

‘THEY PAVED THE WAY’
The New Zealand Portrait Gallery Exhibition
National Archives, Oct- Dec 1997

HUGH TEMPLETON

MOST NEW ZEALANDERS have sharp memories of Wellington; even if they have not been there: of the capital and its Parthenon of a Parliament on the Hill; of the Beehive leaning towards that monster wooden edifice ‘built upon the sand’; of the curve of Lambton Quay, celebrating the great Lord Durham, of the sharp rugged hills overlaid by Tinakori, once Mt. Wakefield; of popeyed houses straggling about the contours, and of the night lights glittering round the great harbour of Tara.

Geography is real. And so are the streets where our cities focus. But how many have even the faintest memory of their founders, of names dressing the inner streets of our capital, like Wakefield, Grey, Brandon, and Plimmer. Rome may show us the wolf suckling Romulus; but few can picture him in his toga, any more than a Londoner can reflect on a King Lud in his wood.

Wellingtonians, however, we might reflect, inherit a city only 150 years on. So in this last quarter of 1997 the embryonic New Zealand

Portrait gallery has given us a chance to revive memories of our founders of the: great age of imperial Britain. Six generations after they established Wellington we have had time enough to collect and sift those memories.

The New Zealand Portrait Gallery has set up a very professional exhibi-

‘Memories; they cling like cobwebs . . .’

PATRICK WHITE

tion We may lack the resources of London’s National Portrait Gallery, but with more public and government interest in our history, we might hope for a proper New Zealand Portrait Gallery for 2000 to match the 1930 New Zealand Museum. A national Portrait Gallery is a natural adjunct to our art galleries and museums. Historically it may surpass them in importance. A portrait gallery helps give a nation its character. For the first time, a special exhibition ‘They paved the way’ brings together the portraits of our capital’s founders. Its collective impact lifts a cohort of cobwebs from our memories.

Why am I so enthusiastic about

this founders exhibition? Because it shows so much about Wellington, and the men and women who made this harbour capital of our oddly wonderful country. This New Zealand Portrait Gallery Exhibition of our Wellington founders then is an important event. Largely unnoticed, it deserves wider recognition, if not on TV, then as a travelling exhibition. But who is to fund it for the edification of the nation’s students?

The exhibition stabs at the visitor with Murray Webb’s drawing of that dynamic, far sighted villain hero, the visionary Edward Gibbon Wakefield. How did he persuade those hard-nosed London business men to invest sight unseen in the Petone swamps and the Wellington ridges? Because he was an innovative genius with the charm, the will and the manipulative drive to match his brilliance?

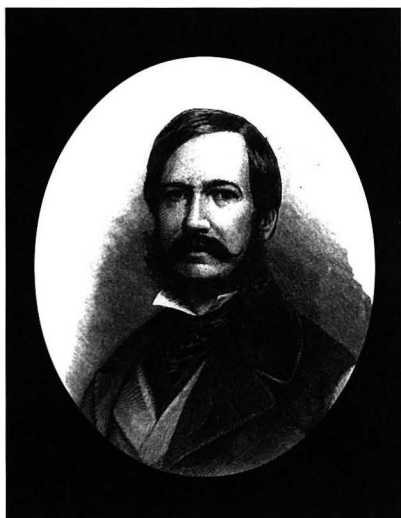
Compare then the two portraits, the dynamic 50 year-old J. Edgil Collins’ version, that shows him at the height of his powers, a contrast to the disappointed severity of the portrait of Wakefield’s old age. His opponents hated him with an abiding hatred. But



Arthur Wakefield (1799-1843). Painting – artist unknown. Alexander Turnbull Library F-18885-1/2-



John Plimmer (1812-1905). Painting by James McMaster. Wellington City Council Archives.



*Edward Jerningham Wakefield (1820-1879).
Engraving – artist unknown.
Alexander Turnbull Library C-5266--.*



*Captain William Mein Smith (1798-1869). Painting
by William Beetham. Alexander Turnbull Library,
Collection G-664, F-155045-1/2--.*

he must have seduced many.

Some may want to ascribe Wakefield's success to studying Adam Smith, others to the horrors of the Barnsby Ridges of his years in Newgate jail. His genius lies in what few ever achieve in one country. Edward Gibbon Wakefield influenced monumentally the development of four nations, Britain itself, Canada, Australia and none more than New Zealand.

How did this genius operate? Clearly as part of a family enterprise. He not only wooed the City of London, but also his upright brother, William Wakefield, to lead the New Zealand Company settlers. Soldier and diplomat, William, despite many disputes, was well liked for his unassuming leadership, his skill in dealing with settlers and Maori alike, and his liberal nature, shown in his magnanimity in sparing Isaac Featherston in their duel.

William Wakefield's greatest contribution may indeed have been the relationships he forged with the local chief, Te Puni. Here we have Barraud's portrait of this equally far-sighted Maori leader opting, for a mass of reasons, for cooperation with the settlers. That is why we should today examine with some speed and equity the shortcomings of those dealings. Heaphy's portraits help us evaluate not only the Te Puni of the harbour and the hills of Wellington, but also his cousin the fighting chief Te Wharepouri.

Fighting takes us to another brother, Captain Arthur Wakefield, the founder of Nelson, black-edged into our history for his foolhardiness, as it proved, at the Wairau affray. That at least forced the Wellingtonians to

look harder over the Rimutakas to the 'vast fields' of the Wairarapa.

Then we have the portrait of Edward Gibbon's only son, the flawed and frustrated Edward Jerningham Wakefield. Clerk at 18 to his father in Canada in 1838, and then to William Wakefield, he saw Wellington in 1839 at its very beginning. Despite his many weaknesses, he brought a special skill to this great family Expedition. With his lively, detailed, exhilarating *Adventures in New Zealand* we can claim him as our first New Zealand writer.

Another portrait, that of Captain Mein Smith, provides a face if not a name to conjure with. He was the soldier the New Zealand Company hired from British army mapping. Most of the settlers came to the new colony for land. So where land was king, Mein Smith was vital as our first surveyor general. We should remember him as we walk Thorndon as well as Petone, and after he fell out with William Wakefield, the Wairarapa. Its squatters, like Mein Smith, and their sheep, and the first inland towns that George Grey helped Masters and Carter establish for small settlers, and where Mein Smith surveyed, gave Wellington province its first economic impetus.

William Beetham's portrait shows a genial and kindly man, but firm and strong enough to stand off William Wakefield, and then become one of our first magistrates and politicians. A player of this scale deserves to be better remembered. The fact that museums and libraries, the Wellington City Council, Parliament and a variety of private owners were willing to allow the public to view their portraits in an exhibition such as this

is a good omen and underlines the need for a developed New Zealand portrait gallery.

Moving past the Wakefields we find that set, steadfast face of our first and only Caesar, George Grey. His origins: Essex man crossed with an Irish mother. His career: soldier, autocrat, constitutionalist, naturalist, linguist, historian, writer, politician, imperialist, and mentor of Seddon and the Liberal revolution. For some 20 years that face was the dominant force in this new Britain in the South Seas, the focus of power in the land he made his own. As the portrait of our first statesman, among so few, it bears study.

Where would a new colony be without its lawyers and educationists? Here is James Nairn's fine portrait of Alfred de Bathe Brandon. Out of London, this 1840 settler got himself into everything: practising law, pushing for self-government, acting as provincial solicitor, founding our education and banking systems, and serving in Parliament. His portrait suggests him a shrewd, canny, demanding man, looking to manage and run himself and his town and district, confident, circumspect, and as direct as Brandon Street itself.

Then too, Wellington needed doctors and editors. It found a brave and demanding practitioner in both fields in Isaac Featherston. That sharp, intelligent face shows up well in a portrait of a man not much known beyond the fact that he was our first provincial superintendent and had a small windswept town named after him.

Yet Featherston was one of the first of our important politicians, perhaps our first populist politician, if

his title 'The Little Doctor' is any evidence. Look at the face. It is that of a very powerful 'very persuasive, very resolute, very deep' politician. He showed this in the way he pressed early for the prize of self-government and then in practising it with skill and resolution. For a generation he served both Maori and pakeha with honour. As his correspondence comes to be examined, we can probe more into the mind behind the purposeful mask of that subtle but combative public man.

Our first builder peers at us from James McMaster's portrait of John Plimmer. In vigorous old age, it shows him still straight and tough minded, with all the self confidence of a Shropshire borderer. The portrait carries too, a warmth and humour that he needed in building the first Wellington on a slim beach surrounded by flax, fern, bog and steep hills. He had the foresight to press for land reclamation, and the luck to have a George Grey to back him. After the first earthquakes he led the rebuilding of the town. We owe him not only our wooden buildings and the first reclamation, but also the first wharf and jetty, the Manawatu railway, and

the first Kirkcaldie and Stains.

I have offered Jeringham Wakefield a place as one of our first writers. But the organisers have included portraits of the Beauchamp family to link us with Katherine Mansfield. Perhaps we owe that gloriously wayward Wellingtonian spirit in reaction to her hard-faced banker father that Henry Beauchamp's pictures display. We may wonder how the Beauchamp genes interacted to provide those diamond sharp descriptions of her remembered Wellington. The exhibition can offer Katherine Mansfield as the first New Zealand writer of genius, the first against whom we judge all others in our evolving New Zealand culture.

Some years back, I begged Lady Powles to have a portrait of Sir Guy Powles painted. Seeing this exhibition makes me grateful for paintings of so many of our founders; and to the New Zealand Portrait Gallery for bringing them together as a group.

Good portraits are like maps, essential to life. Just as maps tell us about our world, and its geography and history, so portraits inform us,

subtly or not, as the case may be, of what and who we are. After 150 years this exhibition of those who paved the way proves the need for a permanent New Zealand Portrait Gallery.

Might the Government consider adding such a New Zealand Portrait Gallery to the Parliamentary precinct? The historic Supreme Court seems designed as part of that magic circle – the Cathedral, the National Library, the Appeal Court, the High Court, and the old Departmental building – ranged around our Parliament on the Hill. Why not add the old Supreme Court to that circle as a New Zealand Portrait Gallery. Now, wouldn't that be a fine politician's gift to the millennium. ☞

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