

**Acknowledge No Frontier:
The Creation and Demise of New Zealand's Provinces, 1853-76**

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For nearly a quarter of a century, between 1853 and 1876, New Zealand was the site of a constitutional experiment, the colony being governed under a politico-administrative structure which attempted to combine the perceived advantages of the federal and unitary systems of government. In more general historical writings 'the provincial years' have tended to be swiftly passed over, viewed almost as an aberrant phase, the emphasis being on the novelty of the quasi-federal aspect of the arrangement. Since 1932 almost the sole specialist published work on the subject has been W.P. Morrell's *The Provincial System in New Zealand 1852-1876*, based on a thesis presented almost a decade earlier. Morrell, a careful scholar, was well aware of the limitations of his pioneering study, conceding it was perhaps unduly influenced by the Otago sources from which he had been compelled to primarily draw. He counselled that in any future overview the working of provincial government in the ten different provinces ought to be fully studied and compared. Yet remarkably, despite an almost exponential increase in New Zealand historical research and writing since the 1960s, despite pulses of revisionism, even revisions of revisionism, his call for further detailed investigation - reiterated in the 1962 second edition - has been largely unheeded. Beyond passing comment in more recent general histories, more extended treatments in the now ageing Otago and Canterbury centennial histories, and occasional unpublished theses, most presented more than 50 years ago, there has been little detailed scrutiny. A new synoptic study of the operation of provincial government in New Zealand is therefore to be warmly welcomed.

In *Acknowledge No Frontier*, based on a University of Melbourne PhD thesis, Andre Brett seeks to answer several fundamental questions. Why were the provinces created in the first place? How did settlers shape and change these institutions during the years of their existence? And why, little more than 20 years later, were the provinces then existing abolished under central government legislation? He correctly notes that from the beginnings of European colonisation there was a strong colonial desire for a considerable measure of self-government. Indeed, by the early 1850s, both in the colony and 'at home', as in the neighbouring Australian colonies, agitation had reached a high level. Yet the solution

devised by the Colonial Office for New Zealand, was markedly different from that accorded the colonies across the Tasman, or for that matter Canada. Under the Imperial Government's 'Act to grant a Representative Constitution to the Colony of New Zealand ... 1852' a colonial legislature, comprising an elected House of Representatives and a nominated Legislative Council, was juxtaposed with provincial legislatures, with elected Superintendents (almost presidential officers) and Councils. Initially Britain's most distant possession was divided into six provinces, three in the North Island (Auckland, Taranaki, Wellington, and three in the South Island (Nelson, Canterbury, Otago). Subsequently four new provinces – Hawke's Bay, Marlborough, Southland and Westland - were carved from within existing provincial boundaries, although Southland was reabsorbed by Otago in 1870. While the provincial administrations were charged with responsibility for a number of critical functions, including the distribution of Crown lands, immigration and public works, the colonial government always held considerable reserve powers, thus ensuring ongoing tension between provincialists and centralists. Reviewing earlier answers to the questions he poses, Brett argues that whereas Morrell and most of his successors have viewed the experiment from an Imperial perspective, the local impetus has tended to be down played. The provincial system of government was a distinctive response to New Zealand needs, and therefore its ongoing modification and ultimate demise were equally the result of changing local conditions and imperatives.

Brett offers what amount to geographical and economic explanations for the comparatively short lives of the provincial administrations. Their setting up was a clearly conceived response to actual immediate needs. During the 1840s there had been constant tension between the widely dispersed settlement bridgeheads scattered around the New Zealand coasts. Despite abortive attempts to provide a measure of devolved government in the 1840s, the distance between, say Auckland and Dunedin, even between those settlements and Wellington, was simply too great to permit effective oversight of the everyday concerns of colonising. Yet, while contemporaries such as William Fox might write of the 'six colonies of New Zealand', the individual settlements were too small; hence some other mechanism to facilitate localised development was required. As Brett recognises, land was the primary local resource, and to settle it and make it productive sophisticated transport infrastructure was required, first through better port facilities, but increasingly more importantly through the construction of roads, later railways. Brett

argues, and persuasively, that the creation of the new provinces was almost invariably an outcome of the inability of the foundation provinces to adequately open up, and foster development in, their most outlying hinterlands. There was always inequity, in that the larger southern provinces had more substantial land funds, but the splintering off in the 1850s, frequently the result of bitter local politicking, only exacerbated inherent weaknesses in the system. In contrast to earlier historians, Brett attributes lesser importance to factors such as the debilitating effect of a decade of interracial warfare in the North Island, or the difficulties of the provinces in securing loans on the London money market by the mid-1860s. To an extent, despite or perhaps because of their impecuniosity, the provinces had already served their developmental purpose. More was now needed. There was thus a certain inevitability about a centralising colonial government assuming ultimate responsibility for Vogel's 1870s public works and immigration schemes. Because the provincial system had been conceived as a response to the needs of the late 1840s, in Brett's words 'as time and space were transformed, so were the roles of New Zealand's tiers of government', this rendering the provinces themselves redundant. While *prima facie* his case is plausible, the impact of war on the northern provinces merits closer investigation.

Perhaps reflecting the subject, this book is not always easy reading, but it is enlivened by some colourful vignettes. For instance, the battles between the partisans of Picton and Blenheim as to just which modest township was to become 'the capital' of the sparsely populated province of Marlborough. This dispute so obsessed local politics that by the mid-1860s few other issues were even considered and competent governance was swept aside. Memorial followed memorial and for a time Marlborough had two competing Superintendents and two bitterly opposed Councils. Then there was the determination of groups in two major provinces - Auckland and Otago - to separate completely and become colonies in their own right. At Auckland the prospect was pushed virtually from the outset, motions to petition the Queen being regularly passed by the Council, although the level of popular support remains doubtful. At Otago the lobbying came later, after the discovery of gold appreciably improved the province's stocks. In both provinces the war in the north gave separation a boost, and for Aucklanders the decision to remove the capital to Wellington stimulated a furious response. This grandstanding was probably as debilitating to provincialism as the struggles of the secessionist provinces. In each of the provinces strong personalities were involved, none less than Wellington's Dr Isaac Featherston. When

provincial elections returned Featherston in 1857, but with a hostile Council, the provincial leader saw no reason to vary his policies, or to replace the defeated Councillors making up his executive. This ushered in three years of infighting and legislative inertia as Featherston allocated significant acreages to his close allies. At one point the entire provincial funds were uplifted from the province's banker and deposited in a private account. Such bizarre episodes, however, should not obscure the fact that there were significant gains under the system, some of which are suggested in a series of appendices.

For readers of an archives journal, how effectively have the key evidential sources been identified and utilised is an obvious question. Without doubt, relevant secondary sources and contemporary accounts have been diligently searched. No serious omissions come to mind. Previous thesis research has also been widely consulted. A great deal of important unpublished New Zealand historical material remains little known on university shelves, although recent moves to digitise holdings are welcome. Noting that Morrell referred to only a very narrow selection of newspapers, Brett sets out to remedy this deficiency. Over 50 consulted titles are listed, some for short periods, others in long runs, most presumably accessed through Papers Past. There is a strong impression that newspapers may have been the most important single source for the study. Yet, while the nineteenth-century New Zealand press offers a liveliness only rarely found in official records, they must be utilised with extreme care (as Ian F. Grant's forthcoming history of New Zealand newspapers will demonstrate). Given the vituperative bent of many of these publications, consider how future historians might recount the 2016 US presidential election with Fox News and CNN as prime sources. If newspapers provide tasty icing, the historical cake itself generally requires stronger ingredients. Brett also suggests that Morrell and others relied perhaps too heavily on official records, and the present work makes far greater use of a small selection of politician's private papers, few of which would have been available in the 1920s. It also makes selective use of a wider range of published official papers of the provincial governments, surprising exceptions being those of Wellington, Taranaki and Westland. What is more perplexing is that there seems to have been no recourse whatsoever to the extensive extant archives of any of the provincial administrations. In a study which sets out to explain the rise and fall of the provinces, how they operated, this is surely a limiting exclusion.

Nicely produced, well -illustrated, this book is valuable as an up-to-

date survey of New Zealand's short dalliance with a quasi-federal form of government, but is unlikely to be the last word on the matter. It stands alongside Morrell's seminal study, complementing rather than superseding the pioneer work. Together they offer a framework for further, and deeper, explorations of the workings, achievements and shortcomings of quasi-federal arrangements. Such research is badly needed, postgraduate studies in political and administrative history having for many years taken a backseat to changing social and cultural history enthusiasms. Though now largely forgotten as governmental entities, New Zealand's provinces nevertheless remain in strongly maintained regional identities and sporting affiliations, and it is a little ironic that the present New Zealand government's strong push for local government amalgamations, for the creation of super-territorial authorities, might suggest a subliminal inclination to return to a form of provincialism.

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