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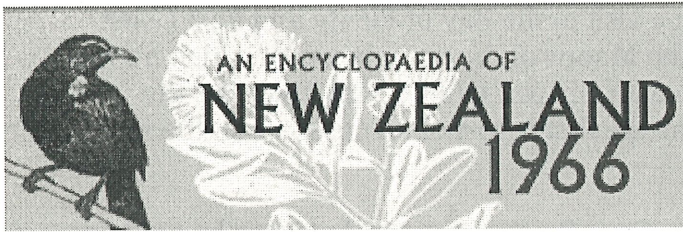
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First book printed in New Zealand

1835

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Browse Te Ara



(Petersen, G., 2009)

COLENZO, William

(1811–99).

Missionary, printer, explorer, botanist, and politician.

A new biography of Colenso, William appears in the Dictionary of New Zealand Biography on this site.

William Colenso was born in Penzance, Cornwall, on 17 November 1811, the eldest child of Samuel May Colenso, a saddler and town councillor of Penzance. He was educated privately and at the age of 15 apprenticed to a local printer. When he had served his time he went to London where he obtained employment with Richard Watts and Son, printers to the Church Missionary Society. A printer and press were required for the society's mission at Paihia in New Zealand and Colenso was engaged as a missionary-printer.

Colenso arrived at Paihia, Bay of Islands, on 30 December 1834 and immediately set up his press. To his dismay he found that certain essentials were lacking. He improvised many of the missing articles and, obtaining some paper from the missionaries, produced on 17 February 1835 the first book printed in New Zealand, *The Epistle to the Philippians and the Ephesians*, in Maori. During the next eight years Colenso produced, with little efficient help, a great volume of work. His most important task, the *New Testament in Maori*, was completed on 30 December 1837 in an edition of 5,000 copies, half of which he bound himself. It has been estimated that between January 1835 and January 1840 the press produced 74,100 books of from four pages upwards, including the *Book of Common Prayer* in Maori, portions of the *Old and New Testaments*, and church papers of all kinds. In October 1835 he produced the first printing in English done in New Zealand, a notice exhorting the settlers to influence the Maoris against de Thierry's pretensions. He also printed the first book in English, the first report of the New Zealand Temperance Society. In addition to the church publications he printed Hobson's earliest proclamations and notices, and also, on 30 December 1840, his *Gazette Extraordinary No. 1*. Two years later his connection with the press was ended.

On 27 April 1843 Colenso married Elizabeth Fairburn, daughter of W. T. Fairburn, who was in charge of the mission station at Otahuhu. Shortly afterwards he went to Te Waimate to study for ordination as a deacon, preparatory to engaging in full-time missionary work.

From youth Colenso had been interested in all branches of natural history. To Allan Cunningham, the New South Wales Colonial Botanist, who visited Paihia in 1838, he owed much of his systematic training in botany. In 1841, during the visits of the ships of Sir James Clark Ross's

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Antarctic Expedition, he made the acquaintance of J. D. Hooker, to whose father, Sir William Hooker, then Professor of Botany at Glasgow, he had been sending botanical specimens. He accompanied Hooker on many botanical excursions and afterwards carried on a correspondence with him extending over 50 years. He also had the stimulus of meeting Charles Darwin and other visiting scientists.

During his first years at the Bay of Islands Colenso made several important missionary journeys. In 1838 he accompanied the Rev. W. Williams on a visit to the Bay of Plenty and East Coast districts. During this journey he first heard from the Maoris of the moa, bones of which he was later able to examine. He wrote a remarkably perceptive paper, dated 1 May 1842, for the *Tasmanian Journal of Natural Science*, which was the first report of an observer on the spot pointing out the nature of the discovery.

In the following year Colenso travelled overland to Cape Reinga, previously visited by only one European, the Rev. W. G. Puckey. His longest and most important journey was made through the East Coast, Urewera, and Waikato districts in 1841-42. Travelling by the schooner *Columbine* to Hicks Bay, he landed there and walked down the coast to the Rev. W. Williams's station at Kaupapa, Poverty Bay, where he turned inland to Lake Waikaremoana. He then made a complete traverse of the mountainous Urewera Country and returned to Paihia via Rotorua, the Waikato, Manukau, and Kaipara. During this journey he collected nearly 1,000 natural history specimens of which a great proportion were new to science. He wrote a fascinating account of his journey and botanical discoveries, *Excursion in the Northern Island of New Zealand in 1841-42*. Two years later he again visited the East Coast and traversed the coastal districts from Hicks Bay to Turanga (Gisborne) where he took ship for Wellington. Forced to land at Castlepoint by bad weather he turned inland and again visited the Urewera district. Acting on Selwyn's instructions he made a census of the inhabitants there. He then followed the Whakatane River valley to the Bay of Plenty and returned home via Tauranga, the Waikato, and Otahuhu.

Colenso was at Paihia when Captain Hobson arrived on 29 January 1840 and he accompanied James Busby to the *Herald* to welcome him. He was present at the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, and in his pamphlet *The signing of the Treaty of Waitangi* (1880) he gave the best eyewitness account we possess of that historic event.

Ordained a deacon in 1844 Colenso was appointed to open a new mission station at Ahuriri on Hawke Bay. He arrived there with his wife on 30 December 1844 to take charge of a district extending from Taupo to Wellington and embracing the whole area eastward of the Ruahine and Tararua Ranges. His first journey was an unsuccessful, though botanically rewarding, attempt to cross the Ruahine Range to Inland Patea. He made his first complete crossing of the range in the course of a trip through Tarawera (Hawke's Bay) Taupo, and Inland Patea, and subsequently repeated the crossing on five occasions. He described some of his experiences in *An Account of Visits to the Ruahine Mountain Range* (1884). His connection with the Church Missionary Society was terminated in 1852 when he was dismissed for an irregular association with a Maori girl. He was, however, readmitted to the services of the Church in 1894.

After his dismissal Colenso lived in Napier and took a lively interest in local politics. He was elected to the first Hawke's Bay Provincial Council and held his seat from 1858 to 1865. He served as Acting Speaker, Provincial Auditor, and Treasurer for short periods. In 1861 he was elected to the House of Representatives, but was defeated in 1866 by Donald McLean. He later served for a further period on the Provincial Council. From 1872 to 1878 he was Inspector of Schools, introducing ideas well in advance of his time. Following his retirement from politics he again concentrated on his botanical studies, but his identifications of numerous new species were frequently challenged. Nevertheless, his impressive contributions to botanical knowledge extending over 60 years fully merited the preservation of his name in one genus (*Colensoa*) and many species. He died at Napier on 10 February 1899, survived by a son and a daughter.

During a lifetime spanning almost the whole of the nineteenth century Colenso followed his varied occupations with unflagging zeal, but his restless energy which drove him from one interest to another deprived him of the fame he could have earned had he confined himself to one sphere. Unfortunately, great mental capacity, dynamic energy, an absolute religious faith, and an insatiable scientific curiosity were fettered to a passionate and uncompromising nature and an intolerance of contrary opinion that brought him in turn into conflict with his fellow workers, his bishop, and his own townsmen. His energy and craftsmanship as a printer were typical of his performance in all other pursuits. As a missionary he laboured tirelessly, caring much for the welfare of his widely scattered flock and indifferent to his own comfort and health. His evangelising efforts were greatly assisted by his extensive knowledge of the Maori language, custom, and tradition, but again an overbearing and dictatorial manner deprived him of the real affection of his converts.

Up to the time of his death Colenso remained the foremost authority on the Maori, as well as on New Zealand botany. His New Zealand Exhibition Essays (1865) on *The Botany of the North Island* and *The Maori Races of New Zealand* are the work of one pre-eminent in those fields. But his attempt to write a Maori dictionary disclosed his deficiencies as a lexicographer and the project was never brought to completion. His services to science were recognised by his election as a Fellow of the Royal Society in 1866, the first New Zealander to be so honoured.

Colenso contributed over 100 papers on various scientific subjects, many of great value, to scientific journals, principally to the *Transactions of the New Zealand Institute*. Other publications of interest and value include *Fifty Years Ago in New Zealand* (1886), a record of his printing days at the Bay of Islands, *Fiat Justitia* (1871), a plea on behalf of Kereopa, the murderer of Rev. C. Volkner, *Three Literary Papers* (1883), and *Ancient Tide Lore and Tales of the Sea* (1889).

by George Conrad Petersen, Editor, *Who's Who in New Zealand*, Palmerston North.

William Colenso – Journals and Correspondence, (MSS), Hocken Library
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