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New Zealand Landscape and Literature, 1890–1925

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ABSTRACT

New Zealand's literature (1890–1925) offers a wealth of information for the environmental historian that is unparalleled by most other countries. A major theme of New Zealand late colonial literature was the removal of the indigenous bush and its transformation into a British-modelled pastoral paradise. The period's poetry and fiction conveys valuable insights into perceptions and attitudes towards this transformation, which cannot be ascertained from other documentary sources.

KEYWORDS

New Zealand literature, landscape, environment, environmental text

NEW ZEALAND LANDSCAPE AND LITERATURE, 1890–1925.

New Zealand literature of the 'late colonial' period offers an excellent documentary source for environmental historians.¹ Between 1890–1925 settlers engaged in an exceptionally ruthless and rapid transformation of the New Zealand landscape. The most overt transformation involved the removal of the indigenous forests of the North Island and their conversion to pasture. Historian Keith Sinclair states: 'The alteration of the central North Island from dense forest to grass must be one of the most startling and efficient reconstructions of a landscape in the world. For the pioneers it was a hard-won and major achievement.'² The demise of the bush was too rapid and visible to ignore, and late colonial poets, departing from the conventions of retrospective Victorian sentimentality that characterised the era, wrote some of the period's best and most memorable verse on the subject. Likewise in novels, the main collective thematic factor is the depiction of and expression of attitudes towards the massive

environmental changes that occurred during the period, as the bush-frontier settlers struggled to transform the wilderness into a pastoral paradise.

LITERATURE AND ENVIRONMENTAL HISTORY

In New Zealand both the disciplines of late colonial literature and environmental history are emerging fields of study. Environmental history in New Zealand is a new and developing area, but one that has an important contribution to make to the global discipline. Factors such as New Zealand's small yet geographically diverse terrain and the late colonial transformation of the environment, which took place rapidly in a concentrated period of time and historically-recently enough to be well-documented, mean that New Zealand's late-colonial environmental history is a model of extreme interest worldwide. In New Zealand itself, the late colonial period has been for a long time incorrectly dismissed as a period contributing little or nothing to a national literature. The international reader will know little of New Zealand literature from this period except for Katherine Mansfield, yet the period's fiction and poetry offers a superb wealth of information for the environmental historian that is unparalleled in most other countries.

Incorporating literature into a multidisciplinary approach to environmental history is rewarding. In the past historical geographers and environmental historians have lamented the lack of adequate historical accounts regarding the clearance of New Zealand's North Island bush,³ overlooking the rich source of literature, wherein writers such as Jane Mander and William Satchell left detailed, factual, historically and geographically accurate accounts of the bush sawmills and settlements in their novels, based on the author's first-hand experience. William Satchell's *The Land of the Lost* (1902) and *The Toll of the Bush* (1905) are excellent documents of environmental transformation, with strong regional qualities in their settings of the Hokianga bush and tidal river country, forest and gumfields. Similarly Jane Mander's *The Story of a New Zealand River* (1920), *The Passionate Puritan* (1921) and *Allen Adair* (1925) document the Northland regions. The little-known *Passionate Puritan* includes invaluable depictions of a timber-mill landscape and settlement, including a rare account of a log dam system, which washed millions of feet of kauri logs downstream to the mill.⁴

Literature, as a source for environmental history, can offer a variety of sources and viewpoints as well as a flexibility that cannot be provided by other historical documents. An environmental historian looking in Mander or Satchell's novels will also find the vocalised opinions of a wide range of representative characters, presenting not only multiple sides of the popular transformation versus preservation of the landscape debate, but implicitly the author's own attitudes. It is widely acknowledged that a nation's literature is fundamental in vocalising the ethos of an age and contributing towards the creation of a national

identity. New Zealand's national identity and literature are intimately concerned with the landscape and its transformation.

LANDSCAPE PICTURES

At its most basic application as a source for environmental history, literature provides 'landscape pictures' – descriptive portrayals of the landscape as seen through the eyes of contemporary observers. As most New Zealand novels were published overseas, they contained much explanatory landscape description targeted at a touristic audience. In poetry, the compilers of the first national anthology of verse stated that if New Zealand possessed any school of verse it was a school of landscape.⁵ However, the ability to write about the New Zealand landscape didn't come easily to settler poets – across the period one can trace the awkward attempts to come to terms with the alien indigenous New Zealand landscape and to find new forms of poetry and language to portray or express it.

The poet who most vividly evoked the physical realities of the New Zealand late colonial landscape was Blanche Baughan (1870–1958). Her poem 'A Bush Section'⁶ is the definitive New Zealand environmental history poem, providing an image of a place, a moment in history and a colonial state of mind. Baughan offers a powerfully visual scene of rural environmental devastation:

Logs, at the door, by the fence; logs, broadcast over the paddock;
 Sprawling in motionless thousands away down the green of the gully,
 Logs, grey-black. And the opposite rampart of ridges
 Bristles against the sky, all the tawny, tumultuous landscape
 Is stuck, and prickled, and spiked with the standing black and grey splinters,
 Strewn, all over its hollows and hills, with the long, prone, grey-black logs.

Baughan saw beauty in the burnt bush landscape – here representing a space in stasis, waiting to be filled with the imaginative labours of future settlers. The ethic of progress often infused poems of this sort. William Pember Reeves's 'A Colonist in his Garden' describes an old settler who has spent his lifetime turning 'wilderness to flower' in the style of England, with imported exotic trees, flowers and birds.⁷ Poems and odes addressing 'Zealandia' were common, praising the labours of the pioneers and their profitable transformation of the landscape, imaged as a struggle and victory over the landscape. Alan Mulgan's 'Dead Timber' suggests the man-made 'desolation' of the New Zealand landscape symbolises 'the story of our gain' – 'There on the hillside, is our nation's building, / The tall dead trees so bare against the sky.'⁸ Others, while endorsing transformative progress, contradictorily lamented the loss of the native bush. The best-known expression of this is William Pember Reeves's 'The Passing of the Forest', a poem that appeared in a wide number of publications including the appendix of Reeves's popular history of *New Zealand: The Long White Cloud*:



FIGURE 1. A farmstead rises in the midst of burnt-over bush, ca 1900.

Ao Tea Roa (1898) – a landmark early environmental history. Reeves felt strongly enough about his subject to constantly amend the final verse of the poem. This is the original conclusion:

Mighty are axe and fire, destroyers twain,
 Swift servants of the arch-destroyer, Man;
 And he is mighty as he hews amain,
 Bronzed pioneer of nations. Ay, but scan
 The ruined wonder never wrought again,
 The ravaged beauty God alone could plan!
 Bitter the thought: 'Is this the price we pay –
 The price for progress – beauty swept away?'

By 1926 Reeves had worked the conclusion into a more strongly-worded and emphatic statement. He replaced the 'mighty bronzed pioneer' with a vandalistic Nature-hater, and significantly relabelled 'progress' as 'Man's dominion.'

The highly visible changes the landscape was undergoing with the removal of the bush became a central theme of novels of the period. John Bell's *In the Shadow of the Bush* (1899) and Arthur Adams's *Tussock Land* (1904) described

the process of transformation in detail, as the bush was felled and burned, grass sown in the ashes and sheep and cattle introduced. Rough settler's huts in clearings were replaced by farmhouses with fences, orchards and exotic trees. Roads and railways linked the growing townships, dairy factories were established, frozen lamb and butter were exported and districts prospered.⁹ The transformation of these bush landscapes took place in an extremely rapid and concentrated period of time, even as little as five years. Blanche Baughan illustrates this brief but vital period of New Zealand's agricultural, social and environmental history in her collection of short stories *Brown Bread from a Colonial Oven* (1912).

Didactic novels were popular, in which the main character's moral development or path to Christianity is inevitably achieved through hard work and the profitable transformation of the landscape. Vivid examples are Herman Foston's *In the Bell-Bird's Lair* (1911) and *At the Front: A Story of Pluck and Heroism in the Railway Construction Camps of the Dominion of New Zealand* (1921); within these, as in many novels of the period, factual essays on breaking in the land were accompanied by photographs depicting the work.

Overall, there is a large body of literature that deals with critical period of the transformation of bush (and other) landscapes. Along with the assertions of progress, there is ample material on negative environmental effects, such as overstocking and rabbit infestation. Bushfires, a constant threat on the bush-frontier, are prevalent in the novels,¹⁰ as well as descriptions of other hazards of bush frontier life – tree-felling accidents, drowning and becoming lost in the bush being common dangers.

RESPONSE TO LANDSCAPE

It is not merely narratives of environmental transformation that make New Zealand late colonial literature an important source. As a body, it also conveys a range of perceptions, responses and attitudes towards the landscape and its transformation, during this confused time of growth and transition. Literature is an institution in society, and as such it both reflects and projects an image of that society's cultural identity. New Zealand late colonial literature is valuable for determining a *Zeitgeist*, the half-conscious assumptions of the age that the writers shared, despite their differences in emphasis. From a single novel of the period, say one of Satchell's Hokianga novels, we can determine underlying attitudes to Progress (with the associated ideas of Empire, new world egalitarianism, social Darwinism and attitude to Maori use of the land) versus the conflicting Romantic attitudes to nature, lamenting the passing of the bush (and the Maori), the emergence of New Zealand nationalism and promotion of New Zealand as home versus England as home. Furthermore we can often identify on which side of the questions the authors come down on. Often they will have the

characters expressing and embodying a range of attitudes, but they will implicitly favour some others. Some of them try a kind of dialectic – i.e. Romantic attitude to nature versus the ruthless exploitation of it, with responsible transformation of it as the synthesis. The authorial attitudes are not always coherent, but when all the novels of the period are examined together a number of shared themes or ideas can be identified.

Common to many national literatures is the influence of the living landscape, where the landscape is an agent that colours and influences the behaviour and feelings of those who live in it. This manifests itself by either the use of landscape as a realistic–naturalistic environment inevitably influencing the characters as organisms within it, or by the more romantic–melodramatic use of landscape as both symbol of and emotional influencer of mood.

Characters, in return, work as agents, expressing attitudes towards the landscape. Many characters of late colonial New Zealand literature view the landscape as a challenging environment to be transformed or domesticated. The landscape was a wild opponent and its subjection was epitomised by the popular term ‘breaking in the land.’ The challenge attitude is a central theme of Satchell’s novels, whereby characters prove their worth against the indigenous landscape. A good example is Robert Hernshaw of Satchell’s *The Toll of the Bush* who, with his young wife Lena, doggedly struggles to clear and work their bush section into a prosperous farm on the model of their neighbour’s, Major Milward, despite setbacks such as the loss of their potato crop.¹¹

Others view the landscape as a terrible antagonist. Robert Hernshaw’s English brother Geoffrey is frustrated at the immensity of the task of converting the wilderness into a garden, and complains of the futility.¹² Sir George Makgill’s novel *Blacklaw* (1914) shows the negative psychological effects of growing up in a bush farm environment in the process of ugly transformation. The character Johnnie reflects the ‘half-finished feeling’ of the country, ‘as though in him there were charred stumps and patches of half-cleared wasteland’¹³ (Johnnie eventually symbolically commits suicide in a bleak landscape). New Zealand late colonial literature is full of alcoholic bushmen, ‘lost’ gumfields fugitives and lonely, isolated settler women. A great amount of fiction concerns the landscape as a silent source of depression, isolation and terror. Katherine Mansfield’s short story, *The Woman at the Store* (1912) describes a woman who has gone mad from isolation in the oppressive landscape of heat, wind, waves of tussock grass and manuka. Once she was pretty and popular, now she has become an ugly figure of sticks and wires, who talks of loneliness and mistakes the narrator’s arriving party for hawks coming over the hill. It is revealed she has shot her husband with a rook rifle and buried him.

Another attitude to the New Zealand landscape is a resource to be exploited – best shown by Tom Roland, the enterprising boss of a milling company in Mander’s *The Story of a New Zealand River* :

'There!' Roland put down the luncheon baskets he was carrying, and waved his hand airily at them. 'Best bit of bush in the colony. Nothing to beat it outside of California. Those trees have stood there thousands of years. Might have stood there thousands more.'



FIGURE 2. Bullocks drag away kauri logs for milling, ca 1905.

‘And you are going to cut them down!’ exclaimed Alice, as if it were sacrilege.

‘You bet I am. Great job too. Takes some tackling.’ He was proud that he had dared to stake everything he possessed on this great adventure. He knew that he was being discussed in Auckland business circles as a bold spirit and as a coming man.

‘I’ve told you what I think about it,’ said Mrs. Brayton.

‘Rot!’ laughed Tom Roland. ‘What would you have people live in in this country? Timber is cheaper than bricks. Those trees make houses for the poor. Somebody has to cut ‘em down. Look at the people who can own their own houses in New Zealand. Why? Cheap land, cheap timber. Something you don’t have in England...’¹⁴

The opposing attitude is the landscape as romantic manifestation of the sacred – so that transformation may be sacrilege. The bush landscape is often described as a holy cathedral. At the sight of the felling of a kauri in *River Alice* has tears in her eyes and Roland cannot understand why she looks at him as if he had committed a crime. Edith Grossmann’s female protagonists reject transformative progress and see the natural landscape as a beautiful and sublime Arcadia.¹⁵ Romantic, religious and aesthetic responses to landscape are mostly associated with women. Male characters, as practical workers and transformers, commonly offer more utilitarian attitudes to the landscape, and primarily embody the challenge attitude.

Some characters regard the New Zealand landscape as the rough antithesis of civilisation. The theme of civilisation (often represented by England) and wilderness is played out in many romance novels – best seen in Harry Vogel’s *The Tragedy of a Flirtation* (1909), where London heiress Lulu cannot cope with the muddy isolation of bush life. British civilisation was often undermined by the superficiality of characters associated with that country, who were portrayed as incapable of settler life. Closeness to the raw New Zealand bush landscape and the hard work of transforming that same landscape were seen to have produced a better calibre of person compared to those grown idle in the softer old world, and this logically led to assertions of national identity. The wilderness landscape could also be seen as a desirable escape from civilisation.

Finally many characters display a religious response to the landscape. In G. B. Lancaster’s *The Tracks We Tread* (1907), face to face with the harsh environment, there is a feeling among the sheep station men that there is very little between them and God. Lancaster’s bushmen recognise God in the bush and therefore realise the implications of ‘the glorious merciless joy that follows the first sob of the blade into green unhandled timber.’¹⁶ Interesting attitudes to environmental transformation and Christianity appear in Guy Thornton’s *The Wowsler: A Tale of the New Zealand Bush* (1916). The narrator equates the beauty

of the bush with the glory of God, yet the transformation of the wilderness by the removal of the bush parallels the path to Christianity. The sight of miles of forest around Mount Ruapehu inspires him to praise God, yet the same landscape is described as ‘acres of the finest milling timber in New Zealand’.¹⁷

DOMINANT ATTITUDES

Overall, a dominant set of attitudes emerges from the full range of the texts, along the following lines. First, the primary attitude to the New Zealand landscape is that of a challenge, to be responsibly transformed into the pastoral paradise. This ultimately overrides, but does not entirely negate other attitudes such as romantic, religious and aesthetic ones. Second, this process of transformation is associated with evolution – a creative anthropocentric version of Darwinism and often also with the development of the British Empire. Third, this process has its cost – the loss of the pristine beauty of the bush (debated against aesthetic and romantic attitudes), the difficult, culturally rough transitional stages of a frontier society, the human ‘toll’ and the destruction of Maori culture. Fourth, the result will justify the cost – ‘the better Britain of the Southern Seas’. Fifth, the emergent New Zealand identity is a result of this process.

After 1925 the majority of accessible bush had been transformed into profitable farmland, a conservation movement had emerged, and this period of New Zealand’s literary and environmental history drew to a close. From the 1930s, the disastrous ecological consequences of the removal of the bush became apparent, and this became a major theme of the following ‘Provincial’ period of literature.

The majority of environmental literature studies have taken place in the UK and North America; however, there are problems with applying generalised theoretical international models to the New Zealand context. New Zealand lacked Europe’s landscape of visible populated historical heritage – therefore its national identity became related to the emptiness of the landscape, with metaphors of freedom, purity, youth, peace and silence common in literature. New Zealand had more in common with North America, with a frontier-landscape culture and history of large-scale environmental transformation, but this was complicated by the colonial condition, notably inherited British landscape ideals. The colonial literatures of Australia and Canada are more relevant, sharing many common themes. However, New Zealand provides a more coherent model. New Zealand has geographically diverse landscapes, yet is too small to have produced definitive regionalised literatures. A manageable-sized body of literature, and a concentrated period of exploitative transformation that was reflected as a dominant theme of the period’s literature, makes New Zealand an ideal study.

Therefore, as documentation of the last and most effective transformation of a landscape under colonial settlement, New Zealand literature, 1890–1925, makes a useful source for environmental history, especially when used in conjunction with the period's non-fiction and scientific literatures.

NOTES

¹The term 'Late Colonial' is a literary (rather than historical) one, used by Lawrence Jones in the *Oxford History of New Zealand Literature* as a definition for the novels of the period 1890–1934, differentiated from the preceding 'Pioneer' or 'Early Colonial' period and the following 'Provincial' period. 'These periods are defined by three interrelated factors: the major social and economic changes in New Zealand society; the novelists' relationship to and attitude towards these changes; and the novelistic modes and conventions that they evolved for depicting their society and expressing their attitudes towards it.' Lawrence Jones, 'The Novel', in *The Oxford History of New Zealand Literature in English*, ed. Terry Sturm (Auckland: Oxford University Press, 1991), 107.

² Keith Sinclair and Wendy Harrex, *Looking Back: A Photographic History of New Zealand* (Wellington: Oxford University Press, 1978), 100.

³ For example, G. Jobbens, 'Life and Landscape in New Zealand', *New Zealand: Inventory and Prospect. The 1956 Lecture to the Wellington Branch of the New Zealand Geographic Society* (Wellington: New Zealand Geographic Society, 1956); G. C. Petersen, 'Pioneering the North Island Bush', in R. F. Watters, ed., *Land and Society in New Zealand: Essays in Historical Geography* (London: A. H. and A. W. Reed, 1965), 66; Rollo Arnold, *New Zealand's Burning: The Settler's World in the Mid 1880s* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1994), 20.

⁴ See R. E. Offer, *Walls for Water: Pioneer Dam Building in New Zealand* (Palmerston North: The Dunmore Press, 1997), Chapter 3, 'The Kauri Dams', for a description of the complex engineering and impressive 'drives' used to transport kauri logs down waterways in the bush.

⁵ W. F. Alexander and A. E. Currie, eds, *New Zealand Verse* (London: The Walter Scott Publishing Co, Ltd, 1906), xxi–xxii.

⁶ B. E. Baughan, *Shingle Short and Other Verses* (Christchurch: Whitcombe and Tombs Limited, 1908), 79–88.

⁷ Alexander and Currie, *New Zealand Verse*, LXII.

⁸ Alexander and Currie, *New Zealand Verse*, XXVIII.

⁹ John Bell, *In the Shadow of the Bush: A New Zealand Romance* (London: Sands and Co, 1899), 2–3. Arthur Adams, *Tussock Land: A Romance of New Zealand and the Commonwealth* (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1904), 272–4.

¹⁰ See Rollo Arnold, *New Zealand's Burning: The Settler's World in the Mid 1880s* (Wellington: Victoria University Press, 1994), which documents the extreme frequency of bushfires in New Zealand and studies the role of fire, both as a danger and as a tool in the development of settler New Zealand. The best literary account of the threat and effects of fire on the bush frontier is in Jane Mander's *The Passionate Puritan* (1921), where the risk of fire in the mill settlement is carefully anticipated from the beginning, with descriptions of the precautions taken to protect the settlement and the conditions that lead

to fire: this careful and realistic buildup precluding any tendency to use the bushfire as a melodramatic plot device, as in many of the period's romance novels.

¹¹ Satchell's practical knowledge of the life and geography of the district were the basis for *The Toll of the Bush*. Kendrick Smithyman states the novel is 'most valuable for his presentation of the "real life" of the Hokianga around the turn of the century, of which otherwise surprisingly few accounts remain' ('Introduction', Satchell, *Toll of the Bush*, 8). The Major's established sheep station was based on Satchell's neighbour, and the episode where Robert's crop is destroyed by wild cattle reflected the fate of Satchell's seedlings, and more generally the Agricultural Department's failed fruit-growing scheme for the district (see Phillip Wilson, *William Satchell* (New York: Twayne Publishers Inc, 1968)).

¹² Satchell, *Toll of the Bush*, 18–19, 23.

¹³ Sir George Makgill, *Blacklaw* (London: Methuen and Co Ltd, 1914), 282–3.

¹⁴ Jane Mander, *The Story of a New Zealand River* (Auckland: Vintage, 1999), 53–4. Mander modeled Tom Roland's opinions on the felling of the kauri forests on those of her father Frank Mander, a prominent sawmillier.

¹⁵ Edith Grossmann, *Angela: A Messenger* (Christchurch: Simpson and Williams, 1890); *The Heart of the Bush* (Edinburgh: Sands and Company, 1910).

¹⁶ G. B. Lancaster (Edith Lyttleton), *The Tracks We Tread* (New York: Doubleday, Page and Company, 1907), 89.

¹⁷ Guy Thornton, *The Wowser: A Tale of the New Zealand Bush* (London: S. W. Partridge and Co Ltd, 1916), 254. This didactic novel traces the rapid development of the King Country township of Owakuri from Godless shanty-town in a bush clearing to a booming, prosperous and spiritual settlement, all in the space of 1905–1912.