



What's the story?
Encyclopedia of New Zealand

1814

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MARSDEN, Samuel

(1765–1838).

First promoter of missionary enterprise, explorer, and recorder of early nineteenth century Maori culture.

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

Samuel Marsden was born on 25 June 1765 at Farsley in the parish of Calverley, Yorkshire, where his father, Thomas Marsden, was a blacksmith and small farmer. Little is known of his family background. According to family tradition his family came under the influence of the Wesleyan movement. Marsden attended the Farsley village school, and then assisted his father for a number of years, acquiring a knowledge of farming and other practical arts which he put to good use in later life. The Elland Clerical Society, so called from a parish in Yorkshire at which it held meetings for a time, had as one of its objects financial assistance to suitable young men wishing to be educated for the ministry of the Church of England. In his early twenties Marsden was selected by the society as a recipient of its help. He spent over two years at the free grammar school at Hull, where Joseph Milner, member of the Elland Society and ecclesiastical historian, was headmaster. Milner and other influential reformers of the evangelical persuasion within the Church of England were among Marsden's mentors at this time. Marsden became a member of Magdalene Hall, Cambridge, in 1790, again under the auspices of the Elland Society.

The Rev. Richard Johnson, chaplain in the British colony of New South Wales, being in need of assistance, Marsden was appointed second chaplain on 1 January 1793. In consequence he left Cambridge without taking a degree. On 21 April 1793 he married Elizabeth Fristan. On 26 May 1793 he was ordained by the Bishop of Exeter. He and his bride took passage in a convict ship, the *William*, arriving at Port Jackson on 10 March 1794. Their first child, Anne, was born on the voyage. On 4 July 1794 they took up residence at Parramatta, some 15 miles from the main settlement at Sydney Cove in Port Jackson.

As background to a more detailed consideration of Marsden as a figure in the history of New Zealand, his life and activities in New South Wales may be briefly summarised. In accordance with Government policy he was given grants of land, the chaplaincies being official positions; and he acquired further land by purchase. These lands, situated near Parramatta, were worked by assigned convict labour, again according to custom. In due course Marsden became an outstanding and prosperous farmer, his holdings in 1807 being some 3,000 acres, a fact which met with some criticism locally because of the alleged preoccupation of Marsden with his temporal affairs. In 1809

3rd

he succeeded Johnson as principal chaplain, and was a senior officiating minister of the Church of England in New South Wales until his death, performing manifold good works. For many years he was a member of the Bench of Magistrates at Parramatta, his career in this capacity being a chequered one. In 1804 he was party to the administering of 300 lashes to a convict insurrectionist in an attempt to ascertain by confession where certain pikes were hidden. It should be remembered that punishments of as much as 1,000 lashes were not uncommon at that time. In 1822 Marsden and other magistrates at Parramatta, having refused to act with a fellow magistrate because of charges against him that were unproved, and having acted beyond their powers in trying a woman convict for perjury, were dismissed from the Magistracy. Marsden's relationships with many of the influential official and private personages of New South Wales were frequently stormy, and he suffered a number of calumnies which were proved to be untrue. His career in New South Wales marks him out as one of the colony's most formative early figures.

Marsden's interest in missionary activities had been quickened in 1798 by contacts at Port Jackson with missionaries from the London Missionary Society's station at Tahiti. He became active in helping the directors of the Society in their various endeavours in the Pacific Islands. Marsden, having met at Port Jackson some visiting New Zealand Maoris, among whom the Bay of Islands chiefs Te Pahi and Ruatara made a deep impression on him, proceeded to London and pressed the Church Missionary Society (a Church of England affiliate) to establish a mission in New Zealand. It was agreed that a nucleus of artisan missionaries should form a settlement, and that Marsden should supervise the mission on behalf of the Society. Marsden accordingly arrived back in Port Jackson early in 1810 accompanied by William Hall, a carpenter, and John King, a ropemaker, and their wives. By a coincidence Ruatara, whom Marsden had met in Sydney, was on the same ship. Marsden learned much about New Zealand from him, and secured Ruatara as a valuable ally at the Bay of Islands.

The inception of the mission was delayed for a time by news of the massacre of the company of the *Boyd* (*q.v.*) on the New Zealand coast in 1809. In the following years Marsden maintained his plans. Thomas Kendall, a schoolmaster, and his wife came out to Port Jackson in 1813 as further recruits to the proposed project.

In 1814 Marsden sent Kendall and Hall on an exploratory visit to the Bay of Islands in the *Active*, a vessel belonging to Marsden himself. Kendall and Hall returned with Ruatara, Hongi, Korokoro, and other influential Bay of Islands chiefs, and reported favourably on the prospects of the mission.

Lachlan Macquarie, Governor of New South Wales, supported Marsden in his desire to proceed with the establishment of the mission. On 28 November 1814 Marsden set out in the *Active* from Port Jackson with Kendall, Hall, King, their wives and children, and three artisans, accompanied by Ruatara, Hongi, Korokoro, and other Maoris. They arrived in the Bay of Islands on 23 December 1814, and anchored near Rangihoua, on the north side of the Bay. On Christmas Day Marsden held the first Christian service in New Zealand. On 24 February 1815 he purchased the plot of land at Rangihoua on which New Zealand's first missionary settlement was established. Two days later he departed for Port Jackson. On this first voyage Marsden paid visits to Maori chiefs at North Cape, Whangaroa, Waimate, Hauraki, and in the vicinity of the Bay of Islands. In his journal of the visit he recorded with telling power of narrative and description the story of these adventurous contacts, and of the Maori way of life at that time. In 1815 Marsden's plans for a seminary at Parramatta for the instruction of young Maoris came to fruition, and in succeeding years many New Zealand chiefs and sons of chiefs attended there.

In July 1819 Marsden departed from Port Jackson for the Bay of Islands on his second visit, accompanied by the Rev. John Gare Butler and family. Butler was installed at Kerikeri, in Hongi's territory, as superintendent of the mission. Marsden returned to Port Jackson in November 1819. Again Marsden's report of this visit contains invaluable details of his contacts with and observations of the old-time Maoris. He extended his sphere of contacts by visiting Hokianga, giving a detailed

account of the district and the contemporary chiefs, and also the Taiamai district.

On 27 February 1820, Marsden was once more at the Bay of Islands, having come over with the naval ship *Dromedary* for the official purpose of using his influence for the securing of logs for naval purposes. On this third visit he remained in New Zealand for nine months. This was a particularly memorable visit from the point of view of exploration and ethnological observation.

When Marsden arrived at the Hauraki Gulf on the naval ship *Coromandel*, he made an overland journey in company with the Taiamai chief Te Morenga to Tauranga. Marsden returned overland to the Bay of Islands via Kaipara on the west coast and Whangarei on the east. Later he went with Butler in a whaleboat to the Auckland isthmus, and was the first European to cross it and describe Manukau Harbour, under the dates 9 and 10 November 1820. He proceeded thence along the west coast on foot to Hokianga, and finally rejoined the *Dromedary*, which arrived at Port Jackson on 21 December.

In July 1823 Marsden set out from Port Jackson for the Bay of Islands on his fourth visit, accompanied by the Rev. Henry Williams and his family. Butler and Marsden had fallen out, and Kendall was suspended from the mission for misconduct. Marsden determined to remove Butler from the mission and install Williams in his place as head of the mission. After Butler had reluctantly agreed to withdraw, Marsden levelled charges of drunkenness against him on the dubious testimony of two sea captains. Williams was installed at Paihia, which thus became the headquarters of the mission. This may be taken as marking the successful completion of Marsden's establishment of the mission. Marsden departed for Port Jackson from the Bay of Islands on 14 November 1823.

On 5 April 1827, Marsden paid his fifth visit to New Zealand, leaving again for Port Jackson five days later. The reason for this visit was to ensure the safety of the mission by using his influence in the pacification of the Maoris, following on news that the Wesleyan missionaries at Whangaroa had had to withdraw because of the conquest of the district by Hongi. Marsden, however, found that the feared threat to Paihia, Kerikeri, and Rangihoua had passed.

From 8 March 1830 to 27 May of the same year Marsden was again in New Zealand, being accompanied by his daughter Mary. The visit had been intended as a routine inspection of the Church Missionary Society's missions, but was enlivened by the "Girls' War" in the Bay of Islands district, in which Marsden and Williams acted as pacifiers. On this visit Marsden did not go farther afield than the Bay of Islands district.

Marsden was now 65 years of age, and the New Zealand mission, under the firm leadership of Henry Williams, no longer needed his frequent presence. In his later years an increasing mellowness developed in him, enforced in some degree by the infirmities of age. He made one more visit to New Zealand, his seventh, being in the country from 7 February to 4 July 1837, in company with his daughter Martha. He returned to Port Jackson with Hobson (later to be Governor of New Zealand) in the *Rattlesnake*, visiting *en route*, as a fitting climax to his travels, the Society's station in the Hauraki Gulf, and the Maoris of Cloudy Bay, Cook Strait.

On 12 May 1838 Marsden died at Windsor in New South Wales, and was buried in the cemetery attached to his church at Parramatta.

Marsden's wife had predeceased him in 1835. She had been an invalid from paralysis since 1811. Marsden was survived by a son, Charles Simeon, who dissipated the holdings he inherited from his father, and five daughters, Anne, Elizabeth, Mary, Jane, and Martha. Family papers show that Marsden was a devoted husband and father.

No stronger or more dynamic personality than Marsden's was ever in New Zealand. His untiring efforts to bring the New Zealand Maoris within the Christian fold, pursued to the limit of his great

physical vigour and with unflinching personal bravery, had great direct and indirect effects on the history of New Zealand. Among the direct ones were the success of the mission itself, the interest in New Zealand as a sphere of British influence and settlement which this occasioned, the inland explorations which Marsden carried out, and his introduction of key personages in Henry Williams and other outstanding early missionaries. The indirect ones were the effect – not entirely happy – of these accelerations of European impact on the Maoris themselves, and the invaluable factual contributions to Maori ethnology with which Marsden's writings endowed New Zealand's early literature. Marsden himself was not sympathetic to much of the Maori culture, thinking, under the influence of his stern evangelical creed, that many elements in it were of the Devil. Nor was Marsden always tolerant of or merciful toward what he conceived to be human error, whether of thought or deed. On balance, however, Samuel Marsden must be set down as the outstanding European figure in the history of New Zealand in the decade from 1814 to 1823.

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