

The Life of Charles Torlesse, 1825-1866

Early Life

Charles Obins Torlesse was born in 1825, in Stoke-by-Nayland, Suffolk, England, the second child and eldest son of Reverend C.M. Torlesse. His father was Rector of the parish, and his mother Catherine was the sister of Edward Gibbon Wakefield. The theory and practice of colonisation was a frequently debated topic in the Stoke vicarage.

As a sixteen-year-old in 1841, he began a three-year surveying cadetship with his uncle Arthur Wakefield at Nelson, working for the New Zealand Company. He returned to England in 1843 after the death of Arthur Wakefield in the Wairau Affray.

The Rev. Torlesse had become a member of the management committee of the Canterbury Association, and with that background, Charles and Thomas Cass sailed for New Zealand in 1848 on the 'Bernica', to survey the site of the Canterbury settlement with Captain Joseph Thomas, Agent for the Canterbury Association.

Surveying

The ship carrying Torlesse and company arrived in Port Cooper (Lyttelton) in December 1848. On December 19, Torlesse, Captain Thomas and Cass left the Deans farm in Riccarton to explore north beyond the Waimakariri River accompanied by William Fox and guided by William Heaphy, Thomas White and two Maori guides, Te Aika and Te Eou. While on this expedition, on New Year's Day 1849, Torlesse climbed a peak in the mountain range Thomas would later name after him. In early January, the men set out again for another exploratory journey before the real surveying began.

Captain Thomas received approval to proceed with the Canterbury settlement in July 1849 and gave the northern survey of the Mandeville District to Torlesse to carry out. A base was set up at Kaiapoi with the building of a survey house, and a makeshift wharf and bridge, the house providing accommodation and office space. By October,

survey stations had been set up throughout the area, and then in December the base shifted to Rangiora where the land was drier.

In December 1850, J. R. Godley, the Canterbury Association's agent, arrived and wished to tour the area that had been mapped. Torlesse accompanied the group as a guide along with his friend John C. Boys, a fellow surveyor. This journey was significant as it marked the first time the name 'Rangiora' was used on a regular basis, taking over from the earlier variation 'Rakihora'. Following this, Torlesse took on the job of laying out the road from Christchurch to Harewood Forest (Oxford), and Harewood Forest to Kaiapoi.

Settlement

In 1851, Torlesse's father purchased two land orders of 100 acres each, which entitled his son to a town section and the right to rent 1000 acres of pasturage. Torlesse registered his claim for two rural sections of pasturage near Rangiora Bush, and he went into partnership with J.C. Boys and Thomas Cass in the purchase of some cattle.

Charles married Alicia Townsend in Christchurch on 27 December 1851, and they lived in the first house built in Rangiora, situated on the edge of the bush by the Northbrook Stream. As well as his Rangiora farm he held the first lease for the Fernside Run, dated 25 August 1851. In its early years, it was stocked with ewes, sheep, steers and horses, most of which he grazed for other owners. Torlesse also purchased about three hundred acres of good wasteland south-east of the bush and between the fork of the Northbrook and Southbrook streams. It was heavy peat swamp and he converted it into productive farmland with the help of newly-arrived migrants. This land was first named Ohipu, then Rivermarsh, and was ready for farming in 1861.

Once settled with his wife, he became quite involved in community matters in the area. In May 1854, the Government declared Charles a Justice of the Peace in the region, and in July 1855, he was made a Resident Magistrate. He was also involved in the planning for the St John Baptist Anglican Church and was the chairman of the

newly formed cricket club. In 1857, his son Arthur was born, followed by three daughters.

Between 1856 and 1859, he gave over the management of Fernside to his brother Henry while he looked for new sheep country. In 1856 he took up the lease of Birch Hill, and Snowdale in 1858. In 1859 Torlesse disposed of these three runs. In January 1861 after a public farewell in Rangiora, he sailed for England with Alicia and their children to visit family.

They returned to New Zealand in 1862. Charles gave up farming, and having sold his stations, entered into partnership with Henry Matson as a stock agent and sheep inspector. Torlesse and his family moved to Rolleston Avenue where he busied himself within the community.

In 1864, he became seriously ill. He recovered enough to return to England with his wife and children, but remained in indifferent health and died on 14th November 1866. He was buried in the churchyard of his old home, Stoke-by-Nayland.

Charles Torlesse was an earnest Christian, and scrupulously straight in all his dealings. In his journals he has left us what is undoubtedly the most comprehensive record of the Canterbury Settlement during its first two years. [Peter Bromley Maling, editor of 'The Torlesse Papers' in his introduction].

Sources Used

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