

The Logbooks of William Henry WEBSTER 1850-1931

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Auckland Central Library Special Collections has been home to two manuscript logbooks written by Midshipman William H Webster for as long as anyone cares to remember. But exactly who he was, and how the logbooks came into the possession of Special Collections has always been a bit of a mystery.

There are, however, a number of clues. The first is a pencil inscription on the flyleaf of volume one, which reads "Upton Hall, Cheshire"; and the second is a faint signature on the reverse of one of the sketches in volume two that could possibly be "Rev Webster". Both volumes have been stamped with an Auckland Public Library date-stamp for 10 May 1943.

According to the Library Donation Book for 10 August 1939 to 10 June 1948, the "Two Log books of HMS Pearl" were donated by "Mrs Seymour" of the "Valuation Dept, Town Hall" on 3 May 1943. They were allocated the donation number 9889. The Library committee formally accepted the gift on 10 May 1943, and the logbooks were given the manuscript numbers 2 and 3. At a later stage they were re-classified as books at classmark RBR (Rare Book Room) 915, before being re-catalogued once more as MS (manuscript) 250. But although Auckland City Archives holds a partial card index for early Council employees, "Mrs Seymour" does not feature, and the key to uncovering more about William H Webster actually proved to be the 1902 edition of *The Cyclopaedia of New Zealand*. This provided a basic biography, which I have expanded below by reference to the logbooks and to various other sources.

William Henry Webster was born on 1 October 1850 at Upton Hall, near Woodchurch on the Wirral peninsula in Cheshire, England.¹ He joined the Royal Navy in 1864 and served as a midshipman aboard *HMS Pearl* - a 17 gun, steam corvette of 1469 tons - from 5 May 1866, with brief periods of service on *HMS Rattler* (5 October – 22 December 1866), *HMS Osprey*

¹ *Alumni Cantabrigiensis*, part II, 1752-1900 vol. vi (1954); *GRO Index of Births* Q4 150, Wirral XIX.349.

(23 December 1866 – 2 January 1867) and *HMS Agincourt* (3 December 1870 – 14 April 1871).

From 5 May 1866 to 14 April 1871 William kept a log of his naval service, and it is this log that is now in the possession of Special Collections. On the whole, it is a dry and unimaginative record of navigational information and routine duties, lacking any personal commentary. But the skillfully drawn charts, and impressive sketches and watercolours that pepper its pages more than make up for its mundanity.

The *Pearl* arrived in Singapore in October 1866 and spent the next four years in the seas around South East Asia, China and Japan. The tour of duty coincided with complex power struggles and civil war in Japan, and William witnessed the bombardment of Hakodate by the Japanese Imperial Fleet in 1869. His log contains a pencil sketch of the offensive (20 June 1869), whilst another of his sketches of the event was reproduced in the *London Illustrated News* on 11 September 1869.

After leaving the Navy in 1873, William studied at St John's College, Cambridge, graduating in 1876/7. He was ordained a deacon in 1876, and a priest in 1878. (This explains the signature "Rev Webster" on the reverse of the sketch of the Mikado's fleet and western ships at anchor in Awomori Bay interleaved with the log at 17 May 1869.) His first appointment was to the curacy of West Exe, Devon, 1876-8, then Pitt Portion, Tiverton, 1878-80. In 1880-81 he was assistant curate of Westfield, Sussex, and he appears as such, now married and with four young children, in the 1881 British census. William had married Mary Stubbs, the niece of Dr William Stubbs, bishop of Oxford, the celebrated academic and historian, in the March quarter of 1874 and sketches of "Polly" and "my sweetheart" can be found at the back of volume two of the logbooks.

In 1881 William was appointed curate in charge of Cocking in Sussex, leaving there in 1882 to become chaplain to the English community at Bonn in Germany. The birth of his fifth child, Godfrey Egerton Webster, took place at this time, and was registered at Dusseldorf. From

1889 to 1890 he was Assistant Secretary to the Additional Curates' Society (Western District), and Organising Secretary (Midlands District) from 1890 to 1892. In 1892 he was appointed curate of Holy Trinity church Launceston, Tasmania, subsequently becoming vicar of Sheffield, Tasmania in 1895, then Rector of Bothwell in 1896. By August 1899 he had arrived in New Zealand where he took up the post of vicar of Waiuku. In 1902 he stepped down to concentrate on farming, and other activities, but was granted permission to officiate in the diocese of Auckland between 1903 and 1906. He then lived in Maunsell Street, Parnell. In 1909 he and his wife returned to England, where he took the post of curate of St Mary's, Hoxton, London from 1910 to 1912. There followed a brief term as curate of St John's, Hampstead (from 1912 to 1913), and the rectorship of Bradden, Northamptonshire from 1913 to 1922. William then appears to have retired to the south coast, living out his final years in a bungalow that he had had built at Barton-on-Sea, Hampshire in 1928, and which he named "Eocene".²

Eocene might seem an odd name for a house, but it is a clue to the Reverend Webster's extra-ecclesiastical interests. It is a geological term referring to the second epoch of the Tertiary period; the Eocene beds near Barton-on-Sea are particularly rich in fossil shells and the Reverend Webster's abode very likely takes its name from the nearby sequence of Eocene strata. It would certainly have been a fine place to live for any conchologist, as the Reverend Webster turns out to have been. From at least 1901 to 1909 he was an active member of the Auckland Institute and Museum, and during this time made several donations of shells to the Auckland Museum, along with a coloured drawing of a *Tethys Tryoni* (sea hare - current name *Aplysia parvula*). He also delivered 4 papers to the members of the Institute - "New Species of Marine Shells" on 27 February 1905, "Additions to the New Zealand Fauna" and "Results of dredging on the Continental Shelf of New Zealand" (both 6 December 1905), and "Additions to the New Zealand Molluscan Fauna" (12 December 1907). The papers are reproduced, together with illustrations by the author, in *The Transactions of the New Zealand*

² *Cyclopedia of New Zealand: Auckland*, p680; *Clergy List* 1903, p1006; *Crockfords* 1932, p1387; *Church Gazette*, Sept. 1899, pp163-4, 1 June 1931, p20; *Wise's NZ Post Office Directory*, 1910; *Calendars of Probate*, 1931; *GRO Marriage index*, Q1 1874 Plympton 5b.384; *GRO Death index*, Q2 1931 Lympington 2b.835; Natural History Museum, Archives File DF100/223.

Institute. Another paper 'New Mollusca from New Zealand' appeared in the *Proceedings of the Malacological Society*.³

The dredging referred to in Webster's 1905 lecture took place in January 1904, in 110 fathoms, off Great Barrier Island, reputedly "the first hauls over the 100 fathom line in Dominion waters". Henry Suter, one of Webster's companions, named a specimen found on the trip *Mitrella Websteri*. But this is not the only mollusc to commemorate William Webster. A fresh-water mussel found by him in an artificial drain in Waiuku in 1902 was named *Diplon menziesi websteri*, and the species *Sassia websteri* was named in his honour in 1932. Webster himself named *Laoma (Phrixgnathus) Francesci* after his son, Francis "to whose energy I owe the major part of my collection of non-marine mollusca".⁴

In 1929 he gifted his substantial collection of New Zealand and foreign shells to the new Auckland War Memorial Museum. This donation, together with the collection put together by his old friend, the late Charles Cooper, and in conjunction with the personal collection of mollusca of the Museum's first curator of conchology, Dr A W B Powell, created what was probably one of the foremost conchology collections in New Zealand at that time.⁵

William Henry Webster died in England on 6 May 1931. A death notice was printed in the *New Zealand Herald* the next day, and obituaries appeared in the *Herald*, *Church Gazette* and *Franklin Times* in the following weeks. In them, tribute was paid to the Reverend Webster as "an enthusiastic conchologist", and benefactor of the Auckland Museum. It was also noted

³ *Auckland Institute and Museum: Annual Reports 1900/1 to 1911/2*; W H Webster, 'New Mollusca from New Zealand', *Proceedings of the Malacological Society* vol. 6 (1904), pp106-108; *The Transactions of the New Zealand Institute*, xxxvii.276-280, xxxviii.305-8 & 309-312, xl.254-938.

⁴ H Suter, *Manual of the New Zealand Mollusca* (Wellington, 1913) pp xi, 436, 745; A W B Powell, *The Shellfish of New Zealand* (Auckland, 1937) pp25, 59 and plate 11; A Wrigley, 'English Eocene species of *Sassia*, with a note on the morphology of the Cymatiidae and the Bursidae', *Proceedings of the Malacological Society* vol. 20 (1932), pp127-140 (p132); Webster, 'New Mollusca from New Zealand', *loc. cit.*, p106.

⁵ *Auckland Institute and Museum: Annual Report 1929-30*; A W B Powell (ed), *Centennial History of the Auckland Institute & Museum 1867-1967* (Auckland, 1967), pp70-1

that he was survived by 4 sons and a daughter. And the daughter's name? Mrs J J Seymour - the 1943 donor of the logbooks to the Auckland Public Library.⁶

⁶ *New Zealand Herald*, 8 May 1931; *Church Gazette*, 1 June 1931, p20; *Franklin Times* 13 May 1931, p6.

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