought, custom and tradition from his Salvation Army days and after. He understood Māori well. Seamer’s celebration of Māori culture can be seen in the Māori Choirs he established. These showcased Māori song, dance, stories and tradition to the public. He took the Choirs on tours, to exhibit Māoridom to the country. Every newspaper report on the Choir illustrates how well-received it was, not just

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<sup>23</sup> “Memorial Notes,” in *Rev. A. J. Seamer Papers Box 1*, (Auckland: Methodist Church of New Zealand Archives, 1963). The author is probably George Laurenson.

<sup>24</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, 190.

<sup>25</sup> Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, 207.



for its musical delights. His later work in retirement focused on the building of Hostels to accommodate young Māori when they moved to the cities in search of work and education. For Seamer, integration did not entail assimilation. Seamer's vision for New Zealand's future was bicultural.

Seamer's vision of the nation contained more room for Māori culture than Belich's argument allows. This raises questions for further research. Was Seamer unique in his racial understanding? Or is Belich's position more limited in its explanatory power than historians have realised? Is Belich's interpretation of Māori as 'brown Britons' adequate? Tony Ballantyne raises doubts, and Seamer's case supports this revisionist argument. If Seamer advocated a bicultural future, perhaps he was not alone. Certainly there is room for the study of other missionaries in the twentieth century. It may be found that the celebration of Māori culture was more common than realised. A single person cannot overthrow Belich's interpretation of racial understanding, but Seamer can certainly raise sharp questions. Perhaps historians' ideologies in early-twentieth century New Zealand recognise less complexity and diversity than existed.



Figure 6: Portrait of A. J. Seamer. Year unknown, but quite possibly from the twenties.

Source: *Methodist Church of New Zealand Archives: Auckland: Home and Maori Mission Department.*

## Conclusion

Arthur John Seamer was a Methodist missionary in the first half of the twentieth century. Seamer was significant for a number of reasons, which could commonly be referred to as his approach toward Māori. His time in the Salvation Army was very influential to him and important in guiding his later career. His work with Princess Te Puea, and Tahupotiki Wiremu Rātana especially, was significant in promoting good relations between Māori and Pākehā, as these movements could have easily turned their backs on Pākehā society if it had not been for Seamer's influence. His deep understanding of Māori life and empathy with Māori issues is probably what earned him the trust of such notable figures as well as the masses. Seamer's success in his mission can largely be attributed to his passion for the work he was doing and his love of Māori people. "One can not help but love these large hearted Māori people. They are both the burden and the delight of my life."<sup>1</sup> Why then, did he love Māori so much? It appears that he loved their hospitality, and the warm reception he always received. Equally, he loved learning from Māori. He was fascinated with Māori thought and customs, honoured their traditions and frequently thought in te reo. In this way, he was converted. And this conversion probably led to a greater Māori trust of Te Hiima. Seamer's understanding and love of Māori led to his celebration and promotion of Māoritanga. This, then asks for new understandings of race relations in New Zealand. Seamer's vision of a bicultural future for New Zealand does not fit with the exclusionist ideas that James Belich argued made up the New Zealand mentality. Rather, Seamer's case promotes the idea of a desire for Māori culture to be included in New Zealand's identity.

Seamer's time in the Salvation Army was crucial to the rest of his missionary career. These formative years were his grounding in Māoridom that facilitated his interest in the people and culture, as well as mission work. It was during his time in the corps that he gained an intimate knowledge of Māori life. During these years Seamer lived amongst Māori, gaining an intimate understanding of their traditions, thought and customs. It was also during this period that Seamer established important relationships with people in Māori society. Within a year he was fluent in te reo Māori, and this was to remain with him for the rest of his life. Seamer's Salvation Army experience allowed him to realise his passion for Māori and for

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<sup>1</sup> A. J. Seamer, "The Ministry of Home Missions," *The New Zealand Methodist Times*, September 29 1923.

mission work. It gave him a solid grounding in networking, and religious and cultural understanding that would heavily influence Seamer's life thereafter.

His relationship with Rātana was very important, for both the Methodist Church and the Rātana movement. As a good friend of its leader, Seamer held great influence over the movement. Seamer's involvement was significant as he encouraged the movement away from deviations from orthodox Christian doctrine. As a last resort, he helped create the Rātana Creed in an effort to standardise the fundamental beliefs of the Rātana movement. As different groups within the church began to vie for power, Seamer encouraged the formal registration of the Rātana Church to prevent factionalism. He took such actions rather than turn his back on the movement. This kept these Māori engaged in European church life and Pākehā society, rather than retreating into isolation and deviating from Christian doctrine. This is reflective of his moral and religious motivations in his mission work, as well as the bicultural vision he had for New Zealand.

Seamer's love of Māoridom led to his adoption of elements of their culture, and his partial conversion, by those he had set out to convert. He understood and "honoured" Māori concepts and traditions. His fluency in te reo Māori was noticeable even when speaking English. He had probably subconsciously adopted Māori oratorical practices. Photographic evidence (fig. 4 and fig. 6) illustrates his willingness to adopt customs such as traditional Māori clothing, as well as his acceptance by Māori into Māoridom. Furthermore, these photographs demonstrate that Seamer did not hide this, and indeed was proud to participate in and promote Māori culture.

Seamer's celebration and promotion of Māori culture can be seen through his formation of Māori choirs. These choirs contained members from different tribes, and toured the country performing waiata, haka, and traditional poi dances. These would be followed by talks by Seamer on Māori people and their traditions, as well as the problems they faced in society. Seamer's promotion of Māori culture, as well as the rave reviews such performances received, is important in rethinking ideas about racial understandings in the first half of the twentieth century.

James Belich argued that Pākehā views of Māori as 'brown Britons' meant they wanted to assimilate Māori, in the sense of replacing aspects of Māori culture with Pākehā culture. However, Seamer's case challenges such conceptions of racial understanding in early-twentieth century New Zealand. He celebrated and promoted Māori culture, which can be

seen in his conversion, as well as in his formation of the Māori choirs. He promoted Māori interaction with Pākehā society, which was illuminated when he encouraged both Te Puea's and Rātana's movements away from disengagement with Pākehā society. Seamer always emphasised: "We need each other. Māori and Pākehā are to become one nation of two peoples. Each must contribute the best of its culture to the common pattern that will develop as a New Zealand culture."<sup>2</sup> Quite clearly, Seamer worked for a bicultural future for New Zealand. As such, Seamer's vision of New Zealand's cultural identity incorporated Māori more than Belich's argument has room for. Consequently, a study of Seamer raises questions of how common his bicultural view was, and thus the adequacy of previous assessments of race relations in early-twentieth century New Zealand

A variety of sources have informed this biography. Seamer's papers at the Methodist Archives have been very useful in uncovering information about who he was and what he did. Although not many have been directly used in the text, various newspaper articles have been very useful in establishing an outline of Seamer's life, allowing me to trace his life and achievements as people drew attention to him at particular times. For a researcher unable to access the Salvation Army's archives in Wellington, Harold Hill's *Te Ope Whakaora* has been of immense value in making primary documents surrounding the Salvation Army's Māori mission available. Along with Seamer's own short family history (found in his papers at the Methodist archives), *Te Ope Whakaora* significantly informed the first chapter. Information directly concerning Seamer has also been found in various books about the people he mixed with, which has been useful in gaining information about the Reverend from different perspectives. Michael King's *Te Puea* and James Henderson's *Rātana: the man, the church, the political movement* were both of great assistance, with the latter of particularly use in the second chapter, as it directly pertained to Seamer's work with the Rātana movement. Works on the conversion of other missionaries have been useful in thinking of Seamer in this context, and deepening understanding of him. Finally, James Belich's work has been useful for contextualising Seamer and alerting me to the relevant questions regarding racial understanding.

This dissertation faced several limitations. Firstly, the 2010 Christchurch earthquake made these archives inaccessible, which perhaps led to relevant sources being missed. Second is the unfortunate loss of documents at the Methodist Church of New Zealand Archives in

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<sup>2</sup> George I. Launson, *Te Hahi Weteriana: three half centuries of Methodist Maori Missions 1822 - 1972*, (Wesley Historical Society, 1972), 258.

Auckland. The Christchurch and Auckland archivists have been very helpful, and I am very grateful for their support in writing this dissertation. Nevertheless, documents at the Auckland archives had been lost, or placed in misleading areas, which hindered this research. Given more time in the archives, or perhaps once the intended digitisation process has been completed, further valuable sources could be located at there.

Secondly, there really is a wealth of sources surrounding Seamer, especially in the *New Zealand Methodist Times*. Given more time to read through these papers more thoroughly, and include them in a larger study of Seamer (with looser temporal and thematic parameters), articles in this publication could offer greater insight into Seamer, and contribute greatly to a more detailed biography of him. (I have drawn upon several articles from this publication, although there are more which have potential use for a more detailed biography). This brings to light a third limitation in that there is so much to Seamer, and so many possible areas to focus on, that this biography, in its thematic nature has been closed to other possible realms of Seamer's life. Thus, it is not a complete biography.

Such limitations give rise to many areas of further research, especially due to the vast amount of sources available that were not able used for this dissertation. Firstly, this work has opened up discourse on Arthur John Seamer, but it is far from conclusive. Indeed, it is but a mere outline of the man, focussing on his work with Māori. More detailed study could be done on this, as well as a more detailed (or differently themed) biography. Seamer's relationship with Te Puea is a weaker part of this dissertation as I focused more on his relationship with Rātana. There is room for a deeper analysis of Seamer's guidance and friendship with Te Puea, as well as more sources to be discovered which can aid an understanding of this relationship. Seamer's relations with Māori have also raised questions regarding racial understanding in the early-twentieth century. Seamer does not fit into the thesis proposed by James Belich. Thus, there is much room for further research in this important area. Other missionaries may be found to have similar views to Seamer, and indeed the positive reception of his Māori choirs would suggest a public acceptance of Māori culture, rather than wanting assimilation. As such, this is an area which begs for further research. Finally, comparative studies would serve to strengthen understandings of missionaries, religion and race relations. Seamer could, for instance, be compared with the Presbyterian missionary, John Laughton, who worked in a similar time period on the East Coast with the Ringatu movement. There is also an argument to further research missionaries in New Zealand concerning their conversion. Biographies of other missionaries,

with comparative interpretations of racial understandings and approaches towards indigenous religions, are an invaluable resource in understanding New Zealand's cultural history. This biography has opened up such discourse and aimed to contribute to such understandings, as well as highlight the need for further, comparative studies.

Seamer's appreciation of Māori and his consequent good relationship with the people have been significant in New Zealand's history. "Seamer's role grew from that of advisor on religious matters to consultant on a variety of social and political issues."<sup>3</sup> Without his encouragement, two important Māori leaders, Te Puea and Rātana, may have led their people away from engagement with Pākehā. At the same time, Seamer's promotion of Māori choirs led Pākehā people towards further engagement with Māori. It is of little surprise then, that Seamer's significance was recognised when he was seen as "in Māori eyes, perhaps the last European missionaries to acquire heroic status in the twentieth century."<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Michael King, *Te Puea*, (Auckland: Hodder and Stoughton Ltd, 1977), 176.

<sup>4</sup> Cyril R. Bradwell, *Fight the Good Fight: The Story of the Salvation Army in New Zealand 1883 – 1983*, (Wellington: A. H. & A. W. Reed Ltd., 1982), 86, and King, *Te Puea*, 175, and Arahi .R. Hagger, "Te Haahi Ratana: History," The Ratana Church, 2003, <http://www.theratanachurch.org.nz/history.html>.

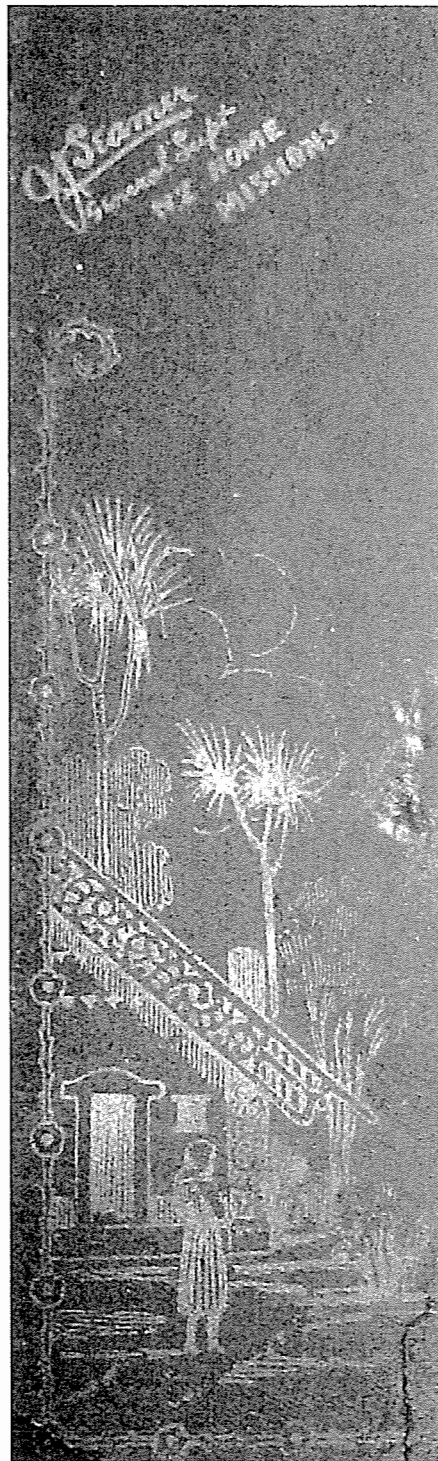


Figure 7: A. J. Seamer's signature upon the card on which the photo in figure 4 was placed. The golden etching portrays part of a typical Māori Marae, with native plants, using the tall fern frond as a border.

Source: *Methodist Church of New Zealand Archives: Auckland: Home and Maori Mission Department*



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