

## **The Presbyterian way of life in nineteenth-century New Zealand**

**Dr Alison Clarke**

[ali.clarke@xtra.co.nz](mailto:ali.clarke@xtra.co.nz)

**Paper presented to the Presbyterian Research Network, Dunedin, 15 October 2009.**

My intention in this paper is to give an overview of the research I have carried out over the past ten years, as it relates to Presbyterians in colonial New Zealand. I will start by saying that one of the key elements of my research into Presbyterians is that I never set out to study them! What I have learned about Presbyterian religious belief and practice is largely a by-product of broader projects and I suspect that gives my work a different focus from that of many other historians of Presbyterianism.

My work has been driven by questions about the New Zealand colonial project. What happened when migrants from Europe brought their social, cultural and religious practices to this country? Which of those practices survived the migration process, and how did they evolve in response to the different physical and cultural environment they encountered? Which practices did Maori and European adopt and adapt from one another, and how were migrants from particular communities within Europe affected by the practices of other migrant groups? Did a distinctive Pakeha culture develop out of these cultural encounters? These questions lie at the heart of my research, along with a simpler – perhaps even naïve – one: what were the lives of ‘ordinary’ people like in this period? There are many elements of colonial life which have yet to be examined by historians but were clearly central to the way people lived.

Religion pervades my research because, quite simply, it pervaded the lives of many nineteenth-century New Zealanders. One of the striking features of Victorian sources – letters, diaries, supposedly secular newspapers – is the extent of religious discourse. Just as it was integrated into these sources, religion needs to be integrated into histories of colonial life. This is part of a larger principle: that of restoring to past peoples their own priorities. Of course we all look at the past with present-day spectacles and our own interests and preoccupations cannot help but colour our interpretations; no historian is exempt from some degree of anachronism. But it is always fascinating to examine history with as few fixed questions and theories as possible. I am one of those historians who likes nothing better than to immerse myself in lots of original sources and to see what arises from those.

My first major research project was a distinctly unfashionable one, prompted by my discovery of a late-nineteenth century debate which had been almost entirely ignored by historians. In 1874 alone it led more than ten per cent of Otago's adult population to sign a petition, provided a topic for fourteen leading articles in the *Otago Daily Times*, and stirred a visitor from Scotland to describe Dunedin as a town with "a very turbulent atmosphere ... [a]s regards matters social, political and religious."<sup>1</sup>

That issue was Sunday observance. Residents of Britain and her colonies debated how Sundays ought to be spent with considerable fervour in the nineteenth century; it was an issue which revealed sharp religious and cultural divides within Western society. My study focussed on Otago, and I suspect the debate was as fierce here as anywhere else, partly because of the influence of Presbyterians, who tended to be the most fervent sabbatarians. They were joined on one side of the debate by other evangelical Christians. Fighting for a freer Sunday were more liberal Anglicans, freethinkers, and those without strong religious connections. Of course many people fell somewhere between the two poles of the debate: Catholic leaders, for example, agreed with the sabbatarian view that Sunday was a day primarily for religious observance and that people should refrain from working; but they did not, like the sabbatarians, oppose Sunday recreation. The major tension centred on the running of public transport and the opening of recreational facilities, such as the library at the Dunedin Athenaeum. In 1885 sabbatarians held enough sway on the Dunedin City Council to prevent, albeit narrowly, the Naval Band playing in the botanic gardens on Sunday afternoons. One councillor declared that nothing could be more effective in demoralising the children of Dunedin than a band playing at the public gardens on Sundays.

It is easy to dismiss nineteenth-century Presbyterians as killjoys; certainly that was the reputation they held with those who opposed their views. But it is interesting to consider why they held the views they did, and also how they actually spent their Sundays. Most importantly, sabbatarianism was deeply embedded in Scottish culture and Scots carried that culture with them to New Zealand. In the colonial setting they

---

<sup>1</sup> David Kennedy, *Kennedy's Travel: A Narrative of a Four Years' Tour through Australia, New Zealand, Canada, &c.* (Edinburgh: publisher\*\*, 1876), pp. 162-3. This project resulted in Alison Clarke, "A Godly Rhythm: Keeping the Sabbath in Otago 1870-1890" (PGDipArts dissertation, University of Otago, 1999). An edited version appears in John Stenhouse and Jane Thomson, eds, *Building God's Own Country: Historical Essays on Religions in New Zealand* (Dunedin: University of Otago Press, 2004).

encountered other migrants with differing views on Sunday, forcing them to either amend or defend their own cultural practices. Of course, Scotland itself was not immune from debates over Sunday, which heated up as liberalism gained increasing sway in the late-nineteenth century, and as technology increased the challenges to a quiet day of rest. The agitation for Sunday trains had been a major factor in the decision of John Somerville, his three sons and brother-in-law, all railway workers, to migrate from Scotland to Otago in 1848; they must have been disappointed when the province's first railway, from Dunedin to Port Chalmers, opened in 1873 with a seven day a week service.

Scottish and Presbyterian sabbatarianism had its roots in the Westminster Confession, which stated that the Christian Sabbath was

kept holy unto the Lord, when men, after a due preparing of their hearts, and ordering of their common affairs before-hand, do not only observe an holy rest all the day from their own works, words, and thoughts about their worldly employments and recreations; but also are taken up the whole time in the publick and private exercises of his worship, and in the duties of necessity and mercy.<sup>2</sup>

The idea that Sunday should be a day of rest and worship was not particularly controversial in a society almost entirely composed of Christians; all churches expected their members to attend Sunday services. Presbyterians were fairly diligent churchgoers, with around half of those adults who claimed a census affiliation to the denomination attending services regularly. This made them, incidentally, much better church attenders than Anglicans and a little less diligent than Catholics; all were outranked by Methodists, who achieved close to full attendance. Even parents who did not attend church often sent their children to Sunday school; by the turn of the century three-quarters of children living in Otago and Southland were on the rolls of various Sunday schools.

In well-populated districts Presbyterian churches generally offered two Sunday services, one in the morning and the other in the afternoon; later in the century most shifted the afternoon service to the evening. Many people attended both services. Rural Presbyterians generally had access to just one Sunday service. Country ministers had busy schedules, often preaching at three different locations on a Sunday; if they could not come each week congregations generally ran their own

---

<sup>2</sup> Westminster Confession, chapter 21, paragraphs 7 and 8, in *The Subordinate Standards and Other Authoritative Documents of the Free Church of Scotland* (Edinburgh: publisher\*\*, 1884), pp. 76-7.

services on the intervening Sundays. Although attending church was an overtly spiritual act, it also served an important social function, bringing a community together. This social aspect was particularly significant in rural districts. One South Otago woman recalled the special effort that people made to dress in their best clothes and attend church: “Sunday was the great day, when we met all our neighbours, and exchanged the local gossip. I will always remember the Sundays.”<sup>3</sup>

Churchgoing was an accepted activity: the difficulties over Sundays centred around how the rest of the day should be filled. The Westminster Confession prescribed abstention from all worldly employments and recreations and the Shorter Catechism, taught to all good Presbyterian children, additionally warned against “profaning the day by idleness”.<sup>4</sup> Conservatives filled their Sundays with explicitly religious activities: family worship, reading the Bible or other religious works and hymn-singing. A favourite activity at Hillend Station, in the Clutha district, was “for everyone to sit around the big dining room table and see who could repeat the longest passage of scripture.”<sup>5</sup> Louisa Will, daughter of the East Taieri manse, was living in Dunedin to attend school when she received a letter from her mother: “Papa and I would not like you to go walking for pleasure on the Sabbath; we would like you to do as we do at home – take a turn in the garden, or take your book and read there if you like, but don’t go either to the sea-beach or to the Botanical Gardens.”<sup>6</sup>

Presbyterians, and other sabbatarians, valued reading very highly as a suitably quiet and worthy activity for Sundays. In addition to the Bible, sermons, missionary biographies and local denominational magazines, New Zealanders had ready access to periodicals imported from Britain, including the revealingly named *Sunday at Home* and *Good Words*. These were quality productions, with articles and stories by leading writers, fine illustrations, and special sections for children. Religious periodicals also published advice to parents on how to make Sundays pleasant for their children, rather than alienating them from religion through excessively severe prohibitions. An 1882 article in the *N.Z. Presbyterian* suggested prohibiting noisy toys on the sabbath, but

---

<sup>3</sup> Unidentified woman cited in Fred Waite, *Pioneering in South Otago* (Dunedin: Otago Centennial Historical Publications, 1948), p. 144.

<sup>4</sup> Shorter Catechism, Question 61, in *Subordinate Standards*, p. 237.

<sup>5</sup> Nan Turner, *The Family of Adam and Isabella Begg* (Dunedin, 1974), n.p.

<sup>6</sup> W.M.W. Brookfield, “Life of William Johnstone Will,” typescript at Otago Settlers Museum.

keeping a special set of toys with religious associations for children to play with on Sundays until they were old enough to read.<sup>7</sup>

The sabbatarians' emphasis on the coming together of family on Sundays evolved, amongst more liberal Presbyterians, into the practice of Sunday visiting, something which the Synod's Committee on Sabbath Observance increasingly complained of as the nineteenth century drew on. The more conservative disapproved of this as a form of recreation, and one which often involved the use of transport. Transport was the greatest of all Sunday evils. Sabbatarians worried most of all about the opportunities it provided for Sunday leisure, but in their campaigns recognised that this argument would not win public approval, so instead contended that it was an issue of Sunday labour: transport operators should not have to work on the Sabbath.

There was a general acceptance amongst nineteenth-century New Zealanders that people should not work on Sundays, except in cases of necessity: feeding stock or providing medical care, for example. But definitions of work differed greatly, and one of the most interesting things about conservative Presbyterians is the way in which they defined work. At the beginning of the Victorian period, most Western societies saw the family as the centre of production, with the efforts of all family members contributing towards its economic wealth. By the end of the century, work had acquired a narrower definition: it now revolved around the labour market rather than the household. Workers were those who sold their labour for wages and family members who did not earn wages – most often women and children – were redefined as unproductive and dependents. The self-employed – gold miners for example – only counted activities directly involving economic production as work. For them, and for many farm workers, Sunday was a 'handy day,' when they chopped firewood, collected supplies, did laundry, carried out repairs and prepared equipment for the working week. Despite all these activities, such people still considered they were taking a day's rest from their work.

By contrast, sabbatarians clung to the older broader definition of work, which included all physical labour, regardless of its economic role. The biggest practical impact of this was that women took a complete rest from domestic labour. While the more liberal-minded treasured the cultural tradition of the Sunday dinner – for many

---

<sup>7</sup> *N.Z. Presbyterian*, 1 November 1882, p. 92. This was an extract from *Christian Nurture*, an 1861 work by influential American Congregational theologian Horace Bushnell. See also *N.Z. Presbyterian*, 2 January 1888, p. 125.

families the most festive of the week – conservative Presbyterians ate meals prepared in advance to avoid the sin of working on Sunday. At the East Taieri manse, for example, the only food preparation indulged in by the Will family on Sunday was heating water or soup. The work of women and children thus received more recognition among conservatives, ironically enough, than it did in some supposedly liberal circles.

Sabbatarians often referred to Sunday as a bulwark: it was the ultimate defence of the Christian religion, of public morality, and of the well-being of society. Some, including Rev George Sutherland of First Church of Otago, believed that God would punish communities which failed to keep the Sabbath. In February 1868 a major storm struck coastal Otago and the whole province, already saturated from weeks of rain, experienced severe floods, which led to widespread damage and the deaths of 17 people.<sup>8</sup> In response to requests from religious leaders, the provincial government appointed a day of public humiliation and prayer.<sup>9</sup> On the designated Thursday, many Otago residents refrained from their usual work and attended special church services. In his sermon on that day, Sutherland claimed that he “had nowhere seen such Sabbath-breaking as he had seen in these lands.” He noted that “God punished His people of old, for the sin of Sabbath breaking; and he believed that there was nothing more likely to bring punishment upon a country than a persistent breaking of the Sabbath.”<sup>10</sup>

This incident reveals the strength of conservative Presbyterian concern about Sabbath-keeping, and also provides insight into a world where providence played a starring role in interpretations of events. The fast day – common parlance of the time for specially appointed days of prayer and humiliation – sparked considerable debate. Some Otago residents believed the floods resulted from natural laws rather than divine providence; some felt the day would be better spent repairing the damage than refraining from labour; others objected to the government directing religious practice.<sup>11</sup> But many observed the day diligently, believing that God indeed intervened directly in local events and this was the proper response to such a severe

---

<sup>8</sup> *Otago Daily Times*, 5 February 1868, p. 4; 6 February 1868, p. 5; 7 February 1868, p. 6; *Oamaru Times*, 7 February 1868, p. 2; *Dunstan Times*, 7 February 1868, p. 2.

<sup>9</sup> *Otago Provincial Government Gazette*, 12, 524 (12 February 1868), p. 39.

<sup>10</sup> *Otago Witness*, 22 February 1868, p. 13.

<sup>11</sup> There were numerous letters to local papers on the subject and the *Otago Daily Times* itself opposed the day. For examples of objections, see *Otago Daily Times*, 12 February 1868, p. 5; 19 February 1868, p. 4; *Otago Witness*, 15 February 1868, p. 8; 29 February 1868, p. 7.

blow. They were, in fact, responding to disaster in a way familiar to all Britons of the period. During the first half of the nineteenth century, kings and queens proclaimed national fast days in response to war, famine and epidemics, and days of national thanksgiving in response to military victories, declarations of peace, abundant harvests, and the end of deadly epidemics. Many saw the direct hand of God in devastating events such as the cholera epidemics and Irish famine and they responded on their knees.<sup>12</sup>

In the second half of the nineteenth century, public fasts became increasingly controversial in Britain and beyond, for the same reasons that sparked debate about the Otago floods day. As calamities such as cholera epidemics became susceptible to scientific explanation, resistance to the idea of special providence in such events grew. This did not necessarily reflect a decline in trust in divine authority, but that Christians increasingly viewed disasters as the result of the natural laws God had created, rather than a special divine intervention.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, a belief in providence survived, particularly in those people whose religion had its roots deep in the Calvinist and Puritan traditions; Presbyterians, of course, were among them. Nineteenth-century New Zealanders observed some of Britain's national fasts and thanksgivings, including an 1854 fast day "for imploring [God's] Blessing and Assistance on Her Majesty's arms" during the Crimean War and an 1872 day of thanksgiving for the recovery of the Prince of Wales from serious illness.<sup>14</sup>

A local event prompting a fast day was the major 1848 earthquake at Wellington. The Lieutenant-Governor of New Munster, Edward Eyre, immediately proclaimed "a day of solemn and public fast, prayer and humiliation," and later reported the day "was most reverently observed, persons of all classes and of all denominations responding in right feeling and conduct befitting such an occasion, and showing by the immense assemblages at the various religious observances of the day, that they acknowledged the hand of the Almighty, and looked to him only for safety

---

<sup>12</sup> For a list of public days of fast or thanksgiving, see J.L.L. Crawford, *Bibliotheca Lindesiana Vol. VIII: Handlist of Proclamations issued by Royal and other Constitutional Authorities 1714-1910 George I to Edward VII* (Wigan: Roger & Rennick, 1913). For further discussion of special fast days, see Alison Clarke, "Feast and Fasts: Holidays, Religion and Ethnicity in Nineteenth-Century Otago" (PhD thesis, University of Otago, 2003), pp. 212-21.

<sup>13</sup> For a particularly perceptive analysis, see Frank M. Turner, *Contesting Cultural Authority: Essays in Victorian Intellectual Life* (Cambridge, 1993), pp. 151-70.

<sup>14</sup> *General Government Gazette of the Colony of New Zealand*, 2, 20 (12 August 1854), p. 107. On the royal thanksgiving day in Otago, see *Otago Witness*, 11 May 1872, p. 14; 18 May 1872, p. 14 and supplement, pp. 1 and 7.

and protection.”<sup>15</sup> When another large earthquake struck at Wellington in 1855, the government resisted requests for a public fast day; locals instead attended special evening services, which centred on thanksgiving that God’s ‘visitation’ had been ‘tempered’ by mercy, for only one life had been lost.<sup>16</sup> That the Otago Superintendent, James Macandrew, was willing to proclaim a fast day for the floods thirteen years after Wellington authorities refused one there suggests that Otago was home to more persistent believers in the power of providence. This was probably due to its greater population of Presbyterians; the Superintendent, James Macandrew, was himself a devout Presbyterian.

Days of thanksgiving were far less controversial than those of humiliation and survived into modern times in the form of special holidays to celebrate war victories and royal anniversaries, which mixed more secular celebrations with religious services. And most Protestant denominations, including Presbyterians, institutionalised thanksgiving in the second half of the nineteenth century with the development of annual harvest thanksgiving services. In Scotland, these evolved out of a centuries-old tradition of special thanksgivings appointed by individual synods or presbyteries when the harvest marked the end of a famine or was particularly abundant. That such thanksgivings were initially responses to specific events is reflected in the mixture of thanksgiving and fast day appointed by the Church of Scotland’s Synod of Perth in 1852, “on account of the abundant harvest, the failure of the potato and turnip crops, and the anticipation of a visitation of cholera.”<sup>17</sup>

In the Free Church colony of Otago, presbyteries in districts where the grain harvest was particularly important, such as Clutha and North Otago, appointed thanksgivings in most years, and as the century progressed these went ahead regardless of the success of the harvest. John Torrance, preaching at a harvest thanksgiving service at Tokomairiro in 1886, a year of poor harvests, suggested that these were occasions for general thanksgiving and not merely for the harvest: “There was always something to remind them of God’s goodness, and lead them to trust in Him. However bad the season, and however lacking the harvest, there were a thousand reasons why they should ‘Thank God and take courage.’”<sup>18</sup> This general

---

<sup>15</sup> Edward Eyre to Governor George Grey, 19 October and 21 October 1848, *Great Britain Parliamentary Papers*, 1849/1002, pp. 4-5. See also *Wellington Independent*, 25 October 1848, p. 2.

<sup>16</sup> *Wellington Independent*, 3 March 1855, p. 3.

<sup>17</sup> *Witness* (Edinburgh), 23 October 1852, p. 3.

<sup>18</sup> *Bruce Herald*, 16 April 1886, p. 3.



compulsion to give thanks, along with nostalgia for an older rural order as towns became increasingly industrialised, no doubt contributed to the adoption of harvest thanksgivings in urban parishes at the end of the century.<sup>19</sup>

Like fast days, harvest thanksgivings reflected providential thinking: Presbyterians celebrated God's intervention in their communities through the provision of the harvest. But they flourished in an age when people were becoming increasingly uncomfortable with the concept of public humiliation, part of a shift away from the portrayal of God as a vengeful judge. The most liberal of churchgoers were still happy to celebrate God's beneficence, which they could, of course, attribute to natural law rather than special providence.

A belief in providence did not confine itself to God's intervention in nations or communities and many good Presbyterians believed that God intervened actively in their individual lives. If you ever have the opportunity to look at an historic diary, I recommend turning to the entries for the first and last days of the year. At New Year many individuals, like businesses and communities, reviewed the year that had just ended, and made plans and resolutions for the year to come. For the devout, this was a time to measure their spiritual progress and record God's blessings upon them. As 1863 drew to a close, Taieri farm labourer William Muir recalled that he had been crossing the equator when the year began, "and now in the providence of God I have nearly seen its close. Now I may say that the Lord has conducted me through many seen and many more unseen dangers ... Thou hast been my help. Leave me not nor forsake me."<sup>20</sup> At New Year 1898 George Thomson, a Dunedin teacher, expressed relief that he had overcome the depression which followed the death of his wife. "I have great cause to be thankful this night for God's great goodness to me this year. We have all – as a family – been sustained in health and strength and in the enjoyment of innumerable gifts; and for myself the feeling of bitterness and of loneliness which in the past two or three years has been so strong, has hardly touched me now."<sup>21</sup>

Walter Riddell, another good Presbyterian, revealed a more explicit concern with material progress in his diaries. The somewhat dour Pukehiki farmer and builder recorded at New Year 1866: "I am entering another year with £83 debt on my head,

---

<sup>19</sup> For further discussion, see Alison Clarke, "Communities Celebrating Landscapes: Harvest Festivities in Nineteenth-Century Otago," in Tony Ballantyne and Judith A. Bennett, eds, *Landscape/Community: Perspectives from New Zealand History* (Dunedin: Otago University Press, 2005), pp. 103-116.

<sup>20</sup> William Muir diary, 31 December 1863, SA-008, Otago Settlers Museum.

<sup>21</sup> G.M. Thomson diary, 31 December 1897, [ref number?], Hocken Collections.

with plenty of hard work before me and if God grant me my health I will be a clear man in another year. I have increased in the year that has passed, a house, an acre of land cleared 15 hens, 2 cows and a son.” His prayers for the new year, also recorded in his diary, reveal that he viewed any material gains as a blessing from God.<sup>22</sup>

Riddell perhaps subscribed to the ideology, common in the nineteenth century, which equated material advancement with individual merit, and had some relationship with Protestant providential thinking, where God intervened for good in the lives of the spiritually worthy.

Although New Zealand Presbyterians measured their economic and spiritual progress in personal diaries, they did not indulge in a new year practice common with English Protestants: the watch night service. Some New Zealand Methodists, Anglicans, Baptists and Congregationalists, like their British counterparts, saw the new year in at church with prayers, hymns and sermons; a practice first developed by early Methodists. This was one of the few times each year when many of the English working classes crossed the church door; seeing the New Year in at church apparently warranted good fortune for the coming year. Meanwhile, their Scottish counterparts celebrated New Year with convivial social gatherings, first footing, drinking, feasting, dancing and picnicking. The influence of Scottish migrants made this a major popular holiday in New Zealand at a time when many in England worked as usual on New Year’s Day.

The significance of New Year in Scottish culture evolved out of the reorganisation of holidays following the reformation. All of the Protestant movements pruned their calendars of some of the many saints’ days and holidays which marked the Catholic year. Most – including Lutherans on the continent and Anglicans in Britain – retained the festivals which marked events in the life of Jesus, most notably his birth and death. But Presbyterians and English Puritans took calendar reform to a whole new level, doing away with all religious holidays. Their religious calendar instead focussed entirely on the week, with its pattern of six days of work and a seventh of rest and worship; no wonder that Presbyterians and English non-conformists, descendants of the Puritans, were the greatest defenders of the Sabbath.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Walter Riddell diary, 1 January 1866, 3 January 1869, 7 January 1871, C-090, Otago Settlers Museum.

<sup>23</sup> For further discussion of New Year and of the background and evolution of major holidays in New Zealand, see Clarke, “Feast and Fasts,” and Alison Clarke, *Holiday Seasons: Christmas, New Year and Easter in Nineteenth-Century New Zealand* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2007). For a

But humans seem to have a deep-seated need for festivals and to mark the cycles of the year. The Scots may have done away with traditional religious holidays, but they made up for the loss of their age-old midwinter festival of Christmas by shifting its associated revelry to the secular celebration of new year. As the Presbyterian tradition evolved, it developed its own more explicitly religious festive occasions. Puritans in the new world quickly institutionalised the festival of thanksgiving and, as already noted, by the nineteenth century harvest festivals had become regular events in rural Presbyterian parishes in New Zealand. And though New Zealand Presbyterians did not generally adopt religious services to mark Christmas and Easter until the twentieth century, they did have an important festival of their own: communion.

On a clear August 1898 evening, John Christie, Presbyterian minister at Waikouaiti, was indulging in a little star-gazing. As he considered the movement of the planets and the pattern of the seasons his thoughts naturally turned to one of the important seasonal events of his own world: the communion season. “Thinking of a suitable time for sacrament. Saw Mercury, the moon, Venus and Jupiter in the sky at once. Venus and Jupiter are in conjunction. Synod on 31<sup>st</sup> October. Good Moon on 23<sup>rd</sup> October. Fast [day] on Wednesday the 19<sup>th</sup>.”<sup>24</sup> For Christie, a conservative who disapproved strongly of the religious celebration of Christmas and Easter, the twice-yearly sacrament with all its rituals was the most notable event in the calendar, and he was not alone. For many devout Presbyterians, communion seasons were the highlights of the year.

One reason that communion was so special was that it came around rarely – just once or twice a year in most rural parishes, though up to four times a year in many urban districts by the turn of the century. By the Victorian era it had evolved into a complex ritual involving up to eight services. Some ministers preached about the forthcoming communion in the preceding weeks, but the season proper started on the fast day, usually the Thursday before communion Sunday. This was a day for intending communicants to examine themselves in preparation for receiving communion. Many took a day off work and fast days remained public holidays in predominantly Presbyterian communities in Otago until the late-nineteenth century.

---

comprehensive study of holidays in Britain, see Ronald Hutton, *The Stations of the Sun: A History of the Ritual Year in Britain* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

<sup>24</sup> John Christie diary, 19 August 1898, AG 102 1-11, Otago Settlers Museum.

At the fast day church services members of the congregation came forward to receive the token necessary for admission to the communion table, and this was an occasion of special welcome to those who would be participating for the first time. Visiting preachers provided an added attraction.

Some parishes held additional special services on Saturday, but in all Sunday was the highlight of the season, drawing the largest congregations of the year. After the sermon, the minister ‘fenced’ the table, warning those who were unworthy not to come forward. Communicants then gathered around a table and listened to a further ‘table’ address before taking communion, which consisted of generous quantities of bread and port. In large parishes there could be two or more sittings of communion, with several ministers to assist. Further services on Sunday evening and Monday – thanksgiving services for the completed celebration – brought the communion season to a close.

The closing decades of the nineteenth century witnessed various changes to Presbyterian communion, including replacement of the traditional port with unfermented wine, the introduction of individual cups, communion cards to replace tokens and a decline in preparatory fast days. But communion remained the popular festive highlight of the church year, as it had been since the earliest days of Presbyterian settlement in New Zealand. In 1854, the first Presbyterian communion at East Taieri attracted an almost universal turnout of settlers in that predominantly Scottish community and many could not fit into the building. Some had travelled over ten miles to be there, as did many when Maitua held its first Presbyterian communion season in 1869. Attendance did not always mean full participation: of the hundred or so people at the Maitua event only thirty took communion.<sup>25</sup>

Many Presbyterians avoided having their names added to the communion roll. Over a ten year period the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand, which included all parishes north of the Waitaki, asked kirk sessions to supply statistics on the number of church adherents as well as communicants.<sup>26</sup> Adherents were, by definition, people sixteen years of age and over who rented a pew or regularly attended services, but

---

<sup>25</sup> For further discussion of the communion season, see Clarke, “Feasts and Fasts,” and Alison Clarke, “‘Days of Heaven on Earth’: Presbyterian communion seasons in nineteenth-century Otago,” *Journal of Religious History* 26 (2002), pp. 274-297.

<sup>26</sup> The results were printed every year from 1874 to 1883 in the *Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand*.

were not communicant members.<sup>27</sup> When first collected in 1874, these statistics revealed that, of the 29 parishes which returned the full information, only one, Leeston, had more communicants than adherents. In most parishes, less than a third of regular adult churchgoers took communion. By 1883, when the statistics on adherents were last collected, communicant numbers had increased and they outnumbered adherents in 11 of 44 parishes but, overall, adherents remained 57 percent of the total.

Among the parishes with the lowest number of communicants were the largely Highland Scottish settlements of Waipu and Turakina. Highlanders were notorious for their reluctance to take communion and Presbyterians in these parishes were simply continuing the accustomed practice of their homeland. But this was clearly more than just a Highland tradition, for ministers elsewhere, despite sometimes concerted efforts, had limited success in convincing adherents to commit to full church membership. Mary Ramsay, a Scottish daughter of the manse, migrated to Dunedin in 1867. “I am very much astonished,” she wrote to her mother three months later, “that so many here attend Church regularly and yet have never communicated even Fathers and Mothers I know several, and have spoken to them, they don’t seem to look upon it as a duty, far less as a most blessed privilege.”<sup>28</sup> Individual kirk sessions regularly expressed regret at the failure of some, especially young men, to join the ranks of communicant members.<sup>29</sup> I suspect, though, that reluctance to participate in communion often arose not from “a low state of personal religion”, as one Synod report suggested, but from a sense of unworthiness.<sup>30</sup> Many a scruple developed over Paul’s warning in scripture: “For he that eateth and drinketh unworthily, eateth and drinketh damnation to himself ...”<sup>31</sup> The practice of fencing the table only accentuated such popular fears.

---

<sup>27</sup> *The Book of Order; or, Rules and Forms of Procedure of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand* (Dunedin/Wellington: New Zealand Bible, Tract, and Book Society, 1887), p. 3. Prior to this date the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand used the Victorian Book of Order as its guide.

<sup>28</sup> Mary Stuart Ramsay, Dunedin, to her mother Mary Ramsay, 19 June 1867, Misc-MS-1800/002, Hocken Collections.

<sup>29</sup> For example, see “Annual Report of the Session & Deacons’ Court of Knox Church, Dunedin. For Year ending 31<sup>st</sup> December, 1878,” p. 7, Knox Church Dunedin archives; St Paul’s Presbyterian Church, Oamaru, Session Minute Book, 12 November 1889, 2619/27b, North Otago Museum; report on annual meeting of St James’s Presbyterian Church, Auckland, *Daily Southern Cross*, 11 August 1865, p. 5; report on annual meeting of St Andrew’s Presbyterian Church, Gisborne, *Poverty Bay Herald*, 1 February 1882, p. 2; report on annual meeting of St Peter’s Presbyterian Church, Christchurch, *Star*, 25 January 1889, p. 4.

<sup>30</sup> Report on the State of Religion and Sabbath Observance, *Proceedings of the Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Otago and Southland* (Dunedin, 1880), appendix, p. 6.

<sup>31</sup> 1 Corinthians 11, 29.

By contrast, the other sacrament, baptism, attracted high participation from Presbyterians. In 1896, more than half the infant baptisms carried out in the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand were for parents who were not communicant members.<sup>32</sup> In the same year the Synod of Otago and Southland reported that parents prized baptism, but “in not a few cases the readiness ... does not spring from any very intelligent apprehension of its meaning, but rather from a desire to comply with a seemly custom, or from some vague fear that the neglect of Baptism may in some way be a drawback to their children.”<sup>33</sup> Some parents, including those who were not communicant members, voluntarily submitted to discipline from church sessions for the sin of fornication in order to obtain the sacrament for their babies.

While sessions retained the power to refuse baptism, parents exerted a significant degree of agency in the manner it was delivered. Church authorities regularly asserted that it should take place in the church, in the face of the congregation; it was, after all, a sacrament which symbolised the integration of the infant into the Christian community. In practice, though, many Presbyterian baptisms took place in the parents’ home.

Rev. George Brown, the pioneer Presbyterian minister at Onehunga, kept a careful record of the baptisms he performed there in the early 1860s. Of 49 baptisms, 23 – just under half – took place in the church, and the rest in homes. Most babies were between one and three months of age at their baptism, with six weeks the most popular age. Two baptisms were conducted urgently: one on the same day the child was born and another, which Brown annotated as “sick,” when the baby was just three days old.<sup>34</sup> Clearly parents had little difficulty convincing their ministers to conduct baptisms privately, and sometimes urgently. As the century drew to a close, the Onehunga kirk session began a campaign against private baptism: the minister was to “in all cases endeavour to get parents applying for Baptism to bring the children to the church”. Three consecutive annual reports expressed pleasure that “parents are more and more conforming to the Rule of having Baptism celebrated before the assembled

---

<sup>32</sup> Report on the State of Religion and Morals, *Proceedings of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand. Held at Wellington, February, 1896* (Napier: Daily Telegraph, 1896), p. 59.

<sup>33</sup> Report on the State of Religion, *Proceedings of the Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Otago and Southland, 1896* (Dunedin: Wilkie, 1896), p. 58.

<sup>34</sup> Onehunga Presbyterian Church, Baptismal Register 1860-1864, Presbyterian Church Archives.

congregation,” though clearly some still clung to private ceremonies.<sup>35</sup> At the other end of the country, in 1897 the Synod of Otago and Southland’s Committee on the State of Religion reported that “private baptisms are greatly in excess of those which take place in church. Distance from church is often assigned as the reason for this arrangement; but as there are some town congregations that scarcely ever witness a public baptism, there is evident need for a change of procedure.”<sup>36</sup>

Private baptism shifted the emphasis of the sacrament from the congregation to the family; christening, as it was more often called, was as much about the integration of a new baby into the family as it was a Christian ceremony. This is typified by the celebrations which took place at the Thomson home in Dunedin in 1887. George and Emma Thomson were devout Presbyterians; George, who was a high school science master, served over the years as precentor, deacon, elder and Bible class leader at Knox Church. When their fifth child was two months old, they arranged for their minister to come up to the house and baptise her, together with the fifth child of George’s brother William and his wife, born just three weeks after theirs. Three generations of the extended Thomson family gathered to welcome the new babies into the family; three friends were also present. After Rev. Stuart baptised the cousins in the drawing room, all adjourned to the dining room for a party.<sup>37</sup>

With baptism we have, of course, moved from the cycle of the week and the year to the cycle of life itself. At the reformation most Protestants did away with the other sacraments involving critical moments in the individual life cycle, that is, marriage and the last rites. Among Presbyterians the rituals of marriage and death moved out of the church and into the home, so it is perhaps not surprising that there was cultural pressure for one of the other major life cycle rituals – baptism – to take place there. Presbyterian ministers officiated at weddings and funerals, but within secular settings; these were rituals combining religion and social event, just like the Thomson baptism ceremony. In nineteenth-century New Zealand, Presbyterians typically married in the front parlour of their family or friends; numerous couples without another suitable venue were married in the manse parlour. The Victorian front parlour became, effectively, a sacred space: even relatively modest homes included

---

<sup>35</sup> Onehunga Presbyterian Church, Session Minute Book, 29 April 1892; annual reports for 1893-1895, written into minute book; Presbyterian Church Archives.

<sup>36</sup> Report on the State of Religion, *Proceedings of the Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Otago and Southland 1897* (Dunedin: Wilkie, 1897), pp. 66-7.

<sup>37</sup> Emma Thomson diary, 2 November 1887, MS-1312/1, Hocken Collections; G.M. Thomson diary, 2 November 1887, AG-926/2, Hocken Collections. On Thomson, see his entry in the DNZB.

this special room reserved for special occasions, special visitors and as a place to display family photographs and other treasures.<sup>38</sup>

Presbyterian funerals, too, generally began in the home parlour. That of Taieri farmer James Allan, who died in 1891, was typical. He died at home with many of his extended family present; his sisters “dressed him and laid him in the parlour.” Two days later the community gathered for his funeral. Reverend William Will “read and prayed” at the house, and then the coffin and male mourners processed to the local cemetery, where “Dr Stuart read at the grave and prayed very nicely.”<sup>39</sup> As only males participated in the graveside ceremony, the rituals in the home assumed special significance for women as the site of their final farewell to their loved one. Such funeral services were very simple affairs, with conservative Presbyterians wary of any hint of the ‘papist’ practice of praying for the dead.

The twentieth century brought enormous changes to the way Presbyterians ordered their lives, in New Zealand as elsewhere; many of the practices of our nineteenth-century forebears now seem distinctly foreign. Who, today, feels they are contributing to the moral breakdown of society by spending Sunday afternoon visiting friends, taking an excursion, cooking a hot dinner or even listening to a band? Many twenty-first century Presbyterians are surprised to learn that, only a century ago, their predecessors deliberately opposed Christmas and Easter. These high festivals of the Christian year are now celebrated with gusto in Presbyterian churches, with many parishes also giving increasing recognition to the related seasons of advent and lent. Meanwhile, communion assumes less importance as a festive highlight, with other Christian festivals to take its place. Celebrations of the sacrament are more frequent and more informal, and potential communicants no longer have to prove themselves fit to attend. The life cycle rituals of baptism, marriage and funeral have long since returned from the home to the church. It is interesting to note, though, that in recent decades those without strong ties to a particular congregation have increasingly held their weddings and funerals outside church premises, as did their forebears, no matter their level of engagement with the local parish.

There are other continuities. Attitudes to Sunday activities have relaxed hugely, yet it remains the day of worship and a day different from the other six in

---

<sup>38</sup> For further discussion, see Alison Clarke, “‘Tinged with Christian sentiment’: popular religion and the Otago colonists, 1850-1900,” in John Stenhouse and Antony Wood, eds., *Christianity, Modernity and Culture: New Perspectives of New Zealand History* (Adelaide: ATF, 2005), pp. 103-131.

<sup>39</sup> Emma Thomson diary, 4 to 7 July 1891, MS-1312/5, Hocken Collections.



more subtle ways. Ideas about providence are also deeply rooted in our culture. Human understanding of geology, meteorology, health and all aspects of the natural world has expanded hugely over the past century and many events can be explained as ‘natural’ processes. Yet, when disaster strikes, many still look to their religion for answers, as well as for comfort. Twenty-first century Presbyterians are perhaps unlikely to attribute a disaster to a specific sin, as George Sutherland did with the 1868 floods, but floods, earthquakes and epidemics are still conceived by many as some sort of chastisement, or a test of faith. And the other side of providential thinking – thanking God for blessings sent, such as a good harvest – remains entirely unproblematic for most.

Human beings in all times and locations have patterned their lives around the seasons of the year, the cycles of individual lives and, in the monotheistic religions, the seven-day week, with its rhythm of work and rest. Changes and continuities in the ways that different societies observed these patterns, some of the most basic building blocks of culture, can be, I believe, highly revealing. I hope that this brief discussion has provided you with some interesting insights into the ways in which nineteenth-century Presbyterians structured their lives in this country.

