

James Speight (1837 – 1912)

Unwarily James Speight, headmaster of St Albans School, told his pupils that his name meant 'woodpecker; henceforth 'Woodpecker' was his name. He did not, however, tell the youngsters how his mother, the genteel but headstrong Mary Hall, had eloped to Gretna Green to marry his father, also James Speight, who was 15 years her senior and a mere exciseman.

When James junior was born at Broughton-in-Furness, Lancashire on 8 June 1837, illiteracy was widespread. Thus the limited formal education which the youngster received was sufficient to gain him employment as a schoolteacher at the Union Workhouse, Stockton, Durham. Years later, the New Zealand Department of Education would introduce a system of teachers' certificates with letters from A to E denoting examination qualifications and numbers from 1 to 5 denoting teaching prowess. The highest possible certificate was A1, the lowest E5. Initially the holder of an E1 certificate, James would, through taking departmental examinations, gain D1 status. This modest qualification was common among headmasters of large 19th century primary schools.

All this was in the future. At 22, James married Ellen Swaine, his parents lamenting that their son should undertake this step when not yet well established. The couple's son, Robert, was born at Garbutt Street, Stockton, on 2 October 1867. Soon after, when James emigrated to Canterbury, he left his wife and son in his parents' care. In 1868 James was labouring in the Cumberland Saw Mills at Duvauchelles Bay, Banks Peninsula. Although falling trees, runaway trolleys and exposed mill machinery caused many injuries, James thrived in this environment and built his own house. He would later describe himself as an 'old bushman' who 'never wondered that Mr Gladstone and others were fond of cutting down trees.' Missing his wife and conscious that he could not see the 'very

good sign' of Robert 'getting... mischievous', he arranged for mother and son to emigrate. The provincial government assisted to a modest extent but James paid the bulk of the passage money. In January 1870 the newcomers arrived on the small vessel, *Celaeno*.

Several Speight offspring were born at Banks Peninsula. In a small plot at Chorlton, a hilly area between Little Akaloa and Stoney Bay, lie Edith and Mabel Speight. Their tombstone states that they were 'children of schoolmaster James Speight'. The births of Hubert and Bertha, children other than Robert who were destined to outlive their parents, were registered in 1870 and 1873 respectively.

With a long black beard, strong build and forceful personality, James was soon a community leader. He was treasurer of the Banks Peninsula Agricultural and Pastoral Association in 1870. Two years later, as school committee chairman, he pushed for the building of the Duvauchelles Bay school and then for the rating of residents so that the structure might be paid for. He was teaching at Wainui in 1873, and, a year later, as headmaster of the Little Akaloa school, demanded that there be erected a building which would comfortably seat the pupils. A new school, opened in 1875, was to serve the community for 50 years. James was also the postmaster, although Ellen probably did the bulk of the work.

The passing of the 1877 Education Act led to the establishment of a Department of Education and 12 geographically based education boards. James became the servant of the South Canterbury and then of the North Canterbury boards. Boards inherited schools from the recently deceased provinces, set up others, maintained them, employed teachers and sent inspectors out to test pupils and assess teachers. Each year the householders of a particular area elected a committee which, in cooperation with the headmaster, had day-to-day charge of the local school.



James Speight at Christchurch Anglican Synod, 1907: Christchurch Anglican Diocesan Archives

The existence of free secular primary school education did not mean that all parents made their offspring avail themselves of it. Inspectors saw children 'toiling like beasts of burden' before and during school hours and too tired to learn should they make it to class. Worse, youngsters were spotted 'revelling in the dirt of the creek... [and] gutter for the greater part of the day... and... becoming habituated to idleness – the parent of vice, the foster parent of evil instincts'.

Children who did attend school found themselves in large classes and promoted from one standard to the next only when they had passed examinations. Each school had substantial grounds with, down the middle, a dividing fence. Thus was play encouraged but the sexes segregated outside the classroom.



James Speight and pupils at Tai Tapu School, about 1880
Tai Tapu School (Consolidated) centennial celebrations, 1867–1967, p11

Experienced teachers managed some classes, while others were taught by pupil teachers. These were 'youths of either sex, between 14 and 17 years of age', who had passed the sixth standard and were 'of good character... good constitution and free from any bodily or other defect or infirmity detrimental to usefulness or efficiency as a teacher'. Before or after school the headmaster gave them instruction, the sum he received for this varying according to the number of his students. At Tai Tapu, James had an assistant and one or two pupil teachers.

At St Albans he had a staff of about 13, of whom over a half were pupil teachers. Should the adolescents survive a regime of small remuneration, large pupil numbers and rigorous testing, they were eventually entitled to enter the Christchurch Normal School to train as teachers. However, only a minority could afford this luxury. Most of those who could manage it went straight into positions as assistants or sole teachers.

Corporal punishment was widely used. The North Canterbury Education Board's 1894 regulations on the subject stated that both boys and girls could be thus disciplined. Neither head nor neck could be touched and canes and sticks were banned in favour of a regulation strap. This was to be at least one and a half inches in breadth and could be no more than 25 inches in length, a quarter of an inch in thickness and four and three quarter ounces in weight.

James moved to Kakahu, South Canterbury in 1877, becoming headmaster at Tai Tapu two years later. Then, in 1887, the board sacked the headmaster of a large Christchurch school, St Albans, and James was put in charge.

A fundamental problem at St Albans was the poverty and consequent ill-health of pupils which caused a high level of absenteeism. This was exacerbated by the parental attitudes already described. A committee member commented that, in the street, he frequently met girls who were quite unknown to him. At an age when they should have been at school, they were instead wheeling perambulators and, as nurse girls, helping to supplement their families' meagre incomes. As well, the population tended to be nomadic rather than stable and manageable. A draft report commented on the 'curse peculiar to the... school... the number of small tenements on the church property in the neighbourhood... [which] afford facilities for poor people to remain an uncertain but usually a short time in the district'.

James raised money by renting out the school buildings to George Hart and Edward William Seager for their popular illustrated talks on Canterbury history. James' son, Robert,

married Seager's daughter, Ruth, in 1899. Other money came from James' own salary, concerts and donations from prosperous residents. The awarding of prizes to all academically successful children kept one group in school. The less academic were encouraged to plant flowers in small plots in the playground, the well-kept gardens adding to the beauty of the area and 'affording wholesome occupation to the children'. When gardening prizes were introduced, the list of achievers became as all-inclusive as possible. A complaint in the school's 1890 annual report that the financial outlay 'was a strain almost too great to bear' merely encouraged the headmaster to look further for potential donors. Eventually children were told that, to qualify for a prize, they must attend regularly and be well-behaved as well as pass their examinations.

There was, in those days, a widespread hostility towards the employment of married women teachers. However, Ellen had, at Kakahu, been a staff member. At St Albans James had as his senior colleague, Ada Wells. As a pupil teacher, Ada had acquired practical classroom skills. At St Albans, she and her husband, the organist Harry Wells, mounted concerts in aid of the school prize fund. In 1892, Ada, pregnant, sought two months' leave of absence. The school committee demanded her resignation but the education board would not agree to this until, in a long letter, James recounted 'the delinquencies of Mrs Wells'. Perhaps headmaster and committee were jealous of this bright, young, university-educated woman. A prominent figure in the women's suffrage movement, Ada would later become the first female Christchurch City councillor.

Although firm in the Wells' case, the alliance of committee and headmaster was often fragile. The committee overrode James' objections to the appointment of a pupil teacher and James had the bitter satisfaction of seeing the young woman fail her examinations and be forced to resign. Believing the St Albans side school – now Elmwood – over-staffed, James sought to bring it under his sway. A public meeting praised

the headmistress, Sarah Smith, demanded the retention of the status quo, and emphasised that it represented the views of parents 'of all children attending the... school with but one exception'. Frustrated, James by-passed his committee and sought approval from the education board for the transfer of a pupil teacher from the side to the main school. Beaten but unrepentant, he told the committee that he had done what was right. These disputes meant ill-will long subsisted between the headmaster and committee members such as Charles Edward Salter. Nevertheless, James remained adamant that he had taken 'a large school in a very low condition and... left it one of the best schools in Christchurch'.

James, who had learned his craft in the harsh conditions of a Victorian workhouse, was best remembered as a 'flogging' headmaster. In 1896 the committee wondered whether his harsh disciplining of the pupils gave the school a bad name. Four years earlier it had concluded that the corporal punishment meted out by the headmaster had been 'not only too severe but unmerited'. There were stories of unnatural penalties. A child who talked at the wrong time was, apparently, attached to the mantelpiece by his tongue. However, inspectors' reports emphasised that the staff exhibited zeal and industry and that good order and attention prevailed throughout the school. Thus did James survive criticism.

The primary teachers' union, the New Zealand Educational Institute, was founded in 1883. James, a member, attended annual general meetings at Christchurch in 1892 and Nelson in 1894. He took part in association activities in Christchurch but held no position on the national body.

At a playground farewell on James' retirement in 1897, Ellen was given a fruit dish 'in recognition of... many acts of kindness', while James received a gold watch chain and two volumes of books. The occasion ended with 'three ringing cheers... for Mr and Mrs Speight', while the committee hoped that James would long enjoy 'the well-earned rest which... retirement from the active duties of a public school teacher

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will afford.' There being, as yet, no Teachers' Superannuation Scheme, James found it necessary to farm, on a small scale, at Coopers Road, Shirley. Eventually he moved to Bottle Lake (now Burwood) Road. A keen Anglican who had played the organ at St Paul's church, Tai Tapu, James was a lay reader from 1901 until 1910 and vestryman at All Saints' church, Burwood from 1897 – 1912. From 1907 until 1910 he was parish representative at the Christchurch Synod: 'His words, if few, were always weighty.'

In 1908 a royal commission investigated alleged abuses at Te Oranga, a home for delinquent girls at Burwood. As an interested outsider James appeared before the assembled dignitaries, his old adversary Charles Salter among them, and defended forcible hair-cutting which brought a miscreant shame but no physical pain. Recalling his bush-felling days, he supported the practice whereby girls were set to work cutting down small trees.

James considered that the good relationship between staff and inmates was shown by the conduct of the latter in church. Their singing, originally coarse, was now 'refined', their behaviour 'positively ladylike... and reverent', indeed much better than that of the general population. Reluctantly James accepted that physical punishment of a recalcitrant inmate aged 20 years might have a brutalising effect.

When Ellen fell ill, James drove her round his paddock to see whether she was fit enough to make the trip to Christchurch Hospital. She died on 24 February 1909.

James then made his will, arranged that 'a suitable tombstone' be erected over his grave and divided his property among his children. Hubert had been James' pupil teacher at St Albans. Robert, assistant curator at Canterbury Museum and lecturer at Canterbury University College, would become Professor of Geology, contribute to the *Natural history of Canterbury* and have a mountain named in his honour. James Speight, 'gentleman', of Burwood, died of heart disease on 6 March 1912 and was buried with Ellen in the Burwood Anglican churchyard.

In *Farewell speech*, a descendant of Ada Wells pictures James as a pedagogue who, with 'loathsome nasal voice', drummed 'dry facts into reluctant heads'. In contrast, the archival record describes an excellent teacher of singing and one of a handful of headmasters who inculcated into their pupils a knowledge of elementary science. Inspectors' reports on James' period at Tai Tapu include the following statements:

'One of the best taught [schools] in the district... The general proficiency will bear most favourable comparison with that of any other district school... [The] school has a good tone and is [a] pleasure to examine.'

Further evidence that James was held in high regard appears in the 1924 newspaper descriptions of a Tai Tapu school reunion. An ex-pupil described James as 'one man he could not forget' and as a school master 'who turned out men and women'. Indeed, so much was said about James that Robert Speight was called upon to speak. He 'expressed appreciation of the kind references to his... father...' and attributed his success in life to 'hard work and the training he had received from the Tai Tapu School'.

A former St Albans pupil, David Florance, described his old dominie:

'He certainly put the fear of lung cancer into my breast when he sniffed through my pockets for the evil smelly weed. I must confess now that I have not smoked half a dozen cigarettes in a lifetime...

It was during my time at St Albans School that the strap replaced the cane. Mr Speight saw possibilities here. He attached a dog-collar to the sawn-off leg of a chair. I was quickly given the opportunity of testing the efficacy of the new horror. I received the allotted number of strokes and Mr Speight left the room but in a flash popped his head back again just as I was beaming at my classmates; it was a short-lived triumph for me.



James Speight (right) and staff of St Albans School, 1893
Diamond jubilee of St Albans school, 1873–1933, p20

It was his business to detect crime and he did it very effectively by standing on a form outside so that, unnoticed, he could watch us through a window.'

Yet David Florance considered that he had no cause for complaint. James encouraged the children in gardening, swimming and drill, took them for reading in the shade of an oak tree, and taught music 'using the correct method of striking the tuning fork on his knee'. Using Ganot's *Physics*, he taught the mysteries of mirrors, lenses and prisms, and, for the annual concert, was his own choirmaster.

A *Church news* obituary said of James:

'Whatever his hand found to do, he did it with all his might, never sparing himself, and having as his ideal 'thoroughness' in all his undertakings... Not only did he respond cheerfully to any call upon his time and energies, but was always ready to suggest that more work might be allotted to him... [He showed] untiring zeal... readiness to give of his best... fearless defence of the right... and... readiness to face unpopularity rather than countenance a wrong.'

In another section of the same periodical James was described as a member of Synod and 'a valued lay reader for the Parochial District of Burwood'.

Charles Salter said of James: 'He had the reputation of being fond of the strap'. In contrast, throughout a long life, David Florance treasured James' obituary. He commented, passionately but illogically, about his bearded headmaster: 'The bewhiskered young people of today have nothing on him'.

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