

FEATURE

Two sides to Whiteley

Nineteenth-century missionary The Reverend John Whiteley is considered a martyr by some and a spy by others — and a battle is now raging over his memorial.

ROCHELLE WEST backgrounds the positive and not-so-positive aspects of Whiteley's life



COLONIAL COUPLE: The Reverend John Whiteley and his wife, Mary.

towards the Gascoigne homestead. His approach was noticed by the waiting Maori, who shouted to him to go back.

Whiteley refused.

A shot was fired and Charley fell. As Whiteley staggered to his knees — some say to pray — more shots rang out and Whiteley fell dead.

The coroner's report at the time states that Whiteley's body was also found with tomahawk wounds to his eyes.

Described by some as a martyr, Whiteley's peaceful missionary life and brutal death has seen him held in high regard in many historical accounts.

It has been written that Maori and pakeha alike mourned the death of the man, with some Maori calling him Te Waitere — a man of high mana.

The name Whiteley is well known in New Plymouth, with the Whiteley Methodist Church named after him, as are the Whiteley leases. The Whiteley leases are areas of land in and around Moturoa administered by the Grey Institute Trust for the Methodist Church. Whiteley was at one time the principal of the Grey Institution, a Wesleyan mission school for Maori children at Moturoa.

Whiteley was born in Nottinghamshire, England, on July 20, 1806. He joined the Newark Wesleyan Church in 1826, later becoming an accredited lay preacher and was accepted for missionary training in London.

Early in his missionary career, Whiteley and his wife, Mary, took a post in New Zealand, initially in the Hokianga.

After quickly becoming fluent in Maori, Whiteley was sent to Kawhia in the Waikato, where he helped Te Awa-i-tai, a convert to Christianity, set up a mission there.

Records show Whiteley's ministry among Maori was successful, with a



CONTENTIOUS CAIRN: The memorial at Pukearuhe to The Reverend John Whiteley.

Photo: ADRIAN MALLOCH

steady growth in numbers baptised and attending church.

While in Kawhia, Whiteley also reportedly became an authority on Maori history, traditions, character and thought. Arguments between both Maori and pakeha were brought before him to decide.

In 1840, at the requests of officials, Whiteley encouraged chiefs from Mokau to Kawhia to sign the Treaty of Waitangi. And when it came to honouring the Treaty, he supported Maori by protesting against Governor George Grey's plan to treat all unoccupied land as Crown land. Whiteley argued that all land had customary claimants.

Whiteley later moved to Auckland where he was chairman of the Auckland district of the Wesleyan church.

He was then sent to Taranaki, which had a significant settler population. He apparently found a community fearful and angry, and a mission in turmoil.

There were serious disputes over land ownership, between settlers and Maori, and between Maori factions.

It appears that during his time in Taranaki, Whiteley's views on Maori land changed radically. Where he had once defended the right of Maori to control all their lands — whether occupied or not — in Taranaki he now insisted that the settlers had a claim to buy and use unoccupied land.

His knowledge of the Maori language also meant his services as a translator and adviser were highly sought after by Government officials. It is hardly surprising, then, that some Maori in Taranaki now believe Whiteley was a type of spy for the Government — not a friend to Maori, but a hindrance to them.

Ngati Tama iwi manager Greg White has said that the Whiteley cairn should be removed from Pukearuhe Reserve, where it has stood since 1923, because it is insensitive to Maori.

The reserve is one of five areas of Crown-owned land that is being returned to Ngati Tama iwi under its Treaty settlement.

While Mr White has been reluctant lately to comment on the future of Whiteley's memorial, stating that the decision to dismantle it has been made and the iwi just wants to move on from the issue, in the past he has said the

cairn was erected for "a guy doing us no good. He was running intelligence for the British".

And it appears that it is not only Maori who have been sceptical about Whiteley's motives. Even a former Methodist minister, Auckland's Graham Brazendale, brings into doubt Whiteley's devotion to Taranaki Maori.

Brazendale, who died about a year ago, studied Whiteley as part of a

Master of Arts degree in History at Auckland University and was considered an expert on Whiteley.

"I chose the topic as the result of reading a sentence in Keith Sinclair's book, *The Origins of the Maori Wars*", Brazendale said in his thesis, "John Whiteley, Land Sovereignty and the Land Wars of the 19th Century, published in 1996.

"This did not sound like the Whiteley I had been taught about, the man who had selflessly served the Maori people for over 30 years, who had died at the hands of a Maori war party, whose death was mourned by both settler and Maori."

Some of Whiteley's attitudes and actions were not typical of Wesleyan missionaries and his uncompromising stand on some issues embarrassed his colleagues, who believed Whiteley could harm the mission, Brazendale claimed.

Whiteley was clearly in the camp of the pakeha settlers in regard to the acquisition of Maori land in Taranaki, he said. In letters, Whiteley went as far as to say that Maori who refused to sell their unused land were idling it.

On a number of occasions Whiteley complained that Maori in Taranaki were "an ungrateful lot", Brazendale said.

"Whiteley also used what could be called theological arguments for supporting the Government in its efforts to purchase land.

"Using the command in Genesis to 'multiply and replenish the earth', he stated that leaving vast areas of fertile land unoccupied and unused was contrary to the will of God. In refusing to allow others to occupy the land, (Maori) were circumventing the will of God."

Whiteley's translation of Government documents into Maori and the fact that in his sermons and conversations with "rebels" he urged them to change their ways and stop fighting the Government,

only fuelled debate that Whiteley was against Maori interests.

Brazendale concluded that Whiteley's attitude towards Maori and settlers in Taranaki was very different from the views he held at Kawhia, where he was held in high esteem by Maori.

The fact that Whiteley was in close contact with a lot of European settlers in New Plymouth, while he was primarily in contact with Maori at Kawhia, was believed to be one of the reasons for his change of heart.

Patriotism and the historical climate of the time were other reasons.

"In Kawhia he was a strong supporter of Maori rights," Brazendale wrote. "He saw it as his duty to protest when it appeared that the Government was about to abrogate important provisions of the Treaty of Waitangi."

"His arrival in Taranaki brought an about turn. While still remaining a missionary to the Maori, he became an advocate for the rights of settlers."

Today's members of the New Plymouth Methodist Church about the kind of man Whiteley was and opinions are likely to be mixed, New Plymouth parish manager John Chittenden says.

It would be difficult for the church to make a statement about Whiteley's historical significance because of those differing opinions, he adds.

Like other sectors of society, there are those in the church who suspect Whiteley was a sort of spy. Older members, however, would fiercely defend the missionary as a man of peace who loved Maori and helped their advancement.

The church management still believes it is doing the right thing in removing the memorial, having consulted with Ngati Tama, Chittenden says.

In removing the cairn, the church is acknowledging Ngati Tama's right to receive the Pukearuhe reserve land "free of any encumbrance".

But ill feeling about the monument's removal has been hard to ignore.

Pukearuhe property owners Murray and Pat Wells have had their offer of having the cairn moved on to their adjacent property declined by the church.

The Wells, however, fear for the memorial's fate and believe that moving it is culturally insensitive to pakeha.

"If they want another Maori war, they'll get it," Mrs Wells has been quoted as saying.

Gascoigne Miller, a descendant of the Gascoigne family whose lives also ended in the White Cliffs massacre, is also agnostic at the likely removal of the cairn, which also honours his family.

"Surely the present-day Maori are aware that the statue was erected with support and funds from pakeha and Maori alike," Miller says.

Wherever the eventual resting place of the John Whiteley Memorial is, one thing can be assured. His bloody end and arguments over his place in history will live on. □

'His arrival in Taranaki brought an about turn'

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