



*Matthew Cowley (right), with his older brother Hyde Cowley, prior to Matthew's departure to New Zealand*





# Matthew Cowley's Mission TO NEW ZEALAND

By Elder Glen L. Rudd

Served as a member of the Seventy from 1987 to 1992

**M**atthew Cowley left home at age 17. It was 1914, and deeply moved by the missionary accounts of his older brother Moses, Matthew had requested to serve a mission. He hungered to take up the cause and wished especially to serve in Hawaii, as his brother had.<sup>1</sup>

Soon after making his request, Matthew received a letter from President Joseph F. Smith (1838–1918) calling him to serve in Hawaii. But the Lord's will for the young elder had not yet been fully revealed. One evening, President Anthon H. Lund, First Counselor to President Smith and next-door neighbor to the Cowleys, came to see Matthew.

*The missionary and translation work of young Matthew Cowley greatly blessed the Maori people.*

“You know,” President Lund joked, “that Hawaiian Mission isn't too far away. The farther we can get you away from this neighborhood the better it is going to be for all of us, and [Hawaii] isn't far enough. I think we had better get you way down there in New Zealand. That's right down there at the uttermost bounds of the earth, the jumping off place for the

South Pole. If we had a mission at that South Pole, that's where you ought to go.”

Having had his joke with Matthew, who had a reputation as a neighborhood prankster,<sup>2</sup> President Lund became serious and said, “I was having dinner tonight, and the Spirit told me you should go to New Zealand. I don't know why. That's the way I feel. If it is all right with you, I will tell President Smith in the morning, and you will be changed to New Zealand.”<sup>3</sup>



So Elder Matthew Cowley left to serve in New Zealand, where he mainly served the Maori people, the backbone of Church membership in many communities there. During what turned out to be nearly a five-year mission, Elder Cowley learned why the Lord wanted him to serve in New Zealand.

### Lessons in Language

As Elder Cowley and his father waited in the railroad station for the train that would carry the young missionary toward far-off New Zealand, Father Cowley gave his son some advice.

“My boy,” he said, “you will go out on that mission; you will study; you will try to prepare your sermons; and sometimes when you are called upon, you will think you are wonderfully prepared, but when you stand up, your mind will go completely blank.”

“What do you do when your mind goes blank?” Elder Cowley asked.

Father Cowley replied, “You stand up there and with all the fervor of your soul, you bear witness that Joseph Smith was a prophet of the living God, and thoughts will flood into your mind and words to your mouth.”<sup>4</sup>

Applying this guidance as his missionary labors unfolded, Elder Matthew Cowley became a constant and able witness of the gospel in New Zealand. Elder Cowley would later joke, “My mind, being mostly blank during my five years in the mission field, gave me the opportunity to bear testimony to the greatest event in the history of the world since the crucifixion of the Master.”<sup>5</sup>

During the early months of his missionary service, Elder Cowley strongly felt the need to learn the Maori language.

The first family he stayed with in New Zealand, the Halls, schooled him. He later expressed thanks to Lizzie Hall Kohu, a daughter of the Halls. “The few months I lived at your home I always regard as the most important period of my mission, as it was here I began to learn the Maori language,” he wrote to her. “I owe more to the people [there] for my knowledge of the Maori language than to anyone else. Your mother was always such a wonderful help and inspiration to me in my work.”<sup>6</sup>

Though for several weeks he had no companion, Elder Cowley worked hard every day. “I would go into the grove every morning at six o’clock and study for eleven hours and fast and pray,” he later said. Then came a critical moment: “I had the audacity to stand up before a group of natives and preach the gospel in their own tongue. I was using words I had never read or heard, and there was a burning in my bosom the like of which I have never felt before nor since in my life. . . . The power of God was speaking through me as a youngster, seventeen years of age.”<sup>7</sup>

During the next two years, Matthew Cowley continued to pursue the Maori language, preach the gospel, and develop a great love for the people.

“I look forward with dread to the day when I will be released from this work among the Maoris,” he wrote in a 1917 letter to his father. “My love for this people has reached such a degree that I fear that I will be robbed of contentment after my return. . . . If it was not for the tie which binds me to my father, mother, brothers and sisters I would like to devote my whole life to the interest of the Pacific Islanders, not only the Maoris but the Hawaiians, Tahitians, Samoans, etc.”<sup>8</sup>

Fortunately for Elder Cowley, he was about to be offered the opportunity to continue serving in New Zealand.





**Left: Elder Matthew Cowley in New Zealand, 1914. Above right: A group of Maori Saints with Elder Cowley. His mission to New Zealand lasted nearly five years.**



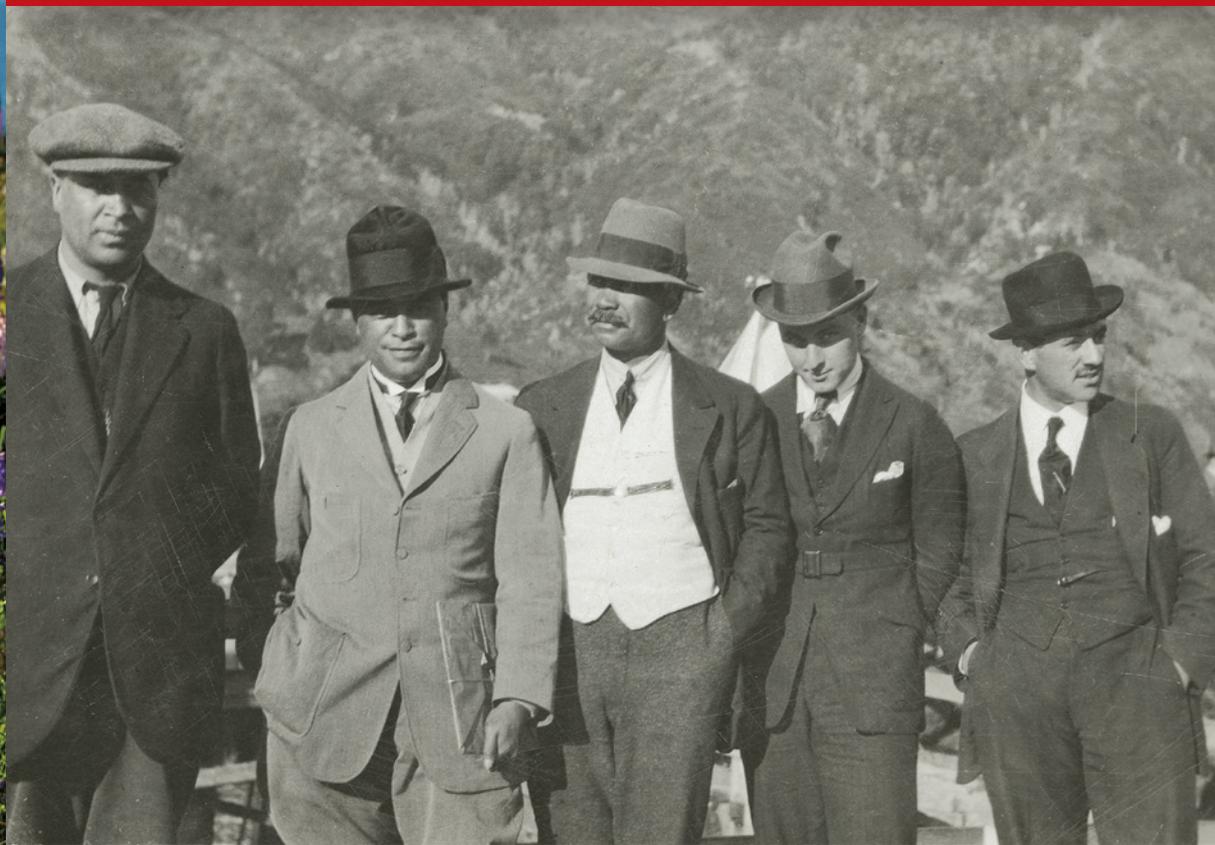
### **A Bit of an Extension**

World War I began in Europe almost four months before Elder Cowley arrived in New Zealand at the end of November 1914. New Zealand, as a loyal part of the British Empire, was deeply involved in the war. Weighing national needs, in mid-1917 the New Zealand government began to restrict the number of new foreign missionaries of the Church allowed into New Zealand. It was clear there would soon not be enough to replace departing missionaries who had completed their service.<sup>9</sup>

Instead of sending Matthew home to be released, President James N. Lambert, the mission president, requested from the First Presidency and the Cowley family that Matthew's mission be extended, partly so he could help cover the impending shortage of missionaries but above all so he could assist in the projected publication of a revised version of the 1889 Maori edition of the Book of Mormon. Everyone agreed, and in 1917, Elder Cowley began assisting the mission

president in preparing the new edition of the sacred record, changing the translation of some 2,500 verses with the help of several Maori members.<sup>10</sup>

During the spring of 1918, three and a half years into his mission, this work was finished, and Elder Cowley arranged to have the book printed in Auckland. If he expected that his mission was nearing an end, there is no indication in his correspondence. Instead, he came away from the April 1918 mission conference with a spate of new assignments, not the least of which was appointment to a translation committee chaired by President Lambert. Elder Cowley was to join two prominent Maori brethren (Wi Duncan and Stuart Meha) in preparing authorized translations of the Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price in Maori. The new assignment prompted Matthew to quip in a letter to his parents, "With all this work before me . . . , you can expect me home sometime during the millennium."<sup>11</sup>



*Above right: A post-card photograph, which Elder Cowley captioned: "Myself and other dignitaries of fair Maoriland, taken at Picton, South Island, May 1918." Far right: Elder Cowley with his mission companion and the Whotere family, North Auckland.*

### **The Work of Translation**

The story of the translation work comes to us from a 1932 letter Elder Cowley wrote to his sister Laura. "The work was extremely interesting and was comparatively easy when I had the spirit of it," he said. "At intervals, however, I would lose the spirit, and this would cause me to spend hours over one short verse. Sometimes I could not work at all.

"When I found myself in this predicament I would lock myself in my room, fast and pray, until I felt the urge to continue."

Matthew also testified that the work of translation was a work of inspiration, performed through the grace of the Lord: "I can say in all sincerity that I experienced, during this work, the feeling of a helping power outside and beyond my own. . . . This was the great experience of my life and it will always

remind me that God can and will accomplish his purposes through the human mind."<sup>12</sup>

In June 1919, President Lambert notified missionaries and district presidents that the Saints could purchase leather-bound Maori copies of the Doctrine and Covenants and the Pearl of Great Price. For the first time, the Maori people could own copies of these books in which they could read the word of the Lord in their own tongue.<sup>13</sup>

### **A Missionary's Farewell**

Elder Cowley was released from missionary service in May 1919. When his ship steamed out of the harbor, it left both Matthew and New Zealand changed.

"To me those five years were years of great development and edification," he wrote in a 1924 letter to friends in New Zealand. "To

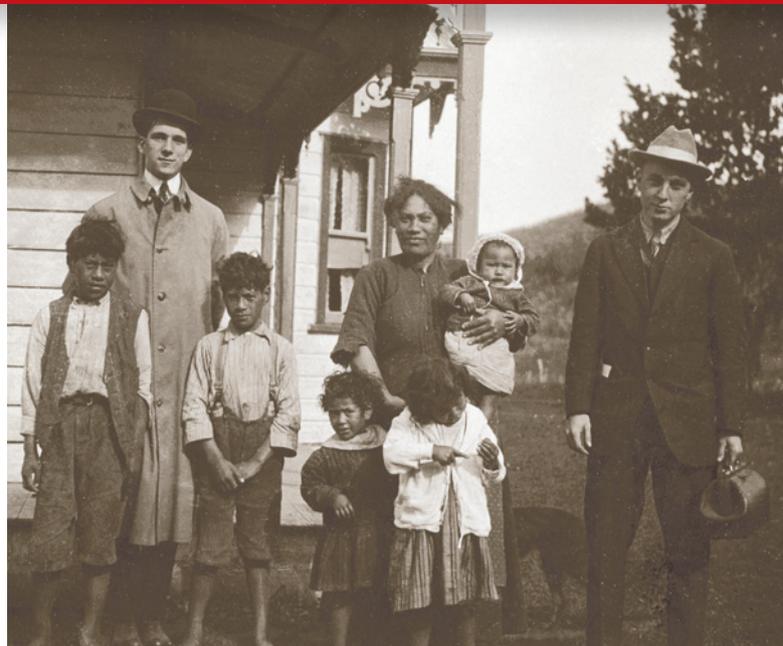


you people and my many other good friends and benefactors of New Zealand, I owe a debt of gratitude which is not within human power to repay.”<sup>14</sup>

As for the love of the people of New Zealand for Elder Cowley, in the letter of release written to Matthew’s parents, President Lambert wrote: “I was down in Hawkes Bay last week—where Elder Cowley spent much of his time while working on the translation of the Doctrine and Covenants and Pearl of Great Price—when a farewell entertainment was given him and could you have seen the many expressions of love and appreciation that were bestowed upon him, I know you would have rejoiced and thanked the Lord. Never before have I seen such love to an elder.”<sup>15</sup>

In a letter to Matthew, President Lambert pronounced a benediction on the young missionary’s efforts. “If you only knew of the influence you have had on [the men at the printing business] and on numerous others, you would indeed be happy,” he wrote. “You will never be forgotten by the Saints [here].”<sup>16</sup>

Matthew Cowley eventually returned to New Zealand as a mission president, and he later became a member of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles. He began this lifelong ministry as a young man who prayed, studied, and fasted to serve the Lord to the best of his ability. His story serves as a witness of what the Lord can and will do through those He has called to His work. ■



**NOTES**

1. See *Matthew Cowley Speaks* (1954), 418; Henry A. Smith, *Matthew Cowley: Man of Faith* (1954), 41.
2. See Smith, *Man of Faith*, 33–36.
3. See *Matthew Cowley Speaks*, 418–19.
4. See *Matthew Cowley Speaks*, 298.
5. *Matthew Cowley Speaks*, 298.
6. In Smith, *Man of Faith*, 49.
7. In Smith, *Man of Faith*, 48.
8. In Smith, *Man of Faith*, 55, 56.
9. See James N. Lambert, *New Zealand Mission Bulletin*, Nov. 1917, MS 13850, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.
10. See Smith, *Man of Faith*, 53.
11. In Smith, *Man of Faith*, 57.
12. In Smith, *Man of Faith*, 54.
13. See Lambert, *New Zealand Mission Bulletin*, June 1919.
14. In Smith, *Man of Faith*, 59.
15. James N. Lambert, in Smith, *Man of Faith*, 59.
16. James N. Lambert, letter to Matthew Cowley, Oct. 3, 1919, MS 13850, Church History Library, Salt Lake City.



**EVERY MEMBER A DISCIPLE**

“We are all missionaries in the Church. Every man and woman has the responsibility of being a missionary. Our slogan, our theme in the MIA [for 1947] is, ‘Let every man know for himself that this work is true.’ Just ponder for a moment. . . .

Everyone should know for himself and herself that this work is true. It is the only way. What good is a man’s religion if

he can’t give a good reason for the hope that he has within himself? . . . Sometimes . . . we think it is a fine thing if we can talk about the philosophies of men and what we have read and all that, but that is not the gospel of Jesus Christ. What we are to preach and what the world needs is faith, repentance, baptism, and the reception of the Holy Ghost.”

**Elder Matthew Cowley (1897–1953) of the Quorum of the Twelve Apostles, *Matthew Cowley Speaks* (1954), 159, 160.**