Epic Year

1893

by

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EPIC YEAR, 1893

If there is any year in our time which can be called annus mirabilis it is surely 1893. In the preceding years reforms that were long overdue had been rejected factiously by the Legislative Council until John Ballance, reasoning with gentle determination, persuaded Downing Street to indicate to both the Legislative Councillors and the Governor that this was not quite the thing. Then, weary of struggle, Ballance died, and Seddon took command before the envious eyes of the Stout Liberals. A general election was due at the end of the year, and the new Premier, to achieve something substantial before he came to the hustings, forced the pace in a crescendo of political bitterness.

Eighteen hundred and ninety-three was annus mirabilis, too, for the little town of Milton, recumbent in a shallow basin of hills surrounding the Tokomairiro Plain. Incorporated in 1866, and chartered as a borough in 1877, it had been stagnant since the railway pushed on to the south, and its people lived in an enclave of the spirit. Many of them were quite unaware of the great social forces which beyond their own rim of hills stirred the very soul of New Zealand. We had our Presbyterian Church, to be sure, the strongest in Otago outside Dunedin. Its spire, the tallest outside of Dunedin, kept watch at the south end of the town over the long main street to where a survey error twisted the road out of sight. The bell, shipped from Scotland and sunk in the burning of the *Henbury*, now dominated the whole of the Tokomairiro Plain.

The people were not without their primeval passions and robust prejudices. In the early 'nineties the Tokomairiro farmers were fighting sternly against three pests which they saw but did not understand—the bot fly, the hessian fly, and the codlin moth. In the evenings and on sale days they tried to form a farmers' union for south Otago. Their wives, too, were worried. Who wouldn't be, having to make ends meet with butter at 5d a pound and eggs at 5d a dozen? Some of the younger wives and many of the daughters were stirred by the fight for female suffrage, but their emotions centred chiefly, I think, on the temperance issue. That question, at any rate, had penetrated to Tokomairiro, even to the lonely villages of the Big Bush, Mount Misery, and Table Hill. When the women were driven into town on Sundays in their buggies and dogcarts their hearts glowed with the fierce determination of Covenanters or Calvinists, and the Presbyterian Church was a full partner in their fervour. Public sentiment was sharply divided on the temperance and prohibition issues. The moral sense of the community, quickened by the sufferings of the '80's, revolted against the lawlessness of the liquor traffic, and was now insisting on reforms. Congregations were riven Even families were split.

The year 1892 went out with a portent. For the first time since 1881 the mayoralty of Milton was contested. Frederick Bastings, proprietor of the White Horse Hotel, and in off hours a humorist and a good singer, defeated the Prohibitionist, James Lockhart, by 52 votes to 46. That was a trial of strength.

ENTER THE ARMY.

About 1885 the Salvation Army commenced to bang its drums and cymbals to the glory of God in the main street. The elders of Milton were shocked by this new religion, but because they sympathised with the Army on the drink question they tolerated it. And so for eight years the Army had continued to throw out noisy lifelines to sinners in poor homes made poorer by drink.

Eighteen hundred and ninety-three dawned pink with the glow of promise Even for Milton the promise was soon fulfilled. Quite early in the year the Governor (Lord Glasgow) spent 10 minutes on the railway platform receiving obeisances from the borough, and Lady Glasgow bunches of the largest flowers that the Plain had ever produced. As the first fruits of the Liberal Government's land policy, the Cheviot Estate was taken over by the State in April. On April 27 John Ballance died, and on June 23 another Premier and a lifelong temperance advocate, Sir William Fox. Nearer at hand the Salvation Army raised £21 in its self-denial effort and made preparations to celebrate the success of eight years' pioneering. Though the staid elders of the borough put up with the Army's pranks, undisciplined youth saw in them a fresh opportunity, A boy named David Kelly and a brickworker named Alfred Jones, neither belonging to any church, took aggressive action. Invading the Salvation Army meeting place, they disturbed the services by loud talking, raucous laughing, and stamping their feet. This cost each of them 7s, plus. David's father promised to punish him. Alfred took his own gruel, and was given to understand that it would be stronger next time. The justice of the peace was John Chantrey Harris, white-bearded, leonine in appearance, and wise to the world. He meant what he said. On the voyage out 40 years earlier he put the captain of the *Gwalior* in irons and took command himself

And so the winter came. As night fell you could see a little veteran of Sebastopol, Stephen Archer, scuttling through the streets with his ladder to light up the kerosene lamps. In different halls devout meetings were being held by various social and religious bodies—the Blue Ribbon, the Christian Endeavour Society, the Band of Hope, the Mutual Improvement Society, the Bible Class, and the Women's Christian Temperance Union. All of them sought, through prayer and persuasion and a unique form of social terrorism, to promote the cause of temperance or, better still, to abolish hotels altogether. The Roman Catholic Church said to its own people what it wanted. The Church of England was not keenly aware of social evils. It was more alert to the old Jerusalem than to the new. And then, too, a couple of the town's hotelkeepers were on the vestry. The host of the White Horse was the life and soul of church socials and sang happily in the choir. That made the drink traffic seem almost innocuous except to very choosy people. The unattached youth of Milton—those who were not members of any of the uplift organisations, or being members, strayed occasionally—gathered every evening to meet the 7.45 train from Dunedin. They would skylark about the station, exchange badinage with tired-looking passengers, and then drift off to seek fresh fields. No dancing—it was wicked. No pictures—it was 1893, and the first cinematograph, with Madame Heller and Ada Delroy, only arrived about 1896. Every now and again on Saturday nights there were sixpenny readings in the Athenæum, where young people recited uplift or dramatic poems, and bearded elders—pioneers of 1848 perhaps—sang 'Ye Banks and Braes' and 'Bonnie Scotland.' It was not easy to persuade youths that they could get their sixpence worth in the Athenæum. It came quicker in the hotels.

Three public houses studded the main street along the wind-swept half-mile betweeen the Presbyterian Church and St. John's (Anglican), and there was a fourth at the railway station. The landlords were still called bonifaces and their houses hostelries, or even inns.

"DOWN WITH THE DRINK!"

Night after night the girl captain of the Salvation Army led her band the length of the main street and back. If the wind was gusty, the music was fitful and discordant. If it was calm, the soldiers witnessed gaily with volley and hymns sung and swung and tambourines banging. Amongst the youths who thus hopefully beat in the millenium with blood and fire were boys who had been at school with us a year ago and had left in the sixth or earlier to go to work.

Some were the sons of thrifty parents; others from homes kept poor by unemployment or drunken fathers. Sometimes the fathers themselves, temporarily and miraculously reclaimed. Perhaps there was some bravado in their bearing, but certainly there was courage.

In July, midwinter, the crusade came to its climax. The Army decided that after eight years the results were good enough to warrant celebrating the anniversary. A major came from Dunedin, and for four days they rejoiced with drum and cymbal, cornet and concertina and tambourine. At their tea meeting they had the countenance of the Presbyterian minister, the Rev. James Chisholm, who a few months earlier had heard General Booth speaking in Aberdeen. After the meeting they marched the street again with their music.

Almost unconsciously these four days of rejoicing culminated in a heightening of defiance. To the reformers the citadels of sin became tangible. More and more pointedly they challenged and taunted the landlords of the hotels. Next to the Athenæum stood the Commercial Hotel, a good house decently conducted. George Coombe had entertained the vice-regally great, and had been mentioned in the books of literary visitors. A hearty, rubicund Englishman, he was not easily put out. He had jovially invited the Army lasses into his bar to sell 'War Crys' to scoffing drinkers. But now suddenly things were different. Somebody whispered, quite untruly, that it was the Salvationists who had chalked on the pavement, "This is the road to hell." So naturally when next the Army drew close to the footpath to open fire on the devil Coombe became irritated with the noise of the howitzers and gatlings of glory. Such ingratitude infuriated him. There were three other hotels in the township. Why pick on him? He rushed to the dining room, grabbed the dinner gong and banged it vigorously to drown the rantings of his tormentors. Then he handed the gong to a fresh lad and brought out the more strident dinner bell. When a crowd of 200 or so gathered to jeer and laugh, and a disturbance seemed imminent, the constable and the town clerk (who blew a large wind instrument in the town band) called for a truce. The Army marched off well content, and Coombe put up his gong and bell with a sense of victory.

BOROUGH FIGHTS FOR ITS DIGNITY.

Being himself a publican, the mayor naturally sympathised with Coombe, but even more he felt it intolerable that the dignity of the borough should be so affronted. Milton, like some other boroughs, had by-laws which forbade the playing of instruments in the streets without permission of the corporation. The mayor forgot that other boroughs had been set back in trying to enforce this ban. Moreover, he had received several letters which indicated that individual citizens were being annoyed by the Salvationists. There was one from the secretary of the Athenæum, who occupied the room next to the town clerk. He protested that the pranks of the Salvation Army disturbed the studious quiet of the reading room. Then there was George Coombe himself, begging to be protected against the nuisance caused by the Salvationists outside his hotel. How could a mayor overlook such plain calls to do his duty? And so the council drew their by-laws out of hiding and mounted them, like field guns:

> By-laws 59 and 60: No person might form, or assist to form, or take part in any procession other than parades or processions of volunteers, fire brigades, funeral, and school processions without having previously obtained permission from the council. Permission was also required for singing or playing, or causing to be played, in any public place or thoroughfare, any musical instrument or instruments, or playing any horn, beating any drum, ringing any bell, or using any instruments or carrying any flag or banner or lighted torch in any such public place or thoroughfare.

The constable was authorised to take action accordingly. With due gallantry the lady captain was warned that proceedings were possible. Nevertheless, the band functioned as usual that night. Informations were laid, five young men were charged, and each fined 5s and costs, or four days in gaol. This time John Chantrey Harris, not as justice of the peace, but as editor of the *Bruce Herald*, roundly censured the Army for baiting Mr Coombe. That was persecution fit only for the bad old days. One of the fines was paid by an unknown sympathiser. The other four boys went to gaol in Dunedin and came back heroes.

The Borough Council found this good hunting, and events moved to a new climax. Captain James Kerr was apprehended for playing a cornet in a public place. Prosecuting counsel tried to cajole him into asking for permission, thus making it appear that it was not the two eggs that had been thrown, or the invalid who might be disturbed, or the horse that might shy at the torches; it was the dignity of the corporation, stung in one of its by-laws, that smarted. The magistrate (Mr R. S. Hawkins) would not agree that the by-law was unreasonable, and therefore ultra vires. He fined the captain £3, well knowing that he would receive the sentence like something from Father Christmas, and go to prison for a month rather than pay. In the *Bruce Herald*, John Chantrey Harris thundered again in defence of the outraged dignity of the town and burgesses. The Army, he declared, was snapping its fingers in the face of the Borough Council; if they got away with that we should have the end of self-government. "Once allow the Salvation Army to act in defiance of the law and society stands in peril of being constrained to run upon Salvation Army lines."

OUR SOUTHERN FURY.

Beyond the rim of hills which surrounded Milton this fracas seemed to look quite different. Indignation meetings all over the country thought so little of the civic dignity of Milton as to declare the by-law "tyrannical and subversive of religious liberty and the fair fame of New Zealand." In Dunedin a minister said they might as well be living in Russia. Meanwhile Captain Kerr, having a fortnight in which to pay the fine, went quietly back to his home in Gore and smilingly listened to the rumblings of the storm. Before the fortnight was up there was a howl in Parliament and a volley of petitions. Why was the Government so negligent when the liberties that had been won at Runnymede were being filched in Milton?

Why, indeed? How could Milton know that this was the annus mirabilis in a much wider sense than ever before? At that moment Parliament was forcing through social reforms that had been simmering for 20 years. In 30 days' sitting it had risen only twice before midnight, and it had sat throughout on an average three hours in 24 after midnight. On two-thirds of the sitting days some obstructionist had moved the adjournment to stop business. And what about? Banking bills, lands for settlement, industrial conciliation and arbitration, alcoholic liquors sale control, railways, shops and offices, and female franchise—measures which were to become landmarks of social reform far beyond the shores of New Zealand. Yet to the councillors of Milton their own paltry squabble outweighed anything that could happen 500 miles away. They were not aware that the concertinas and cornets blaring in the front street night after night were not merely a gesture of defiance against their personal dignity, but a symphonic part of the great diapason of progress, a sort of second bass in the orchestra of reform that was sweeping the country with crusading fervour. Into the din of battling titans at Wellington burst again and again the shrill tocsin of our little southern fury. The big men became impatient and then angry as the high-pitched cries from Tokomairiro persisted. Temperance advocates, demanding protection for the oppressed, intruded ruthlessly on the high concerns of statesmanship to which Parliament was committed. Milton's civic dignitaries savagely threatened any Government which dared to intervene between them and their quarry.

As Minister of Labour, the Hon. W. Pember Reeves had been fighting strenuously to pass workers' legislation which was soon to draw all eyes toward New Zealand and to make him a world figure. Yet at the moment Nemesis was after him. Sooner or later, as Minister of Justice, he would have to take notice of the outcry. The sands of Captain Kerr's fortnight were running out, and he would have to go to gaol. After so much uproar Parliament was surprised to learn that he was not already there. Then Seddon took a hand. Forestalling his own Minister, he assured the Mayor of Newton (Auckland) that the Milton by-law was unreasonable, and should be declared ultra vires, and that "the Government did not intend that the sentence should be served." Years earlier, while in Opposition, he had taken precisely the same stand on the North Island cases. Now he brought down on his head a new outcry, as he stood between the Opposition in Parliament and the temperance conscience in the country, with the Milton councillors watching jealously for any false move. Here was a proof John Chantrey Harris said, that this man was unfit to govern:

> It seems only too evident that, for the sake of manufacturing political capital in view of the forthcoming General Election, and in obedience to the autocratic impulse born of sudden accession to unaccustomed and next to supreme power, the Premier is going to play to the pit in the role of a demagogue. The country may well be on guard against a tyrant era.

It is a matter for wonder to-day how the Premier found time to consider the pesky affaire Milton. Yet emphatically he did think of it. Law or no law, he was determined that the Army officer should not go to gaol for playing a cornet. His Government would never have approved such a by-law; and if it could not be declared invalid he would recommend the Governor's clemency. This decision was supported by indignation meetings in all parts of New Zealand, but in Parliament Seddon was violently attacked for interfering with the course of justice.

APPEAL TO BURGESSES.

Meanwhile, in Milton, the stoic determination of some of the councillors showed signs of wilting, and the mayor threatened to appeal to the burgesses for support. An Irish councillor asked why the Army should be treated in one way and the football club in another. The footballers had paraded the streets in a six-horse drag singing and flying a flag. If that had been the Salvation Army! The mayor angrily ruled his colleague out of order for referring to such a matter, and the council by 7 to 4 upheld him. He was learning, nevertheless, that it was not so easy to keep some of his councillors angry. In fact, he actually had to order the town bootmaker (Cr Gregg), to cast his vote. On the surface it still appeared that the civic dignitaries were determined to get these contumacious religionists behind prison bars before their precious by-law should be struck from their grasp. Accordingly, information after information was hurriedly laid.

In Wellington, with great social measures hanging in the balance, Seddon flogged Parliament mercilessly. After sitting continuously throughout the week we can well believe that he rubbed his eyes in relief and came to the office on Saturday a little later than usual to work off a mountain of departmental files. On that day Captain Kerr, not having paid his fine, was arrested at Gore and put stealthily into the van of a slow train which passed through Milton unobserved. At Dunedin he was met by a crowd of Salvationists, through which he walked radiantly, in volleys of blood and fire and hallelujahs, into the gates of the prison. For two days the Premier looked like a twister to both parties. All he could say was that the Governor had been recommended to exercise his clemency and commute the sentence. He thought that the Army should test the validity of the by-law in a higher court, and, failing that, Parliament should repeal it.

Having seen Kerr into prison and out again, the corporation of Milton was secretly beginning to tire of its pyrrhic victories. Even the *Bruce Herald* hoped fervently that the cur-

rent clutch of seven youngsters would be the last to go to gaol. The new captain of the Army had asked quite humbly for permission to parade the streets, and this had been granted, except for torches. At the same time the football club made a like request to carry its banner. It looked as if the spirit of conciliation was abroad. The Rev. James Chisholm spoke with stern conviction on behalf of the Army, and in both the *Bruce Herald* and the *Otago Daily Times* the gentle voice of a Salvation Army officer, William Lee Martin (later the Hon. W. Lee Martin, Minister of Agriculture), begged for peace and goodwill. Nerves were still jumpy, however. Though the civic authorities seemed to be triumphant and six boys were still in gaol, the *Bruce Herald* took alarm at news that yet higher officials of the Army were coming to the battlefield from afar. A stickler for discipline, John Chantrey Harris was not going to yield to any threat. The *Herald* called upon the council to strike a blow against this new defiance. "If the council gives way," he warned, "the town will be held up to contumely and jeering throughout the colony. No better object could be desired than Colonel Bailey, and the higher the game the more it is worth flying at." The rumour was true. Reuben Bailey, the senior officer of the Army in New Zealand, came all the way from Christchurch for the celebrations. The sporting councillors reached for their guns.

A BROADMINDED MINISTER.

The drill shed being too small for the Salvation meeting, Mr Chisholm, with a broadmindedness that would have been perilous if his congregation had disapproved, invited the Army to use the church hall. There a resolution was passed, on the motion of the minister, seconded by James Reid, rector of the High School, begging the borough council to repeal its by-law. What a hope! With two publicans on the council, it was easy to prove that the public meeting had no standing. The minister and the rector were not even ratepayers; therefore the resolution should be treated as of naught. Q.E.D. Inwardly hoping for the end of it all, the mayor had proposed 12 conditions upon which the Army might operate in the main street, but when Colonel Bailey invited the councillors to his tea meeting they felt a new surge of fury. They would have none of his olive branch; they wanted him on his knees.

Now a new peace move was apparent. Four councillors signed a petition against the by-law. The rest in coterie repaired to the mayor's hotel, where they instructed the town clerk to go ahead with a new crop of informations. When he was charged with playing a concertina in Shakespeare street, Colonel Bailey did not appear; he took it for granted that he would be fined anyhow. But Milton was determined to see him take his gruel. He was produced on warrant. Then the case failed because of an informality in the authority which the majority had so furtively given to the town clerk. The meeting in the mayor's hotel was not duly constituted according to law, and thus the information became in effect that of a private individual. Bailey then refused to plead, he was fined 7s with the option of a week in goal, and the police were ordered to keep him steadily in view. In Dunedin gaol the colonel and his captain were visited by Sir Robert Stout. They had spent only 40 hours in durance when their fines were paid. Free again, they enacted in prison garb in the Dunedin barracks the incidents of their incarceration, and Captain Lee Martin sang triumphantly the Milton song.

Having now gaoled the whole Army from drummer boy to colonel, the Milton potentates were chagrined to find the colonel's conscience still defying them. He suggested that the council should appeal for a verdict to a higher court, but Milton had no intention of jeopardising its by-law. It sniffed at the colonel's "impertinence" and formally "resented his unwarrantable interference in the conduct of its own business." Alongside the report in the *Bruce Herald* were long leading articles on the real troubles of the district, the bot fly in animals, the hessian fly in wheat, and the red flowering sorrel which stained the fallow stubble.

THE FIRE FLICKERS OUT.

On October 6, the day of the great meeting in the Presbyterian Hall, an exhausted Parliament was panting to-

wards its prorogation. Some of the members had actually packed their bags for the journey home when Pember Reeves brought in a Bill to invalidate by-laws like that of Milton. Public opinion, he said, would not sanction treating a well-meaning zealot like a common criminal. A North Island member, R. C. Bruce, who had always opposed the Government, but had a sailor's wide vision and a passion for temperance, asked pertinently who were the lawbreakers in Milton; Was it the man who was playing music or the people who assembled to hoot and yell and throw eggs at him? A Dunedin member, H. S. Fish, who had moved the adjournment about 10 times in the effort to stop Government business, tried it once more, but was defeated by 33 to 10. The Bill passed by 36 to 10, after occupying the House for about two hours.

Next morning early the Legislative Council mustered 24 members out of 46 to put the measure to bed. The Hon. W. Montgomery, whom Seddon had taken into his executive out of respect for his Liberalism, said that most of the members seemed to think that Milton had been harsh and tyrannical, but Dr Morgan Grace, in a slightly cynical mood, reminded them that local government was now "the only root of the tree of liberty left in the colony." With their action put in so praiseworthy a light, the Council threw out the Bill by 15 votes to 9. Trial and execution had taken them just half an hour. Seddon commented sorrowfully on the intransigence of the Council in flouting once more the overwhelming opinion of the Lower House. Being thus prevented from solving the Milton problem in a constitutional way, he said, the Government would now be justified in seeking a decision from the courts. It was taken for granted that any new martyrs made by the court at Milton would somehow escape imprisonment, either through the sympathy of friends or by the clemency of His Excellency the Governor.

And so the fire flickered out. Milton's small-town truculence would not tolerate Salvationists except behind prison bars. The law allowed them this amusement, and the Army did not object, since the making of martyrs profited the cause. But the Government balked them both. Some embers of indignation still glowed in the columns of the *Bruce Herald*, and Fred. Bastings was re-elected mayor without opposition, because nobody else desired so uneasy a throne.

In the General Election, which came close on the heels of the session, there was no contest in Milton. Seddon, stumping the country, looked in for an hour or so on November 22, six days before the poll. A little self-consciously the mayor and his coterie waited upon him, and they stood amicably together surveying the low rim of hills north, south, east, and west, and discussing local topics, principally a new courthouse. Nobody said anything about the Salvation Army or the by-law. Seddon laughed and joked and waved a cordial farewell as he hurried away to make a campaign speech farther south

On November 28 New Zealand voted with exceptional enthusiasm. Temperance advocates and publicans. Hotels in jeopardy in every district. Land reformers and Tories. Haters of Socialism and haters of Seddon. Salvationists and Freethinkers; and for the first time in history, women. Eighty-five per cent. of the women on the roll registered their votes, and 75 per cent. of the men. James Allen being returned in Bruce without a contest, there was no liquor poll at Milton. Elsewhere in the country there was a widespread declaration for reform, and many victories for extreme temperance. In the political field the Liberals were returned stronger than ever. Seddon now had 46 sound and dependable followers. Rolleston had only 20. Eight Independents were no longer to be feared. So little are the affairs of whales influenced by the anger of minnows.

John Chantrey Harris, rustling the bristly palisade of his white beard, began to doubt the validity of his former judgments, and sought new light on the bot fly and the hessian fly. The Army rejoiced unhindered in the main street.

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