

A Sermon by Rev. Dick Weston-Jones, 2 February, 2003 for the Auckland Unitarian Church, New Zealand

"All Heretics Day; Sir Robert Stout"

Many years ago some of the children in a Unitarian Universalist church that I was serving came to me to complain about a terrible injustice. "Other kids get special holidays when they're let out of school, you know, religious holidays" one said to me. "We just have to sit there in school and work, and they get out. Why don't we have a special day for our religion?"

The schools close for Christmas, and at Easter too. The Jewish kids take off days for Yom Kippur and Rosh Hashanah, and some also take off for Hanukah and Passover- Muslim and Hindu children have special school holidays. Why don't Unitarian have a special day? I thought about the injustice, and I invented a Unitarian holiday, right on the spot. "We have 'All Heretics Day,'" I said.

"What's that?" another kid said to me. "What's a heretic?"

"A heretic is a person who believes something that is completely different from what everyone else around her thinks—and acts on it. At one time just about every important idea was a 'heresy.' Most people said you had to believe in a trinity—that 'God' is three persons in one. Before that, the Trinitarians were heretics themselves. Everybody around them believed there were many gods, and the Trinitarians were the ones with a new idea: heresy!

"Do we get a day off from school?" one of the kids asked me. "All Heretics Day" is on a Sunday, so I don't think you can get out of school for it," I said.

"That's no good," said another. "We want one where we can get out of school, and go to the beach."

"Well, you can try this one," I said. "Talk to your mum. Maybe she'll let you take it off." I like to do things like that. Mothers do good with questions like that. I certainly would have liked it if my mother had let me take off for All Heretics Day. I could have asked my minister too, but that wouldn't have done any good, even if he was my father. Mum was the one who would have had to say "yes," or I would have had to play hookey to celebrate my religious holiday. That wouldn't have been so bad.

I don't know what Robert Stout would have said. Well, yes, I think I do know. The thing for which he was most noted, and had the greatest effect, was fighting to keep the church out of the public schools. He was probably the person most responsible for the policy that, until a decade ago, kept all the tax money for church-free public schools. I don't know if he ever objected to the holidays being set by the holy days of the Christian calendar. Probably not, because everybody got the same time off, and he was a pragmatist. He knew the kids wouldn't come to school then, anyway.

He only wanted to be sure that school time wasn't used for religious teaching, and that churches wouldn't get a free ride on public money to teach their sectarian beliefs, and especially not to non-Christian children.

"I remember myself, as a boy, very well," said Stout, "what the result was in part of the Old Country where I was brought up," he said. "There were the Free Church and the Established Church, and there was nothing but hatred between the boys of the different schools. When the schools broke up it began with snowballing, and when there was no more snow, they often took to stones," he said, recalling his childhood in the Shetland Islands, north of the northern most part of Scotland.

Stout grew up there in an intellectual Presbyterian family He was born in 1844, 15 years before Charles Darwin published his book. The Origin of the Species- It was a blockbuster! They bought it, and his father and his uncle both believed that Darwin was right with this idea of Evolution. The family would sit around the kitchen table and talk about radical ideas like that.

In his thesis on The Place of Sir Robert Stout in New Zealand Social History, D. H. Bray said Stout's "agnosticism can largely be attributed to the publication of Darwin's [book] during his adolescence at a period when the religious intensity of a Scottish church cleavage was such as to cause youthful civil war." (p. 98) Stout had begun teaching school the year before Darwin's book was published, when he was only 14 He saw that the society in which he was growing up was one that gave privilege to some, the landowners, and lives of poverty to the rest, who were tenants. He swore he would not live that way.

So a few years later, when he was 19, he had saved enough for the passage to Utopia, New Zealand, in the south Pacific, and he came over to Dunedin, the primary destination for Scots. In 1864 there was a congregation of Unitarians here in Auckland, but nowhere else in New Zealand. Stout probably never knew of that group.

A few years after settling in Dunedin he enrolled as the first student at the University of Otago, New Zealand's first university, and wrote an editorial (5 July 1871) for the daily newspaper where he was working, in which he urged that women should have "equal educational advantages with men," and that "there should be some system adopted to grant certificates of proficiency in the separate branches of learning taught in the university."

The Treaty of Waitangi was only 30 years old, and though there weren't many Maori in the South Island, it was beset with inequities in "land sharking" of Maori land and exploitation by developers. Stout had become a teacher immediately after landing in Dunedin, and also worked in a lawyer's office where he became licensed as a barrister just the day before entering the university. Things sometimes were done backwards in your infant nation—profession first, education afterwards. Pioneers have to do that.

I could go through Stout's career and bore you for hours with tales of this early-day Unitarian of whom most of you knew absolutely nothing just a few weeks ago. (At least you said that when I asked for a show of hands in the congregation of people who knew who Robert Stout was.) History is a fickle teacher. Though almost everyone in New Zealand over a 50 year period from the mid-1870's until his death in 1930 would have known of the Premier of New Zealand and Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, he has nearly been forgotten today. I won't tell you about everything he did—just a few things that, as fellow Unitarians, should make you proud of him and your heritage.

One of the reasons so few people know much about Sir Robert Stout is that the only biography about him was published 42 years ago, and there have been scant few theses by scholars written about him—probably only four in the last 70 years, and I read most of two of them. I suspect one reason is that he was considered a radical in religion in an era when Kiwis paid more attention to propriety in religion.

The authors of the one published biography (Robert Stout, a biography by Waldo Hilary Dunn and Ivor L.M. Richardson, Wellington: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1961, 224 p.) apologized for Stout's Unitarianism, saying "he probably never realized how close he came to the Christian doctrine that the kingdoms of this world must become the kingdoms of Jesus Christ, and that they will become so only as one by one the individuals who compose the kingdoms of the world pass over into the higher kingdom of love and sacrifice." (p. 202)

"In the height of political and religious contests he was frequently called an atheist," they said, "and it may be well, once and for all, to dispose of that allegation. The fact is that for the last quarter-century or more of his life he was closely associated with the Unitarian faith," and they

hastened to say that while he "spoke frequently in Unitarian and other nonconformist churches" he was "a close friend of many ministers"—and then they went on to name well-known Presbyterian and Methodist clergy so their readers would know that it was okay to read about Stout.

Though Unitarians scarcely remember him at all today, he was certainly the best known Unitarian in New Zealand by the public for 50 years. The reason is that he never made a secret of his agnostic beliefs and even identified himself outspokenly with Unitarians beginning in the 1870's, well after that small 1860's Auckland congregation had died, and at least 20 years before this Auckland congregation first gathered in 1898. He probably never heard of the Auckland Unitarians, but knew of Unitarian beliefs from his childhood and from reading the works of Ralph Waldo Emerson, the transcendentalist American Unitarian minister. In 1903, when he was out of politics and had become Chief Justice of the Supreme Court, Stout went about New Zealand lecturing on Emerson, a fact left out of his biography which I learned from the title page of that lecture printed in Wanganui and preserved in the University of Auckland library.

Stout chaired the meeting in 1904 at which the Wellington Free Unitarian Church was founded. In 1905 he spoke in that church on "Theology and the Universe." They were only meeting twice each month at the time. The newspaper account said "The immensity of the stellar universe was brought within the comprehension of the audience, and a very natural deduction was drawn that inasmuch as the ancients were unacquainted with these grand facts, it was fair to conclude that they had not said the last word on theology. The lecturer exhorted his hearers to devote their time and abilities to the search after further truths, and the service of humanity."

Over the next 20 years he spoke frequently to Unitarians, on such topics as "Religion and the State", "Bible in Schools," "The Scriptures as Moral Teaching," "Evolution and the Origin of Life," "Brotherhood: a Vision of the Future," "Peace or War: What Ought We To Do?", "Needs of Peace: the Ideal State," "Lessons from the War," "Modern Beliefs," "Self-Sacrifice: The Basis of All Religions." All these are in the University collection.

Stout was a religious liberal from his earliest days in public. He was a founder of the Free Thought-Rationalists movement in Dunedin, and editor of a newspaper they published, even while he was a Member of Parliament. He was the first person to introduce a bill calling for women's suffrage, in 1878, 15 years before it became law—and by a quirk of politics he was probably the person finally responsible for its signing into law.

Of course many women had fought for it for years by the time that it passed, including one suffrage leader, Harriet Russell Morrison, who later chaired the Management Committee of this church. The irony is that it gained passage for the flimsiest of reasons. (See [The Suffragists. Women Who Worked for the Vote.](#) Wellington: Bridget Williams Books, Ltd., 1993, p. 16)

Here's the story. Prime Minister Richard Seddon, an opponent of Stout's in 1893, was opposed to women's suffrage, but even more opposed to Stout. The battle came down to a couple of votes in the upper chamber. Two Senators who were officially listed as opposed switched their votes when they were insulted by Seddon's contrariness. Local option prohibition and Women's suffrage (both issues strongly backed by Stout) had passed both houses. It was clear that if Seddon wished he could stop both from being signed into law—but it was also clear that Stout would be the big winner, and Seddon would probably lose the Premiership which he had just wrested from Stout's grip.

So he let the bills pass to keep Stout out of his way. There was yet another hurdle, the signature of the Governor General. It took 12 days, until 19 September, 1893 and lots of pressure for that to happen.

The women went wild. They had won the vote—the first nation in the world to provide women's suffrage. Not a lot happened as a result. Probably a few more liberal men were elected to parliament, so more liberal measures passed, but the law still didn't allow women to be elected to parliament, just to vote on men who could be elected. In 1919 the law was changed and women

could be elected, but the first to actually do so didn't enter parliament until 1933, and it was 1947 before one was made a minister.

Back to Stout. Besides working to keep religion out of the schools and to let women into the polling booths. Stout had real influence in many other issues important to NZ. He backed prohibition of alcohol his entire career, but Kiwis overcame his moralism on that one. He was responsible for the passage of the "Married Women's Property Act of 1884" which stopped the practice of women's property automatically being transferred to their husbands upon marriage.

He was largely responsible for the first passage of a probation system in 1886, during his three-year Premiership (1884-1887). He supported graduated taxation—but lost on his first go around. He was the primary person responsible for public leasing of land, a radical idea in land development that preceded all of Henry George's books on land use. He was an early supporter of the 8-hour working day, but was defeated in that. He played a contributory role in the Old Age Pension proposals in 1893, and the provision of hospital and medical services as a right of citizenship.

In most of these issues he was only one of the persons responsible for the ideas that have come to characterize the modern Kiwi state that has been called the most classless society in the world, but he put himself squarely on the side of equality and justice.

He was not a socialist, and would not have agreed with the form that provision of many public services has taken in New Zealand. While he wanted a classless society and supported things like old age pensions, he wanted them to be contributory, not free. He didn't want you drinking either. And he thought that the secret to a healthy society was to not drink and to practice thrift. He preached that to all people, especially to what he called the criminal classes.

As he grew old he worried that the white race was going to be inundated by the masses of people of other races in Asia, and he grumbled that it would be good if the white people would do a stronger job in breeding and rearing more and better behaved children. Stout never felt good about the Chinese laborers in New Zealand's gold fields, but he was a good friend of the Maori's throughout his political and legal career.

I think we can forgive the grumbling of an old man who was worried about what would happen to "his people." It's really not fair to judge people of the past by the sensitivities of the present. But we can be proud when we find a forebear whose heretical ideas led to many of our freedoms today.

Sir Robert Stout was one of whom Kiwi Unitarians can be very proud.

Rev. Dick Weston-Jones,