

THE STORY OF THE SYDNEY UNITARIAN CHURCH 1850-1974

By Eleanor Wilson

OUR BEGINNINGS

From an early Sydney newspaper:

Among the free emigrants who, from time to time, sought in the world of Australia a wider sphere for their industry and enterprise, it might be reasonably presumed that a fair proportion would be persons holding Unitarian views of Christianity, and it has long been known that individuals professing these views had settled in different parts of this Colony. But until the year 1850 no systematic attempt had been made to ascertain their numbers or to organise them into a religious community. On Saturday, May 18th, 1850 however, an advertisement addressed to Unitarians was inserted in the Sydney Herald by Mr. William MacDonnell, whose name will always be associated with the formation of the first Unitarian Church in the Colonies.

The advertisement was as follows:

TO UNITARIANS.

A few persons of this persuasion, feeling the great want of a place of worship, where they could honour God according to their consciences, are anxious to meet and co-operate with brethren of similar views, that they might by mutual aid and counsel make a beginning in carrying out so desirable an object. For this purpose, communications are solicited from Unitarians who reside in Sydney or are scattered throughout the Colony, with such suggestions as their wishes or experience may dictate; and, as this step is but preliminary, those who feel interested in advancing the great truth of the strict Unity of God, will please, for the present, address Alpha at the office of the Herald.

A number of letters were received from people who declared themselves Unitarians and willing to co-operate in the establishment of Unitarian worship, and after several preliminary meetings in the home of Mr. MacDonnell, a public meeting was called for Sunday, June 30th, 1850, at Grocotts Rooms, George Street, opposite Hunter Street. Attending this meeting were three doctors, several lawyers, and other prominent citizens, about 30 persons in all, and a list of over 30 other people known or presumed to be Unitarians, was read.

After much animated discussion the following resolution was unanimously adopted:

That we Unitarian Christians now met together, consider it our duty to establish the worship of God in accordance with the practice of the Unitarian Churches of Great Britain and Ireland and the United States of America, and do accordingly join ourselves into a Society to be denominated THE AUSTRALIAN UNITARIAN CHRISTIAN ASSOCIATION. [The name has been changed more than once since 1850.]

Subscriptions and donations were soon forthcoming and the newly elected committee wanted a room somewhere on Church Hill where the congregation met regularly for a year. They then petitioned the Government for a grant of land on which to build a church and were given a small plot of ground at the foot of what is now Clarence Street. It was of little use to them as the ground was swampy and the little band continued to meet in the rented premises.

It soon became quite an influential body, and it was necessary to look for better accommodation. The trustees heard that the Wesleyan Chapel in Macquarie Street was for sale. It had a pleasant little manse attached and a sale was negotiated with the owners. It stood at the corner of Martin Place and Macquarie Street, where the huge Reserve Bank was erected a few years ago. The terms of sale were 400 down and a promissory note for the balance of 472 payable in 3 years, being for purchase and interest, was signed on January 1st, 1852. After installing gas lighting and adding a porch, along with some necessary repairs to the manse, the whole costing 150, the congregation left their temporary home on Church Hill.

At this stage the name of the movement was changed to THE UNITARIAN SOCIETY OF SYDNEY and the trustees turned their attention to bringing out a minister from England. The British and Foreign Unitarian Association was approached and selected for them as the first Unitarian minister in the Colony, Rev. George Stanley, B.A. After much correspondence a stipend of 200 per annum was agreed upon and on October 25th, 1853, the steam ship Great Britain, 78 days out from Liverpool, docked at Port Jackson and a deputation of eminent Unitarians went on board to welcome their future pastor and his lady.

The Chapel was opened for public worship on Sunday, November 6th, 1853. The following extract from the first Minute Book reflects the pride the trustees and committee felt their achievements:

The Opening Service was felt by many to be deeply interesting and was more numerous attended than the most sanguine had anticipated, the Chapel being filled in every part by a highly respectable and most attentive audience. The sermon delivered by Rev. G. Stanley on this occasion was afterwards published at the unanimous request and at the expense of the Congregation. The commencement of Evening Services was necessarily deferred for a few weeks.

REV. GEORGE HEAP STANLEY, MA. LL.B. 1853-1864

Mr. Stanley announced that his theological position was that of Christocentric Unitarianism. He said:

Whilst I teach Unitarianism as a theology I shall preach Christianity as a gospel, not as a system of philosophy merely, but as a revelation of God to man and in this revelation the Lord Jesus will ever be to me a central figure.

At a preliminary meeting it had been decided that the service in the morning should be liturgical and according to the Congregational mode in the evening.

Mr. Stanley began his ministry with a membership of 141 persons, and a choir of 27, and soon had a Sunday School of over 60 pupils. A Religious Improvement Society was organised, an organ purchased, and the ministerial stipend increased to 400 per annum. Nearly all the pews were let, and books sent out from the parent association in London formed the nucleus of a library. The choir, presided over by a salaried organist, consisted of amateurs, being persons of education as well as attached to our principles do not sing for the sake of display or of lucre, yet all have the regularity so seldom found in volunteers. They meet twice weekly for practice and chant now with considerable precision and no little taste.

Mr. Stanley stayed 11 years and then resigned to devote himself to education. He became Headmaster of a school for boys, many leading citizens passing through his hands. He availed himself of a recent provision of the Colonial Legislature permitting graduates of British Universities to take on examination, higher degrees in the University of Sydney; it was thus that he obtained the degree of LL.B., the first man in the Colony to do so. He lived at Paddington with his family and was always ready to help out at the Macquarie Street Chapel when his services were requested. During his period the name underwent another change, and the movement came to be known as THE UNITARIAN CONGREGATIONAL CHURCH. By

1872 it had become THE NEW UNITARIAN CHURCH and church papers from 1874 onwards refer to it simply as THE SYDNEY UNITARIAN CHURCH.

The first minute book contains copies of indignant letters from Mrs. Stanley, who took great exception to being asked to pay pew rent when her husband was no longer minister. Pew rents represented a good proportion of the income of the chapel.

REV. JAMES PILLARS, MA. 1864-1875

The successor to Mr. Stanley was Rev, James Pillars who, at the age of 30 arrived, with his young wife, to take up the ministry. He worked with tremendous enthusiasm and soon had a full church. Many social activities were organised and the course seemed set for a period of expansion. The land in Clarence Street was sold for 1980 and ground purchased in Liverpool Street for 800. This area was at that time a fashionable residential part, many doctors having their consulting rooms in nearby College Street.

Mr. Pillars laid the foundation stone of the beautiful Liverpool Street Church in 1872, and said:

Probably, before this stone is disturbed, Christianity will have abandoned many of its fundamental beliefs. But the time will never come when the soul of man will cease to reverence justice and goodness; and therefore to be religious in the highest and noblest sense of the word. It was with these feelings they were laying the foundation stone of a new church, not for the ecclesiastical perpetration of any one article of the doctrine of Christianity; but to promote reverence for truth, for the reverent cultivation of the sanctities of sentiment and opinion and the immortal principles of progress.

Rain fell heavily during the ceremony, setting a pattern for Unitarian open-air functions ever since. (When the foundation stone of the church in Francis Street was laid by Rev. Wyndham Heathcote the first rain fell after a long drought, causing him to remark that we should perhaps arrange with the Government to hold outdoor functions whenever rain was needed, when we could expect a deluge!!)

Along this time a man named William Lorando Jones gave a lecture in Parramatta Park for the Sydney Secular Society; he was prosecuted for blasphemy and sentenced to 2 years in gaol and

fined 100. The public reaction was prompt and extreme; Mr. Pillars called a public meeting in the Unitarian Church, a committee was formed to free Jones, over 2000 people signed Mr. Pillars petition to the Government and Jones was released in 4 weeks. This same Jones was the sculptor of the monument erected by public subscription in Rookwood Cemetery to Mr. Pillars memory.

Unfortunately, Mr. Pillars became involved in disputes with the trustees when the new building was almost ready for the roof, the work was stopped (the church was not finished until 1879) and Mr. Pillars left, taking many members of the congregation with him. He continued his work from the Temperance Hall in Pitt Street.

While taking a party of Sunday School boys to a picnic at Tamarama Beach he disappeared from the rocks and his body was never recovered. The Town and Country Journal reported the incident in the following quaint sentences:

The young companions with whom he took his last and fatal ramble on the cliffs, on July 31st, stated that after they had leapt the chasm, they observed him gazing, as if in admiration and deep thought on the waves that dashed up from beneath. It was from the calm enjoyment of such a contemplation that he passed in a moment into the unseen world.

This calamity brought together the separated brethren and a service of reconciliation and remembrance was held in the still roofless church.

REV. JOHN HENRY SMITH 1879-1882

After the Church had been without ministerial leadership, except for the help afforded by Rev. G. Stanley, the next man to take on the restless and difficult congregation was Rev. J.H. Smith. The Liverpool Street Church begun in 1872, was opened by him on August 30th, 1879. After 3 years he resigned to become Headmaster of a country school.

REV. A.B. CAMM 1882-1885

Mr. Camm had been a Congregational minister in England and had served as a missionary in Costa Rica before entering the Unitarian ministry. After serving our churches at Bolton and Blackpool he came to Sydney in 1882. In his inaugural address, reported by *The Sydney Empire* on December 4th, 1882, Mr. Camm said:

Believing that a religious life is one of the prime necessities of human nature, my ministry will be devoted to the nourishing of that life in those who, though unable to assent to the divinity of Jesus, yet believe him to have excelled all other men in the realization of the righteousness and charity of God.

His reporter described him as not so much an orator as a vigorous and subtle thinker. The description of the ceremony concludes:

Teachers of his class, links between educated mind and Christianity (this is said without any implied endorsement of Unitarian peculiarities of doctrine) are not so plentiful in New South Wales that the advent of a man who will labour to nourish righteousness and charity in those to whom he will speak, can be denied a welcome to the Colony.

One of his discourses (his farewell address on leaving Sydney) was published at the request of the congregation under the title of *Phases of Unitarianism, Orthodoxy and Free Thought*. In it he asks:

What does our liberal religion do? It turns prayer into thanksgiving and aspiration. It does not define God; it fears to symbolize Him. As the universe unfolds however, it sees a revelation of higher qualities through Life and Law, towards Love. It feels the universe is good, and finds no better word for the Supreme Life than the simple Saxon "one God". Once a week we find an aid to moral, mental and spiritual growth, in seeking to harmonize our growing individual life with the revealing, infinite "One God". If that seems a remnant of superstition to anyone, at any rate it should not be sneered at. [He was referring to a lecture at the Theatre Royal the previous Sunday when disparaging remarks had been made about Liberalism.] Such an attitude of mind and heart accords with our rational thought.

Mr. Camm returned to England at the expiration of his contract and was killed in a railway accident in the Peak Hill Tunnel in 1891. (The first of three of our ministers who died by accident.)

REV. E.R. GRANT 1885-1888

The next incumbent was Rev. Edward R. Grant, who had several successful ministries in England. The hot climate proved too much for his frail health and he died in Sydney in January, 1888

REV. GEORGE WALTERS 1888-1898 & 1902-1926

Probably the most remarkable ministry in the history of our church began with the induction of Rev. George Walters in June, 1888. He soon made his presence felt, not only in the Unitarian Church, being an active supporter of the Woman Suffrage Movement, President of both the Shakespeare Society and the Dickens Fellowship and a member of the board of control in the early days of the Pitt Town Labour Settlement. He was the author of a Biblical drama *Joseph of Canaan* produced in Sydney at Her Majesty's Theatre and at the Theatre Royal in Melbourne.

In 1898 Mr. Walters, with almost the whole of the congregation, formed the independent body known as the Australian Church, following disputes with the Church Committee. The breach was not healed for 5 years after which he and his congregation came back to the church in Liverpool Street.

He was a cultured and impressive speaker with broad views. He made his pulpit available to many unpopular causes and speakers including Mrs. Annie Besant when she visited Australia on a lecture tour after her prosecution in England for the publication of a book on birth control, judged unsuitable for reading by the general public. Joseph McCabe was made welcome in our church on his visit at the turn of the century, after he made headlines with his withdrawal from the Catholic Church and the publication of *Twelve Years in a Monastery*. Like his predecessor, Mr. Pillars, he was always ready to champion the underdog and unpopular causes and freedom of thought and speech.

A memorable occasion was the Sunday evening when the address was given by the Right Hon. William Morris Hughes, former Prime Minister of Australia. The *Daily Telegraph* reporting the visit said Mr. Hughes seemed uncomfortable in a pulpit and the large congregation expected to see horns sprout rather than a halo appear round the head of the fiery little Welshman!!

Mr. Walters incurred a good deal of odium because he publicly stated from his pulpit that he would not pray for the success of the Allies in the Great War 1914-1918. He said, in explanation of his unpopular attitude:

It is because my conception of God is so infinitely high, beyond all possibility of human conception that I could not invoke that high and supreme power to shed blood and commit horrors at my humble suggestion.

He was fatally injured by a car on his way home from a lecture in the church, after a remarkable ministry of 34 years and his death was mourned as a public calamity.

REV. ALBERT THORNHILL, MA. 1929-1931

With the arrival of Mr. Thornhill we come to the half century in the life of our Church.

After 9 years of notable service at the Auckland Unitarian Church and a previous successful ministry in England, Mr. Thornhill's appointment coincided with the depression years, when he had to cope with reduced membership, and the evils of unemployment and rising costs. He was described by the *Daily Telegraph* as:

a cultured cleric with a big spiritual punch; full of learning and richly eloquent, conveying the impression of intense sincerity.

He immediately set about organising the Jubilee celebrations and reunion of old members, at which the Premier of New South Wales, Hon. W. A. Holman, KC, (afterwards a member of the church) was a principal speaker. Mr. Holman deplored the modern tendency to abuse the benefits of science and the vulgarity of much of the programmes of radio and cinema. He said:

Nowadays a child is able to fill every spare moment with occupations which leave him not only uninstructed, but incapable of forming any faith about the universe or about religion. The battle of rationalism has still to be fought against this new enemy. We do not fight today against established and authoritative churches, that battle has been won almost too completely. What we have now to combat is an insidious influence whose strength, ubiquity and danger is increasing visibly every day. (One wonders what would be the speakers' reaction to cinema and radio programmes in this permissive age fifty years later?)

In spite of the difficult times Mr. Thornhill persuaded the A. B.C. to include Sydney Unitarian Church in its religious broadcasting programmes which resulted in a volume of correspondence from country listeners, many of whom heard about Unitarianism for the first time. He was the author of several pamphlets which had a wide appeal, and in spite of a busy ministerial life, found time for much public activity. Mr. Thornhill was a foundation member of the League of Nations Union; an ardent advocate of licensing reform and a recognised authority on educational matters. He returned to England and took up the study of dietetics. He died in Sydney in 1936.

REV. WYNDHAM HEATHCOTE, BA. 1927-1928 & 1932-1945

The second longest ministry in our church was that of Rev. Wyndham Heathcote, who had been an Anglican clergyman until he developed advanced views and entered the Unitarian Church, serving our churches in Adelaide and Melbourne, Wellington (New Zealand) and Ottawa (Canada) before coming to Sydney. He occupied the pulpit after Mr. Walters' death until the arrival of Mr. Thorrihill from New Zealand, and again after Mr. Thornhill left for England in 1932. He preached with scholarly vigor to an increasing congregation and wrote many pamphlets, one of them having a circulation of 32,000, and retired in 1945, becoming Minister Emeritus.

True to the Unitarian tradition of our ministers defending the rights of citizens wrongly apprehended, Mr. Heathcote appeared in court several times; once to speak on behalf of a Macquarie Street doctor, R.V. Storer, prosecuted for selling a book he had written on *Adolescence and Marriage*, to a policeman, when Dr. Storer was acquitted; to defend a man charged with selling a pamphlet in the Domain without the permission of the Government Dept.

controlling public parks. The pamphlet, written by Mr. Heathcote, became the subject of a Police Inquiry, during which both he and the Hon. Secretary of the Church (the writer of these notes) were interrogated by the police; and again during a censorship prosecution.

During Mr. Heathcotes ministry the beautiful stone church in Liverpool Street was destroyed by fire, with the loss of many of the records of the church; from 1936 until the new church in Francis Street was opened in 1940, the services continued without a break in the Real Estate Institute, Martin Place. The church site, bought for 800 in 1873 and sold for 23,000 in 1938, became a business area for shops and offices.

Mr. Heathcote died in Sydney at the great age of 94, active to the last and busy writing a book on his spiritualist experiences.

Since 1945 our church has been served by six ministers:

Rev. Colin Gibson, MA. 1945-1949

Rev. J. B. Tonkin 1949-1953

Rev. G.E. Hale, BA. 1954-1956

Rev. D.W. Edmunds, MA. B.D. 1957-1961

Rev. W.G. Watson 1963-1966

Rev. Allen Kirby 1967-1968

Mr. Gibson now serves our church in Aberdeen, Scotland, after a ministry of several years at the Adelaide Unitarian Church; Mr. Tonkin and Mr. Hale have both passed on; Mr. Edmunds returned to his native America; Mr. Watson went out of the ministry and Mr. Kirby has been in charge of the Adelaide Church since 1968. Since that time the pulpit has been vacant and the congregation has relied on the help of its many friends to keep our services going.

The type of Unitarianism preached by the fourteen men who have ministered in our Church in the last one hundred and twenty-one years has varied, from the Christocentric views held by Mr. Stanley to the naked Humanism preached by one of our younger men a few years ago. Nevertheless, one strong characteristic has run unchanged all through; viz. a devoted humanitarianism, expressing itself through social idealism and involvement.