

## Ernest at Canterbury College, August 1894

“Sammy, are those batteries ready yet?” asked Ernest as he popped his head round the corner of the gown room. “Nearly sir” replied Sammy Page, who had the job of building and setting up equipment for Ernest. “With the frost last night it took a while for the room to warm up, so I’m a bit behind sir”.

“Mustn’t complain” thought Ernest. At least he had someone to help. Sammy was Professor Bickerton’s chemistry assistant but was allowed time to help Ernest. Compared to Universities in England the place he was given to do experiments was dark, cold and really basic. He even had to write to the University to get permission to do his experiments there. His letter had read

*Sir*

*We respectfully request the use of the gown room below the Mathematical Lecture room for the purpose of conducting electrical researches.*

*In conducting electrical researches a stone or concrete support for the meters is essential. In the Chemistry Laboratory passing traffic makes the room vibrate and we can’t make accurate measurements.*

*We have the honour to be*

*Your obedient Servants*

*E Rutherford*

*J A Erskine*

It was going to be a long day. It took hours to get the batteries prepared, the equipment set up and to take observations. He had to make sure Sammy or Jack Erskine would be round when he was ready to collect observations. Sometimes “Bicky” would drop in to offer words of support. The days of his Professors telling him what to do were over, this was his research, and Ernest had to think for himself.

The late winter morning sun brightened the gown room without warming the body. Voices from outside could be heard, snippets of conversation about life at Canterbury College, what lecturers were teaching and upcoming social events. “Back to work, thought” Ernest, or I won’t have time for a social life.”

### Discussion questions

- 1) What were some of the problems that Ernest faced in doing experiments?
- 2) How is letter writing in 1894 different to now?
- 3) What is the problem in learning with others telling you what to do?

Ernest sat under the archway opposite the Great Hall and tried to relax before rugby practice. He wasn’t good at relaxing. He got restless and in the words of May, his land ladies’ daughter, “fidgety”. A chilly easterly wind had sprung up from the New Brighton area. “Christchurch and the beastly easterly go hand in hand” thought Ernest, reflecting on the balmy climate in Nelson, and at his parent’s more recent home near New Plymouth. “Still it’s an ill wind that blows no one any good” reflected Ernest, “the children will be flying kites as August is the month to fly kites.”

Rugby practice was not a lot of fun. It was hardly surprising though, when your team is at the bottom of the Senior Competition. Morale was not good and many supporters had deserted them, preferring to watch other matches. They missed players like Apirana Ngata, the first Maori to come to Canterbury College who had gone up to Auckland this year. How embarrassing it had been when Professor Brown's daughter had asked "who's the black man?" when Apirana Ngata came round to the Brown household. It was different in Taranaki, his father and his brother George employed many Maori to work at their flax mill. His mother knew Te Whiti, the leader of passive resistance to new settlers after land. On a personal note he was pleased he rated a mention in "The Press" recently and had even scored a try against Drapers. His knee injury troubled him though, a sign that his playing days were limited.

The light was fading as Ernest trudged home from rugby practice along the banks of the Avon River towards his boarding home at Carlton Mill corner. The question of how to earn a living once he completed his research was never far from his mind. For a time he thought teaching may have been the way forward. However one term at Christchurch Boy's High School had cured him of that. As he tried to explain to maths to some of his junior students, others started playing up and as the noise got louder and louder he sometimes reached the point of yelling at some of them in anger. Whatever the students or the teachers nearby thought, it was obvious to him that this was not the future. Carrying out research experiments rather than teaching was his passion.

### **Discussion questions**

- 4) Was Ernest a nervous type of person? Explain
- 5) Why did Apirana Ngata become famous?
- 6) How might our world be different if Ernest had stayed with school teaching?

As he neared Carlton Mill Corner he pondered if he should apply for yet another scholarship. With his luck he would fail at first attempt. His Professors had told him about the 1851 Great Exhibition Scholarship. Prince Albert had built the Crystal Palace in London to show off British Industry and Science. The Exhibition had made £180,000 and from this vast fortune a £150 scholarship was being offered to a New Zealand student who showed ability in research. The winner of this scholarship could study anywhere in the world. "England would be nice" thought Ernest, "my mother came from there and I've heard that Professor J.J. Thompson at Cambridge has a whole laboratory dedicated to research, unlike my Den!"

Life was complicated, even for a young man of 22 years, well 23 years at the end of the month. When he got to Mrs Newton's house there were more things to occupy his mind. Mrs Newton was a widow. He had had to listen to many a story about the evils of alcohol. Mr Newton had died six years ago from his drinking and Mrs Newton had joined the Women's Christian Temperance Union to oppose the abuse of alcohol. She worked closely with Kate Sheppard who had founded the movement. Mrs Newton had even been arrested and taken to court. There was no chance he would start drinking while he lived there. What he did look forward to was talking with May. At first she was just a school girl but now she had started studying at Canterbury he saw her differently. She seemed to understand him and could flash the nicest smile his way. May seemed very keen to go with him back up to Taranaki over the Christmas

holidays; perhaps love was in the air. If so, that presented as many problems as it solved. How to earn enough money to support a wife?

Over tea that evening Ernest listened to discussions about the possibilities now that Women had been given the vote. May kept on giving him glances. "I must write to mother tonight about Christmas" Ernest thought.

Little did Ernest know that in a year's time he would be sailing away from New Zealand's shores, to a world as yet unknown by him, that would become "home". And never would Ernest know that one day his portrait and that of Sir Apirana Ngata and Kate Sheppard would grace our bank notes.

**Discussion questions**

- 7) What would be some of the advantages in going to England?
- 8) What were the big social issues of the day?
- 9) What does it mean "How to earn enough money to support a wife?"