

HAROLD WILLIAMS

A KORERO Report

HAROLD WILLIAMS was born in Christchurch in 1877, the eldest son of the Reverend W. J. Williams, an early leader of the Methodist Church in New Zealand. As the son of a Minister constantly passing from one circuit to another, the boy changed his school every three years. Learning was difficult at first. Arithmetic was a bugbear. Figures were incomprehensible and almost hostile. Many years later he reproached his teachers: "I wasn't altogether a fool; why couldn't they have made mathematics clear to me?"

Even grammar was not easy at first but suddenly, when he was seven years old, there came something like an explosion in his brain. Languages, grammar, and all the ramifications of philology opened to him as if by magic. The tortuous paths of foreign languages, so steep and stony for most of us, were full of colour and harmony for him. He always remembered this sudden sense of inner revolution as one of the happiest moments of his life.

His father was his only help in his reading, but he had a real intuition for finding the right things on his father's bookshelves. With the exception of Russian, languages entered his brain of their own accord. He did not so much learn as assimilate them. At the age of eleven he knew Latin, Greek, Hebrew, French, German, Maori, and Italian. The key to his language studies was the New Testament, which he knew almost by heart. His pocket-money was spent on the purchase of the Gospels translated into many languages. In his teens he found a copy of St. Mark's Gospel translated into Dobuan, a language of New Guinea, by the Rev. Dr. George Brown. Out of that he constructed a Dobuan grammar and vocabulary. His father, finding the loose sheets of the boy's grammar lying about, sent them to Dr. Brown, whose reply showed that "There was in the South Pacific no more astonished man" than the doctor.

It was incredible that a lad who had never seen Dobu and had never even heard the language spoken should have constructed such a vocabulary on so slender a basis.

From the time when he won his first scholarship, his education cost his parents nothing. When he was about to try for a University scholarship, an accident on the playing field of the Timaru Boys' High School endangered his sight. His parents opposed his taking the examination as his eyes were bandaged. But he took it entirely on languages—English, French, German, Latin, and Greek—and won his scholarship brilliantly.

He never completed his course at the University of New Zealand, and never regretted it. It had always been his father's wish that he should become a Methodist minister, and in March, 1898, when he was little more than twenty, Harold Williams was accepted as a probationer for the Ministry, and was appointed for two years to the St. Albans circuit, Christchurch. After two years he was moved to Inglewood, in the Waitara circuit. Here he must have been a puzzle to the quiet country people. A Methodist minister, a Tolstoyan, a philosopher, philologist, socialist, vegetarian, dreamer with a stammer. The people liked him, but could not understand a young man with such a torrent of strange ideas flowing through his head. Small wonder, perhaps, that when the probationary period came to an end, his superiors seized upon his stammer as a reason for refusing to give him a parish. This decision both hurt and disheartened him, and it was plain that his career as a Methodist minister was coming to an end.

As a preliminary to finding another opening Harold Williams decided to make his way to a German university to study languages. Hearing of his intention, Mr. William Wilson, one of the proprietors of the *New Zealand Herald* made a contribution towards