

## Spectacle and "Shedifice": Wellington's Ambiguous Role in the Reception of the Duke of Edinburgh

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**ABSTRACT:** New Zealand's first royal tour occurred in 1869 just four years after Wellington became the seat of the colonial government. The Duke of Edinburgh's short visit left no permanent physical impression on the new capital other than the four trees he planted in the garden of Government House (now Parliament Grounds). Nevertheless, the Duke's reception was an overtly Imperial occasion which highlighted the colonial character of Wellington's incipient ceremonial spaces. In developing this argument, the paper shows how the Australasian colonies adopted a highly standardised format for their reception of royal visitors. Indeed, it will be shown that the first royal visits to Australia and New Zealand were the region's first pan-colonial event. At the same time, the Duke's reception in New Zealand, revealed much about the young colony's still-fluid political geography. In particular, the tour drew attention to the weak and unstable nature of many public institutions. Amid intense inter-provincial rivalry of the 1860s, the royal visit also highlighted the ambiguous relationship between New Zealand's new capital and the colony's other centres of European population. Wellington's response to the royal visit differed little from those of Christchurch and Dunedin, indeed the capital was upstaged by the younger and wealthier settlements in the South Island. Meanwhile, Auckland retained many of the attributes of a colonial capital. One British commentator went so far as to suggest that Wellington was not a "real" capital, in the manner of Melbourne or Sydney. The paper examines this proposition, and draws conclusions about Wellington's true status in the colony at the close of the decade.

### Introduction

New Zealand's first royal tour occurred in 1869 just four years after Wellington became the seat of the colonial government. The Duke's reception was the largest public spectacle yet held in Wellington, and it drew attention to the young capital's incipient ceremonial spaces. Like the capitals of other Australasian colonies, Wellington adopted a highly standardised format for the royal visit, so much so that the Duke's tour to Australia and New Zealand may be called the region's first pan-colonial event. At the same time, the Duke's reception in New Zealand revealed much about the young colony's still-fluid political geography. In particular, the tour drew attention to the weak and unstable nature of many public institutions. Amid

intense inter-provincial rivalry of the 1860s, the royal visit also highlighted the ambiguous relationship between New Zealand's new capital and the colony's other centres of European population.

### Repetitive format of royal receptions

In New Zealand, the main provinces competed with one another to offer the best receptions. However, the outcome was often a feeling of inadequacy rather than triumph. Wellington was particularly sensitive to the fact that it might be upstaged by younger, wealthier settlements at Canterbury and Otago.<sup>1</sup> The New Zealand settlements also

compared their preparations to the welcomes offered in the larger Australian colonies. This comparison was a particularly invidious one, and some commentators warned that New Zealand should not attempt to match the scale or lavishness of the Duke's treatment in Australia.<sup>2</sup> Some members of the Wellington Reception Committee even hoped that the Duke's stay would be a brief one, so that these limitations would not become too apparent.<sup>3</sup>

In the final event, a direct comparison between New Zealand and Australia was avoided because the Duke's tour was cut short after an assassination attempt in Sydney.

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<sup>1</sup> "The Reception of H.R.H. The Duke of Edinburgh: Meeting of Ratepayers" p 5.

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<sup>2</sup> "[Editorial]" (3 March 1868):3.

<sup>3</sup> "Supplementary Summary [Editorial]" p 4; "Joint Sports Committee" p 4.

When he returned a little over a year later, the Duke stopped once more in the Australian colonies before travelling to New Zealand.<sup>4</sup> However, he visited Australia as a "private gentleman" and, faced with limited budgets, New Zealand reception committees were eager to apply the same informality here.<sup>5</sup>

Cities as far apart as Adelaide and Dunedin offered strikingly similar welcomes.<sup>6</sup> In each location, colonists engaged in reassuringly similar rituals which attested to common values and the shared imperatives of colonisation. The itinerary included a public "landing," entry procession, a levee for the gentlemen, "drawing rooms" for the ladies, a military review, a ball and whatever entertainments time and local resources would permit.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> Secretary of State to Governor Bowen 1 August 1868 G 1/69 no.81; Governor Bowen to Secretary of State 8 October 1868 G 25/11 no.102

<sup>5</sup> Governor Bowen to Secretary of State 30 March 1869 G 25/11 no.42

<sup>6</sup> Henry Halloran to Colonial Secretary 29 November 1867 (Attachment: "Official Programme etc.") IA 136/2 no.3875

<sup>7</sup> "Wellington Reception Committee" *Wellington Independent* (17 March 1868):4; Royal Reception Commission Minute Book, 10 Feb 1868 IA 136/1

The format differed little from earlier receptions in the Australian colonies, and the conformity was deliberate. In 1867, when the visit was first announced, New Zealand's Colonial Secretary asked his Australian counterparts about their reception plans. Then he set about making similar preparations here.<sup>8</sup> New forms of communication – the telegraph and regular steamship services – meant that the Duke's progress could be shared with a time lapse of just a few hours or, at most, days between one colony and another or between one city and the next. Because New Zealand was to be the last stop on the Duke's Australasian tour, colonists' expectations here were strongly influenced by published accounts of the receptions in South Australia, Victoria and New South Wales.<sup>9</sup>

### **Weak institutions and undeveloped ceremonial spaces**

Along with the similarities there were marked differences between the receptions offered by the larger, more confident Australian colonies in 1867/68 and the more modest, circumspect celebrations offered in New Zealand a year

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<sup>8</sup> Halloran to Colonial Secretary 29 November 1867 IA 136/2 no.3875; James McCulloch to Colonial Secretary 22 Nov 1867 IA 136/2 no.3748

<sup>9</sup> "The Prince at Sydney" p 6.

later. In 1869, the New Zealand was clouded by troubling uncertainties about the colony's future. A "commercial depression" gripped most provinces: the first serious reversal in the colony's economic development. More disturbingly, the Māori "rebellion" in the North Island called into question the very notion that New Zealand had been fully colonised.<sup>10</sup>

So, a direct transference of reception programmes from one side of the Tasman to the other was not always practical. New Zealand was less populous and less prosperous than the Australian colonies. It also possessed a more dispersed settlement pattern, and suffered from lingering ambiguities about the relative status of Auckland – the largest city – and Wellington – the new seat of government. As a result, the Duke's 1869 tour of New Zealand had a strongly provincial character, and the Government's official welcome was split between the colony's old and new capitals.

New Zealand's government was still at an early stage of evolution, and the royal tour

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<sup>10</sup> Bowen to Secretary of State 30 March 1869 G 25/11 no.42

drew attention to the weak or unstable nature of some public institutions. The colony's system of Provincial Government faced abolition. Premier Stafford's Ministry favoured centralisation of power within the General Government, with new municipal and borough corporations assuming greater control over local matters.<sup>11</sup> This policy was strongly opposed in some regions, particularly in the South. However, the recession strengthened the government's hand by plunging several provincial governments into insolvency.<sup>12</sup> To complicate the picture, greater separatism was also a possibility. Some leading colonists believed that, if the provincial system collapsed, New Zealand would fragment into three separate colonies: two in the North Island and one in the Middle Island.

### **Makeshift venues and outdoor public assemblies**

In New Zealand, cities were ill-prepared for the elaborate public spectacles associated with the royal visit. However, the colonists were used to "making do" and an "ad hoc" approach was often applied to the Duke's

reception as well. Many venues had a makeshift character, and major ceremonies were located outdoors simply because there were no interior spaces large enough to accommodate the crowds.

Because the Duke arrived by ship, Queen's Wharf provided the site for the landing and official welcome. Despite the evening concerts which sometimes occurred there, the wharf was hardly a "civic" space. Moreover, it was leased to a commercial operator, whose permission was required to close the wharf for the official welcome ceremony. For this purpose, the wharf was decorated with flags and covered with matting, but there was no mistaking its utilitarian character.

In 1868, the base of Queen's Wharf adjoined a recent reclamation, and it was here that the Duke would set foot on dry land. Devoid of buildings, this site could accommodate large crowds, but it made a poor first impression on visitors.<sup>13</sup> To correct this, the Duke's entry procession was deliberately routed past the most substantial buildings in Wellington's embryonic business centre.<sup>14</sup> A year later,

new commercial development brought the city out to meet the wharf once more, and the reclamation no longer appeared empty. However, there were still few public buildings of any significance in the young capital.

Reflecting the colony's changing political landscape, provincial and local government were all but invisible in Wellington. The Provincial Government Buildings had been handed over to the Colonial or "General" Government when Wellington became the capital in 1865. The Provincial Council met in the Supreme Court, in lieu of dedicated accommodation. Local government was no better off. Unlike Christchurch or Dunedin, Wellington had no municipal corporation, merely a Town Board of Public Works Commissioners. The Board had offices on Lambton Quay, but there was no town hall where ceremonial events might be staged.

In consequence, two branches of Colonial Government were the only political entities in Wellington with an obvious spatial signature. These were expressed on two adjacent but discrete sites: Government House, the centre of residual British authority, and the

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Duke of Edinburgh on Arrival at Wellington" p 5.

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<sup>11</sup> "The Consolidation of Loans" p 4.

<sup>12</sup> "[Editorial]" (12 January 1869):2

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<sup>13</sup> "Wellington Reception Committee" (22 February 1868):5.

<sup>14</sup> "Proposed Programme for the Reception of H.R.H. the

Parliament Buildings where the increasingly powerful colonial legislature was housed.

Government House was described by a earlier guest, Lord Lyttelton, as no more than a "large cottage."<sup>15</sup> Although it was soon to be replaced (construction of a new Government House was deliberately delayed until after the 1869 royal visit), this modest structure was still the Governor's official residence. Accordingly, it played host to the Duke, and became the centre of royal visit ceremonies.

There was an early attempt to improve accommodation for Wellington's first royal guest. During preparations for the aborted 1868 visit, a temporary "ballroom" was added to grounds of Government House.<sup>16</sup> Detached and half hidden behind the Governor's "cottage," this utilitarian structure did nothing to enhance the government complex. It was immediately nicknamed the "Shedifice" and, by some accounts, its interior was garishly decorated with faux heraldic imagery.<sup>17</sup> The

ballroom was removed just prior to the Duke's eventual arrival in 1869. It is not clear if demolition was carried out to clear the site for the Governor's new residence, or to remove an embarrassing eyesore. The "ballroom" was used for only one major event during its short life, though it did provide storage for decorations remaindered from the 1868 royal visit preparations.

A short distance away, across the bush-clad gully of Sydney Street, Parliament Buildings was only slightly less modest in its appearance. It might not have featured on the royal visit itinerary if Wellington had possessed a town hall or another more fitting place for public assembly. In 1868, the city's Reception Committee and the government's Reception Commission disagreed over the best location for a citizens' ball. The Committee favoured the diminutive Odd Fellows hall, while the Commissioners insisted on erecting the unfortunate ballroom at Government House.<sup>18</sup> When the Prince finally arrived in 1869, neither of these venues was used. The House of Assembly and the

Legislative Council Chamber were pressed into service as makeshift ballrooms. This measure was strongly opposed in some quarters, mainly because there were no adequate supper facilities. In the end, Bellamy's provided a diminutive supper room in which ladies and gentlemen were force to eat in separate shifts.

### **Harbours as ceremonial spaces**

During the mid-nineteenth century, the capitals of most British colonies were ports. The penetration of new territories began from the sea or from navigable rivers. Britain was a naval power, and the British Empire depended on shipping for its economic links as well as for the exercise of political and military control. These common origins and imperatives caused many colonial capitals to occupy similar coastal landscapes. Wharves and waterfronts took on symbolic as well as economic importance. The waterfront was where the most business activity took place, and it was where people, commodities and information were exchanged with other colonies and with "Home."

It was no coincidence that the Duke of Edinburgh was known as "The Sailor Prince." Even after the advent of steam shipping, the

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<sup>15</sup> "Lord Lyttelton on New Zealand" p 6.

<sup>16</sup> Royal Reception Commission Minute Book 10, 27 & 28 February and 2 March 1868 IA 136/1; Colonial Secretary to Royal Reception Commission 18 February 1868 IA 136/2 no.68/38

<sup>17</sup> "The Duke's Visit" p 2.

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<sup>18</sup> Felix Wakefield to Chairman Wellington Reception Committee 28 February 1868 IA 136/4 no.68/5; "Wellington Reception Committee" *Wellington Independent* (17 March 1868):4.

long sea voyage to the Antipodes was a formidable journey. That one of the Queen Victoria's sons should venture so far from England was regarded as evidence not just of the Duke's fortitude but also of the Queen's high regard for her most distant subjects. Of necessity, the Duke's tours, like subsequent royal visits, contained a significant "maritime" component.

At most ports of call, harbours were the first spaces to be activated by ceremony and spectacle. Naval receptions were staged by yacht squadrons as well as small fleets of commercial and private vessels. These displays could be extremely elaborate. Hundreds of small craft escorted the HMS "Galatea" into Sydney Harbour and, along the way, groups of vessels performed elaborately choreographed manoeuvres.<sup>19</sup> After Sydney's superlative display, it was probably best that Wellington did not attempt a formal naval reception. However, the "Galatea" and accompanying men-of-war anchored conspicuously in the inner harbour. In doing so, they created a temporary "royal" or "imperial" space almost in the heart of the

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<sup>19</sup> Halloran to Colonial Secretary 29 November 1867 IA 136/2 no.3875

capital. Although the Duke stayed at Government House, he entertained aboard his vessel and the "Galatea" was opened for public inspection.

#### **Vestigial presence of military**

The military played a prominent part in the official receptions extended to the Duke of Edinburgh. However, Wellington was unusual among colonial capitals in that it possessed no permanent contingent of Imperial troops. Well-drilled military personnel with presentable uniforms and equipment were an essential part of the welcoming ceremonies, yet Wellington struggled to match this expectation.<sup>20</sup> When Governor Bowen arrived in Wellington, the military salute was described by one leading colonist as "shambolic." Also, there was no military ceremonial space in Wellington. The barracks at Mt Cook lacked a parade ground, and were located on the southern flank of Te Aro far removed from the centre of government. Consequently, when plans were

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<sup>20</sup> Governor Bowen to Colonel Beatson 28 February 1868 G 36/5 no.4; Governor Bowen to Major General Sir Trevor Chute 22 August 1868 G 36/5 no.27-34; Governor Bowen to Major General Sir Trevor Chute 30 August 1869 G 36/5 no.134; New Zealand "Guard at Government House [Letter to Editor]" p 4.

made for the Duke to review Wellington's volunteer militia, the ceremony was expediently located on the city's forbidding new reclamation.

#### **Place of Māori in the royal visit**

The British and Colonial Governments regarded the Duke of Edinburgh's visit as an opportunity to reward "loyal" Māori chiefs and induce further co-operation. In 1868, the Colonial Government planned for the Duke to travel extensively through the interior of the North Island, attending "native gatherings" with influential chiefs.<sup>21</sup> The government's Royal Reception Commission rejected its Native Agent's advice that, should the Duke's stay in New Zealand be brief, Māori might congregate at Auckland and Wellington to receive the royal visitor. Instead the Commission preferred to stage these meetings well away from the main centres of European settlement.<sup>22</sup>

When the Duke finally arrived in New

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<sup>21</sup> Governor Bowen to Lord Buckingham 6 March 1868 G 25/11 no.17; Royal Reception Committee Minute Book 12 December 1867 IA 136/1; Duncan McLean to Colonial Secretary 27 November 1867 IA 136/2

<sup>22</sup> Royal Reception Commission Minute Book, 9 January 1868 IA 136/1

Zealand a little over a year later, armed conflict between Māori and colonists had escalated to the point that it was no longer safe for him to travel through the centre of the North Island.<sup>23</sup> The government's preferred policy of separate, geographically distant colonial and Māori receptions was impossible to implement. Instead, loyal chiefs and their families were invited to Auckland and Wellington to receive the Duke.<sup>24</sup>

As a consequence, the two cities could not be presented as exclusively European spaces. Māori occupied prominent positions at the Duke's public landing in Wellington. Prominent chiefs marched in the procession to Government House, and were presented to the Duke at the levee. They attended the ball in the Parliament Buildings and they lunched with the Duke on board the "Galatea." However, at all these events, Māori participation was circumscribed by European forms and symbols. These served to emphasise the incongruity of the chiefs in the urban setting of the colonial capital. In a sense, Māori were just as much visitors on

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<sup>23</sup> Governor Bowen to Lord Buckingham 30 March 1869 G 25/11 no.42

<sup>24</sup> Samuel Pollen to Felix Wakefield 10 February 1868 IA 136/2 no.68/37.

these occasions as the Duke himself.

The only exclusively "Māori" event during the Duke's visit to Wellington was a "war dance display." But even this was treated as tourist spectacle rather than as a ceremony in its own right. The event was further marginalised by the manner of its staging. First, the display was to be held on the Cricket Ground (Basin Reserve) in Te Aro. Here it would have been far removed from the Government Domain, the commercial centre and the most prestigious residential districts. However, the event was poorly organised, and did not eventuate. A substitute was hastily arranged for the following day, this time in a private "paddock" at the back of Thorndon. The Duke watched, and expressed himself pleased with the "interesting" demonstration. But his attendance was brief, and occurred while he was en route to the Hutt Valley.

Newspapers objected to the arrival of so many Māori in Wellington immediately prior to the Duke's arrival. The chiefs and their families were given Spartan accommodation at the Mount Cook Barracks.<sup>25</sup> As already noted, the

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<sup>25</sup> Governor Bowen to Lieut. Col. Elliot 17 March 1869 G 36/5 no.89.

Barracks were well away from the social and commercial hub of the town. Interestingly, there is no mention of Māori resident in Wellington, or of the Duke visiting remaining pā or village sites.

### Conclusion

Despite the reduced expectations associated with the later visit, Wellington suffered from an impression that it did not measure up to the royal occasion. The city was still adjusting to its new role as the seat of government. Auckland still performed some of the functions of the capital. The northern city was to have been the first port of call for the aborted 1868 visit.<sup>26</sup> It possessed a more commodious Government House, and it was host to the largest contingent of Imperial Troops as well as resident military commanders.<sup>27</sup> In 1869, Auckland also played host to the Duke for longer than any other centre. One commentator went so far as to suggest that Wellington was not a "real" capital, in the manner of Melbourne or Sydney, and therefore could not hope to welcome the duke on behalf of the whole

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<sup>26</sup> "Local and General News: The Duke of Edinburgh" p 5.

<sup>27</sup> Governor Bowen to Secretary of State 2 May 1869 G 25/11 no.53.

colony. As if to prove this point, Wellington's reception differed little from those of Christchurch and Dunedin, and there were suggestions in both the *New Zealand Times* and the *Independent* that a "colonial" – as opposed to "provincial" – welcome would be given at Auckland, despite this being the last stop during the Duke's eventual visit. The first royal visit left little impression on Wellington. With the unfortunate "Shedifice" demolished, the Duke's short stay left no more physical trace than the four trees he planted in Government House Grounds. However, the reception did help to create an awareness of the need for ceremonial space in the new capital.

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