The Legacy of Elizabeth Fairburn Colenso

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“T”his is the story of a woman, sincere, humble, unselfish and generous. One who lived for others and never spared herself in any way.” Thus began the account of Elizabeth Fairburn Colenso’s life by her granddaughter Francis Swabey. Elizabeth herself, as a young woman, once wrote, “We have no abiding city . . . we are but strangers and pilgrims on earth,” lines that anticipated much of the heartache of her long life of faithful service.

Elizabeth was born into the Fairburn family at Kerikeri, New Zealand, in August 1821. Her parents, William Fairburn and Sarah (née Tuckwell), came to New Zealand as Church Missionary Society (CMS) missionaries in 1819, where they spent the rest of their lives. William was a carpenter and a catechist for the CMS, and Sarah taught at mission schools, brought up the family, and endured the frequent absences of her husband. In 1834 Elizabeth’s family moved to a new CMS station at Puriri, and Elizabeth was left behind in the household of Henry and Marianne Williams to continue her schooling at the mission school in Pahia. She was indeed “a complete child of the mission.”

In 1843 she married William Colenso, a printer working for the CMS printer, and moved to St. John’s College at Waimate for eighteen months. In 1844 the young couple established a new mission station at Waitangi, Ahuriri, where Elizabeth lived for nearly ten years. She then left her husband to return to her father’s home at Otahuhu before joining the Benjamin Ashwells as a teacher at the CMS mission station at Taupiri in 1854. Seven years later she journeyed to England with her two children. After five years there she returned to New Zealand, eventually settling in Pahia with her daughter. In 1875, when she was fifty-four, Bishop John Selwyn requested that she go to Norfolk Island, to the headquarters of the Melanesian Mission, to help out for four months while his wife returned for a visit to England. Elizabeth went willingly and ended up serving there for twenty-three years, finally returning to New Zealand in 1898 to live with her daughter at Otaki, where she died in 1904.

Childhood, Vocation, and Marriage

Elizabeth was thoroughly familiar with mission life from her earliest days. According to Sarah Mathew, who visited the Fairburns at their home in Maratai in 1840, both Elizabeth and her mother related very positively with Maori: “Mrs Fairburn speaks better of them [Maori women] and their capacity than any other of the missionaries’ wives I have seen.” By 1840, after returning home from Pahia, nineteen-year-old Elizabeth was running her own school, with its own curriculum and program.

In 1843 Elizabeth agreed to marry William Colenso, who was ten years older than she was, and whom she had probably known briefly as one of the Pahia missionaries while she was at school there. However, after visiting the Fairburns early in 1843, William and Elizabeth decided to postpone the marriage for a year until after his ordination. Bishop George Selwyn, father of the Bishop John Selwyn mentioned earlier, was not happy with these arrangements and in a letter to William urged him to return to Waimate married: “If you would prefer coming as a married man I have no doubt that we can make arrangements for Mrs Colenso’s reception . . . In fact I should very much prefer this arrangement.” So William reluctantly conceded to Selwyn’s wishes and they got married as planned.

It appears that both of them were fully aware that initially there was little love in the relationship, but William recorded later, “I fully firmly believed that mutual affection would surely follow, for all I wanted was a suitable partner, particularly in mission work—this was ever uppermost.” For William, mission work was his priority, and for Elizabeth, marriage may well have been a means to fulfill her missionary vocation. They began their married life at St. John’s College, Waimate, where they both worked extremely hard. Elizabeth ran the Infants and Boarding Schools and was so valuable to the bishop that William believed that George Selwyn did not want to lose her and for this reason delayed his ordination! Their daily routine was rigorous, and William wrote, “Had she not been strong and well used to the Maoris and fitted for her work she must have sunk under it.”

During this time their first child, Fanny, was born on February 1, 1844, while William was away on a journey for the bishop. Later that year William was ordained deacon, and they moved to the remote and inhospitable region of Ahuriri.

Ahuriri Years: Domestic Routine, Mission Work

The Colensos’ arrival in Ahuriri on December 28, 1844, did not bode well. As Elizabeth noted in her “Recollections,” “Upon arrival there, we found a native built raupo whare [a kind of grass hut], without floor, doors or windows, with a square hole cut in the roof for a chimney, and the earthen floor covered with mud among the packages.”

Elizabeth worked tirelessly at the Girls and Infants Schools, which were built across the river. She was a resourceful woman. “As soon as lessons were begun, Elizabeth had to paddle across every day to teach her classes.” She was often busy overseeing the mission station, as William was away traveling so much. His area of responsibility was huge, covering almost one quarter of the total area of North Island.

Like many other missionary wives of this era, Elizabeth experienced the isolation and loneliness of being the only white woman in the district. This was certainly a concern for Elizabeth as she approached the end of her second pregnancy. She had received an invitation from Jane Williams to go to Turanga for the birth, and so she and William journeyed the 130 miles to Turanga by foot in midwinter! It was a difficult and dangerous journey, as William observed: “I shuddered sometimes to see the places which Mrs Colenso had to climb up and down—more than doubly hazardous in the present wet winter season.”

Ridley Latimer (Latty) was safely delivered on September 23, 1845. According to William, Elizabeth wrote to him after the birth of Ridley, declaring “that it would not be her fault if anything of that nature ever again occurred.” She continued, “So, from that time, or even long before, we never again cohabited

together as man and wife.” William claimed that they had “but little if any love for each other, and our new mode of living did not cause such a feeling to spring or grow.” He claimed that his happiness was in his work and that Elizabeth was “far happier when I was away from the Station travelling.” Elizabeth’s marriage had evidently failed in terms of finding love and true companionship, but she continued with her busy life of managing the mission station in William’s absences, teaching, and bringing up her children.

Ahuriri Years: Estrangement and Exodus

William was certainly not an easy person to live with. His complex personality and the prolonged absences, both while away traveling and in his study in the garden while at home, made their marriage relationship difficult to sustain. William wrote in his autobiography, “From that time on [after the birth of Ridley in 1845] we dwelt as brother and sister . . . we never loved each other.” Although William had claimed to be happy with this arrangement, in 1848 he began an affair with Ripeka, Elizabeth’s housegirl. Elizabeth did not discover this affair until mid-1851, when Ripeka had a baby, Wi, by William. Two weeks after the birth Ripeka confessed everything to Elizabeth. It seems that William really did love Ripeka, and he strongly resisted her subsequent marriage to Hamuera, another servant in the house. Ripeka and Hamuera came and went several times over the next two years, on each occasion leaving Wi, as William refused to let him go away with Ripeka. Finally in November 1852 Ripeka and Hamuera left for the last time, attempting to secretly take Wi with them, but William heard the cry that Wi was being smuggled into the canoe and refused to let him leave. “I rushed from the study, jumped on board, and demanded from R. my child; she gave you [here written to Wi] into my hands and I bore you off into the house; madly followed by the Maoris of the house and as sole caregiver for the child of her husband’s canoe.”

Now Elizabeth found herself without Ripeka to assist in the house and as sole caregiver for the child of her husband’s mistress. She performed this duty admirably. William affirmed to Wi that “Mrs Colenso kindly and lovingly took you up and well performed a mother’s part towards you in every respect by day and night.” Elizabeth also continued as usual with her mission duties.

Eventually in 1852 Elizabeth’s brother John Fairburn arrived to take her two children, Fanny and Ridley Latimer, to Auckland, ostensibly to learn English. John also brought back with him a letter of confession from William to Bishop Selwyn. Disaster followed tragedy, and in January 1853 a fire destroyed the family home, followed two months later by a severe flood. Their story almost has the sense of a Shakespearean drama with natural disasters and the disruption of creation mirroring the disruption of human relationships and the breakup of the mission station. Elizabeth remained, sleeping in the study and continuing with the school, which had not been destroyed. Two months later Bishop Selwyn arrived with a letter of suspension for William and instructions for Wi to be returned to his mother and her people. William categorically refused to agree to this arrangement, and after a protracted and heated argument in the cold schoolroom, “a fantastic compromise” was reached whereby Elizabeth would leave William to return to her family in Auckland, taking Wi with her. So finally, on August 30, 1853, Elizabeth left Ahuriri for Auckland.

Elizabeth’s exodus from Ahuriri with little Wi provides us with the most fascinating and personally revealing correspondence from Elizabeth that survives. Initially her letters seemed to be full of concern for William and related in detail how Wi was coping with the journey and the new things he was learning. However, once she arrived in Auckland, the tone of her letters changed dramatically. Now she refers to Wi in the third person as “the child” and explains, “My father most positively refused to receive him into his house.” Her final letter to William throbs with the intense agony and deep pain of her years of living with him. She accuses him of “ten years intense misery and suffering on my part, solely and most deliberately caused by you.” She claims that she looked after Wi only because William demanded it, and she writes that “the ‘spell’ which bound me to you was broken” and that she felt “so weary and worn and spirit-crushed.” She tells him she does not want “a farthing or a farthing’s worth from him” and concludes, “I do not wish to have any further communication with you.”

What brought about this change in attitude toward William from the affectionate letters written during her journey to these sad and acerbic epistles written from the safety of Auckland? What caused her to abandon little Wi, whom she apparently loved? Was it her family and the CMS establishment exerting pressure and reminding her of “the Cause”? The answer is unknown, but Elizabeth remained firm and never saw William again.

Waikato Years: Healing of Memories

In 1854, a year after her arrival in Auckland, Elizabeth joined the Ashwells’ mission station at Taupiri, Waikato. According to her daughter, Elizabeth “was appointed by the Church Missionary Society to help in the Rev. B Y Ashwell’s school at Taupiri.” If this information is correct, it was a highly unusual decision—the CMS appointed a married woman, let alone a separated married woman, to a position by herself without her family. Perhaps the Ashwells invited her to join them, as they knew it would be the kind of work she loved and a place where she could recuperate after the trauma of the previous years. Benjamin Ashwell was grateful for her assistance and praised her highly.

Elizabeth spent seven years in the Waikato, which was likely a time of healing and peace for her. She could continue with the work she loved, no longer burdened with an unhappy marriage and strained relationships all around her, and her financial independence meant that she need have no further contact with William.

English Years: Service and Satisfaction

In January 1861 Elizabeth, Fanny, and Latty sailed to England on the ship Boonerges. During the five years she spent there, Elizabeth managed to forge a respectable place for herself in English

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society. She was a devoted church worker and had many references in her diaries to church attendance and to teaching Sunday school. Elizabeth had a heart for the poor, and frequent diary entries refer to her visits to Union Row (e.g., “We then went down to Union Row and saw several of the poor people—gave 3 or 4 of them a trifle”).22

Along with many other Christian women of that era who saw what havoc and destruction alcohol brought into people’s lives, Elizabeth was a committed temperance supporter. She maintained her interest in teaching and in schools and attended a meeting convened by Lord Ebury of the Ragged Schools at the end of June in 1864.23

Elizabeth’s work with the Bible was the most common theme throughout the diaries at this period. A constant refrain was, “Received, corrected and posted proof sheets.”24 Elizabeth was working on revising portions of the Old Testament in the Maori language with George Maunsell, who sent her the proofs. In June 1864 she noted, “Corrected and posted proof sheets have got as far as the 106 Psalm.”25 And in September that same year she recorded that she “translated Aperahama’s paper and posted it to Mr Stack” and was “all morning correcting proof sheets—23 chapters in Ecclesiastes, Song of Sol and Isaiah.”26 Besides revising and preparing portions of the Bible for the press, a book of her own, *Scriptural Stories*, went to the printer in 1864.27 She also mentioned, “Busy translating paper on ‘Keeping the Sabbath for Maories’ . . . Busy also translating William Pou’s letters into English for translation.”28 This translation and revision work took up a lot of her time while she was in England but must have given her much satisfaction.

The major part of her “Recollections” is devoted to a visit to Queen Victoria with a group of Maori brought over to England from New Zealand by an entrepreneur named Mr. Jenkins. Elizabeth was requested by the Colonial Office to act as their interpreter and to perform various other services. She was always interested in New Zealand affairs and was keen to help.

On October 20, 1866, with news that the New Zealand Wars were over, Elizabeth left England to return to New Zealand with Fanny, then twenty-two years old.29 These had been satisfying years for Elizabeth. She was able to be involved with the work she loved—continuing contact with Maori, showing compassion and practical assistance to the poor and marginalized, and ongoing revision of the Bible and translation work.

**Return, Resettling, and Renewed Challenges**

In 1867 Elizabeth and Fanny arrived in Auckland. Before they had even docked, a boat arrived offshore from Devonport with an urgent message for Elizabeth: Mrs. Ashwell was dying and wanted to see Elizabeth immediately. Mrs. Ashwell did die, after which Benjamin Ashwell asked Elizabeth and Fanny to look after his house while he returned to England with his daughter. No doubt Elizabeth was glad to render this service to friends who had so willingly received her after her separation from William fourteen years before. However, Elizabeth did not just look after
their home. As her daughter recorded, “So there we lived for two years, teaching in the Sunday School, working in the Parish, and I was organist for the church.” After two years they went to live at the CMS station at Paihia. There Elizabeth was equally active. “I had free school daily for the Maori children, and a few children of English settlers within walking distance used to attend. I also held Sunday School for the Maori women.”

In 1875, when Bishop John Selwyn asked Elizabeth to go to Norfolk Island to help out at the Melanesian Mission, she readily agreed. Perhaps she felt ready for a new challenge. She wrote, “I gladly went, being work which I liked.” Elizabeth sailed for Norfolk Island in February 1876. She loved devoting herself to the work of the mission there, teaching, sewing clothes for the pupils, nursing both Europeans and Melanesians, and writing many letters of thanks to supporters of the mission. She translated many works into Mota, the common language of the Melanesian Mission. Her granddaughter commented, “She spoke Maori like a native, and learnt the Mota language at the age of 56 and became most proficient in it.” Elizabeth stayed at Norfolk Island until 1898, when she returned to New Zealand to live out her remaining years with her daughter and family.

Conclusion
Elizabeth’s unusual circumstances make her different from most missionary wives of her era. She was indeed a remarkable woman whose life exhibited a devotion to the evangelical missionary cause from childhood. Like some other missionary wives of the nineteenth century, she may have married William as a means to pursue her own missionary vocation, a vocation possible only for married women at this time. She continued her commitment to the cause of mission during her difficult years of marriage at Ahuriri and beyond. For many, such a tragic experience would have resulted in withdrawal into a quiet life, but Elizabeth found solace and satisfaction in further service. This feature makes her legacy so remarkable. Despite the distressing circumstances of a loveless marriage and a subsequent painful separation, she was still able to pursue her missionary vocation and service in many different contexts. It is also noteworthy that the CMS allowed a separated woman to work at their mission stations. She was the first separated woman to do so in New Zealand.

From the perspective of New Zealand history, it is important...
to bring Elizabeth out from under the shadow of her husband, who was later dismissed from the CMS, but whose name and work is probably still better known than that of his wife’s. From the perspective of women’s studies, she is noteworthy for transcending boundaries and crossing over into the public male sphere with her involvement in Bible translation and advocacy for the Maori. From the perspective of mission studies, she is remarkable as a woman who dedicated her life to cross-cultural service, even as a “second career missionary” in her later years.

From a pastoral and contemporary perspective, Elizabeth is an example showing us that despite tragic personal circumstances, we can still be useful in God’s service, overcoming our own broken worlds.

Elizabeth was never intimidated by a challenge and was determined to live a useful life of service to the end. She was a strong woman, courageous in the face of adversity and determined to carry on with the work she loved. In her long and full life, she was a pilgrim to the end.

Notes

2. Elizabeth Colenso to Charlotte Brown, Waimate, August 30, 1843, A. N. Brown Papers, 1828–1887, MS 0756, Red 6, Folder 74 (WTU).
7. Ibid., p. 31.
8. Elizabeth Colenso, “Recollections of Mrs Elizabeth Colenso 89-241-4,” in Research Files, ed. P. A. Sargison (WTU, 1899).
13. Ibid., p. 4.
14. Ibid., p. 3.
16. There is a series of nine letters written over a period of three months, August–October 1853, while she was traveling to Auckland, with three further letters from Auckland written between December 1853 and May 1854.
17. William Colenso, “Letters from his wife, Elizabeth 88-103-1/22” (WTU, 1843–1899), Otahuhu, December 19, 1853. After her father refused to admit Wi into the family home, he went to board with a European family and then with a Maori family in the Bay of Islands.
18. Ibid., Otahuhu, May 27, 1854.
20. The CMS minutes for this period, however, make no reference to this arrangement as an oddity. She is mentioned only indirectly as part of William’s “family” offered a passage to England or elsewhere. Church Missionary Society, “Church Missionary Society Minutes, 1851–1854, Australian Joint Copying Project M187” (Kinder Library MIC 014, 1851–1854), May 31, 1853.
21. Elizabeth Colenso, “Diaries MS0557-MS0563” (WTU, 1862–76). See, for example, diary entries for Sundays December 28, 1862, and January 4 and 18, 1863.
22. Ibid., Friday, December 19, 1862.
23. Ibid., Tuesday, June 28, 1864.
24. Ibid., for example, Tuesday, December 16, 1862; Thursday, January 15, 1863; March 31, 1863; April 29, 1863; June 16, 1863, etc. This diary entry, or some variation of it, occurred more than twenty-five times in her diaries over this period.
25. Ibid., June 19, 1864.
26. Ibid., September 21 and 28, 1864.
29. Latty remained behind to study at St. John’s College, Cambridge.
32. Ibid.
33. “Mrs Elizabeth Colenso, Recollections of her eldest granddaughter, Frances Elizabeth Swabey” 89-241-4,” in Research Files, ed. P. A. Sargison (WTU, 1899).

Selected Bibliography

Manuscript Records

The Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand, contains the following items relating to Elizabeth Fairburn Colenso: Colenso, Elizabeth. “Correspondence.” MS-Papers-1070, 1836–81.
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Works About Elizabeth Fairburn Colenso