

*Charles Towsey of Henley upon Thames in the County of Oxford Gentleman*

*Mary Harriet Sparks*

*W. B. Moorhouse*

# TOWSEY TALES

**NAME:** Arthur John Towsey

**BIRTH DETAILS:** June 1847 Henley-upon-Thames

**DEATH DETAILS:** 9 June 1931 Cambridge, NZ

**CHART REF:** Towsey Chart B1

**MARRIAGE DETAILS:** 25 July 1871 St. Paul's, Dunedin NZ

**SPOUSE:** Jessie Hawkins Mackay

## PART 5 of 5

The heart-felt piece in the "Social Scene" from 9<sup>th</sup> July, 1904, gives a good insight into Arthur's personality. As society had moved into the more relaxed Edwardian era, Arthur was still living by the mores and values of the mid Victorians. With his zeal for the Temperance movement and his faith in the rituals and righteousness of the 'established' church, Arthur would always have come across as somewhat self-righteous and perhaps aloof. But as the above

piece also indicates, he was also a person of strong character on whom you could depend.



It must go sorely against the grain with Arthur Towsey to have to quit the musical charge of St. Matthew's almost on the eve of the removal into the new stone church. But the health of one of the members of his family requires her removal from Auckland, and seeing a professional opening at Wanganui, the veteran organist and choirmaster has decided to move on. Mr Towsey has now practised his profession in three out of the four chief centres of the colony—Christchurch, Dunedin, and Auckland—and his musical experience in New Zealand has extended over forty years. In both Dunedin and Auckland he has conducted the orchestral music at big colonial exhibitions, and in other ways has left an abiding mark upon the musical culture of the population. The Auckland Liedertafel, which practically owes its existence to him, is one of his best monuments here, and on the organ of St. Matthew's he has done solid and artistic work. 28th May 1904



Mr A. Towsey, the well-known Auckland organist, is to reside in Wanganui. Mr Towsey has been in the colony for nearly forty years, twenty-two of which were spent in Dunedin, and five in Christchurch. He was musical conductor at the Dunedin Exhibition. The state of his daughter's health is the cause of Mr Towsey's removal to Wanganui. *25th May 1904*

If Mr Arthur Towsey needed any testimony of the Auckland public's appreciation of his high musical talents and his many excellent personal qualities, the complimentary concert tendered him, on the eve of his departure for Wanganui, by the Liedertafel and other musicians, on Thursday evening last, must surely have convinced him. His Majesty's Theatre was crowded to the doors, and the audience was most enthusiastic in its appreciation of the excellent programme. Mr Towsey himself conducted, and his management of the huge orchestra, which filled the whole of the stage, and included many of the best known local musicians, and the manner in which he directed the Liedertafel, which owes its high standard of efficiency to his untiring efforts, was a treat which will not soon be forgotten.

At the close of the concert the audience rose and joined with the performers in singing "Auld Lang Syne" and "God Save the King," and hearty cheers were given for Mr Arthur Towsey.

*9th July 1904*



**S**OMEWHAT late in the day, we are all finding out how we like Mr Arthur Towsey. On the eve of his departure for Wanganui he has been treated to probably several hundred per cent. more kindness that might have sufficed to keep him here if it had been wrapped up and delivered in proper time. And as Mr Towsey deserves it all, the feeling of regret that the plaudits were so belated will experience considerable expansion. He is one of the few genuine musicians who have made their home amongst us and probably the one least infected with the normal eccentricities of genius. He was always deep in a host of engagements and he always kept them and gave something more than satisfaction. Mannerisms he has that have possibly chilled people, but he was essentially of those whom the better we know the more we like. His departure will leave a wide blank in the musical world of Auckland.

*9th July 1904*

The genuine collective sorrow at his departure, shows how the people of Auckland had suddenly realized just how big a part Arthur had played in the nourishment of their more subtle cultural yearnings, even if they did not always fully appreciate the music itself.

In other words, the colonial gentry of Auckland might have preferred Vaudeville to Wagner; Music Hall to Mahler, but they still liked to have the subtle arts about them, demonstrating that their antipodean remoteness had not cut them off entirely from the finer things of European culture.

There is also an element of the *fin de siècle* uncertainty about this. That is; they had just moved into a new century, symbolic of moving forward into an uncertain future, and had just lost the Queen (The Widow of Windsor), who had reigned for longer than almost anyone could remember. Within that context, the departure of Arthur Towsey, who was the quintessence of Victoriana; conservative, paternalistic, moralistic, but also reliable, trustworthy and indefatigable, was another example of that movement away from the familiar.

There was in fact, a great fear at the time, in certain circles, that British society might be about to fall apart.

The previous decade had been referred to as "the naughty nineties", as society had started to unbutton it's Victorian rigidity. There was also a fear that as the notoriously libertine Prince of Wales became King Edward the Seventh, the mystique of the monarchy would diminish. In the event, to the surprise of many, Edward, during his nine years on the throne, turned out to be a good and largely responsible King. Certainly society loosened up under his reign,



## WANGANUI ORCHESTRAL CLUB

The Wanganui Orchestral Club are to be congratulated upon the success of their second concert of the present season, given before a crowded audience in St. Paul's Hall last night. The programme was much in advance of anything yet attempted in Wanganui, and the manner in which the different selections were interpreted reflected the highest credit upon the club. The orchestral items rendered were Gullitt's overture, "Marionettes," Tschaiowsky's "Chant Sans Paroles," Lionel Monckton's "Country Girl," and Wagner's "Flying Dutchman." Mr. Herbert Collier, the hon. conductor, had the orchestra under perfect control, and the selections were rendered with a preci-

sion, confidence, and delicacy that was much admired and frequently applauded. The soprano vocalist, Miss Towsey, sang "A Song of Sunshine," "Long Ago," "Husheen," and "A May Morning" most attractively, her clear enunciation, perfect phrasing, and ease of delivery being most pleasing in effect. Miss Florrie Scapens, in her violin solos, showed wonderful command over her instrument for one so young. The vocal quartettes rendered by Messrs. A. and C. Tarrant, C. Jensen, and H. Neverman were nicely balanced and well sung, the voices harmonising admirably. Mr. W. J. James sang "Fiona" in good style. Special features of the concert were the fine cornet playing of Mr. G. Buckley in the orchestra, and Mr. Towsey's accompaniments, which were greatly admired.

**19th October 1904**

but it also managed to maintain a proper dignity, buoyed up by the belief that, as the largest empire that had ever existed, Britain, with its Dominions, was the glowing example to the world of what civilization should be.

The gap between this self-belief and the reality, is what has come to be known as Edwardian Hypocrisy.

It is interesting also to note the difference in how the people of the South Island thought about Arthur, compared to those in the North Island: When Arthur was leaving Dunedin and Christchurch, there were mumblings about how much money he cost, whilst in the North, people tended to comment more on his conservatism, without apparently considering the pounds, shillings and pence.

The simple reason for this North/South difference, could probably be summed up in one word; Presbyterianism. A large proportion of the population of the South Island was Scottish, whilst that of the North had a high percentage of more liberal, if not downright hedonistic, Irish and English migrants.

The nature of Mary Towsey's ailment that required her departure from Auckland, was never specified. Perhaps it was something like asthma. One wonders also, if the climate at Wanganui, which was not too far south, would really be that much different to that of Auckland.

We do not hear any further news of Mary's health and she certainly has no trouble

singing, as newspaper reports of the time attest. As to the position to which Arthur was removing himself: he did not take up the position that one might expect, as choirmaster and organist, until late in 1906, when the incumbent left town.

Life for Arthur and Mary in Wanganui, followed a fairly comfortable routine, with Arthur, at sixty years of age, seeming to spend about as much time playing bowls as he was with playing music.

The slower pace of life in Wanganui, compared to Auckland, probably suited Arthur at his age, but we must wonder at Mary's thoughts on removing from the Auckland social set. She was not though, moping about at "The Camp", which was the name of their house in Guyton Street.

*Wanganui 1905*






Whilst Arthur was performing regularly at various musical functions, particularly organ recitals at St. Paul's Hall, Mary seemed to be just as regularly engaged in singing, to much acclaim from the critics, who praised her clear enunciation.

Arthur was not though, just stuck away down in Wanganui. After a bit of advertising, he seems to have taken on enough pupils in the town of Feilding, a couple of hours south by train, to justify the journey for a day each week.

Then also, Arthur travelled from time to time with the Wanganui Bowling Club, for matches against other cities. We see here, that on visiting Auckland in 1908, he was well received by the Liedertafel.

You can read more about the life of Mary Towsey in her own Towsey Tale, in which you will learn that she finally married in 1913, at 35 years of age. This meant her moving from Wanganui, north to a small town called Taumarunui, where her new husband, Reverend James Monfries, was a missionary.

Whether or not Arthur had any choice in the matter of his future abode we cannot really say, but he moved in with Mary and her new husband without apparent hesitation, nevertheless.



**PARS ABOUT PEOPLE**

Arthur Towsey, who, a few years ago, was the guide, philosopher, and friend of the local Liedertafel, was among the visiting bowlers who took part in the tournament last week. He is now an inhabitant of the place where the fasting and sculling champions come from—to wit, Wanganui. Advantage was taken of his visit by the Liedertafel, who paid their old conductor a graceful compliment by entertaining him and the rest of the Wanganui team at a smoke concert last Friday. Considering the vast amount of work that Mr Towsey used to do in the interests of local vocalists and musicians, it is only right that he should be shown that Auckland has not forgotten him. **18th January 1908**

Although "Mr. Towsey expressed his regret at having to leave Wanganui", I wonder if perhaps, at 70 years of age, Arthur might be thinking that retirement in

**THE AUCKLAND LIEDERTAFEL**  
(By Telegraph.—Special to Chronicle.)  
AUCKLAND, July 31.

The twenty-first anniversary of its formation will be celebrated by the Auckland Liedertafel this (Friday) evening by the presentation of its 100th concert. The origin of the Liedertafel was a meeting held in 1892 at which Mr. Arthur Towsey was elected conductor, holding that position till he left Auckland in 1905. The first rehearsal was held in the studio of Mr. Frank Wright, who has been for 14 years chairman of its management, etc. In 1905 Prof. W. E. Thomas succeeded Mr. Towsey as conductor. In reference to the work of the Society he states that the whole gamut of part singing has been exploited and that the committee finds it more and more difficult to select good works that will be new to the programmes. Every composer of note from 1600 has been drawn upon. The complete membership roll contains 251 names, of whom seven remain from the original members and constitute the "veteran" brigade. There are now 102 performing members on the roll and 1075 subscribing members. The first patron of the society was Bishop Lenihan. He was succeeded in 1902 by Mr. Henry Brett who still holds the position. The present secretary, Mr. S. J. Hartbutt, was elected to the office in 1899 and has been unanimously re-elected at every annual meeting since then. Mr. Towsey, who is now resident in Taumarunui, will act as conductor of the anniversary concert. **31st July 1913**

The many friends of Mr Arthur Towsey, both musical and otherwise, will no doubt be interested in the following extract from "Musico-Dramaticus," comments in the "Auckland Weekly News" of last week upon the Auckland Liedertafel's recent concert: "One of the exceptions in question was Krugh's 'Hark, the Merry Drum'—the first item ever performed by the society—to conduct which Mr Arthur Towsey had, on the invitation of the Liedertafel, journeyed from Taumarunui. Great was the reception accorded the musical veteran as he appeared upon the platform, and it was some time before Mr. Towsey was able to proceed with the selection. Needless to say, the strains awakened many pleasant memories and the singers were compelled to respond with the expressive 'When Evening's Twilight,' "

**11th August 1913**



the country was looking like a good option; maybe playing whatever wheezing little excuse for an organ they had up there in Taumarunui.

Moving up to Taumarunui would in itself not present any logistical problems, being on the main trunk rail line between Wellington and Auckland. Moving would simply mean putting an extra baggage car onto the back of the train to carry all of his sovereign purses, three more of which he was given upon leaving Wanganui. But then, the purse from the church offertory would probably not amount to much and the clubs of Wanganui would not have been as big or as financially flush as those up in Auckland. But those are points about which we should not quibble.

Arthur was probably only with James and Mary for a month or so before going up to Auckland, to see his first grandson, Arthur Charles Towsey, the son of Cyril, who had also recently married, but also for the 100<sup>th</sup> performance of the Auckland Liedertafel, at which he was to be the special guest. It was unlikely though, that he would be given another purse of sovereigns.

I do not know when exactly, but before too much time had passed, Arthur decided that he wanted to be closer to the bowls club.

I noticed one reference to him going down to Wanganui to play, but his solution was to move to Cambridge. He might have chosen this location because it was between his daughter and his son, in Hamilton, but it might have been because there was a position available as church organist; a task that would not have been too taxing and, more importantly, because they had a good bowling club.

In about 1920, the Monfries family also moved close to Cambridge, to a place called Monavale, where they leased a farm. They must have stayed there until the early 1930s when, because of the financial pressures of the Depression, they moved to a smaller farm at Cambridge, on the Hamilton Road.

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*The One Hundredth Concert of the Auckland Liedertafel*

*Being the Twenty-first Anniversary of the Formation of the Society*

*Souvenir Programme*

**Friday Evening, August 1st, 1913.**



We see in the photos of Arthur J Towsey, looking rather dapper at the bowls club in Cambridge, in about 1922, that at seventy five years of age, he was still looking good. These photos were probably taken by his daughter, Mary. The little girl is Violet: the eldest of Mary's three daughters.

I met Violet in 1998, when she was eighty four years old, living in Cambridge in a retirement village. At that age she was still in perfect health and, like her grandfather, standing tall and straight. She was also still driving her own car.

When I asked for her impressions of her grandfather, she told me an interesting story that was similar to one told by Cyril's second son, Pat, who was born in 1918.



*Circa 1922: A. J. Towsey at bowls club  
with granddaughter, Violet Monfries*



## *Circa 1922: A. J. Towsey at bowls club*



Violet mentioned that one day, her grandfather gave her quite a large amount of money to go to the shop. She



At the Peace Memorial Hall, Cambridge, the oratorio "The Prodigal Son" and a cantata, "Comala" (Gade) were produced by a choir of 40 voices, under the conductorship of Mr. Arthur Towsey. Mrs. Cyril Towsey was soprano soloist. Mr. Arthur Towsey is now over eighty.

**Evening Post**

**2nd November 1929**

lost the money and was most distraught, but her grandfather was very sweet and loving. All of her memories of him are of that gentle, loving old man.

On another occasion, he was staying with Cyril and his family, who by then had moved up to Auckland. Pat was busy playing some game when his mother came in and said; "Would you please go to the shop and buy such-and-such?" Pat, who did not want to interrupt his game, went to his grandfather and said "Grandpa, would you please go to the shop and buy such-and-such?"

What Pat remembered was Arthur going to his mother and saying in a dramatic, outraged tone; "Do you know what your son said to me!?"

My impression is that although Arthur might have been outraged by young Pat's bad manners, it could also be that Pat was too young to pick up on the amused irony in his grandfather's tone.

The death has occurred of Mr. Arthur Towsey, one of the best-known musicians in New Zealand. (died 9 June 1931)

#### **Pleasantly Remembered.**

Tall, distinguished looking, and a sound musician, Mr. Towsey occupied an uncommon position in musical affairs. Music meant something different in the days before the mechanical kind was invented, and Mr. Towsey was one of the acknowledged leaders, known throughout New Zealand, and in many places beyond the Dominion.

After he retired from active work Mr. Towsey went to live at Cambridge with his daughter, Mrs. J. Monfries. Occasionally he used to "run up to town" when there was something specially interesting in the musical line, and it was always pleasant to see the cordial way the picturesque old gentleman was welcomed when he turned up at any gathering. All the old hands knew, admired and liked "Arthur Towsey"—the dropping of the "Mr." is always a sign of regard—and the new hands had heard all about him, so that even to the last he was never allowed to feel that he had dropped out of things merely because he was living in the country. It was a singular tribute to his personality and his talent. In addition to his daughter, Mr. Towsey leaves a son, Mr. Cyril Towsey, himself one of the city's best-known musicians.