

Secular New Zealand or God's Own Country? Religion's significance in New Zealand history

Timaru U3A, 29 July 2019

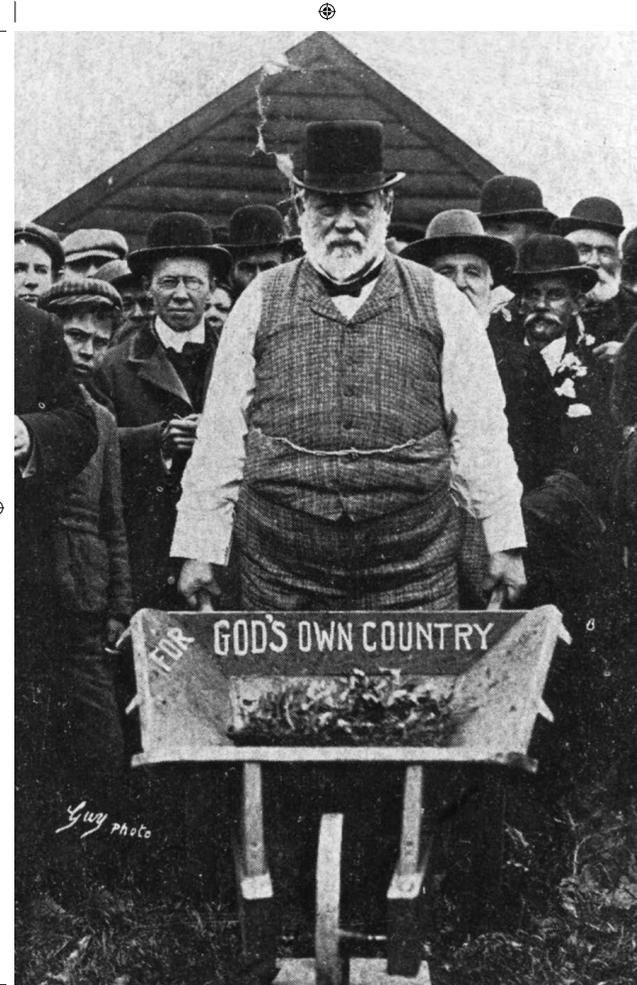
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Key questions:

- Was NZ an unusually secular society from almost the beginning of our history?
- Were the churches weak, unpopular, steadily declining and culturally marginal by 1900?
- If 'Secular NZ' true, why did Richard 'King Dick' Seddon call NZ 'God's Own Country'?

Thesis:

- Secular NZ a myth i.e. largely false
- Mythmakers: progressive nationalist historians
- Reeves-Beaglehole-Sinclair-Chapman-Olssen-Belich-King
- NZ of history more religious than NZ of its historians
- Male nationalist historians secularize our past to discredit 'bad religion': wowser women, puritan parsons
- Main focus: 1840-1970; Pakeha



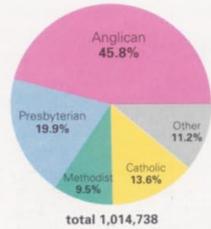
Clearing the ground: preliminary remarks

- Ludwig Wittgenstein: we all too easily bewitch our intelligence by using language carelessly
- 'Religion' a tricky concept
- Is there One Big Thing in our past we can call 'religion'?
- No: 'religion,' 'Christianity,' 'the Church' never monolithic
- Religious diversity crucial for understanding NZ history
- 4 key settler streams: Anglicans, mostly English (42% 1921); RCs, mostly Irish (14%); evangelicals, mixed (40%); secularists/freethinkers, mostly male (2-3%)

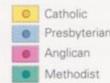


The church-based settlements of Canterbury and Otago endowed their founding churches with sufficient land to allow them to discharge their spiritual and moral tasks effectively and independently. In other settlements no church was allocated significant resources or privileges.

North Island and upper South Island (non-Māori) percentage of major denominations, 1921



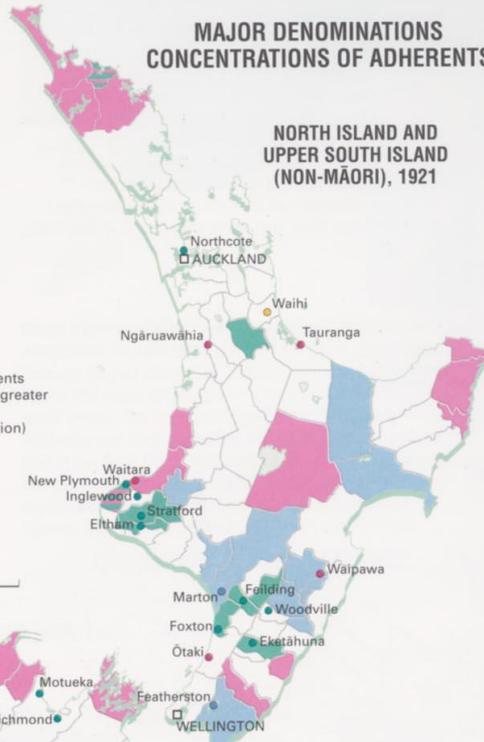
Concentrations of adherents of major denominations greater than the mean + 1.5 SD 1921 (non-Māori population)



200 km

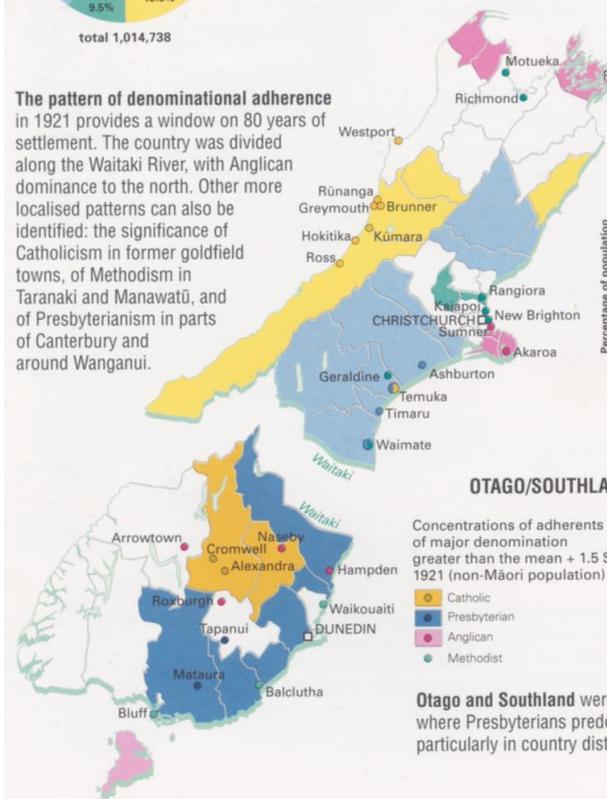
MAJOR DENOMINATIONS CONCENTRATIONS OF ADHERENTS

NORTH ISLAND AND UPPER SOUTH ISLAND (NON-MĀORI), 1921

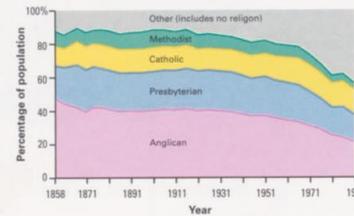


The pattern of denominational adherence

in 1921 provides a window on 80 years of settlement. The country was divided along the Waitaki River, with Anglican dominance to the north. Other more localised patterns can also be identified: the significance of Catholicism in former goldfield towns, of Methodism in Taranaki and Manawatū, and of Presbyterianism in parts of Canterbury and around Wanganui.



Main denominational allegiances declared at censuses, 1858–1991

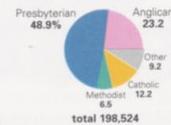


OTAGO/SOUTHLAND (NON-MĀORI), 1921

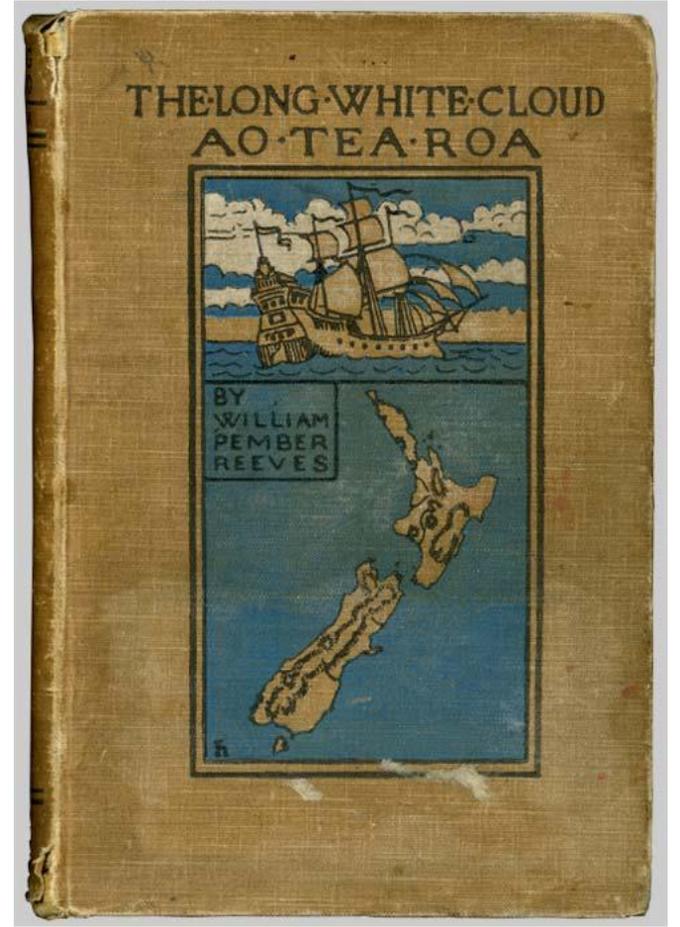
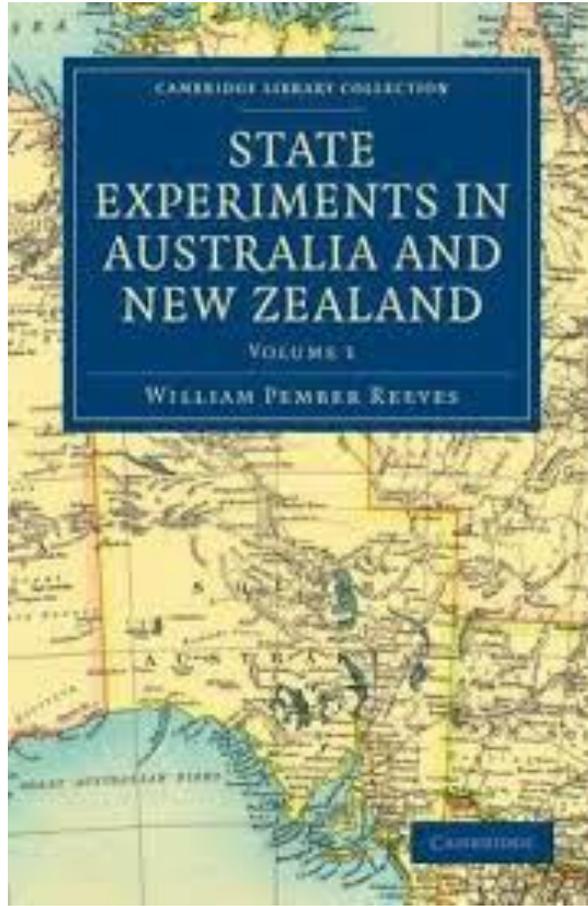
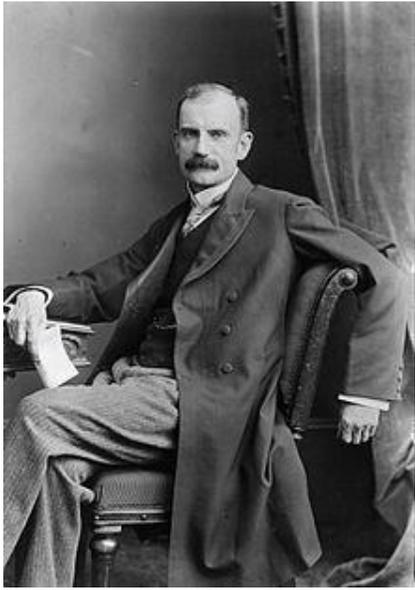
Concentrations of adherents of major denomination greater than the mean + 1.5 SD 1921 (non-Māori population)



Otago/Southland (non-Māori) percentage of major denominations 1921



Otago and Southland were areas where Presbyterians predominated, particularly in country districts.



William Pember Reeves (1857-1932): secularizing NZ history

- Canterbury English Anglican background
- Liberal Minister Education, Justice and Labour: clashes repeatedly with RC State Aid, Anglican bishops, evangelical Bible-in-Schools and prohibitionists
- *The Long White Cloud: Ao Tea Roa* (1898), *State Experiments in Australia and New Zealand* (1902)
- ‘to give information and not to make converts’; ‘collecting and classifying facts’ as objective historian
- Reeves writes nationalist histories celebrating NZ nation-state and its political architects while serving in London as the state’s highest-paid public servant

Reeves as progressive nationalist historian

- Depicts NZ under Liberals rapidly overcoming religious, class, racial and gender inequalities so troublesome elsewhere
- NZ 'a young democratic country... almost free from extremes of wealth and poverty ... class hatreds and fears,' its 'safe and rational experiment' in politics excluding 'some of the worst social evils and miseries which afflict great nations alike in the old world and the new.'
- NZ an exemplary progressive democracy leading the world into C20
- But important tensions between NZ the way Reeves wanted it to be and the way it actually was
- 3 heroes: George Grey, George Selwyn, E.G. Wakefield: all English

Reeves omits or depicts darkly the many church groups with which he clashes:

- ‘fanatical block votes’ (casts Moran and RC State Aid beyond the pale)
- 6 pages on anti-sweating—George Fenwick hero; omits Waddell (supports prohibition and Bible in Schools)
- Women’s suffrage: all credit to male politicians; female suffragists ‘could at best mount the platform and make fluttering, half-audible little speeches’ audiences greeted with ‘the kindly curiosity and amused suspension of the critical faculties which are bestowed on clever children nervously reciting speeches at school gatherings.’
- Why so dismissive, when Reeves and his womenfolk support suffrage? Because evangelical women who dominate suffrage campaign support causes that Reeves staunchly opposes

Historiography 1950-2000: 3 inter-related components.

- **1. Secular New Zealand:**

- K. Sinclair, *A History of NZ*, 1959: 'prevailing religion' a 'simple materialism'; doubted whether 'the general population' was 'in any sense more religious' C19.
- E.N. Olssen, *Ox.Hist.N.Z*, 1981, 1992: over 70% 'did not attend church' in 1881, and 'crisis' hit Protestant churches early C20 when 'dogma disintegrated' and they 'lost authority.'
- J. Belich, *Paradise Reforged*, 2001: the 'Great Tightening' 1880-1930 'a mainly secular crusade.'

2. The 'lapsed masses/middle class churches' theses

- Sinclair, 1959: 'a labourer was almost never seen in church.'
- Olssen, 1981, 1992: middle classes 'dominated all the churches' from which 'working men had defected in droves.'
- P.J. Gibbons, 1981, 1992: the churches 'lay firmly in the hands of the ruling classes.'

3. 'Bad religion'

- Sinclair, 1959: missionary ideas 'as destructive' of Maori society 'as bullets'; Rev. Thomas Burns a 'ensorious old bigot'; Anglican clergy and missionaries 'failed' to prevent NZ wars.
- Binney, 1968: missionaries, driven by 'a profound sense of their infallibility,' aimed to 'destroy' Maori culture, which merely reflected 'the degradation of its creators.'
- Belich, 1986: missionaries and humanitarians virtually as ethnocentric and prejudiced as settler racists

Bad religion (cont.)

- Olssen and Levesque (1978): 'God's Police,' the 'puritan legions,' imposed codes of 'sexual purity,' temperance and 'domesticity' on 1920s NZ.
- Brookes (1981), government Comm. of Inquiry into abortion 1936-37 'turned to the church' to counter 'the feminists and political radicals.'
- Key question: how can 'secular NZ' and 'bad religion' both be true?

Case study: Dunedin 1880-1920

- Dunedin the heartland of social reform: anti-sweating, temperance, and women's suffrage
- Southern Dunedin the most industrialized, densely populated, heavily working class urban area in the country
- Should provide plenty of evidence to support secular NZ, lapsed masses and bad religion
- Does it?
- Mary Leavitt brings WCTU from America 1885



The Anti-Sweating Campaign 1887-1891

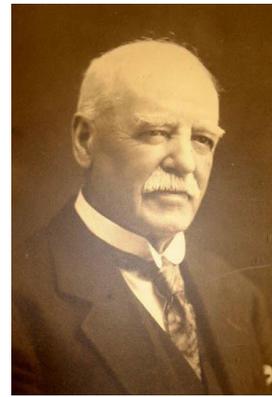
- Context: Long Depression 1873-1896
- Employers in clothing industry mid-1880s cut wages, lay off skilled men, hire women and boys
- Anti-sweating campaign launched and led by evangelicals: Rutherford Waddell, Rachel Reynolds, Winifred Bathgate (St Andrew's), William Downie Stewart (Knox), George Fenwick, Silas Spragg (ODT).
- Female leaders: Reynolds, Bathgate, Harriet Morison
- Cross-class: working class leaders: William Hutchison, Sam Lister (Presb); Robert Slater, Harriet Morison (Meth); Henry Fish (CofE)
- Ecumenical: evangelicals; RCs; Jews; freethinkers.
 - English Anglicans under-represented

Rutherford Waddell 1850/52-1932



Anti-sweating 1887-1891:

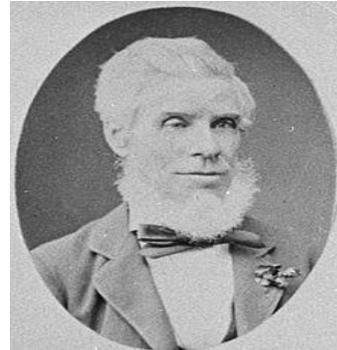
Top row (left to right): L.M. Isitt, English Methodist minister; George Fenwick, English Anglican newspaperman; Henry Shacklock, English Congregationalist manufacturer.



Second row: Robert Stout, Scottish freethinker, lawyer and liberal politician; Rachel Reynolds, Scottish Presbyterian community leader; William Downie Stewart, Scottish Presbyterian lawyer-politician.



Third row: William Hutchison, Scottish Presbyterian unionist; Harriet Morison, Irish Bible Christian unionist; Henry Smith Fish, English Anglican politician.



Bottom row: Bendix Hallenstein, Anglo-German Jewish businessman; John Wesley Jago, Anglo-Scottish Congregationalist newspaperman; Patrick Moran, Irish Catholic Bishop of Dunedin.



Anti-sweating coalition splinters 1892-94 over prohibition-and-suffrage

- Bishop Moran attacks prohibition and claims that only an ‘unlovely loud-voiced woman’ would want the vote
- Fish (CofE) leads attack on prohibitionists and suffragists
- 1892 leading male prohibitionists support women’s suffrage: Waddell, Jago, Stout, Rev. Ready, L.M. Isitt.
- Rev. Ready leads largest congregation in country, mostly working class—preaches prohibition and suffrage in populist style
- Prohibitionists appeal to Nonconformist conscience
 - use language of popular liberalism—liberation from slavery to drink
 - Anti-elitist tone
 - Anti-capitalist tinge

Populist anti-capitalism

- *Prohibitionist* 1 Nov. 1902



The 'Moderate' party 1892-94

- Anti-prohibition and anti-suffrage
- Fear women voters will support prohibition and restrict male pleasures and freedoms
- Dominated by episcopal churches: CofE: Henry Fish, Chas Greenslade, William Dawson, R.L. Stanford. RC: John Carroll, first RC mayor. Jewish: Maurice Joel
- Strong links Speights Brewery, Licensed Victuallers Assn, City Council and CofE
- Parliament: Seddon, Reeves, Fish (all CofE)

The 'Temperance' party: evangelicals

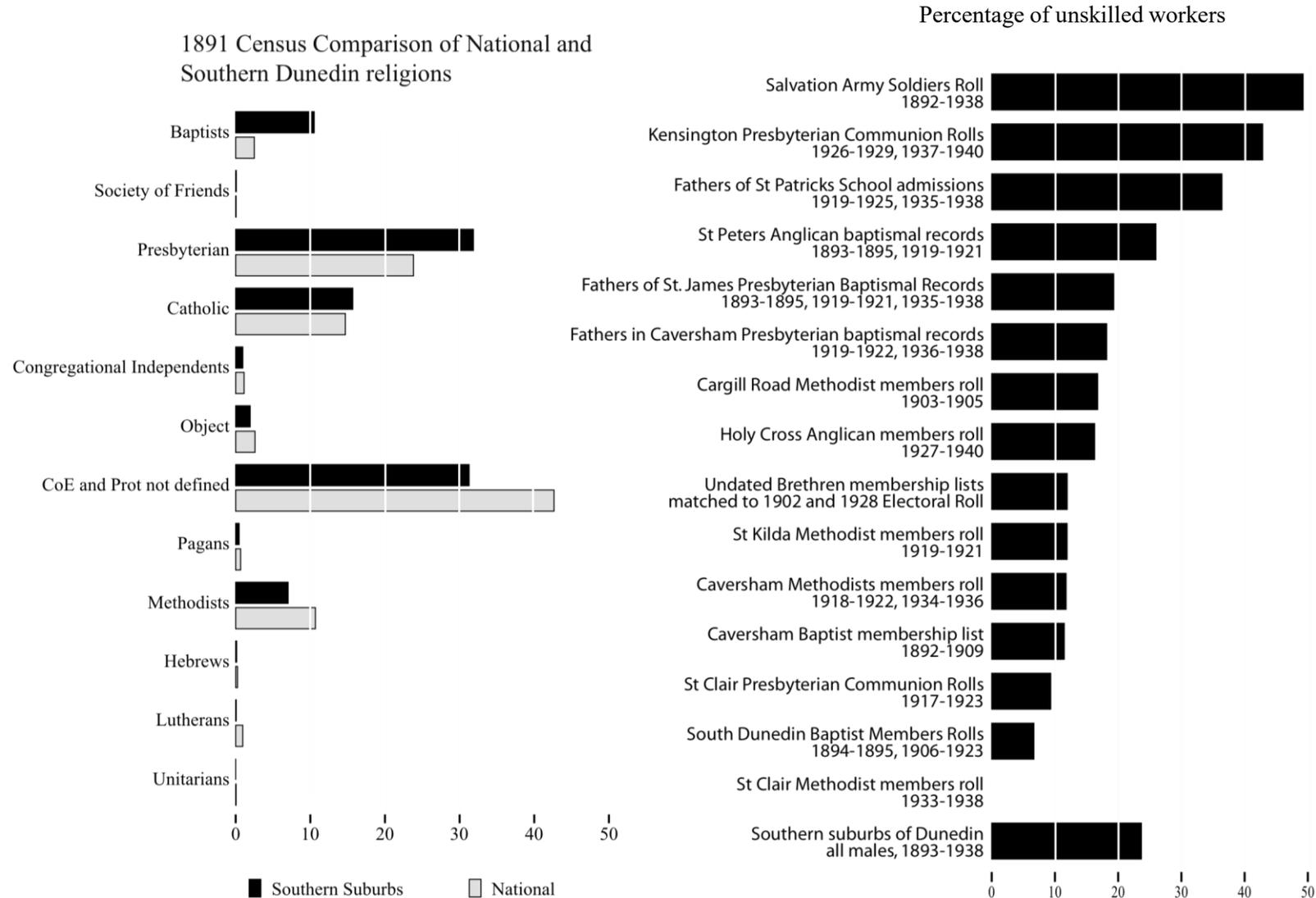
- WCTU women
- Presbyterians: Waddell, A.C. Begg, A.C. Broad
- Methodists: William Hatton, Rev. Ready, Isitt
- Congregationalists: Rev. A.H. Wallace, J.W. Jago
- Baptists: A.S. Adams
- Oppose state compensation to those losing liquor licenses
- Fierce opposition from Moderates

Southern Dunedin, 1890s

- By 1890 the most densely populated, industrialized, working class urban area in the country.
- Pubs and churches, unlike Mornington
- Evangelical churches numerous and strong—ca. 50% popn.
- CofE under-represented, esp. on Flat.
- RCs numerous, esp. South Dunedin
- Freethinkers slightly over-represented

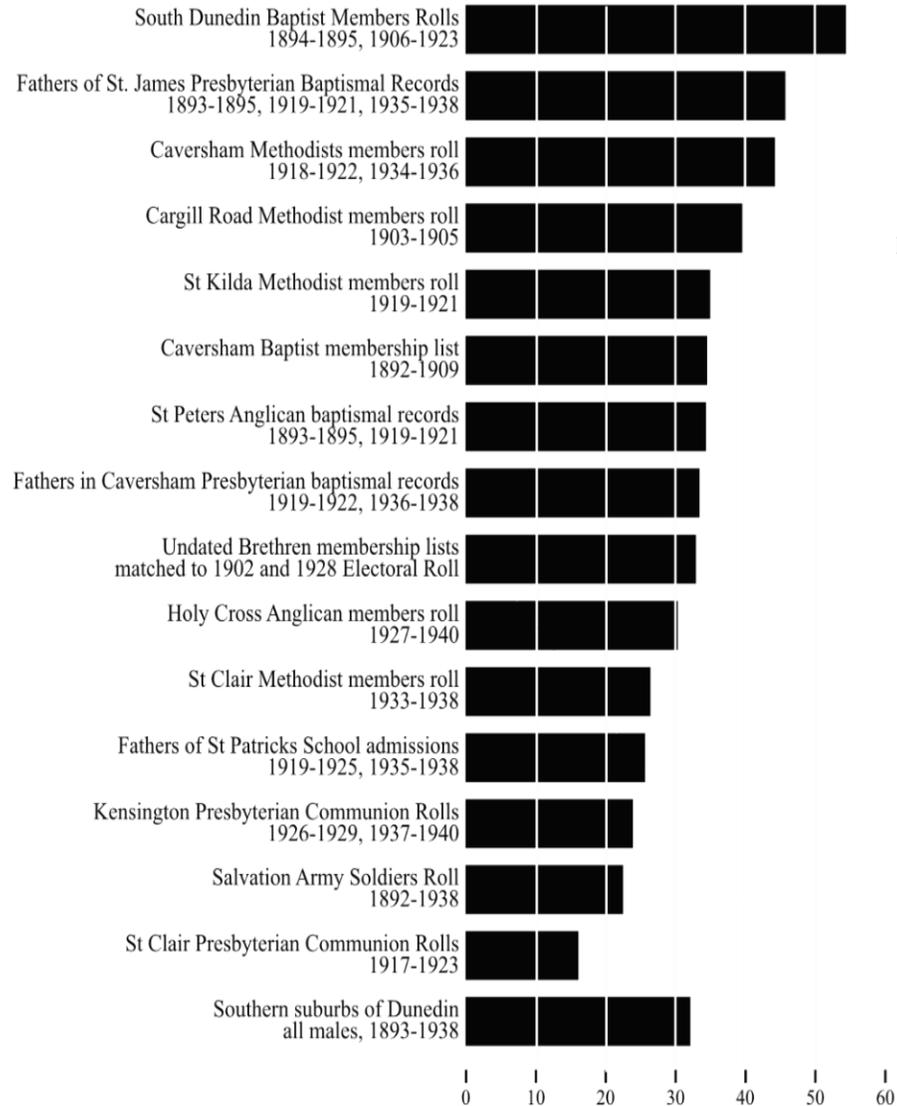


Southern Dunedin Religions

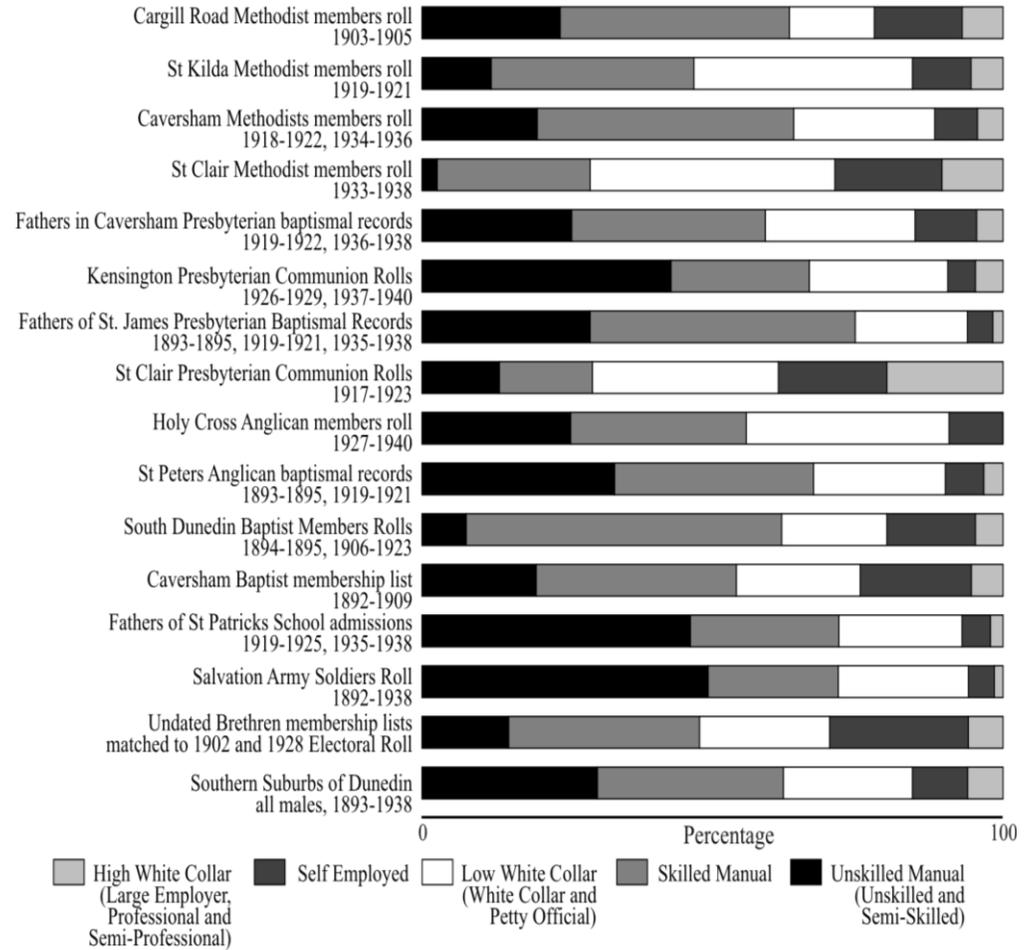


Church and class

Skilled Workers, percentages

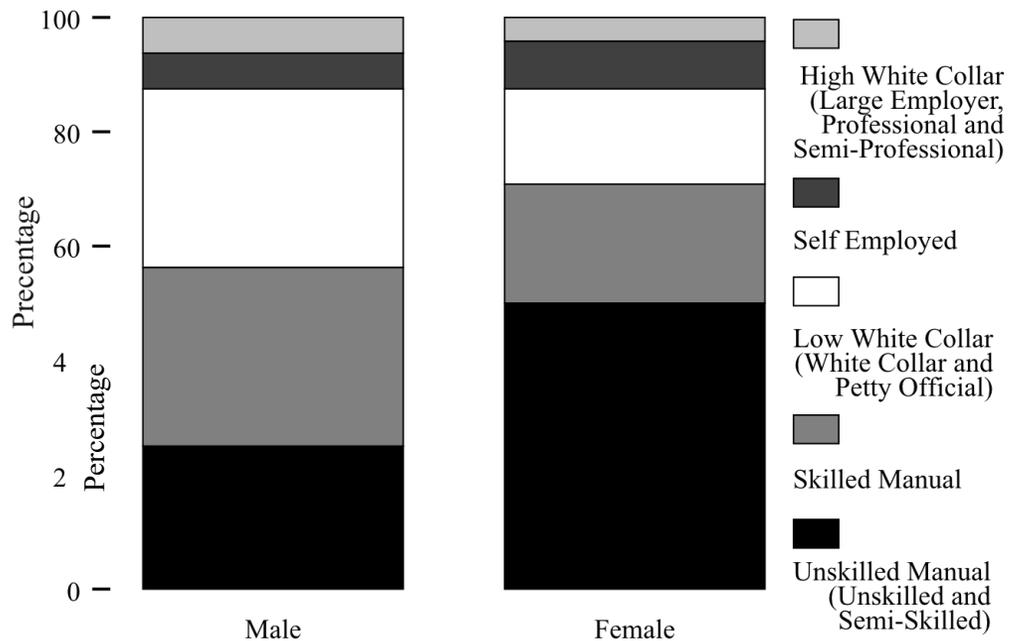


Male Occupational Class Distribution, 5 class model



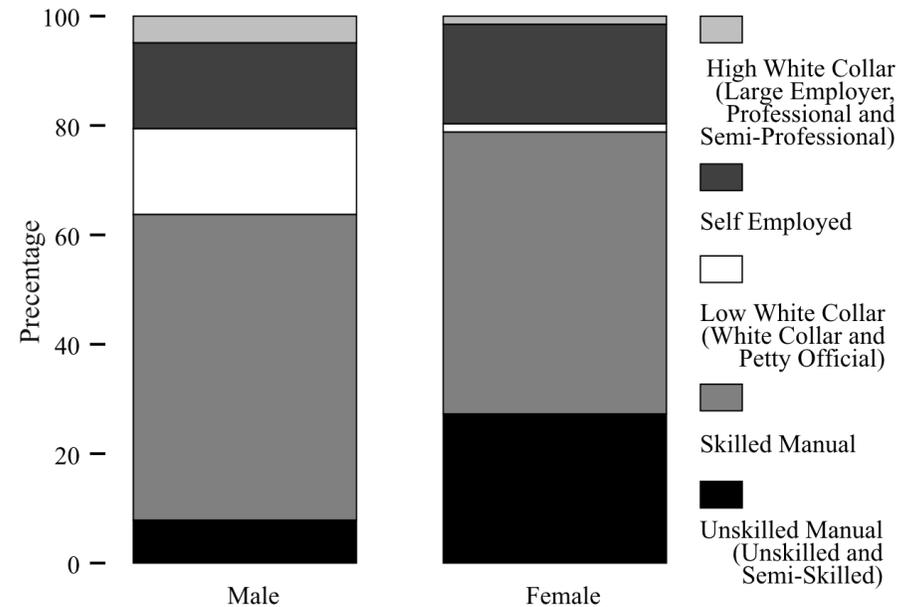
Church, class and gender

5 Class Occupational Distribution of Kensington Presbyterian records by Gender



Source: Kensington Presbyterian Communion Rolls 1926-29, 1937-1940 linked to Electoral Roll

5 Class Occupational Distribution of South Dunedin Baptists records by Gender



Source: South Dunedin Baptist Members Rolls 1894-1895, 1906-1923 linked to Electoral Roll

Sam and Jane Lister

- Sam b. Edinburgh 1832/33 working class Free Church family
- Jane, née Miller, dressmaker
- *Otago Workman* newspaper (1887-1899)
- Sam radically secular: ‘atheist, anticlerical and republican’
- Hostile to monarchy and ruling classes but reserved ‘most savage blows’ for ‘churches and clergy’
- *Workman* ‘enormously influential’ in mobilizing militantly secular working class consciousness—‘the voice of the labour movement’



Lister's war on prohibitionists and suffragists:

- July 1892 joins Fish and Moderates in attacking prohibitionist-suffragist alliance
- 'Male Women' campaigning for suffrage 'vampires,' who, having tasted the 'blood' of their 'husbands,' 'sigh for fresh victims.'
- Supported by 'Female Men,' 'goody goody weaklings,' in unholy alliance for prohibition, suffrage and 'religious education.'
- Giving women the vote worse than giving children 'razors and revolvers to play with.'
- Attacks WCTU and WFL, esp. Morison and Nicol—that 'energetic she-male' trying to 'run the female franchise racket for a consideration.'
- Fish claims 5000 signatures for counter-suffrage petition—but Nicol exposes his tactics in ODT—backlash

Why did prohibition and suffrage flourish in working class southern Dunedin?

- Leading Presbyterian prohibitionist (Waddell): friend of workers; pro suffrage; progressive puritan
- Rev. Ready, prohibitionist and suffragist, leads largest congregation in country, mostly working class
- Stout, leading Liberal prohibitionist, campaigns for women's rights since 1870s
- 'Wowser women': Reynolds, Bathgate (St Andrew's) Morison (Bible Christian) active anti-sweating and Tailoresses Union then prohibition and suffrage
- Working class suffragists Morison and Nicol campaign to swing working class behind suffrage from 1890—effective speakers, writers, organizers
- Practical-material: less money on drink/gambling, more for kids and household
- Anti-suffragists Fish, Lister and Dawson infuriate southern women

1892 Suffrage Petition

- 57% adult women southern Dunedin sign
- Far higher proportion than any other urban area NZ
- Evangelical women from older working class boroughs (Caversham, South Dunedin) dominate signatories
- Anglicans, and newer middle class suburbs (St Clair), significantly under-represented
- RCs under-represented—yet ca. 18 sign!
- ‘Wowser women’ win strong female support southern suburbs: politically influential
- Southern Dunedin a world-leading first wave feminist community
- Women voters help tip Fish out of parliament 1893—and count coup with ‘war dance’ from Garrison Hall to Octagon

Lister: the voice of the labour movement?

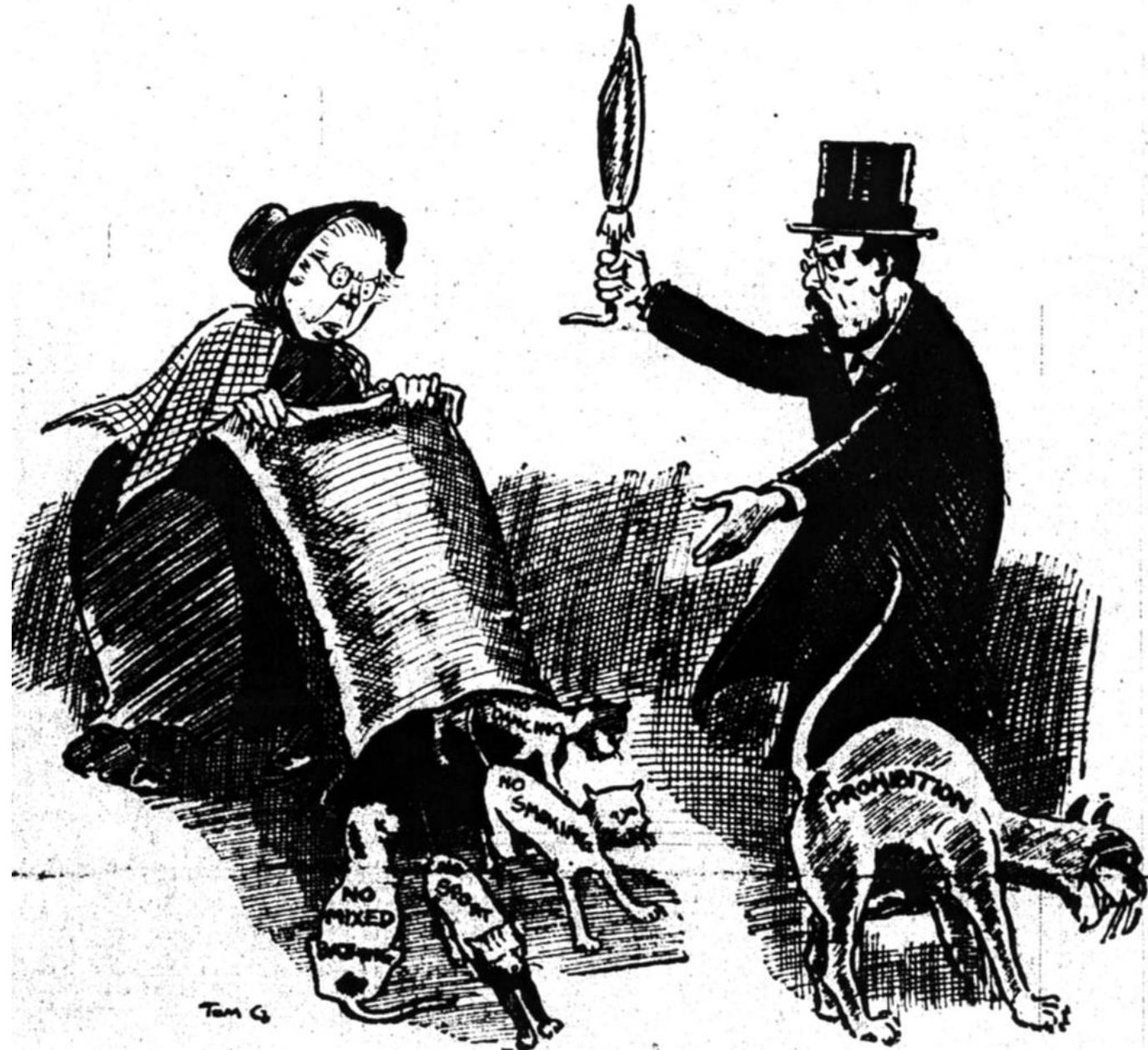
- Doesn't speak for his womenfolk!
- Jane, an active Presbyterian, does home mission work, supports prohibition and signs 1892 petition
- 1893, Worker's Political Committee, led by dry Methodist Bob Slater, nominates slate of Labour candidates for Dunedin seats in general election: all support suffrage and NZ Alliance.
- Lister attacks 'Bawb' Slater as 'old woman' and Labour candidates for 'sacrificing Liberalism to the Prohibition fad.'
- Turns against Fish
- Dry pro-suffrage evangelicals (Slater, Hutchison and Labour candidates) more influential in labour movement than Lister liked
- Significant religio-political divisions within labour movement

Hostility to wowser women and puritan parson alliance

- Extends well beyond Dunedin
- Strong 1900-1930
- Keeps episcopal-evangelical, Church-Dissent, Catholic-Protestant tensions simmering early C20
- Erupt WWI in sectarian conflict

Letting the Prohibition Pussy Out of the Bag.

Truth, 14
Nov. 1914.



PROHIBITION HIGH PRIEST: Goodness Gracious! Don't let the Public see the Kittens!

Truth 28 Nov. 1914
'If the Puritan becomes the
Boss denizen,
Good-bye to Free Speech,
Free Press and Free Men.'



At the Point of the Prohibitionist Pistol.

Conclusion:

- Reeves and Lister clashed repeatedly with religious groups they saw as disrupting their ideal NZ
- Both believed NZ contained too much bad religion
- Reeves's antipuritan nationalist paradigm intensified C20: Beaglehole, Sinclair, R.M. Chapman, Oliver, Belich, King
- Secular NZ more wishful thinking than historical reality