

# ‘The manliest and noblest of all pursuits and professions’: Two Preacher Novelists<sup>1</sup>

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A 1914 article in the *Northern Advocate* profiled the activities of two visiting clergymen in Onerahi. Methodist minister Herman Foston lectured on the history of the prohibition movement to a lively audience who appreciated the ‘excellent pictures . . . thrown on the screen, by the aid of an acetylene light, to illustrate the discourse’. The work of the Baptist minister Guy Thornton in the drought-stricken region was also commended. Described as a ‘water-divining . . . wizard’, Thornton was credited with ‘success . . . in locating and obtaining several flows of hidden water in Taranaki’ with the aid of ‘a forked willow stick’.<sup>2</sup> There is no evidence that these two men met, but they are linked by similarities beyond this serendipitous mention in a local newspaper. Both were clergymen who believed passionately in social as well as moral reform, and both used literature as a means of communicating their message. The following analysis of the fiction written by these two preacher novelists illustrates the way in which literature can provide a valuable window into the beliefs and attitudes of the past. Engagement with Thornton and Foston’s novels reveals fresh insights about religious belief and social reform in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century New Zealand. The novels also both challenge and reinforce enduring New Zealand myths of gender and class identity.

Thornton and Foston have received very little critical attention. In his influential essay on ‘The Novel’ in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature* (1991), Lawrence Jones acknowledged that Thornton’s novel *The Wowser* (1916) was of ‘historical interest’, but was less complementary of Foston’s ‘earnest epics of Christian prohibitionist capitalists’.<sup>3</sup> Joan

Stevens was even more scathing of Foston's *At the Front* (1921) in her 1966 survey of New Zealand literature, dismissing it as 'a journalistic-propaganda story, unbelievably bad, about religion and liquor'.<sup>4</sup> *The Wowser* was described as a tale 'of how the tough bushmen of the King Country came to respect their wowser parson', while Stevens warned that '[p]reaching from a predetermined point of view, whether religious, economic, or social, rarely is productive of literature'.<sup>5</sup> On an aesthetic and stylistic level Jones's and Stevens's criticisms have considerable validity. The two novelists are 'avowedly didactic' and their narratives are punctuated with exhortations to readers more fitted to a pulpit than a novel.<sup>6</sup> Their plots abound in melodrama and coincidences, favourites being the deathbed repentance and the miraculous return of a long-lost lover. Both novelists are valuable, however, for the rare fictional glimpse they provide into working-class lives at a time when the pages of novels were typically peopled with middle- and upper-class settlers. Thornton, in particular, writes in a vigorous style that plunges the reader into the hardships and camaraderie of turn of the century Ohakune.

Part of the sidelining of authors such as Foston and Thornton is due to their subject matter: religion and morality. Since the 1930s these themes have been regarded as unfashionable by the literary establishment. Mark Williams notes that Frank Sargeson and Allen Curnow established an enduring pattern of representations of religion as 'pervasive, utterly negative, deeply implicated in resented female power, and identified with puritanism'.<sup>7</sup> Writing of trends in New Zealand historiography, John Stenhouse has identified a similar tendency to minimize the role of religion in the work of historians such as Keith Sinclair, who attempted to perpetuate a myth of New Zealand as a secular society.<sup>8</sup> The work of critics such as Stenhouse, Allan Davidson, Peter Lineham and others has provided a necessary counter-narrative of the complex ways in which religion is woven into the nation's history.<sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Troughton's work is of particular relevance, his *New Zealand Jesus* placing Foston and Thornton within wider contexts of belief.<sup>10</sup> Building on

this scholarship and on my previous work on New Zealand prohibition novelists, this analysis is informed by Jane Stafford and Mark Williams's declaration that there is an urgent need to reassess early New Zealand literature 'in less restrictive terms than those in which it has been examined so far, to look for its complexities rather than to repeat the negative generalisations that have usually served to characterise it'.<sup>11</sup>

### Godly Lives

Before dealing with the literary themes of salvation, social reform, and gender and class identity it is helpful to briefly consider the lives of these two novelists. Thornton was born in England in 1872 to parents who were lay missionaries with the Church Missionary Society in India. The family came to New Zealand when Thornton was three years old. He was educated at Te Aute College, where his father served as headmaster from 1878 to 1912. Thornton initially rejected his Anglican upbringing and declared himself an agnostic, but in 1893 experienced a religious conversion, which he describes in his spiritual autobiography *From Agnosticism to Christ* (1917). He was later baptized in the sea at Gisborne and became a Baptist and an ardent evangelical Christian. Thornton conducted missions amongst slum dwellers in Sydney and Melbourne, worked for the Queensland Kanak Mission for over a year, and then took his message 'to some of the islands of the Pacific'.<sup>12</sup> He married Elinor Wilson, a missionary teacher from the Rangitikei, in 1902. In 1909 the Thorntons began a mission at Ohakune, working amongst railway workers, sawmillers and bushmen in the backblocks. His experiences here form the backdrop to *The Wowser*, which was lauded by British and New Zealand Baptists as 'a gift to the whole Church of God'.<sup>13</sup> At the outbreak of the First World War Thornton volunteered as an army chaplain, sailing for Egypt in October 1914 with the New Zealand Expeditionary Force. After his war experiences he served as pastor of South Dunedin Baptist Church, where he was regarded as a 'kindly gracious man, said to possess the power of healing with his hands'.<sup>14</sup> He wrote a final book

about his preaching experiences, *Out to Win* (1919), and died in 1934.

Herman Foston was born in Tealby, Lincolnshire, in 1871 and immigrated to New Zealand with his parents and his brother Charles in 1882. In 1894 Foston was accepted as a local preacher in the Wesleyan Church, Sydenham, becoming the superintendent of the Sydenham Wesleyan Sunday school and a prominent member of the Sons and Daughters of Temperance League.<sup>15</sup> After serving in Featherston from 1896 to 1899, Foston was called to Havelock in Marlborough, where he married Bertha Burt in 1901. Foston next served in Taranaki, where he continued his work as a home missionary, church builder and prohibition activist. In 1907 he accepted the role of agent and lecturer for the Province Council of the No-license Leagues of Taranaki. Such was Foston's success that in 1914 the Auckland Province No-license Council sponsored him to conduct a lecture tour on 'The Struggles and Triumphs of Temperance Reform' in Auckland and Northland.<sup>16</sup>

Like Thornton, Foston's novels—*In the Bell-Bird's Lair* (1911) and *At the Front* (1921)—draw on his own experiences. A review of *In the Bell-Bird's Lair* in the *Evening Post* heralded the novel as 'A Story with a Purpose'.<sup>17</sup> *At the Front* received qualified praise in the *New Zealand Methodist*, the reviewer asserting that Foston had 'some distance to go before he can take the rank of a first-class novelist'.<sup>18</sup> A desire to entertain, as well as enlighten and improve, was part of Foston's family background. With his brother Charles, Foston toured New Zealand giving illustrated talks about 'Life in the Land of Pelorus Jack' and 'The Romance of the Moa, Coal, Greenstone and Gold'.<sup>19</sup> Foston continued his ministry in the Waikato and the Rangitikei, before retiring to Wellington in 1928, where he died in 1960.

### 'Christ for me; Christ in me': Personal Salvation

The necessity of a close, personal relationship with Christ as Saviour lies at the heart of both Thornton's and Foston's faith. They shared a passionate belief in the redemptive power of Christ

and in the heroic work of missionaries, ministers and revivalists. Both men were shaped by early experiences of salvation, experiences which led to a life-long devotion to and service for a particular Protestant denomination. While Thornton lauded the Baptist tradition and Foston wrote in praise of Methodism, both authors commented favourably on the work of other Protestant faiths, particularly the Salvation Army. This sense of individual denominational identity within a broader Protestant community reflects what Ian Breward identifies as a Presbyterian, Methodist, Baptist and Congregationalist desire for 'pluriformity within a broadly defined Protestantism rather than uniformity'.<sup>20</sup>

Thornton summed up the outlook of both men when he declared in an interview: 'My creed is a very simple one, and may be summed up in six words—"Christ *for* me; Christ in me!" Christ dying on the Cross saves me from the penalty of sin. Christ living in me by his Holy Spirit saves me from the power of sin.'<sup>21</sup> Personal salvation is central to Thornton and Foston's fiction. Both emphasize a three-fold conversion process: conviction of sin, acceptance of God's grace, commitment to living a transformed life. *The Wowser* provides an excellent fictional example of evangelical conversion in action. Baptist home missionary David Sinclair's first bush service in Ohakune opens with the hymn 'Rock of Ages'. The parson talks of 'the power of the gospel of Jesus to change men's lives'.<sup>22</sup> After hearing Sinclair preach, the narrator, Mr Neville, comes to a realization that his 'whole life had been sin', and through 'the Spirit's power [is] transformed'.<sup>23</sup> Revival meetings bring about transformation on a wider scale. In Sinclair's absence his wife leads the service. She is a powerful speaker whose subject is Christ crucified. Her appeal to 'accept Christ as Saviour and Lord' touches Bill the Bullocky, who comes to the front of the hall: 'the effect was electrical . . . the whole place was charged with emotion . . . others follow seeking salvation . . . revival comes'.<sup>24</sup>

Davidson and Lineham have written of the importance of revivalism in late nineteenth-century New Zealand, when 'revivalist preachers who emphasised repentance from sin,

conversion, commitment and spiritual experience began to attract large audiences'.<sup>25</sup> While some revivalists were overseas preachers—such as William 'California' Taylor of the American Methodist Episcopal Church and Mrs Margaret Hampson of Liverpool—many were local evangelists, and revivals 'united many Protestants and provided a major focus of the social life of the Protestant community'.<sup>26</sup> One of the significant insights Thornton's novel provides is the tenuous and, at times, short-lived nature of these mass conversion experiences. The revival in Ohakune triggers a brief outpouring of religious enthusiasm, but economic hardship, a slump in the timber trade, the closing of several mills and the 'continual shifting of the population' leads to a falling away of church attendance.<sup>27</sup> Thornton regards Sinclair's continued faith and perseverance in the face of failure, disappointment and testing as heroic. For Thornton the home missionaries are 'path-finders who blaze the Gospel trail'; slowly and incrementally, the Sinclairs foster individual conversions and 'civic righteousness'.<sup>28</sup>

Foston also regards the revival meeting as a catalyst for salvation. The hero of *At the Front*, Ralph Messenger, is converted at the East London Mission of Wesleyan Peter Thompson, who urges his audience to 'put your burdens on His back. Do it now.' The rhetoric of conversion as a transformative experience is identical to Thornton's: 'The broken piece of earthenware had been made whole . . . [Ralph] had become a new creation. . . . He made up his mind that he would steer a straight course'.<sup>29</sup> This pattern is replicated throughout the novel, with many of the workers on the main trunk line influenced by the powerful, sincere preaching of Methodist home missionary Hector Nelson. Foston's narratives are less realistic than Thornton's, with preachers and missionaries facing minor setbacks and conversion presented as a virtually universal experience. When human agency is lacking, Foston contrives unique ways for God to reach lost souls. The protagonist of *In the Bell-Bird's Lair* is turned from atheism to 'the light of Truth' when he hears a bellbird in the bush which seems to warble: 'Come Unto Me. . . . Believe. Accept. Receive'.<sup>30</sup>

In both Thornton's and Foston's fiction the focus is almost exclusively on the work of home missionaries and preachers amongst Pākehā settler communities. Māori are barely mentioned, although Thornton does engage with issues of race and faith through the character of Barnabas, a South Sea Islander who was converted to Christianity on a Queensland sugar plantation. Barnabas speaks a pathetically humorous pidgin ('me play God he save soul belongum you') and Thornton repeatedly emphasizes his 'quaint' phraseology, 'ugliness' and 'childlike faith'.<sup>31</sup> Despite these patronizing descriptions, however, Barnabas is used to articulate a radical message of racial equality. Sinclair insists that Barnabas is equal in 'holiness' to 'J. Husdon Taylor of the China Inland Mission', and Neville experiences a 'new feeling of brotherhood' towards Barnabas when he is converted: 'All distinctions of race, caste and education were obliterated by the great fact . . . of our oneness in Christ Jesus'.<sup>32</sup>

### **'I ain't had a drink today': Social Reform**

Personal salvation is the foundation of Thornton and Foston's faith and the core message of their fiction, but this emphasis on the transformation of the individual is inseparable from their desire for widespread social reform. This reflects David Bebbington's assertion that the four 'special marks of Evangelical religion' are biblicism, conversionism, crucicentricism and activism.<sup>33</sup> Davidson and Lineham write of the churches' 'ambition to make the colony a righteous community', and Thornton and Foston's novels enact in fictional form A. S. Adams's belief that 'applied Christianity is the social dynamic which alone can be used to break in pieces the powers of darkness and evil, and to enthrone righteousness and truth'.<sup>34</sup> For some, this enthusiasm for the role of the 'moral policeman' had a political dimension, although others, such as Adams and W. C. Oliver, were anti 'political partisanship', maintaining that 'the regeneration of man's moral being must precede the regeneration of society'.<sup>35</sup> Both Thornton and Foston advocate direct political intervention and legislative reform, arguing that the work of missionaries and

preachers needs to be supported and reinforced by government policy. Their fiction reflects core aspects of early twentieth-century evangelicalism: a preoccupation with raising the moral tone of society, especially through prohibition; an avoidance of wider social issues, such as labour conditions; and a suspicion of socialism.

Writing for the *Christian Outlook* in 1895, G. B. Inglis claimed that there 'is not a vice, or disease, or calamity of any kind that has not its frequent rise in the public house; it degrades, ruins, brutalises a large proportion of our people. The drink traffic deteriorates the race, binds the will, clouds the intellect, enslaves humanity.'<sup>36</sup> Thornton and Foston share this view of alcohol as the central New Zealand social problem. They regard alcoholism as a largely gendered issue. Men are depicted as the addicts and women as the victims of the violence and economic hardship triggered by alcohol. In contrast, Thornton and Foston view masculine abuse of alcohol as endemic amongst *both* the working and the middle classes. Foston and Thornton depict largely working-class communities in which hard-working men turn to alcohol for solace and escape, but some of their severest critiques are reserved for professional men who drink, such as the doctor in *At the Front* whose inebriation almost results in the death of a patient. Sinclair works untiringly in *The Wowser* to save the citizens of Ohakune from the evils of drink and gambling, declaring that 'at heart many of these men are basically splendid fellows. . . . Drink has been the chief reason for their fall.'<sup>37</sup> After Bill the Bullocky is saved he stands up in church and declares: "I ain't had a drink today. . . . You blokes are silly mugs if you keep on keepin' away from the only One as can make an' keep you straight. Why won't you blokes trust Christ?"<sup>38</sup>

*The Wowser* is one of the few prohibition novels to comment on the alcohol ban in the King Country. Thornton declares that the Māori King initiated this ban, forcing the government to 'promise that no alcoholic drink should ever be sold in the King Country' before he would allow the main trunk railway to pass through the region.<sup>39</sup> Perhaps because of its working-

class setting, *The Wowser* has a realistic view of the limitations of prohibition. Thornton is open about the bushmen's love of liquor and the prevalence of 'sly-grog' stills selling 'Lightning Rod' to satisfy this demand.<sup>40</sup> He is scathing, however, of the government's betrayal of Māori by reversing its no-license legislation and argues that, despite its qualified success, prohibition encourages restraint and moral conduct.

Foston's fiction also has a strong prohibition message, reflecting his work as a temperance speaker. He is more unrealistic than Thornton; the work of the temperance preachers in the railway camps in *At the Front* is crowned with unbelievable success. Inspired by Ralph's example, the workers vote for 'No Licence' and the prohibitionists sing 'the Doxology' in celebration of the 'licenced bar and liquor traffic [being] driven out of the Railway Construction Camps – lock, stock and barrel'.<sup>41</sup> In the improbable, ahistoric ending of the novel the "No-Licence" Party, of which Ralph is a member, 'score a magnificent [election] victory right through the Dominion'.<sup>42</sup>

Foston's theology is intertwined with his political ideology. While some early twentieth-century New Zealand authors and preachers grounded their socialist message in Christ's teachings, Foston was critical of the early labour movement and advocated a capitalist system that rewarded hard work. Thornton's political beliefs are not as apparent from his fiction, although a serialized story in *The Christian Herald*, 'Moria in the Meshes', attacked 'every outrage' of Bolshevik 'tyranny'.<sup>43</sup>

Foston's *In the Bell-Bird's Lair* clearly links socialism and atheism. Edward Strangemuir was a labour leader prior to his conversion and had stood for parliament on an anti-capital platform. Religion opens Edward's eyes to what Foston regards as the 'truth'. Edward realizes that inequality is inevitable while some work hard and some are lazy: 'Until men are equal in every sense of the word—physically, morally, and intellectually—it is idle to talk of social equality'.<sup>44</sup> *At the Front* develops more fully Foston's conviction that self-help is the key to success and that labour policies are detrimental to this ideal. Here his fiction connects with what Jock Phillips terms the late nineteenth-

century rise of 'self-made men' who believed in the 'bourgeois ethic of hard work, savings and disciplined self-help'.<sup>45</sup> Christian conversion is Foston's answer to New Zealand's labour problems. He declares that 'if Christian capitalists realised that they were stewards of the wealth they possessed, and wage-earners allowed Christian principles to govern trade unions, there would be less friction between capital and labour'.<sup>46</sup> This reflects wider social patterns in which "Manly self-reliance" was favoured over a political socialism towards feminizing dependency.<sup>47</sup>

Thornton and Foston's fiction fits within a wider discourse of the relationship between settlement and wilderness, order and chaos. Phillips writes that colonizing elites, including clergymen, 'nearly always like to see their role in history as bringing civilisation to a wilderness. Their corresponding fear is that the wilderness may prove too powerful, and that men far from the constraints of ordered society might give way to their lower impulses'.<sup>48</sup> The late nineteenth-century increase in 'social disorder' fed anxieties about 'society going bush'.<sup>49</sup> Thornton and Foston's novels are in part representative of these anxieties, with the working-class sawmilling and railway construction communities in the novels rife with drinking, gambling, and swearing. Both authors remain positive, however, that the forces of Christianity will triumph and that the wilderness will steadily acquire all the 'best' characteristics of civilization: order, morality, education and equality. Indeed, Thornton's novel ends with the narrator's return to the wilderness after time in London. Neville and his wife Gladys 'yearn to breathe once again the pure mountain air, to gaze upon the great forest, to hear the music of the birds, and to live the grand, free life of the bush'.<sup>50</sup> These sentiments replicate the perception of the bush in early New Zealand literature as a 'free place', 'wide and bountiful, oppressed with no burdens, hampered with no restrictions, but fresh and fair from the hands of God'.<sup>51</sup> Thornton and Foston differ from their literary forebears and contemporaries, however, in their co-opting of the frontier as symbolic of a utopia in which civilization and the wilderness are reconciled and men and women can live moral lives in bush communities.

### 'The manliness of Christ': Gender, Class and Faith

As with their vision of a wilderness that is both tamed and free, Thornton and Foston disrupt some of the gender and class dichotomies established by other early New Zealand novelists and by historians. In particular, their novels complicate the binary of the hardy pioneer and the effete wowsler that dominates so many discussions of New Zealand masculinity. Thornton and Foston insist that a man can be both physically active and godly; indeed they connect physical courage to moral courage. They denigrate effeminacy, regarding it as weakness and affectation, but advocate a masculinity that embraces the traditionally feminine qualities of nurturing, self-sacrifice and competent, orderly domesticity. This masculine ideal is not restricted to a particular class, and thus represents a synthesis between middle-class and working-class modes of masculinity.

Phillips contends that the 'character of the Pakeha male stereotype in New Zealand was forged by the interactions of two powerful traditions: the desire to keep alive the muscular virtues of the pioneer heritage, and the concern to contain the masculine spirit within respectable boundaries'.<sup>52</sup> Kai Jensen argues that New Zealand literary culture has privileged the first tradition identified by Phillips, idealizing men who enjoy 'practical and manual work, sport (especially rugby), drinking and war' and whose physical presence is characterized by 'size, strength and (less certainly) [hetero]sexual vigour'.<sup>53</sup> The hard man of the land—tough, ingenious, courageous, foul-mouthed, beer-swilling, free-spending and working-class—is identified as epitomizing New Zealand heroic 'virtues'. In contrast, the middle-class urban dweller has traditionally received only guarded praise, with novelists and social commentators suspicious of a perceived intellectualism, frugality, hypocritical morality and over-dependence on female influence. Thornton and Foston reconcile these two strands in the masculine character, their fiction highlighting that an awareness of religion enriches 'our understanding of our past, and of the ways in which gender has operated in our culture'.<sup>54</sup>

Thornton and Foston's yoking together of two seemingly

opposite masculine ideals has its roots in the nineteenth-century British tradition of manly Christianity. For proponents such as Charles Kingsley and Thomas Hughes, “Manliness” was synonymous with strength, both physical and moral.<sup>55</sup> Troughton writes of the prominence of this tradition in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century New Zealand, in which books such as Hughes’s *The Manliness of Christ* (1879) and Harry Emerson Fosdick’s *The Manhood of the Master* (1913) were popular.<sup>56</sup> Both Thornton and Foston were men of faith and action. In *With the ANZACs at Cairo* Thornton writes of giving an Egyptian ‘tout’ a sound thrashing ‘with a good sjambok’, of hauling young soldiers out of brothels and back to the barracks by the ear, and of kicking a thief attempting to rob an inebriated soldier.<sup>57</sup> Foston similarly illustrates a fusion between Phillips’s two masculine traditions. Arriving in Havelock he ‘found to his great dismay three hotels were doing a flourishing trade’ but resolved to use his love of sport ‘to challenge every “Philistine” who got in his way’.<sup>58</sup>

The spread of Christianity in Thornton and Foston’s fiction is attributable to the manly virtues of their preacher heroes, who embody the hallmarks of the ‘true man’ who ‘lives out his faith in the world’s camp, relating to real men, working as they do, speaking as they do, not affecting to rise above them or pretend he is not subject to like passions as they are’.<sup>59</sup> In *At the Front* Foston describes the role of the minister as ‘a grand heroism, the manliest and noblest of all pursuits and professions’.<sup>60</sup> Ralph believes in a ‘militant’ Christianity which actively ‘fight[s] against such evils as intemperance, impurity, and the gambling spirit of our times’.<sup>61</sup> His faith attracts respect in the railway camps because it goes hand in hand with physical courage and a literal willingness to lay down his life to aid others, such as his daring rescue of a mother and child from a burning building and his refusal to turn back when a tunnel caves in, trapping fellow workers. Thornton’s pastor hero is likewise a man of action as well as prayer. When Bill the Bullocky curses Christ, Sinclair boxes him for twelve rounds until Bill apologizes for his blasphemy and promises to be more respectful in the future.

The working men of Ohakune and the railway construction camps are not being asked to choose between manliness and Christianity, but to become better men by becoming morally as well as physically strong.

It is precisely this manliness that allows the preacher heroes to communicate with the working men they seek to serve. The nineteenth-century Baptist preacher Charles Spurgeon argued that 'Our working class will never be brought even to consider the truth of Christianity by teachers who are starched and fine' and employ 'namby-pamby sentimentalism'.<sup>62</sup> This mirrors Kingsley's dismissal of what he regarded as the 'element of foppery' and 'fastidious, maundering, die-away effeminacy' present in high Anglicanism and Anglo-Catholicism.<sup>63</sup> The physical toughness and manliness of Thornton's Sinclair stands in sharp contrast to the high Anglican Reverend St John, who is labelled as effeminate because of his love of church vestments, his affected voice and his revulsion for crude frontier life: 'He's not a man, he's not a woman, he's just a thing that wears trousers.'<sup>64</sup> This is problematic and reductive, but Thornton and Foston's perception of masculinity does work against essentializing categorizations of 'male' and 'female'. While they abhor affectation and cowardice—which they regard as effeminate—they are vehement that real men must balance their hardiness with a feminine gentleness. Thornton is emphatic that his manly, preacher hero also has a tender, womanly side that is entirely compatible with his active Christianity. When Neville first visits Sinclair's home he encounters the preacher 'busily . . . scrubbing the floor' clad in gumboots, trousers and a sack.<sup>65</sup> He is also a skilled nurse, described by Neville's fiancée Gladys as being 'tender as a woman' when helping those in need.<sup>66</sup> Ralph Messenger, in Foston's *At the Front*, is likewise praised for his self-sacrificing nursing of a smallpox victim: 'He looked after me as kindly and tenderly as a woman.'<sup>67</sup> Tellingly, the grateful patient links this capacity for feminine sympathy directly to Messenger's masculinity: 'he stood by me like a man'.<sup>68</sup> This fictional evidence fits with research on Taradale and Caversham, which reveals that during this period there was a shift towards

masculine domesticity, the 'family man' gaining increasing kudos.<sup>69</sup>

*At the Front* and *The Wowser* are of particular note because of their evocation of the lived realities of tough, masculine, rural, working-class communities, a relative rarity in early New Zealand fiction, which tends to focus on the exploits of middle-class protagonists in cities or prosperous sheep stations. Thornton draws a picture of a rough, frontier community in which mud, danger, privation and loneliness are everyday realities. He writes that the bushmen, railway workers and sawmillers amongst whom Sinclair labours are predominantly 'drinking, gambling, hard-swearing men', yet both Thornton and his pastor hero find much to admire in the physical strength and courage of these 'men of magnificent physique . . . ready to fight if occasion arose, fit to work, able to endure fatigue that would incapacitate weaklings'.<sup>70</sup> The work of evangelism is difficult, with most of the predominantly masculine community sceptical of and mocking towards religion until Sinclair gains respect through his integrity, generosity and physical prowess. Thornton challenges the trope of working-class men as irrevocably irreligious; the sawmillers, bullock drivers and labourers who people his novel change their moral outlook after conversion without losing their core of masculine strength. Significantly it is the active, courageous Sinclair preaching a message of 'the manliness of Christ' who connects with them.<sup>71</sup>

In Foston's *At the Front* a key focus is likewise a tough, masculine, working-class community in which the prevailing mood towards religion is dismissal and antagonism until the words and example of manly Christians earn approval. *At the Front* includes a meticulous and detailed account of the back-breaking, dangerous work involved in railway construction: 'Surveying, clearing the bush, draining the swamps, filling in huge gullies, making big cuttings, building bridges, boring tunnels'.<sup>72</sup> Most of the men survive this brutal world through an egalitarian camaraderie in which an appetite for drinking, gambling, and fist-fights, a proliferation of profane language, and a willingness to help a mate in need are the criteria for acceptance.

Significantly, it is Harry Champness—a lay preacher and self-confessed ‘plain Lancashire man’—who has the most success in getting the railway workers to listen to his message of Christ as saviour.<sup>73</sup> Ralph is likewise respected and followed because he is a ‘manly man’ who the men regard as ‘one of ourselves’.<sup>74</sup>

Thornton and Foston are less innovative in their depiction of women, perpetuating ideals of saintly, refined house angels. In the late nineteenth century women were typically regarded ‘as more delicate creatures than men, of altogether finer sensibility, and able to appeal to men’s highest ideals.’<sup>75</sup> Mrs Sinclair, Neville’s beloved Gladys, Ralph’s dainty Edna, and Hector Nelson’s selfless Edith are all women in this mould. In one respect, however, some of these women depart from the norm. Breward writes of the wide-held belief that the exercise of feminine virtues ‘in the public realm, where male aggression, brutality, and immorality reigned, restrained only by strong laws and powerful community sanctions, was seen as a body blow at the health of society’.<sup>76</sup> Mrs Sinclair and Edith Barlow successfully operate in the public realm without any loss of their femininity. Both run large Sunday schools and are gifted preachers whose words exert a powerful influence on the working men who form their audience.

## Conclusion

Thornton’s four books were ‘widely read in evangelical circles’ in the early decades of the twentieth century, and Foston’s narratives had a similar local appeal, but their fiction was never republished and today sits unread on library shelves.<sup>77</sup> Why am I drawn back, again and again, to dusty archives and rarely opened volumes whose pages are brittle and yellow with age? The collective, yet disparate, identity of a nation and its people is formed through its memories, echoes from its past: influences, impressions, words. Creative fiction is one way in which these echoes are captured and distilled. It is easy today to scoff at Foston’s censorious tone, at Thornton’s moral crusading. In the contemporary life of the nation, however—although frequently detached from matters of faith and predominantly secular in

emphasis—many of the influences present in the work of these preacher novelists continue to exercise a hold on the imagination, sometimes in surprising ways: a belief in individualism and self-reliance; a crusading zeal for social change; a lingering respect for manly, active men whose beliefs are reflected in deeds as well as words; an enduring sense of the natural world as provider and refuge. What attracts me, above all, to these writers is their passion, their willingness to fight for their convictions and beliefs and their unconcern for being popular or praised. We live in an age of tolerance, which is something to be admired and protected when it is linked to the virtues of kindness, compassion and empathy. But tolerance can so easily slip into permissiveness, passivity, uniformity and the triumph of mediocrity. Foston and Thornton are gentle to those who are hurting and broken, but also breathe fire and fury. We may or may not share Foston and Thornton's beliefs, but their vehement desire to fight for a better world and their refusal to settle for the status quo epitomizes an energy and a utopian striving that is admirable.