

Bishop Pompallier's Reserve, Ponsonby – Launch

Friday, 8 April 2005

Speech Notes by Michael Lee

Mesdames et Messieurs,

D'Abord, je voudrais vous souhaiter la bienvenue. Je voudrais aussi saluer Son Excellence Monsieur l'Ambassadeur de France en Nouvelle Zélande Jean-Michel Marlaud.

Je vous remercie de l'honneur de vous adresser quelque mots, au nom de L'Alliance Française également.

Your excellency the Ambassador of France, Rev Father Henare Tait, members of the clergy, members of the Community Board, Honoured Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am honoured to speak today on behalf of the Alliance Française and its Directrice Sonia Plantey.

The French role in New Zealand's early history was significant and today's event is a modest but certainly important step in reclaiming a part of Auckland's cultural heritage.

The French contribution to New Zealand's early history has tended to be overlooked. Not many Aucklanders would appreciate that the very first maps – marine charts of Auckland and the Hauraki Gulf, Waitemata Harbour and the Manukau Harbour were created by French explorers – led by Dumont d'Urville in 1827.

Even fewer New Zealanders would know that the first European woman to see New Zealand and New Zealand Maori was a French woman. Louise Girardin was Admiral Bruny d'entrecasteaux's steward – when his ship Recherche hove to off North Cape to make navigational observations in March 1793. Louise was disguised as a man and was signed on the ship's articles as Louis.

Even further back than that in December 1769 at the same time as Captain Cook was exploring New Zealand a French explorer Jean Marie de Surville also arrived in New Zealand and landed in Doubtless Bay where the very first Christian service was conducted by a Dominican priest Abbé Paul-Antoine de Villefeix on Christmas Day 1769.

The person we have come to honour today was also a priest - Bishop Jean-Baptiste François Pompallier was a truly towering figure during the formative decades of modern New Zealand – literally present at the creation – he was a witness at the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi on February 6th 1840.

Born in 1802 and raised in Lyon at the time of Napoleon, Pompallier was ordained a priest in 1823 and was made a Bishop in 1835 by Pope Gregory XVI (10 Popes before the late Pope Jean Paul II whom we mourn today). Pope Gregory made Pompallier Vicar Apostolic for Western Oceania.

He arrived in New Zealand with a small group of French Marist Priests and brothers 1837. Having set up successful Catholic missionary stations in the Hokianga, the Bay of Islands, soon after he moved to the new settlement of Auckland, which became the capital of the new colony. There he was to find that his flock – previously Maori – was to be mainly Irish – most of whom were British soldiers and their families – such as my own Great Great Grandparents.

Bishop Pompallier's influence is still very much present in the landscape of modern Auckland. St Marys Bay and St Mary's College recall Mount St Mary, essentially the hill where we stand today – which was named by Pompallier. Similarly the cathedral of St Patricks across the valley in Wyndham Street was commissioned by the Bishop in 1846 and opened in 1848. These are part of the physical aspects of his legacy to the cultural heritage of modern Auckland.

In 1868 after a lifetime's work in the South Pacific – mainly based in Auckland, Bishop Pompallier left New Zealand for the last time. Sadly the last two years of his life were not peaceful. We know that very soon after the Bishop began his well deserved retirement in Paris, the Franco Prussian war broke out in 1870. During the *année terrible* Pompallier old and frail had to endure the dreadful siege of Paris.

During those harsh months when the Prussian armies encircled and shelled the city and the people of Paris suffered famine, far off Auckland must have seemed like something of peaceful Paradise. It is believed that during the siege, the Bishop used to write to his friends in Auckland using the famous balloon post used by the Parisians to communicate with the outside world.

And after the siege he had to endure the dreadful events that came with the crushing of the Paris Commune. He died on 21 December 1871.

On behalf of Alliance Française I congratulate Gerard Hill, and the former Ponsonby Herne Bay Community Council, the Ponsonby Community Centre, Frogz in NZ, the musicians of St Marys, the Western Bays NZ Community Board, The Great Ponsonby B&B Small Hotel and Auckland City Council for making this gesture in acknowledging and honouring Auckland's past. In doing so you are building mutual understanding and appreciation of Auckland's special French history, thereby strengthening our friendship with the people of France more or whom are visiting our country. As well as friendship with our neighbours, indeed with our closest neighbours in the French Pacific territories.

Thank you –merci beaucoup.

