

The poetical missionary: The Reverend Thomas Whytehead, 1815-1843

WARREN LIMBRICK

The association between St John's College, Cambridge, and nineteenth century New Zealand is recognised by most researchers and bibliophiles familiar with the names of Sir William Martin, Bishop George Selwyn and Sir John Gorst. Few, however, even know the name of Thomas Whytehead, another Fellow of St John's, who was regarded by his confreres as one of the most notable Johnnians to give his life to New Zealand. His obscurity is hardly remarkable, for his service was more symbolic than real owing to his premature death less than five months after landing at Paihia and removal to Waimate, already an invalid, on a litter carried by the Maoris he had come to serve.

With his strong sense of tradition, Whytehead would have been pleased with his memorial in the new St John's chapel completed in 1869. The vaulted oak ceiling contained nineteen bays each having full-length polychrome representations of *illustriores* of the centuries, sweeping back through the choir from the impressive *Christus rex* above the altar. From Ignatius of Antioch, Origen and Augustine, the procession continued through Roger Bacon, Archbishop Langton, Lady Margaret Beaufort the foundress, up to their own century, represented not unexpectedly by Henry Martyn, William Wilberforce, William Wordsworth and the Master and benefactor, James Wood. But most unexpectedly, there in their midst is Thomas Whytehead, a salutary reminder that our fathers could rate intention and devotion as highly as achievement and influence.¹ That Bishop Selwyn had high hopes for Whytehead's contribution to the Anglican Church in this country is clear from his frequent references to him in the Turnbull Library's collection of Selwyniana, and it is arguable that his death deprived the bishop of his most able lieutenant, and contributed to the shortcomings of his ambitious scheme for the establishment of the new antipodean St John's College, of which Whytehead was to be the first principal.

Thomas Whytehead was born 30 November 1815 at Thormanby Parsonage, Yorkshire, the fourth son of Henry Robert Whytehead, Curate of Thormanby and Rector of Goxhill, and his wife Hannah (daughter of the Rev. Thomas Bowman, Prebendary of Lincoln).² Following the father's early death in 1818 the family moved to York