

PRESBYTERIAN HISTORICAL SOCIETY

of

NEW ZEALAND.

THE VERY REV. JAMES GIBB:

PATRIOT INTO PACIFIST

by

L.H. Barber

ANNUAL LECTURE

Dunedin

1973

THE VERY REV. JAMES GIBB: PATRIOT INTO PACIFIST

From December 1919 until October 1920 New Zealand's foremost Presbyterian minister, the Very Rev. Dr James Gibb, was engaged in an overseas recruiting campaign designed to add twenty ministers and twenty suitable lay home missionaries to the ranks of the Presbyterian Church of New Zealand. James Gibb was the obvious choice for this commission to search out ministers and exit year students from within the Church of Scotland and the Presbyterian Churches of England and Ireland. Despite his trial for heresy in 1890 Gibb had established himself as a pillar of evangelical orthodoxy who by the combined force of his personality and persistency had in 1901 forced the union of New Zealand's two Presbyterian churches.¹ He was the convener of the new church's Home Mission committee, a committee that had scattered so many Presbyterian ministers and home mission agents throughout New Zealand's country back-blocks that in 1912 Gibb was able to boast to the Presbyterian General Assembly:

Already we have, as is evidenced by the Government ecclesiastical statistics, more persons attending our services than those of the Anglican Church, which comes next in order.²

Founder of two church schools, Scots College and Queen Margaret's College; father of Presbyterian social service activities in the Wellington Province, minister of one of the Dominion's largest congregations, forceful orator and skilled ecclesiastical politician, Gibb in public influence at least rivalled and probably surpassed that of the Anglican and Roman Catholic archbishops. In the political sphere he influenced a powerful Protestant lobby. A hesitant supporter of W.F. Massey's conservative Reform party government Gibb addressed oral and written advice to 'our Presbyterian Prime Minister'³ on issues as varied as the Government's labour policy, temperance, drilling of troops on Sundays and the need for the Bible to be taught in state schools. During the 1914-1918 war Gibb added to his public reputation by taking upon himself the role of a zealous patriot. He did not exaggerate when in the 1930's he lamented 'I was as good as a recruiting agent during the War'⁴ - his recorded utterances bear out his contention. At the 1914 Presbyterian General Assembly in moving the traditional motion of loyalty to the throne Gibb denounced the German army's 'excesses of lust and cruelty'.⁵ In April 1915 Gibb's patriotic fervour led him to use the occasion of an invitation to preach in Christchurch to deliver an attack on New Zealand's war contribution. Gibb quickly tipped his hat in farewell to his sermon's text, a passage from St John's

Gospel that argued 'if ye believe not that I am he, ye shall die in your sins'.⁶ Within a few minutes the guest preacher attacked

the great malignant nation with which we are now warring (it) had thrown down the challenge to Christ, and it was inexorably doomed.⁷

Gibb then satirically paraphrased the war creed of the German leaders:

Blessed are the valiant; blessed are the great in soul and strength for they shall enter into Valhalla; blessed are the war-makers for they shall be called the children of God, or of Odin, who is greater than God.⁸

In no doubt that those fighting on the side of the allies were fighting on the side of God and Christianity, Gibb then disadvantageously compared New Zealand's enlistment figures with those of Australia and Great Britain and concluded:

It is the urgent duty of all men of age and physical fitness to offer themselves at once to their country, and it is the duty of all women to surrender their men, nay, to bring pressure to bear on them to do their duty to the flag.⁹

The editor of the Press eulogised Gibb's address in an editorial that demanded 'at least 6,000 men ... within the next six weeks'.

The stirring sermon preached by the Rev Dr Gibb ... last evening should have an inspiring effect, and we should like to see similar efforts from a score of other pulpits in this province.¹⁰

By August 1915 he had worked himself to a fever of patriotic zeal and informed a packed congregation at a state and civic memorial service in the Wellington Town Hall :

Every unmarried man should volunteer. Even it is coming to this, that every married man who is physically fit should report himself to the authorities and say, "When in your judgement the time is come, here am I, send me".¹¹

Gibb cleverly suggested that Kitchener's call was God's call, a suggestion made by quoting Isaiah's response to God and indicating that this was every married man's proper response to the recruiting officer.¹² As Gibb warmed to his task Christian charity was forgotten

We are pledged to this conflict, to see that the insensate pride, the strong ambition, the merciless cruelty, in one word the militarism of Germany, shall be brought reeling and crushing to the dust.¹³

Stern in his determination that the ministry should play its part in the war effort Gibb successfully moved in the 1917 Presbyterian General Assembly that 'military exemption shall be sought for no minister called to service whose place can in any way be filled'.¹⁴

Gibb's jingoism was applauded by many New Zealanders and his patriotic sentiment differed little from that expressed by other leading clerics who given the extent of the Dominion's contribution of manpower to the war¹⁵ effort preferred to lambast the enemy rather than use the pulpit as a vehicle for the soothing sound of Christian charity. Gibb's opportunity to sway public opinion was greater than that allowed to most parsons and he used this opportunity to address patriotic rallies, church courts and congregations on the need for even greater enlistment numbers for the armed forces and the need to crush the central European powers. Gibb's elder son was a minister and his younger son was too young to enlist but Gibb did not allow his family's failure to contribute soldiers to inhibit his demand that younger brothers should follow older brothers to the Front. Those who could volunteer and would not be treated with contempt. Occasionally, and not surprisingly anonymously, a few of New Zealand's more pacific citizens replied, provoked by the charge of cowardice and upset by Gibb's marriage of war and religion. Following a particularly fierce jingoistic sermon in early September 1916 Gibb received this retort from Dunedin:

We've a man down here, doctor, that can beat you hollow at war sermons, simply beat you hollow. I've heard him. You know the style:- Righteousness, Liberty, Freedom &c. These catchwords are diplomatically sandwiched while he rubs on the war paint. It's all so delightful, so uplifting, so unprejudiced, so cosmopolitan, so likely to enhance the Kingdom of God on earth.¹⁶

When in 1919 the Presbyterian General Assembly commissioned Gibb to recruit additional ministers from the United Kingdom its members by selecting Gibb paid tribute to his standing in the church, city and nation. However, a few New Zealanders, especially those still confined in prison following their conscientious objection to enlistment, probably thought it poetic justice that the Defence department's clerical 'recruiting officer' should have his abilities so aptly recognised.

I.

Gibb succeeded in his mission and reported that arrangements were in hand for the first of the new recruits to arrive in New Zealand towards the close of 1920. When Gibb himself returned to Wellington his friends found to their consternation and his enemies to their joy that whilst abroad he had become enamoured with a new crusade. He returned a vocal anti-militarist, a League of Nations man who beat his pacifist drum so loudly that his own congregation at St John's began to empty and his power within the Presbyterian Church courts diminished as presbyters, who were also patriotic New Zealanders, saw the extent of his new crusading fervour. Gibb returned no longer even a reserved supporter of Massey's Reform government but with a new interest in the Labour party and its policies, especially those policies concerned with the elimination of social injustice and the establishment of world peace.

At what point of time did the patriotic parson adopt pacifism and move from his previous political stance? Ormond Burton, a well known New Zealand churchman, writer, and pacifist who served a term in prison for his anti-militarism during the Second World War, holds that Gibb 'left New Zealand orthodox and returned something of a revolutionary'.¹⁷ This claims too much for the impact of a few months abroad, even months of intense diplomatic and political activity, and pays too little heed to the evidence of Gibb's movement away from the role of unofficial recruiting officer, in the two years prior to his European visit.

How and when did Gibb reach his volte face? Charles Murray, an erudite Christchurch minister, was the crucial figure in Gibb's movement from militarism to anti-militarism. On the eve of the first World War Murray was convener of the General Assembly's committee on International Peace and as such was in communication

with the Presbyterian churches of the Empire, the Reformed Churches of France and the German Lutheran Church. As part of his personal attempt to present a united church condemnation of militarism and pro-war policies Murray was in personal communication with Dr Drylander, court chaplain to the Kaiser and with Dr Voights, president of the Evangelical Supreme Church Council in Berlin.¹⁸ Discreetly and consistently Murray retained his anti-militarist and pacifist position throughout the early years of the war despite accusations of pro-German sympathy.

In August 1916 Murray, incensed by Gibb's increased sabre rattling, warned him that he need not expect any revival in the nation's spiritual life as a consequence of war commitment and appealed to Gibb to look carefully at the final intentions of his political allies.

Our Premier expresses his inclination to carry out to its uttermost letter the law of Moses. viz. 'an eye for an eye' &c; as if Christ had never lived. Then I see the Premier of an adjacent Commonwealth expressing the determination to organise ... armies and navies when the present struggle is over. I see in these quarters no sign of improvement in our national life.¹⁹

Gibb disregarded this warning and at the 1917 General Assembly moved a strongly pro-war motion that demanded that the Church be

aware that this war must be waged with ⁱⁿ⁻flexible determination, and that meantime there can be no real or stable peace unless the military power of the Central Empires is shattered, or the Germanic peoples themselves realise that their aggressions have brought them nothing but disaster and the moral condemnation of the whole intelligent world.²⁰

This was too much for Murray who denounced Gibb as a 'strenuous militarist'.²¹ This epithet upset Gibb considerably and at the close of Assembly he forwarded a letter of explanation to Murray wherein he claimed that Murray's assessment of his position was 'the greatest mistake you ever made in your life'.²² Gibb contended that while he moved his motion as the convener of an Assembly committee he was opposed in committee to the motion presented to the Assembly. This argument gained an acid retort from Murray:

Neither our local Christchurch newspapers nor the Outlook gave the least hint that the resolution did not convey your views... All the Outlook says was: "Dr Gibb moved the adoption of the resolution which was seconded by Professor Dickie and carried unanimously without discussion, the House rising and singing two verses of the National Anthem... There was a way, as you well know, by which you could enter your dissent, even tho' convener, but there is no record, or evidence of your dissent. We therefore naturally concluded you supported it and therefore stand forth as a "strenuous militarist" as afore said.²³

Murray had chosen the right moment to take a firm line with Gibb. Already shaken by the death of Max Gray, son of one of his best friends, killed in France 'in front of his men and facing east',²⁴ and shocked by the mounting casualty list within his own congregation, Gibb's advocacy of war policies were made with increasing mental reservations as 1917 proceeded. In July he had written to Captain W. Howard Johnson, in France

it would not surprise me very much if this horrible war should in the end yield no overwhelmingly decisive victory for either side... it will put an end to the ambitions of Wilhelm of Potsdam; but it will do so probably as part of a greater whole, namely, the ending or at least the great diminution of militarism in all the civilised world.²⁵

Perhaps Gibb began his questioning even earlier, in July 1916, when leading a deputation before the Wellington City Council in opposition to Sunday golf he was faced by a deputation waiting on the Council with a request for permission to hold an anti-conscription rally. Gibb's case was based upon the example set by golf players to the children of the Berhamphore orphanage. After the refusal of the pacifist request one of that deputation wrote to Gibb:

Now, which, as a Christian minister, do you honestly believe would be likely to do these children the most harm morally, to see a quiet game of golf played on the Sabbath, or to see the troops going away at intervals with the purpose of killing their fellow men?²⁶

Murray was astute enough to realise that Gibb's certainty had given way to a dilemma and in late December 1917 was even less gentle in his treatment of Gibb. This time the bone of contention was a sermon delivered by Gibb on the teachings of Christ

on the Mount. Gibb attempted in this address to cloak his uncertainty with ambiguities but Murray had none of this:

I have given much time, study and reading to this subject and have come to the deliberate conclusion that war is not the way Christians, and therefore Christian nations, should settle their disputes. If you condemn war on such grounds as I have indicated, I shake hands with you and long to see the day when the Church of Christ will take that stand.... I have made up my mind about it, taught it, and have suffered accordingly.... Then I look at your letters and your articles again and I must confess it beats me to know where you actually stand on this subject.²⁷

Between December 1917 and December 1918 Gibb's public utterances about the war were cautious, ambiguous and less frequent. For Gibb this was a period of intense soul searching over the rightness of Christian support for any war, and in his search for an answer to his dilemma he read deeply not only into theological and ethical works but also critiques of the claim that Germany was solely responsible for the war. Benjamin Kidd's The Science of Power and Philip Gibb's The Soul of the War received special attention.²⁸ One year later, in December 1918, Gibb did not know where he stood and was prepared to speak out.

On 18 December 1918 Gibb addressed a letter to the editor of the Dominion condemning the proposed Imperial demands to be made upon the defeated powers at the Peace Conference. Gibb began by criticising the Dominion editor's advocacy of a tough line at the conference table, an advocacy summarised by Gibb:

that defeated Germany shall be dealt with practically on the principle - one had thought it long ago discredited - of "an eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth".²⁹

Then followed a stern criticism of the increased and increasing harshness of the demands proposed by Lloyd George and the War Cabinet that closed with a declaration that the Empire's leaders had now reached a position in direct conflict with the golden rule

as the Germans, if victorious, would have done unto us, so let us do unto them.³⁰

Gibb noted that the crushing of German militarism had not put an end to the power of militarism throughout the world and warned:

Unless I greatly err, if we abandon ourselves to the mood which now apparently holds the minds of many of our leaders ... we shall find that Armageddon has not yet been fought, that another and even more dreadful war lies before us in the not far distant future.³¹

How could a stop be brought to this headlong race to disaster? Gibb informed readers that the leaders of the British Free Churches, who were previously solidly against Germany, were now strenuously opposing the coalition government and its peace settlement policies. While Gibb was certain that the churches would state their opposition through the accepted and peaceful democratic machinery he was not convinced that the forces of labour would accept this betrayal of their sacrifices. Gibb stated his fear that the Labour party would respond to the betrayal of its ideal of 'no more war' by being driven into the arms of Bolshevism or at least into revolt against constitutional authority. As far as New Zealand was concerned Gibb's solution was clear:

A concordat must be established between the churches and the Labourists (sic) and Socialists, and whoever else in the community is determined that war is an abomination that must be banished from God's world.... If Church and Labour unite there will be an end to militarism in this country and in Great Britain.³²

Gibb's letter provoked four replies. J.D.Sievright rather insensitively suggested that Gibb could not have suffered as other fathers had suffered and closed his rejoinder with a few lines that might have turned the Scottish poet William McGonagall green with envy:

But never can me and you
 Forgive those sons of Cain
 Till the dead have had their due
 And the seas are clear again.³³

'Justice: Neither more nor less' was more temperate in tone despite his insistence that the Kaiser and his subordinates must be punished.³⁴ 'Loyalty' was affronted by Gibb's charges against Lloyd George and accused Gibb of 'a gross libel on our statesmen' and demanded an unequivocal apology.³⁵ A correspondent who called himself 'Mac' attempted a weak defence of Gibb, accused Sievwright of violent language, but even this defender closed with a demand for indemnities for wives and children, and for the furtherance of anti-war propaganda.³⁶ The editor of the Dominion did not change his

mind on the matter of war reparations and twelve days following the publication of Gibb's letter announced that the sweeping victory of the British coalition parties at the polls, with 484 seats to the opposition's 222, was a mandate from the electors for a policy of no half-measures at the Peace Conference.³⁷

Gibb was swimming against the stream and few took the risk of jumping in with him. Several thinking New Zealanders were prepared to give private encouragement but little more. C. Reginald Ford, a Wanganui architect penned his support in a private letter:

I endorse every word that you said in the same. I have long been waiting to see some lead given by the Church in the matter....I do not believe that the New Zealand people as a whole want to see the Peace Conference develop into a game of the old sort, of the diplomatists sitting around a table bargaining for spoils. Judging, however, from the latest utterances of Messrs Massey and Ward this is what they intend and expect.³⁸

In 1919 Gibb was out of tune with the militarist sentiment of New Zealand, a nation that could well be dubbed the Prussia of the South Pacific. The Armistice brought no end to the military obligations of a large section of New Zealand's population. Under the Defence Act of 1909 and its 1910 amendment youths from the age of eighteen years to the age of twenty-one were liable for service in the Territorials and boys of fourteen to eighteen years were obliged to join the Cadets. Despite the fact that during the war, apart from those men enlisted for the Expeditionary Force, approximately 58% of the male population between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five passed through the Territorial Force, and 90% of those between fourteen and eighteen served in the Cadets, leading military authorities, the National Defence League and advocates of a strong Empire, were dissatisfied with the extent of New Zealand's defence arrangements.³⁹

Sir James Allen, the Minister of Defence, assured the House of Representatives that the Committee on Imperial Defence was giving attention to plans for the protection of British possessions in the Pacific.⁴⁰ Although no Territorial camps were held in the immediate post-war years young men were still liable for service, medically examined and selected for units. In 1919 a new syllabus for cadet training was issued by Defence Headquarters, reducing the amount of military instruction but adding other subjects; according to the General Officer Commanding, Major-General E.W.C. Chaytor, advantageously

making for the mental, moral, and physical improvement of those undergoing instructions ⁴¹

Gibb viewed the continuation of the Territorial system, the extension of Cadet training into the realm of character formation, together with the government's support for Imperial re-armament, with alarm. On 12 August 1919 he stated his objections to the Presbytery of Wellington with such vigour and clarity that he received measured support:

The war was fought if possible to end war. Definite promises were given here and throughout the Empire, when the militarism of Germany was broken, militarism would be restricted. An extension of the territorial scheme such as proposed would not repress but intensify the militaristic spirit in this country. It is the duty of every nation to the league of nations to do its utmost to give effect to the conventions ⁴²

Gibb's rejection of the expanded Cadet training curriculum and of Sir James Allen's proposal to reactivate Territorial training brought support from overseas. In the October issue of The Christian World ⁴³ an article entitled 'Militarism in New Zealand' attacked the government's policy and Gibb received unexpected support from Sidney Keith, Church Secretary to the Purely Congregational Church in Surrey, who had met Gibb only once but hastened to encourage him.

I am glad to note that you are taking a leading part in opposing the monstrous proposals of Sir James Allen, and from this far-distant Homeland I beg the liberty of sending to you my devout congratulations. Surely the Churches in New Zealand are strong enough and wise enough to unite and squash such an idea straight away. ⁴⁴

By the date of Gibb's departure for the United Kingdom his anti-militarist opinions, advocacy of disarmament and support for the League of Nations, were public knowledge. To suggest that his conversion to pacifism took place during his recruiting campaign in Great Britain is to fly in the face of his steady movement away from ultra-patriotism; a movement first discernible in his uncertainty of mid-1917, that following a period of soul searching reached its moment of commitment in the Dominion article of 21 December, 1918, and continued to gain momentum throughout 1919.

The Gibb papers provide few indications of Gibb's movements during his time in the United Kingdom. They do tell that the secretary of the Church of Scotland Colonial committee invited him to attend the preliminary meeting of the inter-church Conference on Faith and Order, held in Geneva between 12 August and 20 August 1920,⁴⁵ but there is no indication of Gibb's reply. It is almost certain that he held conversations with leading British theologians, especially with those who held positions on war and disarmament similar to his own. He later encouraged New Zealand post-graduate students to study at Westminster College, Cambridge, and this suggests that John Oman and Carnegie Simpson, temperate critics of war aims during the war and outspoken advocates of a just peace, made their mark on him.⁴⁶

Despite an absence of information concerning Gibb's precise movements in Europe the fortuitous timing of his visit placed him in immediate awareness of the reaction of the Versailles Treaty and the League of the Covenant, both operative from 10 January 1920. He could not but be aware of the charges of calculated vengeance, cynical triumph, economic unrealism, pharasaic judgment and un-Christian behaviour, levelled by such eminent ecclesiastics as Cosmo Lang, Archbishop of York; Canon William Temple, H.R.L. Sheppard, vicar of St Martin-in-the-Fields, C.E. Raven, and others.

On his return to Wellington Gibb at once attempted to construct the anti-militarist alliance of the Churches and Labour, suggested in his 1918 letter to the Dominion.⁴⁷ He persuaded the Presbytery of Wellington to approach selected Labour leaders informing them of the Presbytery's attitude and inviting their support. By mid-1921 encouraging replies were received from the New Zealand Waterside Workers' Federation,⁴⁸ the National Executive of the Labour Party,⁴⁹ and the Okato Branch of the Labour Party.⁵⁰ During 1922 Gibb secured support from representative Protestant clergy and from the Roman Catholic hierarchy - a dramatic break-through in New Zealand inter-church relations. In February 1922, Archbishop O'Shea wrote to Gibb:

You may rest assured that the object for which it (a League of Nations union meeting) is being convened will have the whole-hearted sympathy and support of Catholics. The coming together of Christians for such a purpose cannot fail.⁵¹

In early 1921 Gibb initiated moves to form a Dominion Branch of the British League of Nations Union. At the 1921 Presbyterian General Assembly a League of Nations committee was set up with this aim

in view but before the committee could take action a civic branch was inaugurated in Dunedin, centred around staff at the University of Otago. The Assembly committee resolved to support the citizen's branch in Dunedin and encouraged a Wellington branch initiated by Gibb, who was elected chairman, and strengthened by official representation from the Anglican, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Baptist and Congregational Churches, and from the Salvation Army.

The Wellington branch immediately began a campaign aimed at forming a public sentiment of hatred against war; to demand an immediate curtailment of armaments with a view to their ultimate abolition; to insist that our rulers shall refrain from making secret treaties or alliances with other nations... and to labour for the coming of an era of universal peace.⁵²

Throughout 1922 the New Zealand branch of the British League of Nations flourished. A second branch was mooted for Wellington,⁵³ the Dunedin branch began a series of lectures and made propaganda literature available to new branches, and the Labour party and trade union movement continued to show interest.⁵⁴ A notable barrister, P.J. O'Regan, a defender of conscientious objectors during the war, offered his support and a cheque⁵⁵ - and branches were formed in many of the country towns, including Gisborne.⁵⁶

How did Gibb attempt to propagate the League's aims throughout the Dominion? At the 1922 Presbyterian Assembly he nominated a League of Nations committee of seventy-two members, easily the largest of the Assembly committees, with corresponding members in every Presbytery.⁵⁷ Gibb's plan was simple, to use his control of General Assembly and to use the machinery of Presbyterian church government to establish vital cells of League propagandists throughout New Zealand.

Gibb had manufactured machinery he believed would enable the anti-militarists to win public support to their cause. He then began his search for a patron for his movement, a notable New Zealander whose eminence would attract the uncommitted. Sir John Salmond, the Chief Justice, was approached and on 12 June 1922 declined;⁵⁸ hardly a surprising decision from one who as New Zealand's representative at the Washington Conference on the Limitations of armaments rejected the argument that the Dominion's were now independent nations able to form their own separate foreign policies.⁵⁹

In considering alternatives Henderson Pringle was insistent that 'Massey would never do',⁶⁰ a decision that the Prime Minister,

firm in his support for a Singapore naval base, a New Zealand division of the Royal Navy and a strong Empire, had he known, would have confirmed. In the end Sir Francis Bell, Massey's chief lieutenant, accepted the office of president and did the League little harm by it.

Gibb now considered himself to be in a strong position with a section of the clergy enlisted as storm troopers for the League and with a nominal alliance between the Churches and Labour working in the interests of disarmament. His aim was clear enough; a unilateral renunciation of war by New Zealand followed by complete national disarmament. Gibb demanded a New Zealand foreign policy divorced from Massey's imperialistic notion that when the King declares war the Empire is at war. To immediately effect this aim Gibb needed to persuade the government to accept a dramatic and revolutionary change and this Gibb did not, and could not, do. In 1922 the Reform party was in the hands of one of the most competent party managers ever to become a New Zealand premier. Massey knew well that a Protestant lobby could be a dangerous irritant and had earlier been offended by threats to boycott his candidates at the polls should they refuse to pledge themselves to vote for the teaching of the Bible in the state schools. He was also annoyed at the political intrigues of the Rev. Howard Elliott and his Protestant Political Association and had no intention of allowing party members a right to make up their own minds on a matter as vital as defence. The Liberal opposition similarly embraced the notion of Imperial defence leaving only a handful of Labour members as spokesmen for disarmament.

Lack of supporting voices in Parliament did not worry Gibb in 1922 for he believed the Labour party was the political force of the future and would soon be in office as New Zealand's government. Gibb's attempt to ally the party and the Church brought occasional outbursts from clerics of more conservative political persuasion. The August meeting of the Presbytery of Wellington was the occasion for the fiercest of these attacks when the Rev. B. Hutson gave notice of motion:

Whereas a meeting was held in a theatre of this city last Lord's Day evening under the auspices of the Labour Representation Committee in the interests of the 'no more war movement' and was addressed by the leader of the Extreme Labour party and by two ministerial members of this presbytery, who are spoken of as representing the Church. The Presbytery, while recognising the right of every member to hold and express for himself an opinion consistent with good citizenship and while earnestly desiring and strenuously seeking the reign of universal peace