



Copland, James 1834 - 1902
Presbyterian minister, doctor, writer

James Copland was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, on 3 February 1834, the son of George Copland, a clothier, and his wife, Catharine Pearson. He studied arts and theology in Edinburgh and Berlin, obtained a PhD from Heidelberg university in 1858, and took the degree of MD at the University of Aberdeen in 1864. He then became a licentiate of the United Presbyterian Church. Copland intended making a career as a medical missionary, this work being 'the noblest in which we can engage'.

James Copland emigrated to Otago, New Zealand, as ship's surgeon on the *E. P. Bouverie*, leaving Glasgow in August 1864. He was received by the Presbyterian church as a probationer on 11 January 1865, and ordained in May. He then became the first Presbyterian minister to the goldfields town of Lawrence. On 6 September 1866 he married Katharine Rutherford Anderson at Dunedin; they were to have six children.

Copland was a highly popular and dynamic minister, and his congregation included Episcopalians and Congregationalists. He set up parishes in Roxburgh, Alexandra, Clyde and Queenstown, and his horse, Pegasus, became well known in the district. His precentor, leading the singing of the psalms in worship, was, most unusually, a woman; after failing to 'adhere to tunes more familiar to the Congregation' and not responding to the authority of the session, she was forced to resign in 1869. Among Copland's converts were several Chinese.

In 1871 Copland left the goldfields to become the first Presbyterian minister at North Dunedin. His congregation grew rapidly, not least in its youth work: almost 200 children attended Sunday school by 1876 when an enlarged church was opened. Copland introduced the use of hymns, a choir and a harmonium. In 1874 he took leave overseas for health reasons. Throughout the decade he played a prominent role in the Presbytery of Dunedin and the Synod of the Presbyterian Church of Otago and Southland. He convened the latter's Foreign Mission Committee with great organisational flair, and became the synod's moderator in 1879.

Copland abruptly resigned from the ministry in 1881. Tensions between the North Dunedin congregation and its ruling session appear to have been the main problem. The session unanimously opposed union with the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand, a project dear to his heart. There had been a disagreement, too, about the time of the evening service, and a succession of resignations, including that of the session clerk. And Copland had made enemies: a sermon was denounced by one of his Sunday school teachers as a 'base and cowardly attack on the character of certain young women'. He resumed his other career as a medical practitioner, but continued to be prominent in church life as an elder of First Church, Dunedin. Katharine Copland died on 30 November 1887, and in 1888 James Copland moved to Gore. He became clerk of Maitua Presbytery on 7 January 1891. On 12 March 1892 at Roslyn, Dunedin, he married Constance Harriet Gillies, née Carnegie.

Copland was involved in both journalism and pamphleteering. He produced a free-lance monthly journal, the *Evangelist*, from 1869 to 1879. It covered church news, particularly the missions to the Chinese, the Maori and the New Hebrides (Vanuatu). Copland showed real journalistic flair, best seen in the vivid records of his trips to the North Island in 1871 and the Holy Land in 1874. His religious tracts display a systematic, well-stocked but unoriginal mind which yoked a concern for sound and liberal education to evangelical Protestantism. He published a religious and scientific critique of spiritualism, and argued for the historicity, plenary inspiration and authority of the Bible: the revelation of God cannot be confounded with 'the errors and imperfections of human frailty and ignorance'. His most important writing, *The origin and spiritual nature of man* (1885), penned as part of his unsuccessful candidacy for the chair of mental and moral philosophy at the University of Otago, argues cogently against Charles Darwin: concerned to defend the personal identity and moral nature of the self, he condemns evolution as both a materialist and reductionist reading of human life and an unrealistic, unproven hypothesis.

A concern for social problems is shown in his *Socialism: or the wrongs and remedies of our social condition* (1878), which cites socialist and communist writers, accepts the legitimacy of trade unions, and praises the Rochdale Equitable Pioneers' Society whose activities formed the basis of the modern co-operative movement. Nevertheless, Copland argues that the sole remedy for working-class distress, given that class's natural indolence, improvidence and tendency to multiply, is education, co-operation and emigration. There is no reference at all to New Zealand conditions.

A keen traveller and observer, Copland was, in some respects, a man of the world. His breadth of outlook is shown in his wide-ranging writings, his critique of extremist teetotalism, his impatience with sectarianism, his support for Presbyterian church union, and his advocacy of the scholarly training of ministers and missionaries within New Zealand. He was concerned with educational issues, advocating the provision of scholarships to a non-élite New Zealand university and supporting a non-denominational school system to provide 'the real thinking power in the land'; its curriculum should include scientific instruction as a relief from the 'continual grinding of the three R's'. To complement this secular education Copland campaigned tirelessly for better equipped Sunday schools and for the Bible in schools movement.

Copland's considerable talents flowed increasingly, however, into a rearguard action against the spread of radicalism and infidelity. He promoted revivalist meetings, wished to tighten up church discipline, defended the 'sanctions of morality' and opposed the religious indifference caused by the 'knocking about of colonial life'. He expressed alarm at the desecration of the sabbath, the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act 1867 and the Contagious Diseases Act 1869, both of which, he believed, encouraged vice. He opposed the legalisation of marriage to one's deceased wife's sister, and was a fierce foe of the Catholic bishop Patrick Moran, 'ritualist' Anglicanism and freethinkers. Yet he was no narrow Presbyterian: he advocated a truly catholic Christianity, by which he meant a well-educated, evangelical Protestantism transcending our 'endless divisions'. He exemplifies the particular strengths and weaknesses of an emergent New Zealand Presbyterianism, combining considerable scholarship and concern for liberal education with moral, social and theological conservatism. He died at Gore on 9 November 1902, survived by his second wife and four children of his first marriage.

PETER MATHESON

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