CHRISTCHURCH'S TEMPLE OF TRUTH: the Astonishing Story of the American Bigamist-Evangelist-Fraudster Arthur Bently Worthington (real name Oakley Crawford) in 1890s New Zealand.

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Christchurch has had several different nicknames since its founding in 1850. At first it was known simply as 'the city of the plains', in recognition of its site on the coastal edge of the Canterbury Plains, the largest area of relatively flat country in New Zealand.

In the 1870s it was avoided as 'the city of stinks', on account of its poor drainage, numerous cess-pits and high death rates from diphtheria and typhoid fever. No wonder Christchurch was the first New Zealand city to build deep brick sewers underground, in the 1880s, to improve its drainage and sanitation.

Then it became known as 'the cathedral city', after the consecration of Christchurch Cathedral in 1881, with its distinctive neo-Gothic spire. It was also known in the late nineteenth century as 'the city of churches' from the abundance of churches of various denominations.

It was then known as 'the garden city', a name that was bestowed by a visitor to the 1906 International Exhibition held in Hagley Park. The British Commissioner, Sir John Gorst, went up to the top of one of the exhibition's towers, by electric elevator, looked out over the colourful flower beds below and the willow trees lining the Avon River, and declared that Christchurch had already achieved the ideal of the 'city beautiful' movement in England as a 'garden city'. And the name has stuck, ever since.

Now, of course, since the events of 2010 and 2011, it is known to the rest of New Zealand as 'the city of quakes', and we no longer have a cathedral spire at the heart of the city. Instead, according to the Wizard of Christchurch, we had 'Old Stumpie', but even that was pulled down by a digger. At last, there are moves afoot to have the cathedral rebuilt as it was.

But before the ‘garden city’ name was bestowed, in the 1890s, Christchurch was also known as ‘the city of cranks’ because it was regarded as a hotbed of radical politics, women’s suffrage, labour unions and alarming new ideas. Professor Bickerton was one of the so-called cranks that gave the city this reputation, and the subject of this lecture was another one, probably the city’s most notorious resident in the 1890s.

What sort of a place was Christchurch in the 1890s? It was a market town of about 50,000 people, serving the farms of the Canterbury Plains and processing its produce. There were freezing works for export meat, and big grain-stores and wool-stores along Moorhouse Avenue for what were still Canterbury’s staple export earners. There were leather tanneries and shoe factories, breweries and biscuit factories, engineering works producing everything from coal ranges and farm machinery to dredges and steam locomotives, there were clothing factories and woollen mills, and the usual range of urban crafts and retail outlets, from corner dairies to large department stores such as Beaths, Ballantynes, the DIC and Strange’s. Christchurch was becoming famous across Australasia for its home-grown brand names and patent medicines: Bonnington’s Irish Moss cough mixture, Baxter’s Lung Preserver, another cough mixture, and Edmond’s ‘Sure to Rise’ baking powder, were all Christchurch inventions. So too was the brand name Sanitarium which started as a little health food factory in Papanui about 1899.

Visitors commented on the city’s many trees and parks, its flatness and its dispersed suburbs. Quarter acre sections were then standard outside the central city, with plenty of room for a front garden, a vegetable garden and fruit trees at the back. Christchurch was at last coming out of the long depression of the 1880s, and prosperity seemed to be returning. New houses were being built in the expanding suburbs. Visitors remarked on Christchurch’s wide empty streets, its hard frosts in winter, its dusty nor-westers in summer, and the prevailing sense of orderly calm. This was a quiet, conservative, pleasant place in which to live.

One American visitor in 1890 said that Christchurch was a city of ‘bicycles, bridges and parsons’. It certainly seemed to have a lot of bridges, and churches. The cycling craze of the 1890s took Christchurch by storm, and its flat terrain meant that bicycles remained the cheapest form of transport for almost the next century. The celebrated American author Mark Twain visited the city in

November 1892 and said of Christchurch: 'half the population rides bicycles, anywhere they like, and the other half are kept busy dodging them'.

Christchurch was a very sporty place, and the birthplace of several of New Zealand's major sporting codes: rugby football in 1879, cricket, golf, lawn bowls, lawn tennis, hockey, croquet, and so on. In the 1880s it welcomed lacrosse from Canada, which didn't last, and polo from England, which did.

Christchurch was also a very 'churchy' place. Religion played a big part in the life of the city in the late nineteenth century. In 1881 there no fewer than 24 different religious denominations holding regular services each week. Besides the Anglican majority with their many churches there were numerous Presbyterians, Methodists (or Wesleyans), Catholics, Baptists, Congregationalists and Lutherans. The small Jewish community built a splendid synagogue in Gloucester Street in 1881. The Salvation Army arrived in 1883 and had a strong presence in the Market Place with their parades and brass band. There was a Spiritualist congregation, and a Theosophical Society. There were even a few Mormon missionaries and Seventh Day Adventists who preached in the Market Place (now Victoria Square).

But the most spectacular and talked-about religious phenomenon of Christchurch in the 1890s was undoubtedly the Temple of Truth in Latimer Square.

This is still a great Christchurch story. It has several classic ingredients: a charismatic preacher, his beautiful wife, a devoted following, an impressive church, yet also, behind the scenes, lurid tales of bigamy, desertion, and sex-scandals. It provoked great public outcry, even a riot, and the first and only time the Riot Act has been read in public in Christchurch.

The name on everyone's lips in 1890s Christchurch was that of Arthur Bently Worthington, either to revere him or revile him. But that wasn't his real name. He was born in the US in New York State in 1847 and was christened Oakley Crawford. His father was a lawyer. As a young man Oakley served briefly in the American Civil War and later said he was so sickened by the carnage that he resolved to dedicate his life to God and so he became a Methodist minister in 1867.

Within a year he had married Josephine Ericson Moore in New York, and never divorced her, so his next seven or eight 'marriages' were all bigamous. In 1870 he was gaoled on a charge of obtaining money by false pretences and spent two years behind bars. On his release in 1873 he promptly changed his name, and kept doing so, as he moved from one town to another. He claimed in one place to be a Doctor of Divinity, in another that he was a lawyer. He frequently changed his occupation, and forged references and credentials. He was embarked on a long career as a confidence trickster.

His favourite *modus operandi* was to charm a wealthy widow, get control of her money, then suddenly depart with the cash, only to pop up somewhere else under a different name. He fathered at least three children by various women, and abandoned them all. His happy hunting ground was the American mid-west, where towns were growing rapidly, full of new faces and new businesses, and full of opportunities for swindlers.

In 1889 he fled a bigamous marriage in Dakota and returned to New York State where he assumed the name Arthur Bently Worthington, the name he was to keep for the rest of his life. He then joined the Christian Science movement, and practised as a faith-healer. The editor of a Christian Science journal at this time (not the famous *Monitor*) was Mrs Mary Plunkett, a strikingly beautiful and graceful woman, whose husband was a moderately wealthy businessman. Worthington turned on the charm and she fell for him, heavily. Amazingly enough, the husband was also charmed, and agreed to an amicable separation and a generous settlement to support their two children. However, John Plunkett's friends persuaded him to investigate Worthington, and he soon discovered that the police were on Worthington's trail for a string of embezzlements and bigamous marriages. As things were starting to get too hot, Worthington and Mary suddenly disappeared, with her two children.

In January 1890 they turned up on a ship arriving at Lyttelton, of all places, and then settled in Christchurch, in a small house near the Papanui tramline. We have a later eyewitness account of his first lecture, and the clever way he attracted attention. First he inserted a simple ad in the daily papers, 'Worthington is coming'. People naturally began to ask, 'Who is Worthington?' The city had plenty of visiting entertainers in the 1890s, singers and music hall musicians and the like, and it was assumed he was one of that ilk. He advertised

his first meeting on a Sunday evening after church hours at the Oddfellows' Hall in Hereford Street. The hall was dimly lit, the curtain was down, and a simple rostrum with brass rails stood in the middle of the stage. Sweet piano music could be heard from behind the curtain. Once the hall was full, the doors were closed, and the music stopped. At that moment a single figure in black emerged from behind the curtain and stepped up to the rostrum. A single light shone on his handsome silver-haired figure.

Our eyewitness could still recall his opening words thirty years later: 'I have come to you tonight to speak to you on the religions of the world. Man is a religious being. No man living is without a religion of some sort. No nation, no people, has ever existed without religion'. Then followed a description of the evolution of religious belief through the many forms of religion in the known world. Worthington spoke for over an hour without notes, in 'clear, cultured, well-modulated tones', with perfect diction and elocution, in his distinctively American accent. At the end he said that he and his dear wife had come to Christchurch as 'Students of Truth', and invited small groups to continue their quest for truth in life at his home in Papanui. His next lecture overflowed the hall. He made no charge or collection, claiming they were a poor couple, and said he would trust to the generosity of those who came 'to carry them along'.

Worthington continued his lectures on religious history, with 'No collection', and soon gained a popular following. He was also an amateur magician, and advertised children's nights, with Bible readings, catechism, popular songs and magic tricks. He called himself 'the Wizard of the South West'. One newspaper advertisement invited children (for sixpence) and their parents (for a shilling) to come and see the mysterious watch and handkerchief, the bottled imps, the cabalistic stool and the inexhaustible hat. (It all sounds a bit like Harry Potter a century too early.)

Worthington's lectures on religious history soon turned into straightforward revivalist preaching, calling on his audiences to repent their sins and renew their commitment to God. Newspaper reporters described him as a 'tall and handsome' American with blue-grey eyes and 'expressive gestures'. He dressed immaculately, with white starched collar and cuffs, and an old-style long black frock-coat. His manners were said to be 'impeccable.' Worthington was without doubt a charismatic preacher. He was not a shouting Hell-fire preacher, but quite the opposite. His style was softly persuasive, good-humoured and self-deprecating. He charmed his hearers, as he had charmed the succession of

women he claimed to be his ‘wives’. People found themselves wanting to believe what he said. He said he was ‘a seeker after Truth’, promising his hearers that a life lived according to the tenets of true religion was a life of supreme happiness. He had the knack of making people feel as if he was taking them along on his personal quest for truth and happiness. And there by his side was the beautiful wife, who adored him and believed everything he said. They were an unbeatable team.

Our eyewitness (whose recollections appeared in the Adelaide *Register* on 20 December 1917, p. 9) says that the young and thoughtful members of almost every church in Christchurch were attracted to Worthington’s lectures and discussion groups. Gradually detaching themselves from their old churches, they formed a new religious movement.

Worthington claimed in July 1891 to have over 400 ‘regular, sincere, and devout worshippers of God’, holding two regular Sunday services and two evening meetings during the week with an average attendance of over 200. In addition there was a Sunday School, numbering over 300 young scholars, and a Day-School or ‘Kinder-Garten’ for smaller children, while their mothers met to study the scriptures. The Students of Truth also published a fortnightly pamphlet called *The Comforter*, in which could be found ‘the most advanced and latest utterance of Christian scholarship’.

Late in 1891 Worthington published a collection of his sermons in book form, printed by Brown and Gates in Cashel Street, Christchurch, and published by ‘The Students of Truth, Latimer Square’. *The Worthington Lectures* are now a rare collector’s item, and I am indebted for my copy to my good friend Colin McGeorge, who also has his own copy. The Preface claims that the lectures were taken down in shorthand by one of the students, and therefore represent ‘platform utterance’ rather than the carefully polished written text of an author. It is perhaps significant that he called them lectures rather than sermons, suggesting a serious academic or philosophical purpose rather than a simply religious one.

Just to give you a taste of Worthington’s eloquence, here is an extract from the lecture entitled ‘Classification and Application’ (pp. 332-4):

> The Power of the Word is alike the agent of his cleansing and the instrument by which he is clothed. The Power of the Word is the prayer of affirmation through which his mind is placed in communion with God.

> We are all in bondage to personal error. We are all carrying some load that should be denied and put off. We may have a very insolent and cruel temper, or an unkind tongue. Deny its power. Some vicious habit or secret sin lurking in the closet of our lives may be hidden away, or so we suppose. Deny its reality or power. Deny that you love sin. Deny that you are wicked, cruel or unkind in any relation of life. Deny that lust has a home in your heart. Claim that you are a royal son of God. Claim the truth of life, and deny its falsehood, and your words shall be established unto you. This Truth shines as a glorious revelation, the magnificent beauty of God's speech to us, which, despite false seemings, we can make practical in demonstration. There is nothing in life that does not carry its stamp, and we must be able to classify so as to know what is false and what is true. Whenever we see discord, suffering, inharmony and imperfection, we must know they carry the stamp of mortality and stand for denial. God is the Good, and created all that ever was created and pronounced it good, and nothing else has ever been created. None of these things we have mentioned are real, they are not of God, they do not bear the God-stamp, hence they must be denied. Wherever there is anything that is at war with harmony, and contradicts it, you may safely classify it with the untrue and false.

And so on, and so on, page after page. These are splendidly vague generalisations, and express the sort of sentiments nobody would want to disagree with. They are the sort of lectures that one would find difficult to remember in detail, yet the oratory would have been overwhelming and convincing at the time.

Fortunately we have a reliable and intelligent observer of Worthington's lectures. The lawyer (and later judge) Oscar Alpers, in his delightful memoirs *Cheerful Yesterdays*, recalls being sent along to listen to Worthington by the newspaper editor for whom he wrote occasional editorials. Alpers listened, and very soon concluded that Worthington was a fraud, but a very clever one. He had the gift of making the most banal platitudes sound as if they were completely new and original insights. He quoted from a wide range of authors, from Plato to Ralph Waldo Emerson, but Alpers considered that Worthington didn't fully understand these ideas and took them out of context, half-baked. While he was obviously widely-read, he was also obviously self-educated.

Alpers recalled that people leaving his meetings were often heard to say, 'He says things you don't hear in the churches'. Yeah, right, we might say. Worthington's lectures or sermons attracted a devoted following. His devotees hung on his every word and accepted his teachings without question. He made them feel good, and hopeful. He told them to regard each other as brothers and sisters in the love of the Lord. And they responded, telling their workmates and acquaintances about the warm atmosphere of friendship and kindness at his meetings.

But it wasn't all preaching. There was a lot more going on behind closed doors. As it later emerged, the Worthingtons offered confidential advice to young married couples on how to achieve happiness in marriage. This advice was mostly about how to improve their sex-life, and may have included advice on contraception, a powerful attraction for couples wanting to limit the size of their families. The word soon spread, and more and more couples came to join the movement. One of the secret groups led by 'Mrs Worthington' was the 'Society of the Blue Veil' for unmarried women. These may have included advice about contraception. All sorts of lurid rumours began to spread around Christchurch -- which only helped to increase the attendances at Worthington's lectures. One of the rumours was that the Worthingtons offered private appointments for selected couples which were little more than wife-swapping sessions, but of course there is no evidence to substantiate such startling allegations.

Now it is not unusual for the founders of strange new sects or cults to be sexual experimenters, or simply randy old men. But, as with many new sects and cults, there was also a lot of money involved. Worthington made much of the fact that there was no collection plate at his meetings. Anyone was free to come and listen to him. Yet the money rolled in. Couples grateful for their new-found sexual liberation were happy to make secret donations, sometimes very large ones.

What sorts of people were attracted to Worthington's lectures? Oscar Alpers says they were not primarily the poor and uneducated working class, but rather well-educated artisans and respectable middle class people, typically clerks and small businessmen and their families. Worthington seemed to appeal especially to the men, who brought their wives and daughters along. Such men were not usually church-goers, because they got tired of being berated by the clergy for their sinful money-grubbing ways. According to one of Worthington's followers, the teaching in the mainstream churches was 'not such as ennobled

them', whereas 'the students of Truth had teaching which *elevated* them' and made them feel good about themselves and their success in business. Worthington evidently appealed to self-made men who were bent on improving their status in society, and there were plenty of such men in Christchurch in the 1890s. Apparently some of them were willing to tithe and give Worthington a tenth of their income.

Part of Worthington's preaching was a belief in reincarnation or the migration of souls. He persuaded one of his earliest converts, a well-known and respected Christchurch house-painter named Charles Duggan, that in a previous life he had painted the doors of Noah's Ark. This poor deluded man became one of Worthington's staunchest supporters, as his Treasurer and the superintendent of his children's Sunday School. As the numbers increased, Worthington's following soon outgrew rented lodge halls. The movement needed a temple of its own, a Temple of Truth.

Apparently Worthington had no trouble raising a large amount of money very quickly. Some of his followers were willing to mortgage their own homes to help pay for the new temple, and in August 1892 it was opened, on the corner of Armagh and Madras Streets, at the northern end of Latimer Square. Next door they built a two-storey twelve-room house for Worthington and his family. The Temple of Truth was built by George Simpson, a leading Christchurch building contractor, who along with Alfred Duggan had been one of Worthington's first converts in the city.

Newspaper descriptions of the Temple of Truth suggest that it was a most impressive edifice from the outside and a breath-taking marvel on the inside. It was designed by one of the city's leading architects, W. A. Clarkson. It had tall Ionic columns on the facade, rather similar to those of the 1881-2 Oxford Terrace Baptist Church in the next block. Reporters at first thought these were made from Oamaru limestone, but Alpers inspected them closely, and found that they were hollow, made of timber with a sandy stucco. On the pediment above the columns were large Gothic letters announcing 'God Reigns', and in plain Roman letters 'The Temple of Truth'. A spacious entrance hall 36 x 16 feet had a library room on one side and a 'healing room' at the other, indicating that Worthington still offered faith-healing to his followers. The main auditorium was 97 feet long and 34 feet high, with a gallery on three sides

capable of seating 650. The floor of the auditorium had space for a thousand bentwood chairs, all locally made. The windows were filled with tinted church glass, and the interior was illuminated by gas lighting. In winter the auditorium was warmed by gas heaters.

The interior decoration must have been quite stunning, with decorative panels in maroon, crimson and gold set on pale blue and white walls. The ceiling was in French grey with stencilled patterns in pale blue, buff and pink. There was a maroon frieze around the walls with 26 different versions of the cross in gold leaf.

The temple was intended not only to delight the eye but to tickle the ear. It had excellent acoustics, and music was a large part of the appeal of Worthington's meetings at the Temple of Truth. The pipe organ had been purchased for Worthington by an anonymous American benefactor, probably his wife. Popular hymns were sung, led by a choir of fifty voices, and soloists regularly featured at the services, both vocal and instrumental. While the Salvation Army set great store by its brass band, Worthington's musical fare was obviously aimed at pleasing a more refined middle class audience.

The grand opening of the Temple of Truth on 11 August 1892 was attended by an estimated 1,200 people, and journalists were told that it opened debt-free. The newspapers estimated the cost of such a lavish building, and the house next door, must have been no less than £10,000 (or about $1 million in today's money).

With such splendid new premises, warmed by gas heaters in the winter months, Worthington's following grew apace. Through his fortnightly pamphlet, *The Comforter,* he began to promote his ideas about a vegetarian diet. He was a devotee of health foods, and insisted that a proper diet was essential to human happiness. There was even talk of opening another branch of the movement in Auckland.

But opposition was gathering. The Christchurch clergy had been dismayed to see their pews empty as curious people voted with their feet and went to see the Temple of Truth. More than a few stayed, captivated by Worthington's preaching and faith-healing, or perhaps the sight of his beautiful wife, or the private marriage-guidance sessions. In October 1892 a crowd of women from the Free Methodist Church blocked the street outside Worthington's new house on Madras Street to condemn his latest pamphlet on sexology. This had been

issued free only to the men of his congregation. The Methodist ladies claimed that it promoted free-love, and would do infinite harm to community morals and the sanctity of marriage. Worthington in reply challenged them to give one example of anyone led astray by his teachings, and the good ladies of the Methodist Free Church were dumbfounded. They could not. But they insisted that the pamphlet was immoral and said he should leave town. Worthington replied that he had no intention of leaving his flock, and would never leave Christchurch until he was carried to the cemetery. The crowd of women then sang a hymn, prayed, and dispersed.

Opposition to Worthington's Temple of Truth became more vocal and more serious in 1893, led by the Reverend Dr John Hosking, a Methodist minister who had been educated in America and whose contacts there had warned him about Worthington's past. The Methodists were especially embarrassed because Worthington claimed to be an ordained Methodist minister. Yet the clergy of other denominations also began to complain about his doctrinal unorthodoxy and his peculiar teachings about sex and free love. They accused Worthington of breaking up marriages, but he replied that he was simply helping people to escape from unhappy marriages and to find new partners with whom they could find true happiness. The words 'true' and 'truth' peppered all of his public statements and his interviews with newspaper reporters.

While criticism grew from the outside, by 1893 all was not well inside the Temple of Truth. With hindsight it would appear that Worthington's 'marriage' was on the rocks. His 'wife' Mary had started her own elite female enclave within the congregation, 'The Order of the Temple', and had begun calling herself Sister Magdala. The members of this order wore long black robes and proclaimed the spiritual benefits of celibacy. It was rumoured in some newspapers that this was merely a cover for yet more promiscuity and free love. Perhaps Mary had grown tired of the wife-swapping sessions, or was annoyed that her 'husband' was having sex with too many other women without her knowledge.

The crisis erupted in June 1893. On 2 June a letter was published in the Christchurch *Star* signed 'Indignant' which asserted on good authority that Worthington had spent time in prison for fraud, had deceived and deserted no fewer than seven women in the US, and was now forcing his present wife to leave him. The letter-writer claimed that he had made her sign an agreement to leave New Zealand and never to make any public statements about him or the

finances of the Temple of Truth, and in return for her silence she would receive a living allowance for life. She had responded by getting her children to sign a paper renouncing the surname Worthington. The letter-writer concluded that he was a fraud, a liar and a swindler, calling him ‘a double-dyed villain’. This was marvellously libellous stuff, yet Worthington remained silent.

Apparently all of these allegations were true, but Worthington’s loyal supporters closed ranks in solidarity and Mary was forced to pack her bags and leave the family home. She went to live at Coker’s Hotel in Manchester Street, where she was visited by her loyal members of the ‘Order of the Temple’, and supported by her best friend, Miss Marc, who called herself Sister Gertrude, before taking her children by ship to Australia. She told reporters that Worthington had spent all her money and had had numerous sexual liaisons with the female members of his congregation. From the pattern of his previous frauds, he was probably now on the lookout for another wealthy woman to defraud.

Christchurch had never before had such a juicy sex scandal reported in such lurid detail in the local newspapers. Their reports were copied by other newspapers, so the whole of New Zealand knew about the goings-on at the Temple of Truth down there in supposedly quiet respectable churchy conservative Christchurch. Everyone was talking about it, and whispering about the people who were known to attend services at the Temple of Truth.

In mid-June 1893 members of the mainstream churches showed their disapproval of Worthington by gathering outside the Temple when services were in progress and throwing stones onto the tin roof or rapping on the front doors with sticks. This episode is of great interest to cultural historians, for this was a very old English folk tradition of ‘rough music’, intended to show community disapproval of immoral behaviour. The police were called to keep order, and the mayor, Eden George, made an appearance asking the crowd to disperse. Much to his surprise, they did.

Not surprisingly, given the circumstances of the Worthingtons’ marriage break-up, the Students of Truth began to disagree amongst themselves and factions emerged. Respectable families anxious for their reputations in the town now denied any association with Worthington. Sister Magdala’s loyal supporters were the first to secede, claiming that her doctrines were sound, regardless of

her husband's behaviour. They were outraged that he had tried to suppress her teaching within the Temple. Evidently the 'truth' was whatever he said. Or for her supporters, whatever she said.

The Temple's treasurer, the loyal house-painter Charles Duggan of Noah's Ark fame, denied that any of Mrs Worthington's money had been used to build the Temple, but 'Indignant' again wrote to the *Star* asking what had happened to the £120, the last of her money, that she had given to Worthington? Was it used to shut the mouths of those small property owners who had mortgaged their homes to help build the temple?

The newspapers suggested that relations between the Worthingtons had first become strained when he went north to set up a new branch in Auckland. In his absence she had given a lecture on sexology which some of the Temple's trustees found 'distasteful'. On his return he demanded that she never again speak in public without his authority as 'head of the work'. She responded that as co-founder and co-worker she had every right to teach whatever she thought was true, including her beliefs about sexual matters. The main bone of contention was that she had advocated a life of celibacy for all, for married couples as well as single folk. No wonder the trustees had been upset. That sort of preaching was not likely to appeal to the men of the congregation.

Another report claimed that Worthington had threatened to surrender his lease and debentures on the Temple and abandon his work in Christchurch, so rather than risk this, the trustees had decided that his wife had to go. And she had very readily agreed to the terms they proposed.

It would appear that she soon forgot about the terms, and was happy to tell reporters whatever they wanted to know. She said that she had not known about Worthington's dubious past when they married, but he had told her about some of it and she had forgiven him. She said she had really loved him and admired him back then. She had given him control of her bank account and cheque book, and though he had been lavish with her money he had never been dishonest. And he had been like a father to her children. But now it was all over, and she was going to Australia to start a new life.

The Worthington affair had been the talk of all New Zealand during 1893 but things calmed down after the departure of Mrs Worthington, or Sister Magdala. Her most devoted friend and supporter, Sister Gertrude, had accompanied her to Australia. By now Worthington's name had reached the highest quarters in the

land, and the Seddon government in Wellington had instructed the New Zealand Police to seek Worthington's extradition to face charges of bigamy and fraud in the US. Unfortunately, they discovered that New Zealand had no treaty agreement with the US covering extradition. The American authorities were probably happy to let him stay in New Zealand and cause trouble here rather than in the US.

The Students of Truth were in the news again in July 1894 when one of their original supporters, Mrs Elizabeth Ingram, a widow, sued the trust board for £12, that being the interest owing on six debentures worth a total of £400 that had been issued to her by the trustees in September 1892 in return for her life savings. In the ensuing court actions and appeals, many details about the finances of the Temple of Truth were exposed to the public gaze.

It emerged that Worthington did not own the Temple, but paid the trustees £240 a year for its use. The social hall and kindergarten opposite the Temple had been built by him with borrowed money. The total amount raised by debentures was £4,880 but as the trustees had no income apart from Worthington's rent they had fallen behind with the interest payments. They relied on a clause in the original debentures which said that interest would be paid from 'available funds'. With no funds available, they felt no obligation to pay the interest. But some debenture holders, like Mrs Ingram, were desperate for their money, and saw no prospect of it ever being repaid.

The Magistrate found in favour of Mrs Ingram but the trustees appealed the decision in the Supreme Court, where Mr Justice Denniston urged the parties to settle out of court. In January 1895 the Temple was put up for auction, and the successful bidder, one Mr Weber, paid £3,050 for it on behalf of A. B. Worthington. After repayment of mortgages and legal costs, the trustees had only £1,750 available to repay the larger debenture holders. We still do not know who put up the money to buy the Temple. One newspaper speculated that it was 'a prominent Freethinker' and that Worthington himself had not contributed even a pound. Though he promised to repay the smaller debenture holders if they dropped all legal action, they do not appear ever to have been repaid.

Worthington's loyal followers celebrated the fifth anniversary of his first lecture in Christchurch with a reception, tea and entertainment in March 1895, which

included glees, quartets, solos and dances by the children. A month later Worthington was in the news again, taking legal action to have his name restored to the list of officiating ministers under the 1880 Marriage Act. The Registrar-General was not satisfied that the Temple of Truth was a religious body, but Worthington supplied the signatures of ten respectable men who swore that he was their pastor, and Worthington was again allowed to conduct marriage ceremonies.

But he could not very well conduct his own marriage ceremony. With Mary Plunkett out of the way in Australia, it was rumoured that he was contemplating marriage with one of his parishioners. She was not a rich widow, but a young single woman. Apparently he had approached several ministers of religion, but they had all declined to officiate for him.

Then in August 1895 the newspapers announced his Registry Office marriage to Miss Evelyn Maud Jordan, and this caused a great sensation in the Temple of Truth. Even his longest-serving supporter George Simpson seceded, taking a large part of the congregation with him. They went back to hiring lodge halls for their services. What was left of the Students of Truth continued to hold their services in Latimer Square.

Worthington's most persistent critic had been the newly-established *Sun* newspaper, run by John Thomas Marryatt Hornsby. In August 1895 it published an article headed 'An Irreligious Minister of Religion' in which it accused Worthington of 'brazen immorality', and setting an example of 'vulgar baseness and hideous hypocrisy'. Worthington promptly brought a charge of contempt of court against Hornsby, as the article referred to a case still before the courts. The case was heard at the High Court in Christchurch before Mr Justice Denniston. Hornsby claimed that the *Sun* was the only newspaper that had had the courage to show Worthington in his true light, and had said nothing new that hadn't already been said by the other newspapers two years before, or by the Reverend Hosking in his pamphlets. If the 'catalogue of his crimes' published two years ago had not been true, Worthington could have recovered £10,000 in damages, but he had remained silent. He had also stayed silent when the *Sun* invited him to deny that he was Samuel Oakley Crawford. But Denniston agreed that the *Sun* had been in contempt, and fined Hornsby £10, with seven guineas in costs. He noted that the *Sun* was not a wealthy paper, and said he did not wish to crush the defendant, so would give him a fortnight in which to find the money.

Worthington now brought an action for libel against Hornsby, claiming £100 for each of three articles published by the *Sun* in August. But Worthington's promised witness from Australia failed to turn up, and had not filed any affidavits, so the judge dismissed the case as non-suit. By now Hornsby was ill and almost bankrupt. The court granted him an order to wind up the *Sun* company in December 1895. Most people in Christchurch must have thought that Worthington had been vindictively litigious.

People now began to press Worthington to repay the money they had lent him, especially those who had recently seceded from his congregation. He suddenly departed for Australia in December 1895, in order to raise funds, but in March 1896 the Temple's trustees told newspaper reporters that he was in Hobart and did not intend to return to Christchurch.

Much to their surprise, and everybody else's delight, Worthington returned to Christchurch in September 1897, but the trustees refused him entry to his Temple of Truth. So he hired the Oddfellows' Lodge hall in Lichfield Street and announced a series of Sunday lectures. The first two were well-attended by the curious and some of his former followers, but there were rumours of an intention to disrupt his third lecture, so he asked for a police escort. The police obliged with a force of 40 men, four of them on horseback. On 26 September the Oddfellows' Hall was crammed with an estimated thousand people, with more outside wanting to get in. The police estimated the crowd in the street at 6,000. Obviously there was nothing much else to do in Christchurch on a Sunday afternoon.

The crowd became restive and noisy, with much hissing and booing during the lecture. The police made two arrests, but Inspector Broham told Worthington that he could not guarantee his safety on foot if he left the hall, and recommended that he send for a cab. (This would be a horse-drawn hansom cab.) The cab arrived at 8.40 pm, but the crowd pressed close and would not let it leave.

The city's two magistrates, H. Wedderburn Bishop and Richmond Beetham, consulted and decided that the situation required the reading of the Riot Act, whereupon Beetham climbed onto the cab and read out the following words in a loud voice:

> ‘Our Sovereign Lady the Queen chargeth and commandeth all persons being assembled immediately to disperse and peaceably depart to their habitations or their lawful business, upon the pain of being found guilty of an offence on conviction of which they may be sentenced to imprisonment with hard labour for life. God Save the Queen!’

The was greeted with groans and hisses, but the police then set about clearing the street with their batons, and the crowd fell back, only to regroup in High Street. Beetham urged Worthington to return to the hall for his own safety, but he refused. Then at 9.15 the cab suddenly turned around and raced off in the opposite direction. Some of the crowd ran after it, and followed it up Colombo Street to the house where Worthington was staying. The four mounted police got there first, however, and stood guard as Worthington disappeared indoors. Several hundred people milled about in the street, but when the constables on foot finally came panting up with their batons drawn the crowd quickly dispersed, and by 10 pm the street was cleared.

Worthington obviously enjoyed being the centre of attention, for he tried again on 3 October to give a public lecture. This time the crowd was smaller, only about 3,000, and a large police contingent was again on duty, with both magistrates present. But just as the lecture was ending, about 8 pm, the city fire alarm went off and the Fire Brigade sprang into action from the Lichfield Street fire station. (This was an old Baptist chapel that had been converted into a secondary fire station in 1871. The main station was in the Market Place, now Victoria Square.) The horse-drawn appliances had trouble getting through the dense crowd, with much cheering and jocularity on all sides. Then a rumour spread that Worthington had been concealed in one of the fire engines, and the cheers turned to groans and boos. But he had already slipped away by a back alley.

Now the historical record goes quiet, and next to nothing is known of Worthington during 1898. By now he was thoroughly discredited, and probably existed on the charity of his few remaining devoted followers. Sometime in April or May 1899 he departed for Australia and never returned to New Zealand.

However, at some time in the late 1890s his former wife Mary Plunkett returned to Christchurch with her friend Sister Gertrude Marc, and they lived with her daughter in the big house known as the Temple Home, next to the Temple of

Truth. Presumably she paid rent to the property's new owners. Mary and Sister Gertrude set up a School of Mental Science devoted to helping people recover from depression, and in March 1901 Mary Plunkett married again, becoming Mrs Atkinson. (Her new husband was related to the former premier, Sir Harry Atkinson.) The marriage was not, apparently, a success, and she fell ill with extreme depression, 'amounting at times to acute melancholia'. All the efforts of her friends to cheer her up proved unavailing.

In June 1901 one of the domestic servants found her body face down in the ornamental pond in the garden at the back of the Temple Home. The coroner later gave a verdict of death by suicide. Her daughter was adopted by a Christchurch family, while her son remained in New York, living with relatives.

We next hear of Worthington in Melbourne in 1902, when he was gaoled for defrauding a wealthy French widow, the splendidly-named Miranda May de la Juveney. Apparently he had convinced her that she was a reincarnation of the goddess Isis, and was the pinnacle of the 'pyramid' of followers he had gathered in Melbourne since 1899. He, of course, was Osiris. He shared with her his plans for a grand new Temple of Truth with kindergarten attached, along the same lines as the one he had had in Christchurch, and she began to contribute larger and larger sums of money to the project. He also had plans for a Sanatorium in St Kilda, to be run along Christian Science principles.

But nothing came of these plans. When Mme de la Juveney had run out of ready cash, Worthington ran out on her, and accepted a 'call' from the Hyde Park Unitarian Church in Sydney. She asked for her money back, and when he refused, she went to a lawyer who promptly told the police. Worthington was charged with obtaining over £1,000 by false pretences, and the jury wasted no time finding him guilty as charged.

The judge declared him 'one of the most dangerous imposters' that had ever come into Australia. For a former convict colony, that was a very considerable accolade. Worthington spent several years in a Melbourne gaol, and was visited there by some of his loyal New Zealand supporters. On his release he went to Adelaide, but was recognised by one of his former students from Christchurch, who warned the newspapers of his past. They starved him of the publicity he needed, and he left Adelaide within a fortnight. Back in Melbourne he joined the Salvation Army, and even wrote a pamphlet for them, but his past kept

catching up with him, and he finally took ship for California with his second (or seventh?) wife from Christchurch, Evelyn Maud Jordan, and their four young children. On the way they were shipwrecked, but survived. Worthington was the consummate survivor.

Then he returned to New York State, and became a Presbyterian minister. By now he had a white goatee beard and moustache, with rimless glasses. But he hadn't changed his habits, and was soon in trouble for defrauding members of his congregation. He simply moved on, changing his name in various places, until he was arrested in 1917 on a variety of charges. He died in prison on 13 December that year, after being confronted by one of his female victims and suffering a heart attack. He was aged sixty.

And what became of the Temple of Truth? The trustees managed to sell the hall to a syndicate of property investors, and repaid the many small investors who had helped to build it. In January 1898 it was renamed the Choral Hall, and became a popular venue for concerts, travelling shows and political speech-making. It was often altered over the years, and finally lost its impressive facade and columns. It later became known as the Latimer Dance Hall, and was a popular Saturday night gathering place for young people. It was demolished in 1966 and the site has been an empty car park ever since. The large 12-roomed house where the Worthingtons lived was also demolished, a bit sooner than the hall, and was replaced by the Christchurch YWCA.

What a bizarre story! Now, what does it tell us about Christchurch and New Zealand in the 1890s?

It suggests that there were profound social and cultural changes afoot that created a fertile ground for Worthington's peculiar deceptions. The rapid growth of New Zealand towns and cities after the 1880s depression had created a lot of new white-collar jobs in offices and retailing. These people aspired to middle-class respectability and home-ownership. Land was relatively cheap, and the banks were again willing to lend money. This was New Zealand's first educated generation, the products of the primary schools of the 1877 Education

Act. They were avid readers, but not especially highly-educated, and a little learning is always a dangerous thing.

This was a generation disenchanted with the mainstream churches of their parents and grandparents. Worthington's teachings about personal happiness and a satisfying sex-life must have been a heady mixture for the twenty- and thirty-year olds of the 1890s, and not a few middle-aged couples as well. He seems to have tapped into a growing wave of reaction against High Victorian prudery and strict morality, no doubt fuelled by numerous examples of hypocrisy in high society at home and abroad. The wealthy social elites of Britain and North America seemed to have their own rules about moral behaviour, to judge from the scandals that occasionally surfaced in the newspapers.

Was there something distinctive about Christchurch that made it a receptive environment for a confidence trickster like Worthington? There probably was in the 1890s. It was not just the home for many of New Zealand's sporting codes. It had been a cradle of the trade union movement, with railwaymen, watersiders and engineers all forming unions in the city in the 1880s, and culminating in the formation of the Canterbury Trades and Labour Council in 1890. The Maritime Strike of 1890 had been well-supported in Christchurch and Lyttelton, but failed nonetheless. Artisan radicalism was strong in Canterbury. Politicians such as William Pember Reeves, Harry Ell and Tommy Taylor, were gaining solid support among what became the Liberal voters of Christchurch in the 1890s. Reeves wrote articles for his father's newspaper, the *Lyttelton Times*, discussing socialism and communism, and frightening thereby the city's conservative wealthy elite. He labelled one exploitative landowner a social pest; the landowner promptly named one of his racehorses 'Social Pest'.

Christchurch already led New Zealand in movements for social reform and especially women's rights. The Women's Christian Temperance Union had been formed in Christchurch in 1885, and the Canterbury Women's Institute lent its support to the campaign for women's suffrage led by Kate Sheppard. Women like Ada Wells, Edith Searle Grossman and Maud Reeves were all active feminists in the 1890s. There was much debate over equal pay and better working conditions for women. The first meeting of the National Council of Women was held in Christchurch in 1896.

New ideas were in the air. Edward Bellamy's popular utopian novel *Looking Backwards* (1888) was much-discussed, and its ideas included free state education, state control of industry, prices and wages, equal pay for both sexes, and marriage for love rather than for economic dependence.

All this added up to a ferment of new ideas in 1890s Christchurch. A younger generation of mostly Liberal voters questioned and challenged the conservatism of their elders in politics, religion and social conventions. The movement to do away with women's corsets is very typical of this period. One figure who typifies this generation is the controversial social reformer Ettie Rout. She later married the physical education pioneer, Fred Hornibrook, who advocated the Sandow Method of physical fitness. His Christchurch School of Physical Culture embodied the 'healthy mind in a healthy body' motto. Ettie appears in a group photo of respectable but corsetless women in 1904. She made her way as an independent woman with two of the new technologies of her generation: the bicycle and the typewriter. She was a brilliant shorthand typist. Later, during the First World War, she lobbied the government to provide sex education and contraception for the troops, scandalising matronly opinion, but privately supported by several senior army officers, and adored by the troops.

Worthington's half-baked mixture of religion and philosophy and free love struck a chord with Ettie Rout's generation, the newly-affluent white-collar workers who had good salaries and new houses on quarter acre sections. Radical Christchurch of the 1890s suited him perfectly.

But you can fool only some of the people some of the time; you can't fool everyone all of the time. While religion, sex and money still make a powerful brew, as they have all through the ages, the founders of new cults and sects often seem to have very human feet of clay, not to mention other parts of their anatomy, and get found out in due course. Though radical Christchurch welcomed Worthington and gave him more than a fair hearing, when his murky past became more widely known he was discredited and laughed at. Christchurch finally saw him off with ridicule, scorn and the Riot Act. And yet, in the NZ census reports of the early 1900s, there were still a few loyal devotees who gave their religion as 'Students of Truth'.

His ideas, however, or perhaps those of his wife, surfaced again in a divorce case heard in Christchurch in June 1906. This couple had lived quite happily until about 1896, when the wife had become involved in a 'quasi-religious

association' which from literature produced at the trial seemed to devote a lot of its time to discussing relations between the sexes. This sounds very like Worthington's Temple of Truth. The wife found that she had no 'soul affinity' with her husband, and refused him conjugal rights, though they continued to live under the same roof. Then she left in 1902, and said she wanted a divorce. When the husband heard that she intended going to Australia he filed for a divorce. In granting the divorce, Judge Denniston made some interesting remarks about marriage. He declared that a wife's denial of conjugal rights was tantamount to desertion. Was this how Worthington had felt in 1893 when Mary Plunkett started her own 'Order of the Temple' as Sister Magdala?

SOURCES:

Newspapers: *Lyttelton Times* and *The Press*, Christchurch; available online through NZ National Library's website, *Papers Past.*

Sun newspaper (24 August 1895), Auckland University Library. (Not to be confused with the *Sun* newspaper, 1914-35.)

The Worthington Lectures, Vol. I (1891). There was no volume II.