

The following review appeared in Landfall On-Line in July 2012

The Hungry Heart, Journeys with William Colenso, by Peter Wells; Vintage, \$49.99.

Give Your Thoughts Life, William Colenso's Letters to the Editor, Compiled by Ian St George; Otago University Press, \$65.

A question lingers throughout a reading of Peter Wells's *The Hungry Heart* - what exactly is this book? There are no clues in the way of preface or blurb and readers must make up their own minds. But a reviewer has the advantage of a publicity sheet in which Wells says the book allowed him to re-engage with his 'former passion' of colonial history and 'I hope I also bring the vividness of a novelist's eye and ear to an historical narrative.' The 'Journeys' of the sub-title do not relate to William Colenso's North Island explorations, which are said to have been over-emphasised elsewhere, but rather the emotional journeys of a 'difficult, passionate man.' Wells says, 'The larger picture I want to present is Colenso as a passionate if flawed outsider, a towering figure in New Zealand's intellectual heritage.' His epigraph on the title page is taken from a New South Wales government travel poster: 'Sometimes it's the winding roads, the missed turns or the unplanned surprises that make a simple journey something special.' What other kind of surprises are there?

It becomes clear that the journeys are Wells's own, in search of his own place and identity and sexual heritage. Wells appears to find an ancestor in Colenso as the 'outsider, the questioner, the maverick,' and perhaps as 'an extremely difficult, prickly creature: people of individual genius often are,' although 'genius' seems a step too far. Wells writes, 'Wasn't I, in effect claiming Colenso by writing a book about him?' Only if you want to, only if you wish to be less than objective about your subject.

Wells's physical journeys in search of Colenso are limited: the environs of his Napier home and the Bay of Islands. He is particularly focussed on Waitangi, just south of Napier, the site of Colenso's Hawke's Bay mission station; but there is no trace of it, even in the shape of the natural environment, following floods, shoreline and land use changes. The nondescript character of the location is well reflected in Wells's photographs yet he works hard to invest Waitangi with a sense of being 'accompanied' by Colenso and his missionary past. He acknowledges, following a DoC guided group walk of the area, that no-one else feels this and it leads him to the powerful observation that to most

Pakeha, history comes from 'something Maori. This was how Pakeha people now tried to position themselves. They tried to adopt all things Maori ... Yet this way of looking involved a species of blindness, as well as a tonal deafness as to the wairua of their own specific history.' This is the chief achievement of Wells's book, a vivid invoking not just of the life of William Colenso but also of the worth of the heritage in the 'harshness of the life and the moments of illumination of the very earliest Pakeha migrants.' Pakeha need to claim their own history and not rely on someone else's.

Wells journeys into the emotional and sexual lives of Colenso and those close to him, and within the social contexts of the times, mostly from the 1830s to the 1850s. His sources for this are largely Colenso's own diaries, letters and reports, as well as the work and collections of other students of Colenso, especially Ian St George, and the writers of the only full Colenso biography (1948), the late A.G. Bagnall and G.C. Petersen. Although the publisher states that the book 'is footnoted, so it can function as a learned work', an understanding of Wells's research and writing context is hampered by the lack of an acknowledgements page or a bibliography.

Much of what Wells has to say about Colenso's character, his emotional and sexual condition, is intriguing and thought-provoking. But it does not add much to what was already known of a courageous, disputatious polymath, a missionary often high-handed with Maori and who was defrocked following his fathering of a child with a Maori servant. Wells's account of the consequent stresses and breakup of his marriage with Elizabeth Colenso (Fairburn) is perhaps the best section of the book. But too much of Wells's text is marred by such pop psychology observations as 'One could probably murmur the word *bipolar*'; 'Possibly, as in most marriages, everyone just crossed their fingers and hoped for the best,' and, in the caption to a photograph of daughter Frances, 'Like any child of a split marriage, she looks pensively into the future.'

The balance of the book can be best illustrated by contrasting two chapters. Wells devotes the 15 pages of Chapter 17 to an entirely fruitless investigation, based on second and third-hand hearsay, into whether or not Colenso had his way with boys. On the other hand, he allocates only the five pages of Chapter 21 - of which only one is narrative text - to Colenso's considerable travels and explorations of the North Island. Yet these were key to his outstanding botanical collections, as well as his missionary work. For Wells, Colenso's well-known assertion, 'My home is *in the wild*' represents a gasp of escape from the oppressive atmosphere of the Paihia missionary community. But this is usually

taken at its face value: Colenso's joy at being able to fulfil his dream in New Zealand of emulating the heroes of his youth, African explorers such as Mungo Park. Late in life he wrote that, as a young man in Cornwall, 'I had very nearly devoted myself to carry on that enquiry-research in Central Africa.'

Wells's narrative makes for an entertaining, and sometimes absorbing read, and it is enhanced by numerous illustrations in a finely produced book. It should achieve its object of stimulating greater awareness of one of the more significant and controversial figures in our 19th century history. But in the end it reads like a book about another book: a narrative of the research, analysis and speculation for a full biography or historical novel.

Wells wishes to present Colenso as a 'towering figure' in our intellectual heritage, even genius; but by claiming too much for his extra-missionary achievements, seeing too much of his story through a sexual lens, and discounting the explorations, Colenso is somehow diminished. Wells convincingly evokes Colenso's emotional difficulties, the spiky, often authoritarian, characteristics that estranged family, friends and colleagues. Colenso was not a genius. He was an energetic, courageous, articulate and intelligent early New Zealander who demonstrated the range of skills and enthusiasms, the versatility and ingenuity, that we continue to praise as hallmarks of our national character. And if you want to find him now, it will not be in Napier, nearby Waitangi or the Bay of Islands. As he told us, his home was *'in the wild'*.

On the other hand, Ian St George's *Give Your Thoughts Life* makes a convincing case that William Colenso's second home was in the letters columns of local newspapers. In a feat of scholarship, St George has compiled a 500-page volume incorporating 235 - from many hundreds - of Colenso's letters to the editor. These are mostly to the *Hawkes Bay Herald* and published between 1847 and 1898, a 50-year marathon of opinionated public correspondence that ranged over subjects from Charity to Education to Maori to History and Politics. Provincial newspaper columns were the 'public spheres' of their time and in 1859, Colenso told his fellow citizens, 'You have the Press, both open and free: use it. Give your thoughts life; let all good measures be brought forward, discussed and well ventilated.'

An index to such a collection would require a small volume of its own so that St George has wisely numbered the letters in chronological order and listed them in an appendix of Letters By Subject. A friend and contemporary, Coupland Harding, wrote after Colenso's death in 1899, 'Readers of his voluminous newspaper correspondence could not fail to form some idea of his extensive stores of information, his methodical style, his British pugnacity, and indomitable energy. They would note certain curious mental "kinks" and personal prejudices ostentatiously displayed, but only personal acquaintance could reveal the beauty and spirituality of the hidden life - the unfathomable kindness of his nature.'

Give Your Thoughts Life supplements Ian St George's 2008 *Colenso's Collections*, his private letters to naturalists Allan Cunningham, W.J. Hooker and J.D. Hooker and which mostly revolved around his botanical and other natural history collections. Both books are intended to complement St George's forthcoming annotated edition of the 1948 Bagnall-Petersen biography. With all of St George's volumes and Wells's book on hand - plus the bibliographical work of the Colenso Project - a substantial foundation will have been laid for a new, comprehensive and definitive biography of a great Victorian New Zealander.