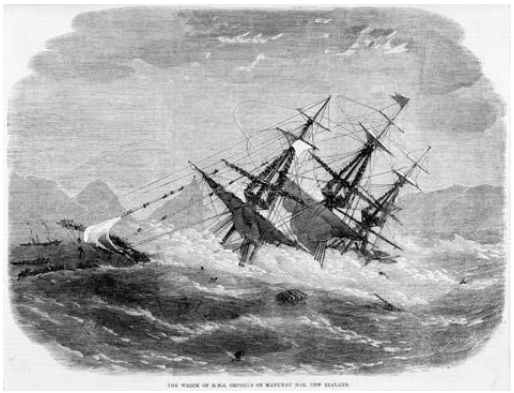
The New Zealand Disease

Not many countries have a way of death attributed to them. In imperial India there were many ways by which you might not survive, and 18th C Batavia was best avoided, but as was recently pointed out to me[1], in the 19th century there was the term, the New Zealand disease.

New Zealand through the first decades of the 19th century was considered a fairly safe place for missionaries, settlers, traders and the military. It was relatively disease-free for visitors, compared with India, China, and even Australia. Sadly it was a declining situation for Māori as infections such as venereal diseases and measles came with the visitors. There were also comparatively few European lives lost from conflicts, with murders such as those of the Gilfillan family at Matarawa in 1847, or of the Rev Carl Volkner in Opotiki by Pai Mārire followers in 1865, standing out as somewhat rare events.



However, there was a national hazard, and this was drowning, particularly evidenced by the relatively large numbers of lives lost on the unruly coasts of the country. The worst was the loss of 189 lives when the *Orpheus* foundered on the Manukau bar in 1863, but many others drowned before this in smaller craft in the rough seas of Cook Strait or along the west coasts of the two islands.

Treacherous seas and harbour bars were not the only sites of drowning tragedies. Young men who came out for adventure, to settle, or explore, or for the missions, were at risk of drowning when crossing rivers and lakes, unaccustomed to the treacheries of seemly benign waterways. They came out often with financial backing from families, well equipped, a sense of adventure, well educated, but no one had taught them to swim.

Such a one was William Curling Young (1815-1842), from a shipping family and with a father who was a founding New Zealand Company director. William was the eldest son, and at 25 wrote a book on China critical of British policy[2]. This was a little bit precocious and unhampered by Young never having been to China.[3] He was a friend of the Wakefields and Alfred Dommett, and arriving in Nelson in 1842, he briefly became the New Zealand Company Agent in Nelson and was offered a magistrate's position by Governor Hobson but declined, stating that it would inhibit him from criticizing the government. And then on 14 August 1842 he was drowned while crossing the Wairoa River. His mother Mary gathered his letters, and a number are deposited in New Zealand libraries.[4]

Another local river, the Wairau in Marlborough, was also responsible for the drowning of my friend's[1] ancestor Francis Otterson. Otterson also arrived in Nelson in 1842 with wife and child, fathered four more children, planted some blue gumtrees and was drowned in 1854. The trees became known as the Otterson gum trees, the last of which was felled in 2005, and Otterson is memorialised by the remaining, handsome stump.[5]

Another tragedy was recorded by William Howitt in his history of New Zealand.[6] Howitt's suffering is obvious, as he describes in the final chapter of his book how while : *'Having had one son…….as the successful discoverer of the lost expedition of Burke and Wills, and the recoverer of their remains, and having lost another in assisting to open up the interior of New Zealand, he [the author] has entered on the undertaking as a labour of love*.' In 1863, his younger son Herbert drowned in Lake Brunner with two companions while cutting a road from Canterbury to the West Coast, aiming at the Grey River mouth, and passing Lake Brunner.[7]

One of the passengers on one of the NZ Company's first ships, the *Oriental* (hence Oriental Bay in Wellington), also had little time to get colonisation underway. Edward Betts Hopper, a promoter and Director of the Company, sailed with his friend the Hon. Henry Petre[8] and Francis Molesworth, arriving in Port Nicholson in 1840. The three partners set up a flour milling and sawmill business in the lower Hutt Valley, only for Hopper to drown when working the sawmill, in the Hutt river 9 months later.

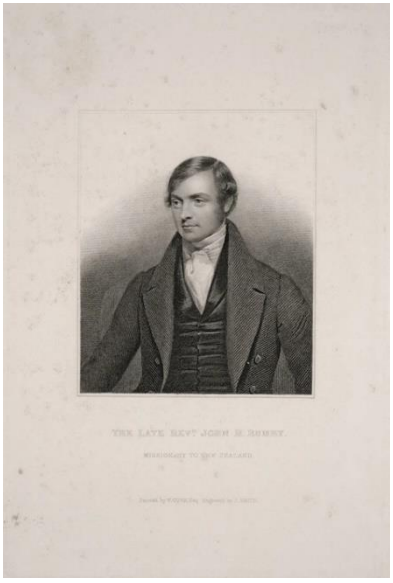
Moorings Creek Petoni & the Honble Henry Petre's residence shown in the distance. Brees, 1847, Plate 14. Alexander Turnbull Library, record #22606916

It also worth repeating the sad tale told to Maria Williams (Mrs C Thompson) and recounted at the end of her book on Canterbury (which actually says very little about Canterbury).[9] '*Thomson inserts a 'The Stewardess's Story', a dramatic and tragic story told to her by a stewardess on the ship at Sydney. The woman and her husband and the their two small children sailed and traded in the Pacific, quite happily, until one day at an unnamed island, they were attacked by the local people. She and her husband fought them off, but the attacking men leapt into the sea with the two children. The daughter was retrieved but her 6 year-old son was never seen again, though reportedly was alive. They settled in Sydney and her husband sailed later to New Zealand to try gold digging, but was drowned crossing a river. She was left with her girl and a job as a stewardess on the Sydney passage.'*[10]

Amongst all this misery, there is one drowning that seems more poignant, for reasons not really clear. Although he didn't write an account of his short time in New Zealand, he did get a later biography, filled with exerts from huis letters and diaries.

Barrett, Rev. A., *The Life of the Rev. John Hewgill Bumby. With a Brief History of the Commencement and Progress of The Wesleyan Mission in New-Zealand. John Mason, London, 1852. Bagnall 321, Hocken 164. (2nd ed. 1853)*

John Bumby was born in Thirsk in Yorkshire in 1808, declined to go into business, persuading his father that he should enter the Wesleyan ministry. Apparently he was a sensitive, impressionable youth, carefully nurtured in the faith by his mother to the extent that '*It was under the influence and teaching of this parent, that the youth began to have serious thoughts respecting the evil of his own carnal nature, and the misery resulting from the want of a conscious salvation from the guilt and dominion of sin.'*[11] This is perhaps not the best training for the missions, but even though delicate, he was keen, and after an extensive ministry in England, he sailed in 1838 on the *James*, not quite in the Wesleyan style since he travelled with his sister, a paid servant, and against Methodist policy, gifts for Māori. He arrived with a couple of other missionaries at the Wesleyan mission at Māngungu in the Hokianga on March 1839.[12] Bumby had been assigned to be chairman of the mission but the resident missionary John Hobbs had his doubts. There seemed a problem with Bumby's rigid attitude to Anglicans, not helpful among the small missionary communities, and Bumby himself soon realised that this was not the place for him, hoping to go back home after serving a short two or three year term.[13]



A couple of months later Bumby was off with Hobbs and other missionaries on an extensive tour of the North Island, reaching Port Nicholson in June, dropping off young Māori trained as teachers at various mission sites on the way. He made a short trip to Sydney, at the time when the Treaty was signed. On May 10. 1840 Bumby is back at Māngungu welcoming the *Triton* again with his fellow missionary John Waterhouse bringing in a mission party. Barrett relates the preaching and conversions of the Weslyans with great evangelical fervour: '*In the afternoon a love-feast was held; when, amongst others, Nene (Thomas Walker) spoke, also William Barton, his son-in-law, and Moses, with great feeling and impressiveness, of their conversion to Christ and while the newly-arrived brethren were enjoying the scene, and inwardly praising God for what their eyes beheld, receiving, at the same time, the same gracious unction as was poured on the rest, - our friend, Mr. Bumby, gave out from the pulpit, with a voice faltering with emotion, the following hymn, composed in Maori....*'. The fellow missionary John Waterhouse then took the *Triton* south to deliver missionaries at Kawhia and Taranaki, Bumby accompanying them, intending to return from Kawhia by land.

Bumby crossed the island to the Thames estuary, meeting up with the missionary William Fairburn (whose daughter Elizabeth married Willliam Colenso, with eventual regret) at his station at Maraetai on the western coast of the gulf. In discussing how best to get back to the Hokianga, Bumby went against the advice of Fairburn and decided to go by canoe up the east coast past Auckland and on to Whangarei. The irony is that Fairburn thought the east coast route too dangerous and Bumby thought likewise of Fairburn's suggestion of travelling via the Manukau Harbour (and its treacherous bar which Bumby feared), up the west coast. Bumby set off with a number of young Māori men, landing first at Waiheke island, then on to Motutapu where they also stayed. By now there were some 20 people on the canoe. Barrett continues: *'About twelve o'clock the natives judged it right to hoist a sail, in order to catch a*

gentle breeze which was rising they were now between Motutapu and Tiritirimatangi: a man arose for this purpose, and, with eager and careless haste, several others got up at the same time; the canoe was immediately upset, and all were precipitated into the water. It was a moment of intense consternation; but as soon as the natives could recover themselves a little, for they swam well, they directed their efforts to save Mr. Bumby. They actually righted the canoe, though filled with water, and succeeded in getting him in again. They cut off his clothes even to his linen, in order to lighten his person; and thus he sat for some moments shivering in the cold, and bailing out the water with his hands; with what a rush of solemn recollections, and still more solemn anticipations, who may say? He had assisted many over "death's cold flood" by his prayers and counsel; and was his own hour now come, far from the circles of those who loved him best? and did the summons reach him on the chilly waves of a New Zealand sea? But now the poor natives, some of whom had been entangled by the sail under water, were exhausted, and pressing into the canoe, alas! overturned it once more. One of the party, the son of Haupokia , the Chief at Mr. Whiteley's, immediately went down, and never rose. This seemed to strike a panic into the natives, and they began to give themselves up for lost. James Garland, however, a noble fellow, exerted himself to the utmost, and called to his companions around, begging them to come and die, if they must needs die, with their beloved Pastor. James and the Tonga lad succeeded in getting him upon the upturned canoe, and for a while he sat across it, the poor youths in the water keeping hold of him, and trying to keep him steady. There for a while longer he remained, we may say, without clothing, and in the bitter wave; but now the poor Tonga lad became exhausted, and he likewise sank to rise no more; and our brother, finding that he as well must die, continued in the sole embrace of James Garland, as long as it was possible to compose his agitated spirit. In this condition he began breathing out his soul to God in earnest prayer: the excitement and physical perturbation of such a scene was natural, and he exclaimed, "O dear, dear, dear me! " Ka mate, ka mate ! " We are dead. ' For about half an hour he was enabled to keep this position, though becoming increasingly paralysed with cold. The precious moments were spent in repeating his latest acts of trust in the all justifying blood, and in commending himself, with the last enemy in view, into the adorable hands of the Conqueror of death. But now a succession of swelling waves were setting in from the ocean and Hauraki Gulf: one of these came rolling on he saw it approach: it soon overwhelmed them, and, after a brief struggle, our dear brother's afflictions were all over, for he sank in deep water, and never appeared at the surface again. Garland was carried a great distance by the wave, and was on the point of perishing too, but, being a good swimmer, he gained the canoe once more, with five other companions on looking down, he saw the body of his dear master descending into the deep; but this was his last sad sight. The surviving natives righted the canoe, bailed out most of the water, secured some of the boxes that were floating about containing Mr. Bumby's papers, and, as they were a diminished company, they succeeded in reaching land, when the melancholy intelligence spread like lightning in every direction, producing the utmost sorrow and distress.'

Thirteen of the crew drowned and Bumby's body was never found. His death seemed to resonant particularly strongly through the missions and back in England once the news arrived. Barrett says, in his usual rather baroque language: '*It was not by splendour of genius that he won for himself such an amount of esteem and responsive affection, though he was not devoid of genius; nor was it by the extent and variety of his acquirements, though these were respectable; nor was it by tamely yielding up to the will of others principles which were founded on conviction, and by him held dear; but by a thorough dedication of himself and his all to the great work of winning souls to Christ. ..... A human being must have a heart of stone , to see a man pouring out his very soul and strength on his behalf, and yet remain unaffected by it.'*

There is a crude sketch of the disaster in Williment's book on John Hogg. [14] It is by the James Garland (Hemi Karena), mentioned by Barrett, one of the young Māori men who survived, and who had tried in vain to hold on to Bumby in the water. The sketch is held by the Methodist Missionary Society in London.

Barrett's book is much better than the first pages suggest, with their long passages of evangelism and flowery language typical of the time. But the real value, and enjoyable reading, is in the lengthy and numerous extracts from Bumby's letters and diaries, and those of other Wesleyan missionaries. They give a fine view of the establishment of the Methodist mission and the trials and activities of the missionaries sent out to establish a mission which, distinct from the Anglican CMS mission, was largely devoid of land purchase scandals and the ambiguity of straddling Māori society and the growing British administration and military. The book went into a second edition the following year. It also has a frontispiece portrait by the English portrait painter William Gush (1813-1888), done in 1840-41, and presumably from a sketch available in London at the time, engraved by R Smith, a member of London's Etching Club. It's a sensitive portrait, showing a young man with perhaps more steel in him than the narratives suggest. Alfred Barrett (1808-1876) himself was also a Weslyan minister, becoming governor of the Richmond Theological Institution, and author of numerous religious works.[15]

Bumby never married but was survived by his sister Mary, who has her own story in New Zealand history. When Mary stepped ashore at Māngungu with her brother in March 1839, she had two beehives amongst her luggage. While James Busby, the missionaries Richard Taylor and William Cotton (who later wrote books on beekeeping in New Zealand[16]), and Eliza Hobson, all kept bees, and there were two species of native bees around, Mary is credited with introducing the first hives. The bees soon went wild and are recorded as plentiful in the 1860s.[17] After Bumby's death, Mary married the Rev Gideon Smales, and they lived at missions in the Hokianga, Porirua and Aotea harbour, before settling in East Tamaki in Auckland. They developed a farm, Hampton Park, and built a chapel, St John's, on what came to be known as Smales Mountain. This a volcanic cone, site of the pa Te Puke Ō Tara (the hill of the Chief Tara, hence the current Otara suburb), and it was badly damaged by quarrying through into the sixties. When I was a lad brought up on a farm nearby in Flat Bush in the 1950s, we used to go to Smale's mountain for the quarry, where there also was a rugby field for the local competition. The chapel is still there. Mary Bumby died on a voyage back to England in 1862, and Gideon Smales married twice more and the numerous children left descendants still in the area up to recent times.[18] Mary has been remembered in history and fiction, with a novel based on her life published recently.[19]

Mary Anna Bumby, c 1830s by an unknown artist. Collection of the

[1] Dr William Laing, friend, colleague and fine plant biochemist.
[2] https://ianferg.nz/startled-at-the-thought-of-abandoning-canton/
[3] Young, William Curling. The English in China. London, Smith, Elder, 1840.

[4] https://cristinasanders.me/2019/02/13/william-curling-young/
[5] https://heritage.tasmanlibraries.govt.nz/nodes/view/5565
[6] Howhttps://heritage.tasmanlibraries.govt.nz/nodes/view/5565 itt W The history of discovery of Australia, Tasmania, and New Zealand, from the earliest date to the present day. London, Longman, Green, Longman, Roberts and Green. MDCCCLXV [1865].
[7] https://ianferg.nz/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Remote-in-Southern-Seas.-Early-NZ-books-1830-1839-1.pdf
[8] https://ianferg.nz/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Remote-in-Southern-Seas.-Early-NZ-books-1840-1843.pdf
[9] Thomson C. Twelve years in Canterbury, New Zealand: With visits to the other provinces and reminiscences of the route home through Australia, etc. (From a lady's journal). London: Sampson Low. [1867].
[10] https://ianferg.nz/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Early-New-Zealand-Books-between-1863-and-1873.pdf
[11] Barrett, Rev. A., The Life of the Rev. John Hewgill Bumby. With a Brief History of the Commencement and Progress of The Wesleyan Mission in New-Zealand. John Mason., London, 1852. Bagnall 321, Hocken 164. (2nd ed Bagnall 321, 1852). https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=DswNAAAAQAAJ&pg=GBS.PA1&hl=en
[12] https://dict-bio.howison.co.nz/person/john-hewgill-bumby
[13] Williment T M I. John Hobbs. 1800-1883. Wesleyan missionary to the Ngapuhi tribe of Northern New Zealand. Wellington Government Printer, 1985.
[14] Ibid. p. 156.
[15] https://www.biblicalcyclopedia.com/B/barrett-alfred.html
[16] Cotton, W. C. My bee book. London, Rivington, 842. Bagnall 1448; A manual or New Zealand beekeepers. Wellington, Stokes, 1848, Bagnall 1443. A version in te reo Māori (Bagnall 1445) was also published in 1849.
[17] Honey bees brought to New Zealand, URL: https://nzhistory.govt.nz/mary-bumby-brings-the-first-honey-bees-in-new-zealand, (Manatū Taonga — Ministry for Culture and Heritage), updated 24-May-2024
[18] Clark, J A (compiler). East Tamaki, including the adjoining areas of Flatbush and Otara. Waiuku, Papatoetoe Historical Society, 2002.
[19] Laird, J M. Mrs Bumby's mission. Northern Bee Books, 2024.