



In the early 1860s, the Otago Provincial Government authorised chaplains to enter the Dunedin Gaol. As a consequence, in 1866, John Ainslie Torrance was appointed as the first prison chaplain to that institution, a position which he held for the next ten years. Torrance's chaplaincy duties were also carried out to the Dunedin Hospital and Mental Asylum in addition to the gaol. He was a printer by trade, an elder of the Presbyterian Church, and not an ordained minister. Funding to pay for his stipend of 225 pounds per year came from voluntary subscription, as did the finance to cover the multitude of welfare work with which he became engaged. He led worship each Sunday at the gaol and also the Hospital and Mental Asylum. Prison visits were not just confined to the old gaol in Stuart Street, but also to the prison hulk "Sarah and Esther" moored at the Otago Peninsula. As gaol chaplain he was required to attend executions and offer spiritual comfort to the condemned, although these were few in number. Today, much of Torrance's ministry would be regarded as being community work: helping released prisoners into employment, providing money for them to return home and giving donations of food and clothing to their families. His methods were simple and uncomplicated and his object was to give people a chance to set their lives in order. If he could encourage them into the Christian Faith at the same time, that was a bonus.

Gordon Parry noted that

Torrance was fortunate to have strong support from the business community he was a man of exceptional quality. Although an elder of Knox Church and a staunch supporter of all Presbyterian causes, he made it clear that sectarianism never affected his work. Where there was a need he tried to deal with it, no matter what religious profession (or lack of it) the individual happened to have. Evidence of this came a few years down the track when a Roman Catholic Priest expressed gratitude for the help Torrance had regularly given to my people.

Torrance was supported by the Gaol Chaplain's Fund Society in his ministry, but his

position was terminated after the demise of the Provincial Government. In 1877 at a public meeting in Dunedin, The Patients and Prisoners' Aid Society was established with

the object as stated in the constitution to employ an agent to encourage and instruct by means of religious services and otherwise the inmates of Dunedin Hospital Gaol and Lunatic Asylum, and to aid persons discharged from these institutions to make a fresh start in life.

The Dunedin Patients and Prisoners' Aid Society became the forerunner of a cluster of voluntary organisations of a similar nature that were set up in other parts of New Zealand in the 1880's and which later grew into the New Zealand Prisoners' Aid and Rehabilitation Society. Some local Prisoners' Aid Societies continue to maintain close links with prison chaplains who, in a number of instances, continue to serve on their management committees.

Divine Service was held every "Sabbath" and when practicable, a choir composed of prisoners "led the psalmody" on religious holidays. An organ accompanied the singing, religious books and other reading material was supplied to prisoners and a night school conducted by an educated prisoner under the supervision of the chaplain provided literacy tuition and "special studies, such as languages, phraseography, engineering etc."

Torrance wrote of his ministry to the people of Ngati Ruanui, led by Titokowaru, who James Belich describes as being "not just a general" but also "a spiritual leader" who was "pioneer of passive resistance" and then to the prisoners from Parihaka, some of whom were also held at the Dunedin Gaol after 1870. Torrance's views were those of his own Presbyterian background.

They revealed a mix of this worldview and a genuine desire to assist the prisoners under his pastoral care in a manner that was sensitive to and appropriate for them. Of the Ngati Ruanui and Parihaka people he wrote:

The Taranakis, headed by their chief, an aged, tall profusely tattooed man of princely appearance and demeanour, and reverentially looked up to by all, were a fine body – men of splendid physique and of noble spirit and mien: but the Parihaka folk, a mixture of full Maoris and half castes and quarter castes, were in every aspect a poor lot – in appearance, as in fact aimless in appearance, mischievous, larrikin louts, altogether destitute of the qualities that marked the warriors who preceded them. The Taranakis ... were deeply sympathised with ... the general bearing of the riff raff from Parihaka inclined one to cuff their ears.

Torrance observed that these men "were also sincerely religious" and he described how the Reverend Alexander Blake "then of the Kaikorai Valley Presbyterian Church and formerly Provincial Maori Missionary" was engaged to lead services "at which the older men were speakers." He talked of provision of craft material for them to "produce ornaments," a "war canoe performance," his presence at the death of a young man in the presence of "an old tattooed father" who sat at the foot of the bed, and an instance of cultural misunderstanding between himself and a group of Maori prisoners in which he recorded: "their manner showed they felt stung, and I regretted the incident.

John Ainslie Torrance, who was born in Edinburgh, Scotland, c 1833, died on 10 August 1908 and is buried in Dunedin's Southern Cemetery with his wife Eliza.

⁶⁴ Parry, G. (2002). *Patients, Prisoners and Progress*, Otago. Patients and Prisoners' Aid Society Otago Incorporated. pp. 4-5.

⁶⁵ Chisholm, J. (Ed.), (1898). *Memorials of John A. Torrance*, Dunedin, N.Z. Bible Tract and Book Society. p.8.

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