

Transcription Stories: Rev. Benjamin Ashwell and the mission school at Kaitotehe

Dr. Natasha Barrett

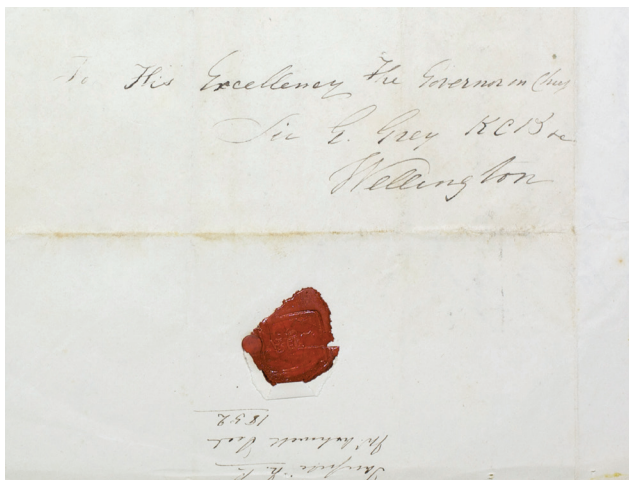
Introduction

During the COVID-19 lockdown in 2020, I occupied my time transcribing Grey New Zealand Letters from Sir George Grey Special Collections, which is part of Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections. All the letters have been digitised and are available via Manuscripts Online, which made working remotely relatively easy.¹ Library transcription projects such as these not only assist with online searches but also aid research. This is because 19th century script can be challenging to decipher and requires familiarity with the abbreviations frequently used by authors at the time.

As part of a coordinated approach towards this project, I was tasked with working on letters by authors whose surname began with the letter 'A'. This included ten letters (GLNZ A13.1-A13.10) written by Rev. Benjamin Yate Ashwell (1810-1883) to Sir George Grey (1812-1898).² Ashwell wrote these letters from 1849 to 1871, a time span which included both of Grey's terms as Governor of New Zealand (1845-1854 and 1861-1868). In this article, I will discuss the mission station school at Kaitotehe run by Ashwell, which I pieced together whilst transcribing Ashwell's letters and undertaking additional research.

Figure 1:

Envelope with seal (excerpt and cropped). Letter from Rev. Benjamin Ashwell to Sir George Grey. 27 December 1852, GLNZ A13.5, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.



Ashwell and the mission station at Kaitotehe

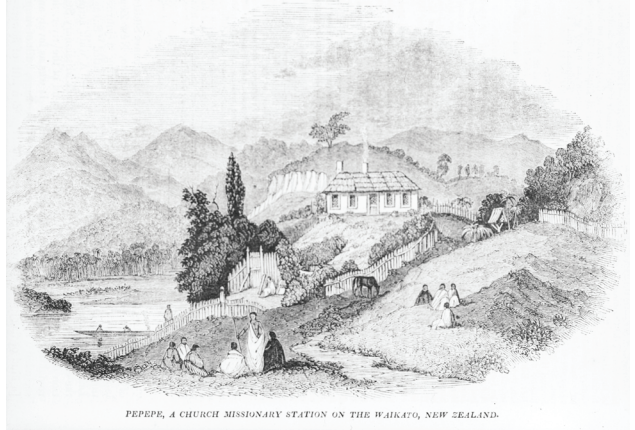
Ashwell was born in Birmingham, England and trained with the Church Missionary Society in London (1831-1833). He spent a few years as an Anglican lay missionary in West Africa before emigrating in 1835 to New Zealand. Between 1839 and 1842 he helped Rev. Robert Maunsell (1810-1894) establish a mission station at Maraetai, Waikato Heads. Graduating from these duties, Ashwell set up and administered a mission station in the Waikato (1843-1863). Ashwell did not forget his missionary colleague though and remained in contact with him, mentioning Maunsell often in his letters to Sir George Grey.

The mission station run by Ashwell was located a short distance from the rear of the pā at Kaitotehe. The pā had been built at the foot of the sacred maunga (mountain), Mount Taupiri, by King Pōtatau Te Wherowhero (?-1860), paramount chief of the Waikato tribes. Kaitotehe lay on the flat and fertile land of the west bank of the Waikato River, opposite the settlement of Taupiri and within close vicinity of Ngāruawāhia. From this location, Ashwell was responsible for a large district of around 70 miles, comprising 30 villages and extending as far as Port Russell. Despite not having very robust health, Ashwell's already busy working life was also occupied with running the mission station's school for Māori children. Under his direction and indefatigable energy, the school grew and developed. From a colonial perspective it was deemed successful (up until the war in the Waikato), leading Cowan to describe it as the "centre of religion and secular learning on the mid-Waikato."³

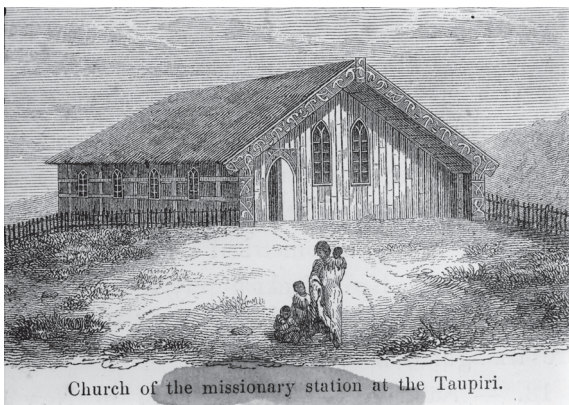
Ordained by Bishop George Augustus Selwyn, Ashwell is described as being temperamental and eccentric. Despite this, he was influential and respected by Waikato Māori, who called him Te Ahiwera or Hot Fire. He was not, however, supportive of the growing Kīngitanga (King) movement in the area and his letters are full of references to the growing unrest. When war broke out in the Waikato in 1863, he evacuated to Auckland. Based at Trinity Church in Devonport from 1866, he ran the Parish of the Holy Trinity, which at the time incorporated all of the North Shore. Whilst in this role, he continued working as a missionary with Māori, holding a "Maori [*sic*] Service once a month at the Lake" (located between the suburbs of Takapuna and Milford), as well as working with communities in North Mahurangi and Te Muri.⁴ After working again in the Waikato during the 1870s, he permanently returned to Auckland. He retired in 1883, ending a missionary career of over 49 years.

Figure 2:

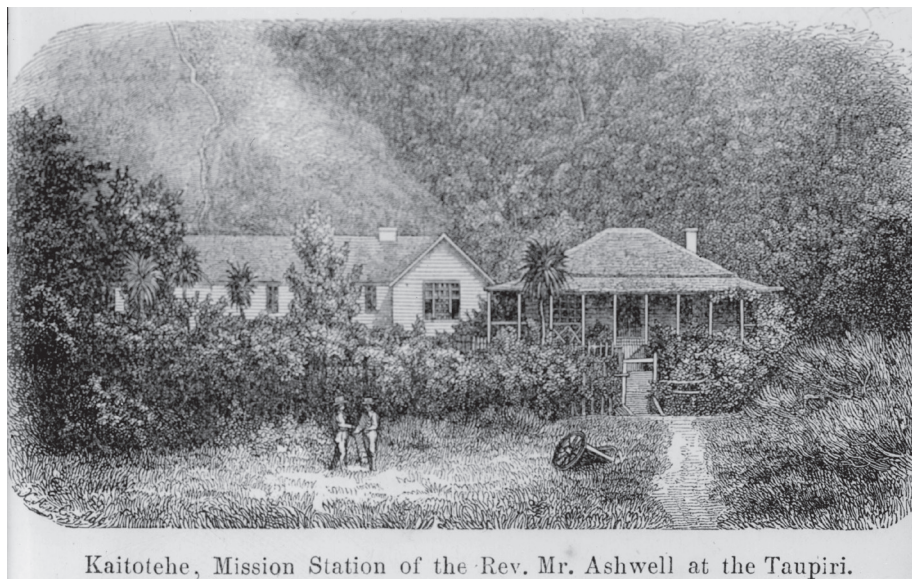
Copy negative by James D. Richardson (n.d.) of an engraving from the Missionary Register. Showing the mission station at Pepepe (Kaitotehe) near Taupiri, on the Waikato River. 4-1275, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections. Engraving derived from an original by George French Angus, 1844.



Kaitotehe Mission Station (also referred to as Taupiri Mission Station) was much drawn, painted and later photographed, including by the painter George French Angus and photographer Bruno L. Hamel (see figures 2 and 5). The latter visited the area in 1859, as part of the Government Scientific Exploring Expedition conducted by Dr. Ferdinand Hochstetter (see figure 3). In addition to impressions showing the whole mission station, artists and photographers also focused on capturing specific elements. This included the school and church, the latter combining both Māori and Gothic Revival architectural elements (see figure 4). Hochstetter described the church as “a pretty specimen of a Maori [*sic*] building” and noted “its door-posts and gable-beams [*were*] gayly painted.”⁵

**Figure 3:**

Copy negative by James D. Richardson (n.d.) of a wood engraving of the Church at the mission station at Taupiri (Kaitotehe). 4-6909, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections. Engraving derived from a sketch by Augustus Koch (mapmaker), published in: Dr Ferdinand von Hochstetter, *New Zealand Its Physical Geography, Geology and Natural History...* Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta, 1867, 308.



Kaitotehe, Mission Station of the Rev. Mr. Ashwell at the Taupiri.

Figure 4: Copy negative by James D. Richardson (n.d.) of a wood engraving of the Mission station at Kaitotehe, Taupiri. 4-6901, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections. Engraving based on a photograph by Bruno L. Hamel, published in: Dr Ferdinand von Hochstetter, *New Zealand Its Physical Geography, Geology and Natural History ...* Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta, 1867, 303.

The mission school

Schooling at the Kaitotehe Mission Station was conducted in a “highly finished and ornamental weatherboarded house” containing a central school room, dining room and dormitory.⁶ It is this mission school, that was the subject of many of Ashwell’s letters to Grey during the 1850s. Although Grey does not appear to have visited the school until January 1863, as the war in the Waikato was beginning to ignite, he was, however, pivotal in establishing and setting the tone for Māori education policies during the 19th century and well into the next. Grey believed in colonial theories of ‘civilisation’ and racial amalgamation (retaining and combining what was perceived to be the most desirable aspects of European and Māori culture), although the effect was more akin to assimilation (i.e. ensuring Māori learnt European ways). Central to achieving these goals was Grey’s approach to education policy and for this he consulted with Maunsell, who was considered an authority on Māori education. Accordingly, when first in office Grey established the Education Ordinance 1847 to support

Anglican, Roman Catholic and Wesleyan mission schools throughout New Zealand with public funds.⁷ This policy was founded on instruction in religion, the English language and training in manual and domestic skills, and was officiated by government inspectors. The subsequent Native Schools Act 1858, which provided subsidies for 'native' mission boarding schools, was also based on these principles but additionally required Māori children to board on site.⁸

Ashwell references Grey's involvement in education policy when he wrote to him on the 25th November 1852, stating

"[k]nowing the interest which you take in the formation of Schools for the instruction of the Aborigines I take the liberty of bringing under your notice the present position and prospects of the School at Kaitotehe."⁹

Over the years of their correspondence, Ashwell informed Grey about the growing numbers of pupils at Kaitotehe. This was a less formal way of reporting on the mission school's progress, although Ashwell, like Maunsell, was also an officially licensed government inspector of mission schools. By the 24th May 1850, for example, Ashwell states that the number of pupils had risen to around 30-40.¹⁰ Less than two years later (27 December 1852), he is pleased to report the number of pupils had nearly doubled to "sixty[,] chiefly girls."¹¹ By the time Hochstetter visited in

Figure 5:
Photograph by
Bruno L. Hamel
of pupils posed
outside the
Kaitotehe Mission
Station school.
1859, 7-A15830,
Auckland Libraries
Heritage Collections.
Taken during
the Government
Scientific Exploring
Expedition,
conducted by
Dr. Ferdinand
Hochstetter.



1859, it had risen again to 94 pupils, consisting of 46 girls and 48 boys.¹²

Although Ashwell does not describe the daily routines of school life in his letters to Grey, he does elaborate on this in newspaper articles and subsequently in *Recollections of a Waikato Missionary* (1878):

*The rules were as follows:-- An hour before breakfast--6 a.m. in summer, 7 a.m. in winter--the bell rang: prayers and Bible-class for an hour; this I always took. 8 a.m. in summer, and 9 a.m. in winter, the bell rang for breakfast. 9 a.m. in summer, and 10 a.m. in winter, the bell rang for school. 1 p.m., dinner. 2 p.m., the sewing-school for girls, and farm work for boys, till 5 p.m. At 6 p.m., tea. After tea, the elder girls were engaged knitting, and the others in a reading class. Our usual course of instruction was reading, in native and English grammar, geography, history, writing, arithmetic, and singing ...*¹³

As the rules outline, there was a close adherence to the Education Ordinance fund regulations. This included foci on literacy and religious studies, as well as gendered activities for the pupils (as was typical of the time); namely indoor household work for the girls and outdoor farming for the boys. The latter is also revealed by Hochstetter's description of the school during his visit. He observed that "Maori [*sic*] girls, who are here instructed in different branches of domestic work, while the boys are trained for agriculture and all sorts of useful trades."¹⁴

Funding

Despite Grey's departure from New Zealand to take on the post of governor of Cape Colony (South Africa) in 1854, Ashwell continued to advise him about schooling in the Waikato and ask for assistance. In his letter of 1 September 1855, for example, he writes:

*I feel assured that your Excellency still feels an interest in the progress of Education amongst the Aborigenes [*sic*] of New Zealand. The Waikato Schools I believe are still progressing. Mr Maunsell Number 80 Scholars Mr Morgans 30 Half Castes & Native and Taupiri 52.*¹⁵

The school was supported by annual government funding of around £100 through the Education Ordinance fund, but by the end of November 1852 the school was in debt. Ashwell relayed this to Grey explaining "[i]n 1850 I erected a large School House containing three rooms on one wing of mine own dwelling. This Building cost £280, and for its erection I received £50 from the Government Grant, and no other assistance."¹⁶ Further on in this

letter, Ashwell catalogues the costs of running the school, describing how this often resulted in shortfalls. This was despite taking on boarders from 1846 and seeking other forms as revenue, such as the sale of mats woven by the female pupils.¹⁷ He notes:

*We have maintained, an average number of 50 Boarders, during the last three years and for their support have received only £100 per annum, from Government Grant, besides these scholars we board and pay an English Female Assistant. We are now more than £300 in debt. The question has now been forced on my attention whether I should not considerably diminish the number of scholars. This step I should deeply regret ...*¹⁸

Grey responded to Ashwell's request for assistance by sending him £100 towards the costs.¹⁹ As this and other letters show, Grey played an important role in supplementing the school's funding.

Something which we can identify with today, is the cost of food. Ashwell advised Grey on the 25th November 1852 that he feared "food rising in price in consequence of the late discovery of gold in this Hemisphere."²⁰ This is probably a reference to Charles Ring's 1852 discovery of gold near Coromandel town. As a solution, Ashwell informed Grey that he had bought around 100 acres of land, located 2 miles away, with the intention of enabling the mission station to be self-sufficient. In outlining his plans, he strategically appealed to Grey to help finance this endeavour:

*Revd. R Maunsell has undertaken that his school should plough and harrow it for us. For his preliminary operation, we need between £30 & 50, and my object now is to solicit this assistance from your Excellency. I forbear enlarging on the advantages which I expect to result to us from this undertaking. I am aware that your Excellency has more than once expressed strong opinions, upon the desirableness of helping Institutions to gain their own support, and I indulge strong hopes that the economical way in which the aid hitherto gained to us has been expended will induce your Excellency if possible to grant us the aid so much needed, at this juncture.*²¹

This tone also appears in subsequent correspondence, where Ashwell states "[t]he kind interest your Excellency takes in our institutions is an encouragement to persevere."²² It was evidently a successful approach, and in his letter of 1 September 1855, Ashwell thanks Grey for further funding, stating:

The benefit Taupiri Institution has received from your present of Plough

*and Horses, induces me again to thank you for your many kind favours which have greatly encouraged us in our work. We trust that Agricultural Labours will eventually render the Institution self supporting.*²³

Debt

Evidently the strain of debt wore Ashwell down, as did a letter by Rev. Maunsell about the Kaitotehe Mission Station’s financial situation, which was published in the *New Zealander* on 30 October 1852.²⁴ In his letter of 28 March 1853, Ashwell took great pains to explain to Grey the reasons for the debt, including accounting for Maunsell’s reporting on the matter. He also enclosed accounts to back up his statement (see figure 6), which included a stated annual cost of £4.5.0 per child:

*I have the honor [sic] of forwarding for your inspection an account of the Funds of the Taupiri Institution from which your Excellency will see that the amount of the Debt was £321.0.0 at the time you so kindly sent the £100. Probably a mistake arose through a letter published in the New Zealander by the Revd. R Maunsell in October last he only knew that the School was considerably in debt, which being sufficient for the object of his letter he never enquired the amount. The annexed account was given to the Inspector in October last. it will be seen that the outlay in a suitable Building is the cause of the debt being so heavy. Your Excellency will be pleased to hear that this the blessing of God our School continues to prosper and still affords us much satisfaction.*²⁵

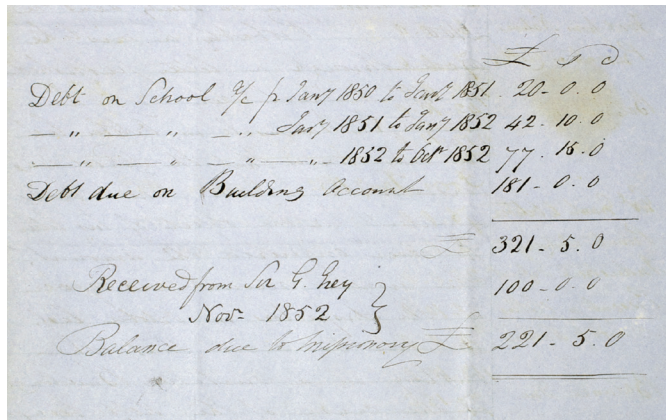


Figure 6: Excerpt from letter by Rev. Benjamin Ashwell to Sir George Grey showing accounts (cropped). 28 March 1853, GLNZ A13.6, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.

A more formal report about the Kaitotehe Mission Station, including its finances, appeared in the Supplement to the *New Zealander* on 11 June 1853. This report was written by Ashwell and formed part of a series of official 'Accounts of the Schools in the District of Auckland'. Without any apparent concern for modesty, Ashwell ended his report by stating:

*"[th]e personal and painstaking labours of the Rev. Mr. Ashwell and of Mrs. Ashwell, in teaching the children, and in the general care of the school, are most exemplary."*²⁶

Grey's departure from Aotearoa New Zealand

As well as discussing the school's debts with Grey, Ashwell wrote to inform him on the 1st September 1855 that his departure for South Africa was still felt by Waikato iwi, even after more than a year had passed:

*The Natives of Waikato often speak of your Excellency, and do not forget the many benefits they received from your kind and judicious administration. They much regret your not returning. We also join with them in their regrets, but as there is something selfish in our wishes, our prayer to God is that it may please him to make you equally successful in your endeavours to benefit the numerous Aboriginal Tribes of Southern Africa as you were in this country.*²⁷

These feelings are echoed by a farewell address to Grey from the children of the Kaitotehe Mission Station school. This was published in the *Maori Messenger: Te Karere Maori* [sic] on the 29th December 1853 before Grey's departure.²⁸ The newspaper also lists 30 female students who signed the address, one of whom is perhaps the pupil Ashwell wrote to Grey about in 1855:

*[O]ne of our School girls, who presented the address to your Excellency wishes to write to you. I gave her permission as you expressed yourself pleased with her. I enclose her letter which is entirely her own you will excuse it as such.*²⁹

Unfortunately, this letter does not accompany Ashwell's letter, nor does he identify the female pupil. Research using the students' names from the newspaper article has not yet been fruitful. However, this information may still be waiting to be found somewhere in Aotearoa New Zealand collections or perhaps even overseas.



Figure 7: Patrick Joseph Hogan. Taupiri Māori signing an address to Sir George Grey prior to his departure from New Zealand. 1853. Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections, 5-785.

Conclusion

As I hope I have shown, the transcribed letters reveal information about the daily running of the Kaitotehe Mission Station school from Ashwell's perspective, including wrangling financial debt. They also give glimpses of what school life might have been like for the Māori pupils at the time. Moreover, at the heart of these letters and indeed any correspondence, are the relationships between people and the way these developed, strengthened or may even have ruptured over time through the activity of letter writing. Fundamentally these letters show that Ashwell's relationship with Grey endured, despite Grey's role as Governor ending and his relocation to South Africa. On the other hand, Ashwell's relationship with Maunsell may have become strained when Maunsell very publicly reported the amount of debt incurred by the Kaitotehe Mission Station.

More broadly, these letters, and others from the Grey New Zealand Letters, contain a wealth of information about 19th century colonial life in Aotearoa New Zealand, including missionaries and mission stations, religion, governmental policy and education. Furthermore, the past histories contained in these letters remain relevant to present day Aotearoa New Zealand, including for the reclamation of Mātauranga Māori knowledge and whakapapa (genealogical descent).

Please note, a version of this article first appeared on the Heritage et AL blog, 6 May 2020 <http://heritageet.al.blogspot.com/2020/05/transcription-tales-rev-benjamin.html>.

With thanks to Sir George Special Collections, Auckland Libraries for permission to reuse this content. The original blog was written whilst Dr Barrett was working as Senior Curator Archives & Manuscripts for Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries.

Endnotes

1. See: <http://www.aucklandcity.govt.nz/dbtw-wpd/msonline/index.htm>.
2. Also referred to as Benjamin Yates Ashwell but Benjamin Yate Ashwell is the preferred name authority.
3. James Cowan, "Famous New Zealanders: No. 18: The Rev. B. Y. Ashwell: Missionary of Waikato: The Story of a Peacemaker", *The New Zealand Railways Magazine* 9, no. 6 (September 1934): 21, http://nzetc.victoria.ac.nz/tm/scholarly/tei-Gov09_06Rail-t1-body-d7.html.
4. Letter "Rev. Benjamin Ashwell to Grey, Sir George." 30 June 1871, GLNZ A13.10, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.
5. Dr Ferdinand von Hochstetter, *New Zealand Its Physical Geography, Geology and Natural History with Special References to the Results of Government Expeditions in the Provinces of Auckland and Nelson* (Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta, 1867), 308.
6. Rev. Benjamin Ashwell, "Taupiri School", *New Zealand Spectator and Cook's Strait Guardian*, September 14, 1853, 4. <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZSCSG18530914.2.10>.
7. See: http://www.nzlii.org/nz/legis/hist_act/ea184711v1847n10224/.
8. See: http://www.nzlii.org/nz/legis/hist_act/nsa185821a22v1858n65306/.
9. Letter "Rev. Benjamin Ashwell to Grey, Sir George." 25 November 1852, GLNZ A13.4, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.

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10. Letter "Rev. Benjamin Ashwell to Grey, Sir George." 24 May 1850, GLNZ A13.2, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.
11. Letter "Rev. Benjamin Ashwell to Grey, Sir George." 27 December 1852, GLNZ A13.5, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.
12. von Hochstetter 307 - 308, *New Zealand Its Physical Geography, Geology and Natural History with Special References to the Results of Government Expeditions in the Provinces of Auckland and Nelson* (Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta, 1867), 307-308.
13. Rev. Benjamin Ashwell, *Recollections of a Waikato Missionary* (Auckland: William Atkin, Church Printer, 1878), 20. N.B. The letters in this publication were originally published in the *New Zealand Herald* and then re-printed in the *Auckland Church Gazette* (1874-1876).
14. von Hochstetter, 309, *New Zealand Its Physical Geography, Geology and Natural History with Special References to the Results of Government Expeditions in the Provinces of Auckland and Nelson* (Stuttgart: J. G. Cotta, 1867), 309.
15. Letter "Rev. Benjamin Ashwell to Grey, Sir George." 1 September 1855, GLNZ A13.8, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.
16. Letter "Rev. Benjamin Ashwell to Grey, Sir George." 25 November 1852, GLNZ A13.4, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.
17. Rev. Benjamin Ashwell, "Taupiri School", *New Zealand Spectator and Cook's Strait Guardian*, Volume IX, Issue 847, September 14, 1853, 4. <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZSCSG18530914.2.10>.
18. Letter "Rev. Benjamin Ashwell to Grey, Sir George." 25 November 1852, GLNZ A13.4, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.
19. Letter "Rev. Benjamin Ashwell to Grey, Sir George." 27 December 1852, GLNZ A13.5, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.
20. Letter "Rev. Benjamin Ashwell to Grey, Sir George." 25 November 1852, GLNZ A13.4, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.
21. Ibid.
22. Letter "Rev. Benjamin Ashwell to Grey, Sir George." 27 December 1852, GLNZ A13.5, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.
23. Letter "Rev. Benjamin Ashwell to Grey, Sir George." 1 September 1855, GLNZ A13.8, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.
24. Rev. Robert Maunsell, "Original Correspondence – To the Editor of the New Zealander New Zealander (Supplement), October 30, 1852, 2. <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZ18521030.2.8>.
25. Letter "Rev. Benjamin Ashwell to Grey, Sir George." 28 March 1853, GLNZ A13.6, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.
26. 26 Rev. Benjamin Ashwell, "Taupiri School", *New Zealander (Supplement)*, June 11, 1853, 5. <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/NZ18530611.2.13.2.2>.
27. Letter "Rev. Benjamin Ashwell to Grey, Sir George." 1 September 1855, GLNZ A13.8, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.
28. Author unidentified, "Farewell Address From The Scholars of Taupiri School", *Maori Messenger: Te Karere Maori* [sic], December 29, 1853, 4, <https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/MMTKM18531229.2.14>.
29. Letter "Rev. Benjamin Ashwell to Grey, Sir George." 1 September 1855, GLNZ A13.8, Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections.