The Introduction of the Spiritual to New Zealand*

Negro Spirituals are familiar to us all. On Good Friday we have all heard soloists and quartets singing: "Were you there when they crucified my Lord?". At the Billy Graham Crusades massed choirs often sing, "Every time I feel the Spirit". Even the rugby crowds have taken over the spirituals with the English World Cup side being supported by crowds of fans singing "Swing low sweet chariot".

Spirituals have become part of the evangelical heritage. They are part of the gospel culture to which Baptists belong. But how is it that these spirituals, which arose from the faith and agony of black slaves in the plantations of 18th and 19th century America, crossed the Pacific to New Zealand?

When Decimus Dolamore started the first Baptist Church in New Zealand at Nelson in 1851 no one sang spirituals. Thirty-one years later when 22 Baptist Churches formed the Baptist Union of New Zealand none of them included spirituals in their services or concerts.

This all changed, however, on 24 November 1886 when the s.s. Manipouri docked in Auckland harbour. On board the ship from Sydney was a group of former slaves and the sons and daughters of slaves called "The Fisk Jubilee Singers". They took New Zealand by storm, traveled the length and breadth of the country for seven months, gave over 200 concerts and sailed from Bluff for Australia in May 1887.[1] Before they arrived in New Zealand Negro spirituals were

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almost unknown here. After they left, their songs were being sung and whistled in every town in the land.

Their name, "The Fisk Jubilee Singers" comes from Fisk University in Nashville, Tennessee - one of the first Colleges for Blacks in America. It was started after the Civil War by a missionary society to help educate emancipated slaves.[2] It is estimated that four million blacks were freed. They were usually homeless, penniless and uneducated. To provide education for them was a huge challenge. Schools were started in little cabins, in army tents and in the open air.

One school was started by teachers sent out by the American Missionary Association. The Association was started in 1846 to work among the people of Jamaica and West Africa. But with the end of slavery the Mission saw that a huge need existed at home. By 1863 it had 83 ministers and teachers working amongst the freed slaves. As the work expanded, the need for teacher training also increased.

Fisk University at Nashville, Tennessee was set up by the Association in 1866 for the higher education of freed slaves and to equip ministers and teachers. The name "Fisk" was given as a tribute to General Clinton B Fisk, a distinguished Christian leader who helped to establish the University. A group of buildings which had been used as an army hospital were made available and the work began. But finance was a continual problem. As the old hospital buildings fell into decay, a new site and a new building became an urgent necessity.

The University treasurer, George L White, a former school teacher, had gained a reputation as a choir leader. [3] He had no formal musical training, but was put in charge of music at the University. He began to pick out the best singers amongst the students and in 1867 gave a public concert with his student choir. It was a huge success and raised some money for the University.

The next year he gave another and better concert and, in 1870, his well drilled singers went to Memphis singing in a packed out

Opera House. About this time the National Teachers Association of the United States held its Annual Convention in Nashville. The Fisk Singers were asked to provide an item at the opening ceremony. Some white people objected to the presence of the ex-slaves but the quality of the singing was so good that the group was asked to sing at every session of the Convention. George White, sensing by this time that the singing of his students could be a good money-raiser for the University, began to plan a tour with the group.

Their first tour began in October 1871. The singers took part in services at two prominent Congregational Churches in Cincinnati and were warmly received. From there they moved on to other towns. But they had their problems. Hotels refused them accommodation because of their colour and they were subjected to constant racist prejudice. At one concert only 20 people turned up and they had hardly enough money to travel to their next assignment.[4]

At Columbus, Ohio, they decided to call themselves the "Fisk Jubilee Singers" after the Old Testament "year of Jubilee" which had been identified by them as the year they were freed from slavery.

In New York, Henry Ward Beecher, a leading preacher of the day, gave them his enthusiastic support. He commended them to a Boston friend:

> *They will charm any audience, sure; they make their mark by singing the 'spirituals' and plantation songs as only they can sing them who know how to keep time to a master's whip. Our people have been delighted.*

After two months on the road, thanks to Beecher's commendation, the tour which began with such a struggle, became a succession of triumphs. In Washington, members of Congress attended their concerts and the President gave them an audience. This gave them the stamp of approval and soon they were everywhere being acclaimed.

Their songs were written down for the first time by T F Seward, a well known teacher and composer, and were published in book form. Thousands were sold at the concerts. When the tour ended, after three months of effort, $20,000 was donated to Fisk University, a sum far exceeding their expectations.

The reputation they made on that first tour resulted in an invitation to the Second World Peace Jubilee held in the Boston Coliseum. A crowd of over 20,000 gathered but racial prejudice again raised its head when the Singers, on their first appearance were hissed on to the platform by some of the crowd. But, a day or two later, opposition disappeared when they were invited to sing the Battle Hymn of the Republic, "Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord".

J B T Marsh describes the scene:

> *Every word of the first line rang through the great Coliseum as if it sounded out of a trumpet. The great audience were carried away in a whirlwind of delight. The trained musicians in the orchestra bent forward in forgetfulness of their parts and one old German was conspicuous holding his violin over his head and whacking out upon it his applause with the bow held in the other.*
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> *When the grand old chorus, 'Glory, glory hallelujah' followed with a swelling volume of music from the great orchestra, the thunder of the bands, and the roar of the artillery, the scene was indescribable. Twenty thousand people were on their feet. Ladies waves their handkerchiefs. Men threw their hats in the air and the Coliseum rang with cheers and shouts of 'The Jubilees! The Jubilees for ever!*[5]

The final seal on the success of the Jubilee Singers in America

came when President Grant invited them to the White House in Washington. Standing in a semi-circle the ex-slaves sang a spiritual now famous the world over - "When Israel was in Egypt's land - Let my people go".[6]

After their successful tour of America the Jubilee Singers were invited to England. Backed by the Earl of Shaftesbury and the Duke of Argyle and supported by the churches, the singers were a success from the start. Their status as former slaves appealed to the imagination and their music captured the hearts of every audience. They became celebrities overnight. Gladstone, the Prime Minister, entertained them in his home and as the final accolade, Queen Victoria requested to hear them.

Still overwhelmed by their reception the eleven black students, six women and five men, were ushered into a private room. The Queen was waiting for them. "Sing me some of your songs", she asked. Quietly, but with deep feeling, they sang a spiritual which before long was being sung by choirs and soloists throughout Britain .. "Steal away to Jesus". It is still being sung today.[7]

With new members added from time to time, the Jubilee Singers made several more visits to Britain in subsequent years and their continued success assured that Fisk University would not go bankrupt.

Then came 1886 and the visit to New Zealand. Something of the fame of the Jubilee Singers had already preceded them. Immigrants had passed on news of their singing. Church papers commended their Christian character and the religious message of their songs. But New Zealand was still comparatively isolated. To the majority of the colonists the singers were still only a name. They arrived in Auckland at the end of November. There were eleven in the party: four sopranos; two contraltos; two basses and two tenors - with an accompanist. The senior of the two basses, F J Loudin, was leader and manager. He had been with the Jubilee Singers for twelve years.[8]

Their first concert in the Auckland City Hall, like all the others to come in New Zealand, drew capacity crowds. There were no staged effects. Dressed in plain dark clothes the eleven sat in a semi-circle. Every programme started in the same way, not with a rousing chorus but with the quiet haunting melody of "Steal away to Jesus".

Newspaper reporters vied with one another in their descriptions.

> *Their first song, "Steal away to Jesus" showed how perfectly they are trained and how marvelously voices may be made to blend. The melody seemed to come not from human beings but from some celestial instrument so exquisitely blended were the tones, so perfect was the time.*[9]

Not to be outdone another reporter wrote:

> *The voices blended in such perfect harmony, the touches of light and shade were so skillfully defined and the enunciation so perfect that for the moment listeners literally forgot about all worldly affairs.*[10]

The first half of each programme consisted almost entirely of Negro spirituals sung as solos, quartets or by the whole group. In the second half, the singers made the crowd laugh with comic songs or weep with the sentimental ballads of the day. The spirituals, however, proved to be the real attraction. Although one critic spoke of them rather condescendingly as "These plaintive, quaint and humorous melodies", the New Zealand public couldn't have enough of them.[11]

The group sang over one hundred different spirituals during the tour. Some of them were rollicking songs like "G'win to ride up in the chariot" or the "Gospel Train". But the bulk of the spirituals were quiet and sad in tone reflecting the agony of the slave days. A favourite at the concerts was the spiritual, "Nobody knows the trouble I see, Lord". When the Jubilee Singers sang that, a reviewer wrote:

> *At times the voices of the singers rose in a loud plaintive wail then sank with a gentle cadence like the sighing of the wind. As the last note died away the audience were almost breathless. Then followed a storm of applause.*[12]

From Auckland the singers moved south. Their itinerary sounds like a gazetteer of the North Island:

> Auckland, Onehunga, Otahuhu, Hamilton, Cambridge, Te Aroha, Thames, Napier, Rotorua.....

The Maori of Rotorua impressed the singers. Writing about them afterwards, F J Loudin, the group leader, said:

> *The Maoris are a strong, vigorous, intelligent people. They seemed to take to us at once and though their songs have a limited scale of three tones, still they were charmed with our music. I have known them to follow us from town to town simply to talk to us and hear us sing.*
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> *One woman who, with two children, was on the train with us going to the next town, said to me: 'It seems as if your singing makes me crazy. I've been to two places to hear you sing and I'm now going to a third.'*[13]

The highlight of the North Island section of the tour was undoubtedly the visit to Wellington. They were there for a week in February 1887. Night after night the Opera House was densely packed. The Evening Post reported:

> *Not a seat was vacant, the circle gangways were occupied and the back of the barricade was thronged with ladies and gentlemen who had to stand throughout the entire performance.*[14]

The crowds were so great that the City Council had to step in and insist that all passageways should be kept clear. At the end of the visit, the newspapers announced:

The business done by the Jubilee Singers during their stay in Wellington has exceeded anything achieved by any theatrical company which has ever visited this city. The average nightly attendance has been 1300.[15]

During the interval of each concert, the manager told the story of the Fisk University and the part the Jubilee Singers had played in its development. He then announced that a book was on sale at the door entitled "The Story of the Jubilee Singers". "It included", he went on, "the music of the songs we sing". Thousands of copies were sold and the spirituals were soon being tried out by choirs and soloists in town after town. Negro spirituals were undoubtedly at the top of the 1887 hit parade.

After Wellington, the Jubilee Singers crossed Cook Strait to Nelson and began to work their way down the South Island. Hardly a township of any size was missed. Kaiapoi, Oxford, Lyttelton, Rangiora, Ashburton and Amberley - in Canterbury - all had concerts. But it was in the main centres that they enjoyed the greatest success. This was largely due to the enthusiastic backing of the churches.

In these Victorian days, good churchmen looked at theatres with some suspicion. But when the Jubilee Singers appeared at the Christchurch Theatre Royal, the crowd included a large number of clergymen, and as one observer noted, "Others who are seldom seen at entertainments".[16]

The religious attractions of the spirituals had clearly triumphed over the Churches' disapproval of theatre-going. Church members flocked in great numbers to the concerts, some of them no doubt feeling a little guilty as they crossed the threshold of places usually denounced from the pulpits as "strongholds of Satan". A writer in "The New Zealand Baptist" in January 1887 warned readers about the dangers of the theatre:

> *The neighbourhood of the theatre is strewn with dead men's bones, the ghastly remains of the victims who were drawn from their straight course by the craving for rich scenery, beauty of form and the chorus of music. Should we not do well to follow the example of Ulysses and his fellow voyagers, who closed their ears or tied themselves to the mast till they could no longer hear the notes of the bewitching song?*

Such warnings were undercut by the strong spiritual tone of the Jubilee Singers and by the Christian message of many of their songs.

The tour finally came to an end in May 1887 when the singers reached Invercargill. For three successive nights they packed Sloan's Theatre and when the ship on which they were to travel to Australia was delayed for a day they gave Invercargill a bonus farewell performance.[17]

Altogether the Jubilee Singers had been on the road for seven months with hardly a break. They had given over 200 concerts. Before they arrived in New Zealand Negro spirituals were largely unknown. By the time they left Negro spirituals had been given a new status and were being sung and whistled in every town in the land.

Such a successful story seems almost too good to be true. These Jubilee Singers seem to have been one of the most popular and successful groups ever to tour New Zealand. Were there no problems or criticisms? Only one. A Wellington reporter noted the obvious financial success of the tour and then added:

> *The Jubilee Singers are not singing on behalf of Fisk University. There is no longer any necessity to raise funds in the manner originally adopted .... they are giving entertainment solely on their own account.*[18]

No one else seems to have raised this point. At the concerts, Fisk

University was always mentioned and most people no doubt assumed the profits from the tour would be going to that institution.

An Otago reviewer quietly pointed out: "The Fisk Singers have been gathering an extraordinary amount of current coin during their tour off New Zealand" but he did not suggest that there was anything wrong in that.[19] Apart from these two comments nobody seems to have questioned the finances of the singers.

I wrote to the librarian at Fisk University and asked if they had any records in their archives of the New Zealand tour of the Fisk Jubilee Singers. The librarian replied, "we are sorry but this information is not in our Jubilee Singers Archives". [20]

So was this visit one of the most brilliant confidence tricks ever imposed on the New Zealand public? It is hard to be sure after over a century has passed, but when I was doing this research I was contacted by a lady in Devonport, Auckland. She proved to be the great granddaughter of Mattie Lawrence, the assistant musical director of the Jubilee Singers when they first toured New Zealand. She told me she often wondered where her great grandmother acquired "a large fortune". The family heirlooms included cut crystal with Mattie Lawrence's initials engraved on it. The original set, she said, had 200-300 pieces. [21]

Eventually the true story emerged. The original group of the Fisk Jubilee Singers, the group that raised money for the University, disbanded in 1879 after its return from Europe. The University had no connection with the Singers from that date but the group themselves, having tasted the fruits of success, decided to stay together. They formed themselves into a joint stock company and continued giving concerts under the leadership of George White until 1882. At that point, he felt the time had come to disband finally.

One of his key singers, F J Loudin, urged by some of the group, disagreed and offered to carry on the group. Not all the members

continued but their places were filled by others. For two years the group, still calling themselves the Fisk Jubilee Singers, toured the United States and Canada with the profits being shared among the singers.

Then, in 1884, they decided to begin a world tour. It lasted for six years. They left New York in April 1884 and sailed for Great Britain where they had difficulties. A rival group was being planned calling themselves: "The Original Fisk University Jubilee Singers". Approaches were made to some of the singers in F J Loudin's group to join but apart from one singer, all remained loyal.

After a successful tour of England, the group visited Ireland and then, after considerable delay went on tour to Australasia. They sailed from Liverpool on May 13, 1886 and arrived eventually in Melbourne where all the key leaders of the church and state enthusiastically welcomed them. They gave eighty concerts in Melbourne, sixty in Sydney, forty in Adelaide and thirty in Brisbane. Then followed their seven month tour of New Zealand.

The Jubilee Singers, now singing for private profit and with new singers, returned to New Zealand for further tours in 1888, 1904, 1910 and 1924.

The Jubilee Singers in one form or another continued to tour Britain, and possibly other countries as well, into the 1930's. I myself heard such a group in the Assembly Hall in Edinburgh about 1938 and can still recall the superb harmonies and wonderful singing.

Whatever we may feel about the financial dealings of the Jubilee Singers, we must be grateful that they introduced New Zealand to so many wonderfully moving gospel spirituals which still enrich the lives of many.

Angus MacLeod

NOTES:

1. Details of the Jubilee Singers are contained in two histories written by Rev G D Pike. Volume I describes the first campaign in U.S.A. and Volume II describes the first visit to Great Britain. These two volumes were later combined in *The Story of the Jubilee Singers with Their Songs* by J B T Marsh. 3rd edition London 1876. Another edition published in 1899 included a supplement by F J Loudin containing an account of their "six years' tour around the world, and many new songs".
2. The American Missionary Society was formed in 1846 and sustained missions in Jamaica and West Africa in addition to working among blacks in the slave-holding States in U.S.A. By 1868 it had 17 academies for the education of freed slaves including Fisk University in Nashville. It was named after General Clinton B Fisk and was opened in January 1866 with 1000 students in the first year.
3. George L White, the son of a blacksmith, was born in 1838 and became a school teacher. He fought for the Union in the civil war and became the first treasurer of Fisk University. In 1867 George White gave a public concert with his school chorus. It was received so warmly that he gave another the following year.
4. For details of the first tour see *The Story of the Jubilee Singers* (1899 edition) chapter V.
5. *The Story of the Jubilee Singers* (1899 edition) p.41
6. *The Story of the Jubilee Singers* (1899) p.36
7. *The Story of the Jubilee Singers* (1899)pp.48 ff
8. Frederick J. Loudin joined the Jubilee Singers in 1875. Details of his life are in *The Story of the Jubilee Singers* (1899 edition) p.104 ff. He became manager and director of the company in 1882. See also: *N Z Herald* 24 November 1886 p.4
9. *Evening Post* 9 February 1887
10. *Southland Daily News* 25 May 1887
11. *Otago Witness* 6 May, 1887
12. *Otago Witness* 6 May, 1887
13. *The Story of the Jubilee Singers* (1899) p.142
14. *Evening Post* 11 February 1887
15. *Evening Post* 17 February 1887
16. *Lyttelton Times* 15 March 1887
17. *Southland Daily News* 27 and 28 May 1887
18. *Evening Post* 15 February 1887
19. *Otago Witness* 6 May 1887
20. Letters to A H MacLeod from Fisk University 10 August 1971
21. Letters to A H MacLeod from Jacqueline Fagan 10 and 27 May 1981