Colenso, John William

(1814–1883)

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John William Colenso (1814–1883)

by Samuel Sidley, 1886

Colenso, John William (1814–1883), bishop of Natal, was born at St Austell, Cornwall, on 24 January 1814, the eldest child of John William Colenso, mineral agent for part of the duchy of Cornwall. Originally dissenters, his parents and their four children became members of the Church of England in his adolescence. For four years he attended the mathematical and classical school in St Austell. His mother, whose maiden name was Blackmore, died when he was fifteen and at about the same time his father, for whose welfare his mother had been an almost constant worry by sea. This appears to have ended his formal schooling for he was obliged, in order to help the family finances, to accept employment as a sizar at Dartmouth.

He seems already to have made up his mind that he wished to be ordained and he was also showing a marked talent for mathematics. He was able, after private preparation, to enter St John’s College, Cambridge, as a sizar on 22 May 1832, at the age of eighteen. Supporting himself by private teaching and what he could earn in the mathematics, he was soon several thousand pounds in debt, which hung over him for years. He returned to St John’s College from 1842 to 1846 and from Cambridge published two textbooks, one on algebra in 1841 and one on arithmetic in 1843.

Colenso’s Achilles’ heel, in particular, was a considerable success and earned him considerable royalties. He married on 1 January 1846 Sarah Frances (1826–1893), daughter of Robert Bunyan of Highgate, local of the London office of the Norwich Union insurance company. Marriage necessitated resigning his fellowship, but his wife’s family obtained for him a living in Devon at St David’s College, which he disliked, was not incompatible with that tradition. Before his marriage, his wife had introduced him to Frederick Denison Maurice, whose ideas on evangelical principles on which he began to earn a reputation for unorthodoxy. He argued, for instance, that polygamy was to influence him profoundly. A belief in the universal fatherhood of God and the unity of all humanity, together with doubts about the ‘endlessness of future punishment’, began to characterize his preaching. He does not appear, however, at this stage in his life, to have regarded the Bible as other than literally true. In 1835, just as he was planning the publication of a volume of sermons to be dedicated to Maurice (which was to earn him the chiefship of the evangelical Record), his interest in missions brought him to the notice of Bishop Robert Gray of Cape Town, whose diocese was being divided and who was looking for potential bishops for his new sees. In April 1855 Colenso accepted the offer of the bishopric of Natal. Having been issued with royal letters patent, he was consecrated on 30 November 1855 by Samuel J. Andrews, archbishop of Cape Town, and arrived in Natal on 18 January 1856.

In May 1855 Colenso arrived in Natal with his wife and children and a number of workers for the new diocese. His first task was to establish his headquarters at Bishopstowe, 6 miles east of Pietermaritzburg. Unfailingly energetic, he chose to live outside the capital of the colony so that his home at Bishopstowe could also be his chief residence station... (1855), his interest in missions brought him to the notice of Bishop Robert Gray of Cape Town, whose diocese was being divided and who was looking for potential bishops for his new sees. In April 1855 Colenso accepted the offer of the bishopric of Natal. Having been issued with royal letters patent, he was consecrated on 30 November 1855 by Samuel J. Andrews, archbishop of Cape Town, and arrived in Natal on 18 January 1856. His linguistic ability was also put to work in translating the whole of the New Testament, with grammatical notes and an English translation. His

Colenso was appointed mathematics tutor at Harrow School in 1836 and was ordained in 1837. In material terms this, too, was a period of hardship and financial stringency. The school was in a less than buoyant state and, though Colenso ran a boarding house, usually a source of additional income for an assistant master. His house was destroyed by fire and he was soon several thousand pounds in debt, which hung over him for years. He returned to St John’s College from 1842 to 1846 and from Cambridge published two textbooks, one on algebra in 1841 and one on arithmetic in 1843. Colenso’s Arithmetic, in particular, was a considerable success and earned him considerable royalties. He married on 1 January 1846 Sarah Frances (1826–1893), daughter of Robert Bunyan of Highgate, local of the London office of the Norwich Union insurance company. Marriage necessitated resigning his fellowship, but his wife’s family obtained for him a living in Devon at St David’s College, which he disliked, was not incompatible with that tradition. Before his marriage, his wife had introduced him to Frederick Denison Maurice, whose ideas on evangelical principles on which he began to earn a reputation for unorthodoxy. He argued, for instance, that polygamy was to influence him profoundly. A belief in the universal fatherhood of God and the unity of all humanity, together with doubts about the ‘endlessness of future punishment’, began to characterize his preaching. He does not appear, however, at this stage in his life, to have regarded the Bible as other than literally true. In 1835, just as he was planning the publication of a volume of sermons to be dedicated to Maurice (which was to earn him the chiefship of the evangelical Record), his interest in missions brought him to the notice of Bishop Robert Gray of Cape Town, whose diocese was being divided and who was looking for potential bishops for his new sees. In April 1855 Colenso accepted the offer of the bishopric of Natal. Having been issued with royal letters patent, he was consecrated on 30 November 1855 by Samuel J. Andrews, archbishop of Cape Town, and arrived in Natal on 18 January 1856.
Archives
Sources
unreserved
was a friend of F. D. Maurice even before her marriage to Colenso; she maintained a regular correspondence for more
avoid Natal society, preferring to worship in the mission church rather than in the cathedral. She wa
Colenso
Perhaps because of their isolation, Colenso's family was a very united one. Of the bishop's five children, one son (J
the Natal native affairs commission in the previous year but, because he encouraged the Zul
the deposed and exiled Zulu king's case
did everything he could to put the deposed and exiled Zulu king's case
insisted on mitigation of the sentences. Many coloni
draw up documents. It was partly through his intervention
insist on monogamy for Christian converts would, by putting aside other wives
question, entail the worse evil of destabilizing traditional society.
and calling the status of their children in
death. A majority of the English bishops agreed to inhibit Colenso from officiating in their dioceses, but more liberal
W. K. Macrorie, was appointed under this constitution and consecrated in Cape Town, without royal mandate, as
was regarded by many as an attempt
achieved the passage of a constitution for the 'Church of the Province of South Africa' which enshrined this. In Natal it
Thomson had involved himself with, the colony's policies regarding the indigenous people.
Six Articles, and its implications for his sacramental theology were particularly unacceptable to the Tractarian clergy.
In the eyes of the law he was bishop of Natal, and some two
as a convert—take charge of my affairs. I believe I can place them in the hands of one of your bishops with
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as a convert—take charge of my affairs. I believe I can place them in the hands of one of your bishops with
in the metropolitan's court for teaching contained in his commentary on Rom
an endowment of the diocese. In the eyes of the law he was bishop of Natal, and some two
of W. K. Macrorie, was appointed under this constitution and consecrated in Cape Town, without royal mandate, as
C. J. Uys,
A. C. Upham,
C. J. Uys,
O. Chadwick,
J. Rogerson,
P. B. Hinchliff,
Bodl. RH, family cormsp.
Natal Provincial Archives, Pietermaritzburg
University of Natal, Durban, Campbell collections
Co-operative Union, Holyoake House, Manchester, letters to G. S. Holyoake
Hunt, L., letters to Frances Cobbe
Lizl, B.O, letters to R. Elrter
LPL, cormsp. with A. C. Tait
Natal Provincial Archives, Pietermaritzburg, Carl Faye collection
National Library of South Africa, Cape Town, letters to Sir George Grey
Suffolk RO, Bury St Edmunds, copy of cormsp. with Sir Basta Freer
University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, Cullen Library, Church of the Province of South Africa archives

Likenesses
S. Sidley, oils, 1866, NPG [see illus.]
Ape [C. Pellegrini], chromolithograph caricature, NPG: repro. in VF (28 Nov 1874)
E. Edwards, photograph, NPG
H. N. King, carte-de-visite, NPG
London Stereoscopic Company, carte-de-visite, NPG
Maull & Co., carte-de-visite, NPG
T. C. Wageman, watercolour drawing, Trinity Cam.
carte-de-visite, NPG
portrait, St John Cam.

Wealth at Death
£5454 1s. 7d. administration with will, 23 Oct 1883, CGPLA Eng. & Wales