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FREETHOUGHT IN THE MANAWATU AND WANGANUI IN THE 1880s

a research exercise presented in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Batchelor of Arts (Honours) at Massey
University.

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INTRODUCTION

Freethought was an affront to the dominant belief of New Zealand settler society. It challenged the hegemony of Christianity and claimed to explain reality in another way.

In this research exercise I have studied an area of New Zealand, the Manawatu and Wanganui, during the 'Golden Years' of international Freethought. It has been used as a window for the ideas and activities that was Freethought in Nineteenth-century settler society.

I have attempted to briefly explain the development of Freethought in Britain before turning to the place of Freethought in late nineteenth century New Zealand. The early triumphs and disappointments are registered there before I turn to discuss the Manawatu and Wanganui more specifically.

In the second chapter the origins of Freethought associations in the Wanganui and Manawatu are investigated. The possible reasons why associations were established in the areas they were is identified before the life of the associations are focussed on. In this instance the paper centres on the ways Freethought was disseminated, the types of activities its members took part in and the names of prominent individuals are looked at. The chapter also focusses upon statistical information to try and unravel the mystery of the discrepancy between official records of Freethought membership and those claimed by the associations themselves.

Chapter Three looks at the ideas that made up Freethought. This includes attempting to see Freethought in the context of liberal thought. It also includes the types of ideas these Freethinkers in the Manawatu and Wanganui were likely to be dealing with, that is the people who were their intellectual stimulants. The ideas which Freethinkers endorsed will also be described. Values-debates with Christians will also be described to see where these opposing groups stood. Differences of opinion within and outside the group will be looked at.

Chapter Four deals with the decline of Freethought associations in the Manawatu and Wanganui. The various reasons Freethought declined in this area is explored. This will include anything from the attitudes of Christians toward Freethought to the loss of charismatic leaders. The 'Golden Age' of Freethought occurred in New Zealand in such a short time that one wonders whether the sun had time to rise on the idea. The importance of its reliance on other countries for its stimulation will also be explored as a possible reason for its early decline. Perhaps it did not fit the social milieu that was New Zealand settler society?. Finally I will briefly explain what happened to Freethought following the 1880s.

I hope you find this research an interesting insight into the world of a group that has not received very much attention in the past. What the emergence of Freethought in this country shows is the vitality of settler society. Many were prepared to discuss ideas and debate them. There was more to settler life than the pursuit of material gratification. Even the smallest of towns was by no means an intellectual back-water. Infact, the vitality of these settlements contained is not evident today in a society that is supposedly open to many more ideas and theories.

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