

YATES Michael

contributed by Judith Devaliant, author of *'Elizabeth Yates: the First Lady Mayor in the British Empire'*

Michael Yates was born in 1841 in Lanarkshire, Scotland. He went to Australia with his mother and sister after his father died. They moved to New Zealand after a year, and Michael went to sea as soon as he was old enough. He worked in the coastal trade to begin with, and then in the Pacific. Michael qualified as a Master Mariner and captained and part-owned several schooners in the Pacific trade. In 1860 he purchased the island of Matukaari in the Whangaroa Harbour, and also bought property in Onehunga and Hamilton. When forced to retire in 1874 because of a bad leg resulting from a childhood accident, Michael was able to live off the rent from his properties. He was a colourful character in Onehunga with his bushy beard and his status as a retired sea captain.

In his mid-thirties with plenty of energy, Michael joined the Masonic Lodge and the Onehunga Choral Society, taking part in several operas. On 15 December 1875 he married **Elizabeth Oman** with whom he lived in a cottage in the corner of Selwyn and Arthur streets with a section that extended to the grounds of Saint Peter's Church, where they both worshipped.

Michael had a circle of friends with whom he enjoyed a drink while they discussed local affairs. His involvement in politics began with writing petitions for neighbours who wanted improvements to the streets and footpaths in their areas. The two big issues in Onehunga at the time were the need for a reticulated water supply and the need for a cemetery to replace the overcrowded burial ground at Saint Peter's Church. Michael attended public meetings called to discuss the waterworks in his criticism of plans that would have left the Borough Council in serious debt.

In September 1887 he was elected to the Onehunga Borough Council, and after some hesitation he stood for Mayor in December 1889. As Mayor he had to supervise the completion of the waterworks while trying to keep the costs down. Michael was re-elected Mayor three times thus serving a longer term than his more famous wife. Michael worked hard for the Borough, and while Mayor he served a year on the Vestry at Saint Peter's Church. When his friends became worried about his health in 1892 there was some talk of Elizabeth standing as Mayor in his place, but Michael was opposed.

When fading health forced his retirement in 1893 he withdrew his opposition to Elizabeth standing for Mayor and supported her through a difficult year. The cartoonists had fun depicting Captain Yates as the Mayoress in a long tartan skirt with a nautical jacket and a little jaunty hat perched on his head. Another cartoonist had him down on his knees scrubbing the floor with Elizabeth supervising and telling him to peel the potatoes because she had to write a speech.

In his later years Michael was described as a crusty gentleman with a bushy beard and a gammy leg. When he died on 25 September 1902 an obituary in the New Zealand said he would be remembered most for his efforts, (coupled with assistance of his wife) that led to the re-opening of the Waikaraka Cemetery. His opposition to the waterworks was forgotten and he was remembered as the man who gave Onehunga its domestic water supply.

Michael was buried in **Saint Peter's Cemetery** after a well-attended funeral service.

