

The prince, the pageant and the pioneers

A commemorative space for Wellington's first British colonists

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In May 1920, the Prince of Wales attended a history pageant on Petone Beach. The highlight of the performance was a re-enactment of the arrival of New Zealand Company settlers at the same place 80 years earlier. For the occasion, a 6,000 seat amphitheatre and model Maori village were constructed at the intersection of Buick Street and The Esplanade. The arena opened directly onto the beach where a rudimentary jetty reached 100 feet into the harbour. None of the structures were permanent, but the pageant left an enduring imprint by fixing the co-ordinates of what was putatively the nation's birthplace. When they laid out their venue, the pageant's organisers referred to the local street pattern rather than any accurate record of the historic landfall. Petone's orthogonal plan post-dated the settlers' arrival by several decades, but it provided convenient axes for a commemorative space. The performance was designed to give these lines symbolic value and, significantly, the Prince of Wales was made to traverse their full extent. In doing so, he defined an emblematic threshold between land and sea, and he inscribed a symbolic pathway from the New Zealand Company's fleet to the notional site of its first settlement. The pageant's wider setting was equally significant. A close context of tidy bungalows, private gardens and efficiently planned factories suggested that the pioneers' most important legacy was a proletarian garden suburb. So, the pageant gave both geometry and meaning to the future memorial. The two orthogonal axes defined a symbolic origin, and the surrounding suburban fabric promoted a version of progress which underpinned New Zealand's national identity.

Keywords: commemoration; New Zealand; pioneer; royal visit.

Introduction

When the Prince of Wales toured New Zealand in 1920, his receptions were used to style New Zealand as a prosperous and progressive state. This paper examines a single episode during the

Prince's visit to Wellington, showing how rapid social and economic development was linked to ethnicity through an invented sacred space and the imagined figure of the pioneer. During an elaborate reconstruction of the dominion's founding moments, Pakeha New Zealanders were shown to have inherited the enterprising spirit of the first British settlers. According to this trope, prosperity and growth were affirmations of British character. However, the pageant also drew attention to difference. The unique pace and direction of New Zealand's development were attributed to exaggerated ethnic traits which set New Zealanders apart from metropolitan Britons.



Fig.1: History pageant on Petone Beach for the Prince of Wales' visit, 7 May 1920 [Source: Hutt City Libraries. Petone - Celebrations 642. H.R.H. the Prince of Wales at Petone Beach etc.].

“The Coming of the Settler”

On his second day in New Zealand's capital, the Prince of Wales attended a history pageant on Petone's foreshore. The beach was the landing place for the first New Zealand Company settlers, and the pageant's highlight was a re-enactment of the pioneers' arrival in January 1840. Instigated by the Petone Borough Council, the performance was the centrepiece of a larger “carnival” or “gala”. This event was designed to attract visitors and thus capture a share of the economic activity generated by the royal tour (Post 4 February). While it served local business interests, the pageant also resonated with a pervasive theme in royal visit discourse. The performance sought to create an idealised image of the early settlers, casting them as heroic figures in a narrative about nation building and the spread of British culture.

Wellington's Early Settlers' Association took charge of the pageant's content and staging (Dominion 12 March). In the association's selective account of New Zealand's foundation, the first generation of European colonists transformed a “savage land” into a “nation” and set the new country on a course

for prosperity (Dominion 8 May). The “sturdy” settlers faced privation, hard work and disappointment but their “courage” and strength of character enabled them to persevere and ultimately triumph over these challenges (Dominion: 7 May, 9; 8 May; Post 5 May).

In an article entitled “The Coming of the Settler. An Historic Pageant.”, author “G. L.” romanticises the New Zealand Company’s activities and inflates the significance of their first settlement: “It was a great and heroic purpose to animate a people, who proved, probably beyond their expectations, the builders of a nation destined to take in due course a proud and influential place with the great nations of the earth” (Dominion 7 May, 9). With his extravagant praise for the Petone settlers, “G. L.” gave credence to a persistent claim about the distinctive temperament of New Zealanders. By exceeding expectations, the early colonists showed that innate “British” attributes had not just survived but flourished in the young colony. Putatively, this evolution had occurred because Britons were “animated” or reinvigorated by the challenges of breaking in land and founding a new country.

Advent of formalised commemoration

As the events of 1840 faded from living memory, it became more difficult to measure the pace and direction of change without formalised rituals or markers. The country’s development could no longer be encompassed by a single lifetime, and it was necessary to find other ways to embody the increasing span of the dominion’s history. Accordingly, the Early Settlers Association saw the pageant as an opportunity to educate the public and, at the same time, raise funds for a permanent pioneer memorial on Petone Beach (Dominion 25 February; Post 4 February). This idea received wide support. The New Zealand Times suggested that the country’s school children were more familiar with the story of the Mayflower than the history of colonisation in New Zealand (“New Zealand Times”). Praising Americans for keeping “green” the memory of its “early pilgrims”, the Times predicted that the festivities at Petone would help to correct this anomaly. In other words, the purpose of the pageant was not just to “convey to the young Prince some of our earliest traditions” (Post 5 May) but also to “acquaint citizens with a piece of early history which might not otherwise become widely known” (“New Zealand Times”).

So, the Petone pageant signalled a change in commemorative practices brought about by dwindling numbers of pioneers. First-hand accounts from “old colonists” were superseded by dramatizations and an attempt to anoint Petone Beach as the birthplace of the nation. The Souvenir Programme emphasised that events would take place on historic ground: “The Scene of the Actual Landing of our Pioneer Settlers on January 22nd 1840.” Later, the souvenir declared proudly: “HERE WAS SHAPED THE COURSE TO A GREAT DESTINY” (Souvenir Programme, 1,7). The pageant gained further authority from the involvement of 27 elderly settlers, all of whom had arrived in New Zealand before 1850. These surviving “pioneer settlers” signed an address to the Prince of Wales (Post 4 May). This was presented during the pageant’s final scene, when “all the different parties in the pageant [were] assembled and in the presence of those pioneers of the forties left to us this day” (Souvenir Programme, 5).

All the signatories to the address were in their 80s, and the eldest was 93 (Post 4 May). This fact sent a clear message that future commemorations would no longer possess a direct human link to the earliest days of the colony. As the New Zealand Times observed: “The pioneers have gradually but surely dropped out of the arena. Their places have been taken by the captains of industry, until to-

day the name of 'pioneer' is becoming a memory" ("New Zealand Times"). With this statement, the Times created an image of New Zealand's original British settlers passing the baton of progress to new generation of leaders tasked with creating economic growth.

"The foundation of a Great Nation"

These nationalist themes help to explain why Petone's pageant received generous support from the Government (Internal Affairs, 2). The historical theme held particular appeal for the Minister for Internal Affairs, Sir Francis Bell, in part because he had family connections with the Wakefields and the New Zealand Company venture (Dominion 25 February). Bell refused to let Petone's reception escalate into a full-scale civic welcome. However, he favoured the pageant over many similar proposals (Dominion 25 February), adding the event to an already crowded tour programme (Bell, 2). The Government later granted £160 towards the pageant's costs. This was a modest sum in relation to total public expenditure on the Prince's reception. However, as a "local" event, the pageant was unique in receiving direct Government funding (Internal Affairs, 2).

As if to justify the state's involvement, organisers attempted to portray the pageant as a story of nation-building which would capture the imagination of all New Zealanders. The performance was billed as the "most ambitious" gathering in the Prince's Wellington itinerary (Dominion 8 May) and as the "chief attraction" of his second day in the capital (Post 23 April, 7). The Prince was welcomed to Petone by Sir Francis Bell and Mr J. E. Jenkinson, president of the Early Settlers Association (Post 8 May). Government officials were conspicuous on the dais where the Prince's hosts included the Prime Minister and members of Cabinet as well as the mayors of Petone and Lower Hutt (Dominion 8 May). Significantly, the Early Settlers Association broadened the scope of the performance by including a series of vignettes in the manner of history pageants then popular in Britain. These re-enactments ranged from "The Coming of the Maori" to Captain Cook raising the Union Jack and the arrival of the first Wesleyan missionaries. The Wellington pioneers' landing was presented as the culminating event when: "Our fathers and mothers who, braving dangers by sea and by land, laid well and truly the foundation of A GREAT NATION" (Souvenir Programme, 3,5,7).

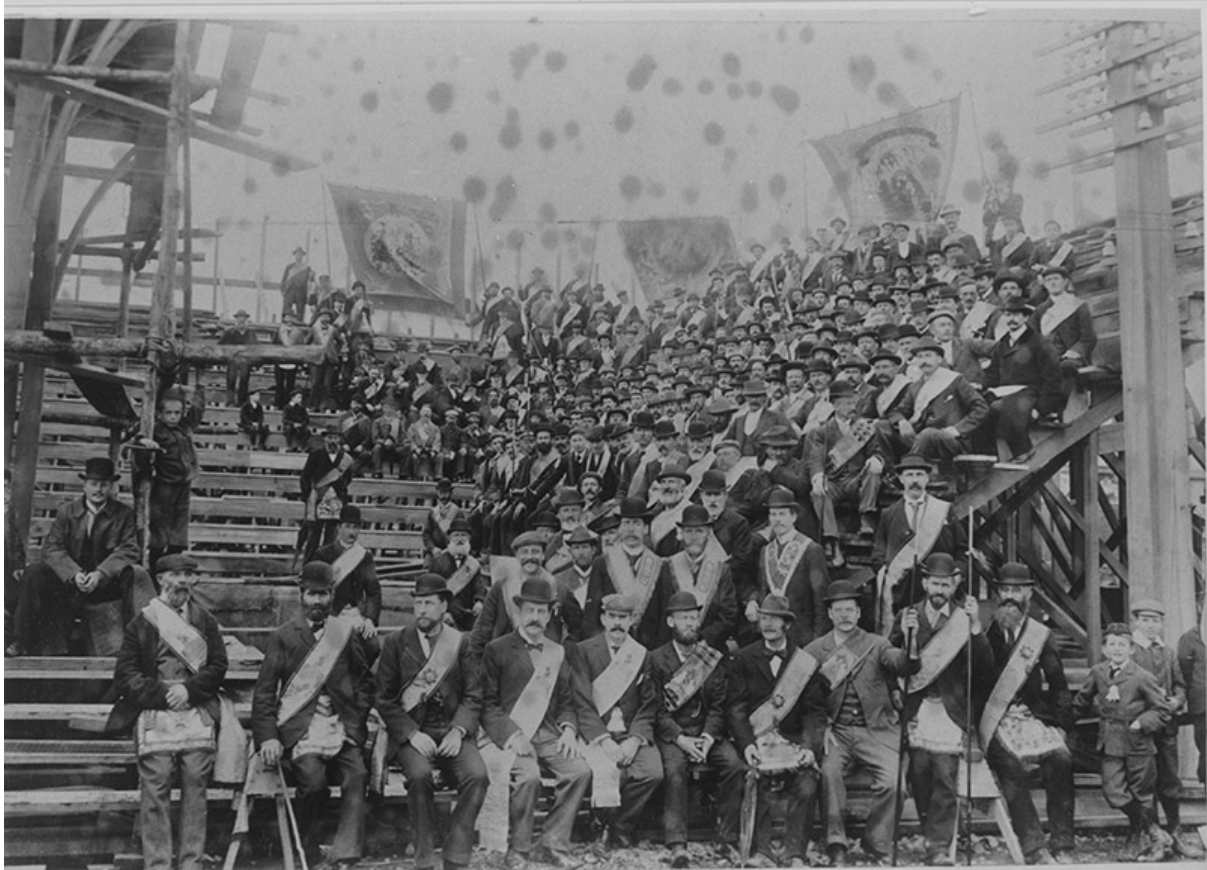


Fig.2: Members of the Orange Lodge posing in the temporary stadium at the intersection of Buick Street and The Esplanade [Source: Hutt City Libraries. Petone - Lodges 636. Orange Lodge seated outdoor gathering etc.].

Configuring a ceremonial space

The pageant was staged in a purpose-built “arena” at the intersection of Buick Street and The Esplanade, these streets being closed for the purpose (Observer 15 May). A temporary amphitheatre was constructed here as a commercial venture (see Fig.2). Local contractor, Mr R. Tremain paid £50 to the Petone Borough Council for the exclusive right to accommodate spectators at the site (Post 5 May). Seats in the stand sold for between three shillings and ten shillings (Observer 15 May). According to some accounts the “immense stadium” could accommodate 9,000 or 10,000 people. However, its capacity was probably closer to 6,000 (Dominion 8 May; Post: 16 April; 24 April).

The stand formed “three sides of a square” which abutted The Esplanade’s sea wall (see Fig.3) (Dominion 8 May). In combination, these elements defined a performance space which was strongly centred yet open to the beach (Dominion 5 May). Officials watched from a dais at the eastern end of the enclosure (Post 5 May). Old colonists occupied a similar platform at the western end (Post 1 May). So, the two groups addressed one another along an east-west axis which denoted the final threshold between land and water.

The venue’s north-south axis defined a notional pathway from the harbour to the site of the first settlement. Like the sea wall, this datum already existed at the site but was reinforced by the ephemera of the pageant. The axis followed the centreline of Buick Street but received emphasis from the bilateral symmetry of the temporary stand. Its linear trajectory organised two elaborate

pieces of scenery which served as focal points in the performance. At the path's southern extremity, a 100 foot "landing-stage" projected into the water (Dominion 8 May). This had a "primitive character" reminiscent of the makeshift structure built to receive the settlers in 1840 (Post 30 April). The second piece of scenery was a "little Maori village" or pa. This occupied the centre of the arena "opposite the point where the first settlers actually landed". The village was described as "a group of raupo [reed] huts within a palisade" (Dominion 8 May; Post 21 April). Each hut was decorated with "elaborate carvings" borrowed from the Dominion Museum (Post 5 May). The gate into this "old-time pah" and the "front" or seaward corners of the palisade were also marked by "fearsome-looking carved Maori posts" (Post: 21 April; 30 April).

The north-south axis carried beyond the venue in both directions. To the south, this datum extended into the harbour. The Prince arrived at Petone on the government steamer Janie Seddon. As the boat approached, a "great flotilla" comprising 34 yachts and 32 motor-boats drew up in two lines so as to create a cordon on the water (see Fig.1). Beyond this "picturesque guard of honour", the training ship H.M.N.Z.S. Amokura lay at anchor, posing as the New Zealand Company's vessel Aurora. Nearby, a Maori war canoe – also borrowed from the museum – waited to intercept the Prince's ship (Dominion: 25 March; 30 April; Post: 23 April, 7; 26 April; 8 May). To the north, the main ceremonial axis continued along Buick Street as far as Jackson Street, Petone's main commercial thoroughfare. Both streets were strung with bunting, and Buick Street was spanned by two purpose-built arches. The first arch led into Buick Street from the arena, and the second helped to articulate the intersection with Jackson Street. The Gear Meat Company sponsored a third arch near its shop in Jackson Street. This had been built for the recent peace celebrations. However, the company modified its decorations for the Prince's visit, removing the word "Peace" and substituting "Welcome" (Dominion 7 May, 8; Post 6 May).

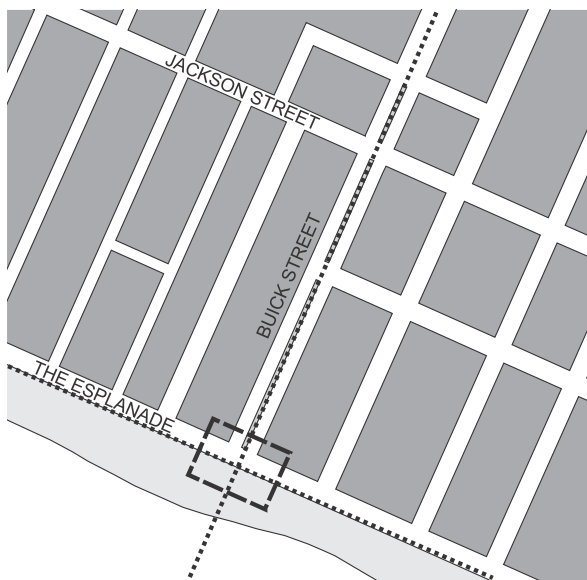


Fig.3: Petone Pageant – location plan (left) and intended layout (right). [Source: Author.]

Inscribing a symbolic path between sea and land

The pageant's script ensured that both axes were animated by the performance. Actors made their entrance by boat and trudged up the beach towards the pa which served as a ready-made domicile for Maori and European alike (Dominion 25 March; Post: 26 April; 8 May). The village provided "coigns of vantage" from which groups of "Natives" "issue[d] forth" to challenge and welcome successive boatloads of adventurers, missionaries and pioneers. Somewhat incongruously, the pa also played host to Colonel Wakefield – who had entered the compound dressed as Captain Cook – and the other members of the New Zealand Company's survey party. As the first of the Aurora's passengers approached the landing stage, Wakefield and his associates strode out to greet the latest arrivals (Post: 5 May; 8 May). Meanwhile, Maori gathered on the beach to chant a welcome to the newcomers (Souvenir Programme, 5). At this point, the pageant programme instructed: "All fraternise and then enter the pa" (Dominion 25 March). This was followed by a "Grand Finale" during which a children's choir sang Rule Britannia (Souvenir Programme, 7). All the actors emerged from the pa and lined up along the sea wall, thereby closing the "fourth" side of the arena and giving dramatic emphasis to the margin between land and sea (Post 5 May).

The Prince of Wales was the only participant to fully traverse both site axes. Sir Francis Bell placed great importance on the guest of honour travelling to Petone by boat and landing "as the original settlers did" (Bell, 2). In a sense, the Prince's arrival was itself a piece of theatre which required the royal visitor to re-enact the historic moment of landfall on Petone Beach. Approaching from the water, the Prince was the first to inscribe the southern arm of the primary north-south axis. During the pageant itself, the first Maori, the earliest British explorers, the missionaries and the pioneering settlers all followed in the Prince's footsteps. By the end of the performance, the symbolic path between sea and land had become a well-trodden route.

Later, when the pageant had ostensibly concluded, the Prince walked the length of the site's transverse axis. He passed along the sea wall from east to west, meeting first the performers and then the dominion's real-life pioneers (Souvenir Programme, 7; Post 5 May). During his final moments at the venue, the Prince inspected the pa and emerged from the stadium into Buick Street where school children formed a guard of honour. The Prince entered his car and motored the short distance along Buick and Jackson streets to Petone Railway Station. Here, he boarded a train and continued his journey to the military hospital at Trentham (Bell, 2; Hislop; Souvenir Programme, 7; Dominion 8 May; Post 5 May).

Failed theatrical performance

Despite careful choreography, the pageant failed as a piece of theatre. The re-enactment of the settlers' arrival was coherent enough, but the performance could not subsume New Zealand's other foundation myths. The great migration from Hawaiki; Cook's declaration of British sovereignty; the arrival of Christianity: by conflating these episodes with the Petone narrative, the show confused its audience and aroused the parochialism of critics in other parts of the dominion. Even the Prince of Wales appeared puzzled by the range of items on the programme (Post 8 May). An Auckland newspaper ridiculed the whole occasion describing it as resembling "Mrs. Jarley's Wax-works" and asking: "is it possible that the Early Settlers are serious?" (Observer 25 April).

On the day, few onlookers were able to appreciate the elaborate history lesson conceived by the pageant's organisers. As many as 15,000 people tried to witness the event, even though admission was restricted to ticket-holders and invited guests. Would-be spectators pushed their way into the venue, occupying an area set aside for school children, returned soldiers and veterans. Finding their view of the proceedings obstructed, many of the paying audience abandoned their seats and joined the crush in the centre of the stadium (Dominion 8 May; Post: 5 May; 8 May). Crowds engulfed the performance space, and the beach itself became "black with people standing right down to the water's edge" (Post 8 May; Observer 15 May).

As a result, actors were confined to a narrow pathway between the jetty and the Maori village. Instead of giving thanks "in a picturesque manner" and performing a "dance of joy", the first Maori to step ashore "marched in single file" towards the pa. Captain Cook and his party were forced to arrive "in style" at the landing-stage rather than wade ashore on the beach. Samuel Marsden's missionaries also "filed" across the sand towards the Maori village (Post: 26 April; 8 May). Congestion meant that various artful "tableaux" promised in the souvenir programme could not be executed. Instead, the "scenes from old New Zealand" became "almost buried", and costumed performers merged incongruously with the throng of spectators (Dominion 8 May). The crowd "pressed uncomfortably" around the official dais, and the Prince lost sight of the old colonists on the opposite side of the stadium. As one observer described it, the surviving pioneers were "squeezed out of the picture" (Post 8 May).

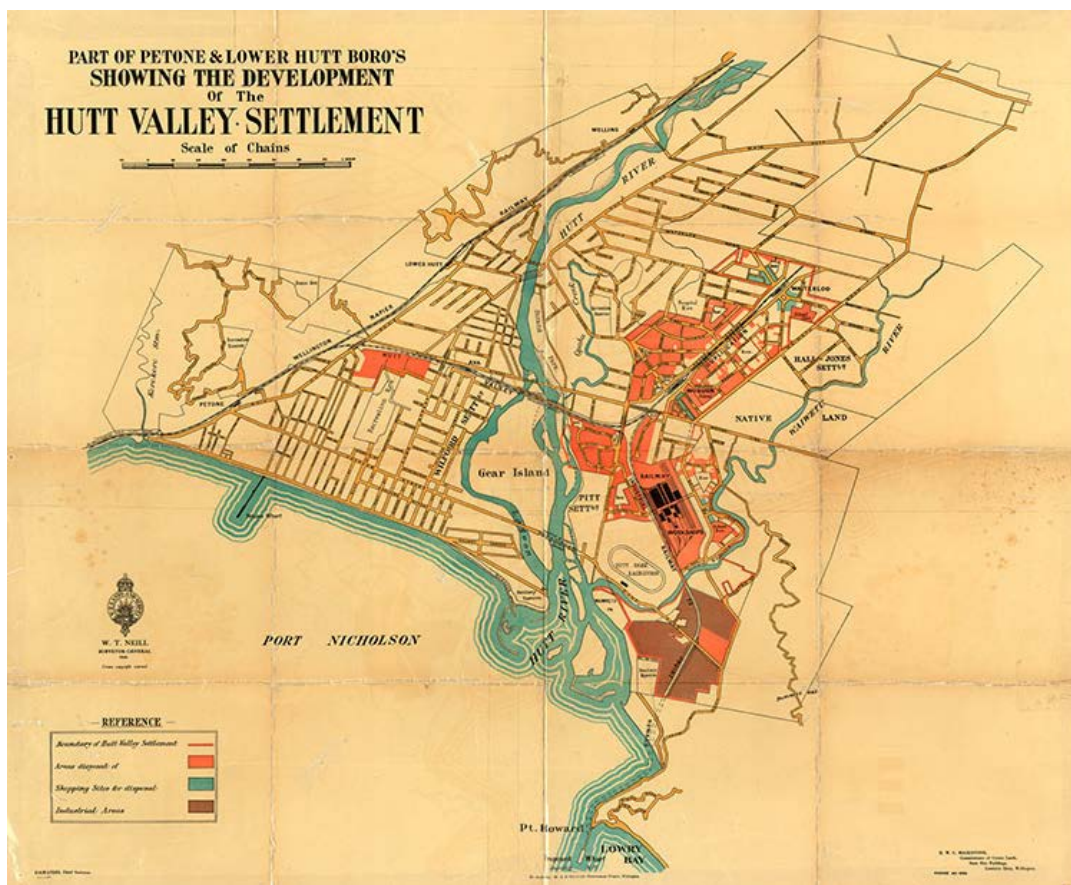


Fig.4: Partial plan of Petone and Lower Hutt with new residential and industrial subdivisions highlighted in orange, c.1928 [Source: Hutt City Libraries. 8269. Part of Petone & Lower Hutt etc.].

“Modern industries, and comfortable homes”

In spite of these setbacks, the pageant succeeded in fixing the site of a future memorial (Fig.5). Prior to this event, there was no visible record of the first settlers’ landfall other than the beach itself. Despite claims that Wellington’s pioneers had arrived “on this very spot” (Dominion 20 March; Post 8 May), the pageant’s organisers had no reliable markers to indicate where the Aurora’s passengers stepped ashore. Such a space needed to be created and, although the pageant’s footprint was ephemeral, it gave a recognisable spatial signature to Wellington’s founding moment. The coordinates were chosen expediently and owed little to historic fact. The stadium was centrally located on Petone Beach and offered a commanding view of the harbour entrance. The elaborate staging took its cues from an orthogonal street layout which post-dated the settlers’ arrival by several decades. Anointed by royal patronage and legitimised by the “verisimilitude” of the re-enactment, the intersection of Buick Street and the Esplanade became a plausible location for the anticipated monument.

The pageant’s suburban setting conferred meaning as well as structure. The performance took place on Wellington’s rapidly expanding urban periphery (see Fig.4). A matrix of low-density housing and well-planned factories suggested that the old colonists’ most valuable legacy was not the city’s distant centre – just visible across the harbour – but the wide streets, tidy bungalows, productive gardens of an emerging proletarian garden suburb. Here, co-operative building ventures and subsidised loans allowed working class families to purchase their own dwellings. According to the organisers’ rhetoric, New Zealand’s rapid progress was nowhere more evident than on Petone Beach where the first settlers’ landing place was surrounded by “thriving modern industries, and comfortable homes”. The pageant drew attention to this juxtaposition. As the Evening Post reported: “The intention has been...to contrast the conditions of the empire-founding days of...Queen Victoria, with the greater comfort and luxury of to-day” (“New Zealand Times”; Post 5 May).

Accordingly, prosperity and progress were dominant motifs in the pageant’s final scene. Before he left the stadium, the Prince was presented with “three handsome rugs” which had been manufactured by the Wellington Woollen Company at their local factory. Two of the rugs bore the royal arms. These were intended for the King and Queen as a memento of their visit to Petone’s woollen mills nineteen years earlier. The third item was a travelling rug, and this was embellished with the Prince of Wales’ Feathers (Fraser; Marley; Dominion 8 May; Post 8 May). The Prince also received a letter from the chairman of the company’s board of directors. This spelled out the symbolic significance of the gifts and their relationship to Petone’s historic beach:

Your Royal Highness has just taken part in a demonstration representing the landing of Early Settlers in this Country and we hope this presentation will demonstrate to you the development of our industries and the advancement we have made under the British flag, and that you may realize, that New Zealand excels in peace and industry as well as in war (Marley).

Later, British journalist Everard Cotes relayed a similar message in a royal travelogue entitled *Down Under with the Prince*:

The occasion of the pageant was taken with happy appropriateness to present the Prince with samples of the finished product of the great industry with which the descendants of the early settlers have endowed New Zealand. The articles selected were rugs of beautiful softness and delightful warmth, made of wool grown in the interior, and carded, spun, dyed, and woven in mills close to the beach where the original missionaries landed. "A field which the Lord hath blessed" in every sense of the term (Cotes, 71).

To secure its place in the iconography of the royal visit, the Wellington Woollen Company placed a full-page advertisement in the commercially produced *Welcome Souvenir*. This recalled the Duke and Duchess of Cornwall and York's visit to the Petone Woollen Mills in 1901. The promotion also boasted: "The Prince of Wales will be pleased to know that close to the spot on which he will be received in Petone, where the pioneers of Wellington Province landed 70 [sic] years ago, there is a woollen mill making goods the superior of which he will not see at Home" (*Welcome Souvenir*, 4). The company's claim linked the twin themes of pioneers and progress, connecting these ideas with the notion that New Zealand had begun to outperform metropolitan Britain in certain endeavours.

The pioneers were credited with establishing the speed and trajectory of the colony's development. So, references to heroic first landings were a frequent adjunct to claims that New Zealand had advanced further than the Motherland. During the pageant on Petone Beach, the proximity of modern industries and tidy workers' bungalows helped to conflate the pioneer story with New Zealand's self-styled reputation as a prosperous and progressive state. In other words, Petone's pageant was an elaborate affirmation of national characteristics which seemed to explain the dominion's rapid advance.

Conclusion

Despite its failure as dramatic art, the pageant demonstrated the versatility of the pioneer image. The performance represented both the persistence of British culture and the advent of a distinctive colonial character based on exaggerated ethnic traits. By some measures, New Zealand's early colonists were more British than Britons "at Home" because certain ethnic traits had been heightened by the colonial experience. When they left Britain, the first settlers were already atypical; either because the New Zealand Company selected the best "stock", or because weaker and less enterprising individuals elected to stay behind. When the pioneers arrived in their new home, whatever innate talents they possessed were honed by the unprecedented demands of settlement. For some observers, the challenges of founding the colony provided a corrective to the docile habits of metropolitan Britons. In other words, the harsh conditions of colonial life strengthened aspects of British character which had become enfeebled among the population "at Home".

So, the first New Zealand Company settlers were depicted as the carriers of Anglo-Saxon virtues and as a breed apart. During the performance on Petone Beach, these twin identities contributed to a broader narrative which defined all Britons as progressive but recognised the unique pace and direction of New Zealand's development. In this foundation myth, evidence of progress connoted either British patrimony or the colonists' more enterprising spirit. By celebrating the early settlers' fortitude and "grit", the pageant endowed contemporary New Zealanders with the same superior

talents. In this way, the pioneer legend joined New Zealanders to metropolitan Britons but also recognised the dominion's unique destiny.



Fig.5: Wellington Provincial Centennial Memorial, Petone Esplanade, constructed in 1939 on the site of the history pageant. [Source: Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. Wellington Provincial Centennial Memorial. Eileen Deste Collection. Ref.no.1-2 004310 F.]

Abbreviations

- ATL Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, Ephemera Collection
 ANZ Archives New Zealand, Wellington
 Post Evening Post (Wellington)

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