Story: Kendall, Thomas

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Page 1: Biography

Kendall, Thomas

1778?–1832

Missionary, orthographer, linguist

This biography, written by Judith Binney, was first published in the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography, vol 1, 1990.

Thomas Kendall was baptised on 13 December 1778 at North Thoresby, Lincolnshire, England. He was probably the fifth child (of seven) of Susanna Surflit and her husband, Edward Kendall, a small copyhold farmer. He retained a Lincolnshire accent all his life. In his upbringing he was influenced by the evangelical revival within the Church of England, which taught men and women to seek their salvation through the recognition of the pervasiveness of sin and the acceptance of the grace of God.

After leaving home at the age of 14, Kendall became a school monitor in Immingham, Lincolnshire, and then an assistant schoolteacher in North Somercotes, Lincolnshire. On 21 November 1803 he married Jane Quickfall in Kirmington, Lincolnshire; there were nine children of the marriage. After he married, Kendall struggled to make a living as a draper and grocer in North Thoresby, but on a visit to London in November 1805 underwent the religious experience of being 'born again of the Spirit'. Swayed by the powerful preaching of the Reverend Basil Woodd, a prominent revivalist, he sold his business, and with his family went to live in London in January 1806. He became an ardent member of the congregation of Bentinck Chapel, in Marylebone, the place of his rebirth.

In 1808 Kendall applied to the Church Missionary Society to become a settler in New Zealand. Samuel Marsden, chaplain of New South Wales and CMS agent, was then impressing on the CMS the need for such a mission. By 1809 two other settlers, William Hall and John King, had been chosen, but it was not until May 1813 that Kendall finally set sail, as the schoolmaster. He and his family stayed in Sydney until Marsden sent him, with Hall, on an exploratory voyage to the Bay of Islands in March 1814. There they met the chiefs Ruatara of Te Hikutu and Hongi Hika of Ngai Tawake, and invited them to travel with them to Port Jackson (Sydney).

The mission was founded under the patronage of these two chiefs at Rangihoua, in the northern Bay of Islands, in December 1814. It comprised Kendall, Hall and King, and their families. Isolation, both physical and mental, and the difficulties of simply surviving placed severe strains on the missionaries and aggravated the personal differences among them. Kendall's appointment as justice of the peace in New Zealand and his assumption of the role of leader were a further irritant. He was an emotional, idealistic and self-torturing man, driven by evangelical zeal and seeking perfection, although believing at the same time in his own deep imperfection; when opposed, as he often was by Hall and King with their more pragmatic, secular approach, he was subject to outbursts of ungovernable temper. The appointment of the Reverend John Butler as superintendent of the mission in 1819 did not relieve the tensions, and indeed deepened Kendall's sense of his own failure.

Kendall started the school at Rangihoua on 12 August 1816. It opened with a roll of 33 but closed at the end of 1818 owing to a lack of supplies and trade. Failure also seemed to threaten Kendall's other prime concern: the study of the Maori language. In 1815 he had had printed and published in Sydney the first book in Maori, *A korao no New Zealand; or, the New Zealander's first book; being an attempt to compose some lessons for the instruction of the natives*. He continued his attempts to understand and write down spoken Maori, and in 1818 sent off a manuscript spelling book to the CMS. Doubts, however, were raised about it by Professor Samuel Lee, oriental linguist at Cambridge University and former protégé of the CMS.

To establish the accuracy of his work was one of the primary reasons for Kendall's unauthorised visit to England in 1820, accompanied by Hongi Hika and the younger chief Waikato of Rangihoua. The three went to Cambridge to work with Lee on the compilation of a Maori grammar. The book, *A grammar and vocabulary of the language of New Zealand*, was published at the end of the year, and laid the orthographic foundations of written Maori.

Despite the CMS's disapproval of Kendall's return, the visitors were entertained widely. Waikato and Hongi were introduced to George IV. The painter James Barry portrayed Kendall and the two chiefs. Kendall is shown wearing, as he always did, a natural wig and dressed in elegant clerical costume. He had been ordained as a priest on 12 November 1820 by the bishop of Ely, to preach specifically in New Zealand as he had neither Latin nor Greek. He returned to the Bay of Islands in July 1821, bolstered by this recognition of his work, and by his friendship with Hongi, the most powerful leader at the Bay.

But Kendall's relationship with the other settlers deteriorated rapidly. He attempted unsuccessfully to assert his leadership, using his influence with Hongi against them. Nevertheless they all endorsed the letter he wrote on 27 September 1821 which assessed their difficulties and argued their need to conciliate the Maori 'in every possible way'. He defended the gun trade, in which he himself had begun to deal. He told the CMS that the settlers could not dictate to the Maori what articles 'they must receive in payment for their property & services. They dictate to us! ...It is evident that ambition and self interest are amongst the principal causes of our security amongst them.' This provocative letter was the immediate cause of his dismissal by the CMS in August 1822.

His outspokenness was compounded by the rumours spreading, late in 1821, about his affair with Tungaroa, daughter of Rakau, the old tohunga of Rangihoua. She had been taught by Kendall at the school, and was a servant in his household. Once the news broke he fled with her to Kaihiki, a village on the Te Puna inlet, near to the mission station, but ended the relationship in April 1822. He later tried to explain to a ship's captain that he had lived with her 'in order to obtain accurate information as to their religious opinions and tenets, which he would in no other way have obtained'; sophistical perhaps, but not without some truth. Rakau must have been one of Kendall's major informants.

In a series of letters written between 1822 and 1824, mostly to the CMS, Kendall attempted to describe Maori cosmological thought. He sent seven letters, together with three shipments of carvings (now lost), and a drawing of the entrance to a carved storehouse, which is the earliest known illustration of such a structure. This portrayed Nukutawhiti, the canoe ancestor of Nga Puhi. Kendall also published a letter under the pseudonym 'Solicitus' in the *Sydney Gazette* on 8 January 1831.

Kendall argued that the carvings, attached to war canoes, storehouses and elsewhere, were images depicting three 'states' of existence. The first state he described as undistinguished, formless matter before life; the second was life in this world; and the third, life after death. The drawing of Nukutawhiti is of the ancestor in the first state of existence. But Kendall's descriptions are not clear. They were also distorted by his reading – under the illusion that the Maori were descendants of the Egyptians – of late eighteenth century accounts of Egyptian religious beliefs, particularly from his 1797 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*. It is probable, however, that he came closer to understanding the symbolic content of the carvings than anyone ever would again.

Marsden, having learned of Kendall's adultery, came to New Zealand in August 1823 to dismiss him. Kendall agreed to leave, but when the *Brampton*, on which the Kendalls had embarked, was wrecked on a shoal in the Bay he changed his mind. God had intervened, it seemed, to assure him he had tasks still in New Zealand. With Jane and the family he moved back to the home he had built at Matauwhi, away from the mission, on the south side of the Bay. They remained there until February 1825, when they sailed for Chile where Kendall became the clergyman attached to the British consulate at Valparaiso. In 1827 he and his family returned to New South Wales, where he was given a land grant of 1,280 acres at Ulladulla.

Kendall maintained his interest in the Maori language, and twice attempted to have a revised edition of the *Grammar* published in Sydney. An important change he wanted to make in the orthography was the adoption of the 'wh' digraph, in addition to 'ng', included in 1820. But he was blocked at every turn by Marsden. His efforts to have it published privately by subscription failed, although he had raised sufficient money by March 1832. He was drowned in early August 1832 when his cutter, the *Brisbane*, bringing a cargo of cedar and cheese from Ulladulla for sale in Sydney, was wrecked off Jervis Bay in a storm.

Thomas Kendall pioneered the transcription of Maori; he also sought to understand Maori conceptualisations of their universe. He was destroyed by the hostility he encountered from the mission world. He was also blinkered by his religious preconceptions. Although the 'apparent sublimity' of the Maori ideas had 'almost completely turned [him] from a Christian to a Heathen' (as he wrote in 1822), he stayed convinced that these beliefs must be a remnant of original scriptural knowledge.

Kendall has become a central figure in the literary imagination of New Zealand: Frank Sargeson, Bruce Mason, and in 1984, the Wellington co-operative Theatre of the Eighth Day have all attempted plays about him, and Keith Sinclair's poem, 'Memorial to a missionary', still poses the essential question, 'what in that dreaming hour...did he learn from the south?' Kendall sought knowledge and friendship; and he bought them with guns. He rejected his own society, if only for a little while, in recognition of the attractiveness of the Maori world. But his delusion was akin to that of Faust. He discovered that he could not shuffle off the culture he was born to, nor his notion of the overwhelming power of sin, but that he could lose his belief in the pre-ordained salvation of his soul.

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