

AFFIXING NAMES TO PLACES

*Colonial surveying & the construction of cultural space*¹

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IT HAS ALWAYS BEEN THE acknowledged right of an explorer to affix names to places', the surveyor Charles Douglas wrote in his field book in 1860, 'and unless the said names are absurd or very inappropriate they are allowed to remain'.³ Douglas' comment aptly described the way in which language, the ultimate instrument of empire, was employed as a colonising tool in the European transformation of the New Zealand landscape. This paper will examine the ways in which colonial surveyors participated in colonisation through the process of naming. I will argue that by 'affixing names to places', the European settlers attempted to domesticate, tame, and ultimately possess the new environment.

Naming is defined here as the act of writing over the land. Naming the land was an assertion of literal acquisition; fixed on maps and in narratives, names incorporated the land into a discourse which had its origins beyond New Zealand shores. By inscribing European names on the land and encoding these places on a map, surveyors laid the foundations

upon which imperial power could be extended. Naming a place was not only an attempt to legitimise the ownership of that place; it also reinforced the authority of the society that produced the name. In this way, place names may be read as expressions of power and the means of transforming 'space' into 'place': a literal way of construct-

*As much as guns and warships,
maps have been the weapons of imperialism.*

J. B. HARLEY,

'MAPS, KNOWLEDGE AND POWER'²

ing cultural space. The Australian historian Paul Carter has defined 'cultural space' as 'the spatial forms and fantasies through which a culture declares its presence'.⁴ Moreover, while the imported nomenclature was an assertion of European authority, it was also a denial – a de-scription – of the existing indigenous landscape which was already navigated and named. In naming an already known place, European surveyors were therefore writing over and appropriating earlier histories. As Mark

Monmonier has argued, 'when local resistance makes political control questionable, relabeling [sic] the map is a convenient way to both assert and exaggerate the new regime's authority'.⁵

The naming of New Zealand has occurred in several successive waves, from early Polynesian migration through to the organised settlement schemes of the latter half of the 19th century. The names given by early Maori – inscribed through tribal conquest and re-conquest – and the names given by the European explorers, whalers, surveyors and settlers, were statements

of possession and attempts at making the foreign seem familiar. As each colonising group imposed their place names on the land they did so over those of the colonised. The historical landscape of New Zealand may therefore be read as a cultural palimpsest, where the layers of systems of nomenclature provide an index to its history of occupancy and colonisation.⁶

In the early period of European settlement in New Zealand, the inscription of British place names made

the young colony immediately accessible to the invading migrant society. 'Names of places, too, should be changed', Edward Gibbon Wakefield advised in his *Art of Colonization*, '[for] they make part of the moral atmosphere of a country ...'.⁷ It seemed appropriate to transport linguistic fragments of Britain to New Zealand: Dunedin, Cheviot, and Cambridge, for instance, were evocative of places elsewhere, while Palmerston, Wellington, and Gisborne celebrated historic individuals. The map of New Zealand reads like an inventory of British imperial history; Wellington, Nelson, Napier and Hastings are designations which recall other times and places. Indeed, European New Zealanders (not unlike Maori) seem to have defined their environment in terms of legends of arrival, conquest and permanence. For the early British colonists, place names were the most tangible, easily transportable (and inexpensive) memoir of Britain that they could transplant in the colony.

The colonising impact of systematic inscription is most obvious where 'little Englands' have been replicated on New Zealand soil. The name 'New Plymouth' is a case in point. As if the language itself could impart something of the old world onto the 'new', British place names (and personal names) were transported wholesale to the colony; in Taranaki, for instance, there is Stratford, Inglewood, Carlyle, Raleigh, Eltham, Midhurst and Egmont.

In contrast to the consciously created colonial society, it is assumed that England and its society simply *is*. As Ross Gibson has explained:

English society ... appears to have

grown out of the soil rather than planted itself there ... East Anglia is not just arable land: it is also Constable country ... Cornwall connotes Celtic prehistory ... Hampshire evokes maritime myth and history; the Midlands are about industrialisation and transport: and so on in a national semiosis that is limited only littorally.⁸

Place names in New Zealand may be read as dedications, designations or descriptions: commemorative of a revered individual or deity; referential to something or somewhere else; or literal and self-referential descriptions. The urban topography of New Zealand tends to dedicate and memorialise founding figures. The street map of New Plymouth, for example, reads like the minutes of a meeting of the New Zealand and Plymouth Companies. When Frederick Alonzo Carrington, surveyor to the New Zealand Company, drew up his map of the proposed New Plymouth settlement in 1841, he did not fail to acknowledge his financial mentors. The streets Vivian, St Aubyn, Buller, Devon, Leach, Lemon, Pendarves, Gilbert, Eliot and Cutfield Roads honour the Directors of the Plymouth Company; in Wellington, Young, Currie, Wakefield, Fillis, Molesworth, and Courtenay Streets and Woollcombe Terrace the Directors of the New Zealand Company. The choice of the name of Auckland was also a semantic form of patronage. The settlement was named, according to Felton Mathew, 'after Lord Auckland, at the time Governor-General of India, and an old friend and patron of Governor Hobson's'.⁹

Colonial surveyors have received particular attention in both rural and

urban nomenclature. Chief Surveyor to the Canterbury Association, Captain Joseph Thomas, has Mt Thomas and the Thomas River named after him. Thomas Cass, who succeeded Thomas as Chief Surveyor, is commemorated in a bay, a peak, a river, and street names in Canterbury. Streets in the South Canterbury townships of Timaru, Temuka and Geraldine, laid out in 1856-64 by the government surveyor, Samuel Hewlings, all bear the name of their architect. In New Plymouth, Liardet Street, Octavius Place and Carrington Road memorialise the early surveyors. On the west coast of the South Island the Harper Saddle honours a West Coast surveyor, while the surveyors Brunner, Lewis and Dobson are recalled in Brunner town, the Lewis Pass and Arthur's Pass. In this way, place names were records of particular moments and expressions of personal presences.

Place names also functioned to domesticate the environment. European – especially British – names held a particular nostalgia for surveyors. While exploring the Waitaki and Clutha river region in 1857, John Turnbull Thomson renamed the Ahahuri Pass the 'Lindis', after Lindisfarne, near his English home.¹⁰ At his survey camp in December 1885, he wrote:

We have a new home now on the margin of a very beautiful lake called Lake Tennyson. Some people say it was named after a man in England who used to 'invent' poetry. Others say after old Bill Tennyson the Bullock driver, who used to cart up to Jollie's Pass, but I should hope not; it would take away the charm of this beautiful place'.¹¹

At Great Barrier Island in 1885-86, the surveyor Sidney Weetman wrote a description of the island peaks:

The lowest of these Pinnacles I christened General Gordon, because looked at from some positions it resembles the figure of a colossal man, standing with his arms behind him, looking out over the sea, and, as my visit took place shortly after the fall of Khartoum, this rock suggested to my mind the lonely figure of Gordon, as one might imagine him looking out from the palace-roof for the relief expedition which never came'.¹² In providing the island with a historicised genealogy, Weetman's naming brought the island – in linguistic terms at least – from the margin to the centre; from an outpost of empire to the European metropolis.

The landscape of central Otago contains further evidence of the systematised naming with which settlers attempted to domesticate the New Zealand environment. James McKerrow's naming of the mountains, rivers and streams of the Wanaka, Wakatipu and Te Anau regions on his reconnaissance surveys during 1861-62 may be read with reference to commemorative, referential and descriptive methodologies. McKerrow made an initial survey of the country around and within the watersheds of the Wanaka and Hawea Lakes, extending down the Clutha river to Cromwell. McKerrow named Mt Albert in honour of Prince Albert, consort to Queen Victoria, who died in 1861, and the Buchanan Peaks for John Buchanan, the botanist and draughtsman, particularly remembered by McKerrow for

his explorations of the Tuapeka country. The Castor and Pollux Peaks were suggested to him 'by the 2 brother stars in the constellation of Gimini [sic]', while the Minaret Peaks were so named as they reminded McKerrow of 'a Mohammedan Mosque'.

The streams running from Mt Pisa to the Clutha river – the Socher Burn, Tinwald Burn, Amisfield Burn, Park Burn, Small Burn and Lowburn – are all Scottish names, chosen by McKerrow at the request of Robert Wilkin, who was the holder of the Mt Pisa run in 1861. McKerrow's names of Mt Alba, Glacier Dome, Turret Peaks, Mt Triplet, Terrace Peak, Teat Ridge, Sentinel Peak, Isthmus Peak, Twin Peaks, Fog Peak, Mt Niger, Black Peak, Treble Cone, End Peak and Knuckle Peak were descriptive, as were those McKerrow gave to the streams running into the western side of Lake Wanaka: Bay Burn, Rough Burn, Estuary Burn, Rumbling Burn and Fern Burn.¹³ McKerrow also remembered the giants of European science on his expedition to Lake Wakatipu.¹⁴

While such names were classificatory, indicative of the arms of empire reaching out to embrace new territorial possessions, they also revealed the efforts of the colonial migrant society to preserve in New Zealand the culture from which they had come. These names provide evidence of the hybridised nature of the colonial society; removed from their original context, these names expressed the attempt to maintain at least a semblance of European cultural and intellectual identity.

By constructing a network of names on the land, surveyors

colonised the country linguistically, and in doing so, created their own geographical reality. McKerrow 'possessed' the southern landscape by naming and mapping it.

Naming also expressed the efforts of the European settler society to fashion a particular colonial identity. Like the maps of New Zealand, littered with names derivative of Britain and reflective of the local environment, the identity of the colonial settler was mimetic and hybridised. Place names were therefore not simply words imposed on a blank space, but provisional and occasional historic events which recorded the intentions – as well as the actions – of the namer.

Mapping reflects the way a landscape has been conceived, and the land may be seen, quite literally, as an unfolded map. The maps made by surveyors were significant as they transcribed named and known landscapes into a specifically European cultural register. Moreover, the strategies employed in map-making – the re-inscription, enclosure and ordering of space – have been shown to provide an analogue for the acquisition, management and reinforcement of colonial power.¹⁵

European explorers and surveyors in New Zealand were particularly reliant on Maori for their knowledge of the land and their ability to construct mental maps, often transcribed on non-permanent media for the instruction of others. The earliest known Maori map of the North Island, 'Aotea', was drawn in charcoal on the deck of the *Endeavour* by Maori rangatira at Whitianga.¹⁶ Between 1769 and 1859 similar maps were constructed by Maori for

European explorers from Colenso and Nicholas, through to Mantell, Thomson and Hochstetter.¹⁷ Maori conceptualised a geographical reference framework into which topographical features could be fitted. This included a metaphorical understanding of landscape, determined by description and genealogy, where the observer required a knowledge of the history of the place and its cultural significance, in order to understand its nomenclature. The map therefore served as a mnemonic device indicating an intended travel route, where the drawing of the map recalled certain features in the mind of the narrator, and the naming then fixed them in the memory of the observer.

Surveyors frequently appropriated Maori geographical knowledge, incorporating it into their own maps. In translating this knowledge from one discourse to another, surveyors acted as cultural mediators. As Barbara Belyea has written of European explorers in North America, they:

occupied a middle position between the two cultures, slipping from one convention to the other as they guessed what the native maps "meant".¹⁸

The information exchange was unequal, however, as explorers were ignorant of the territory long familiar to its native inhabitants:

The explorers wanted this knowledge not as it came structured in [indigenous] ways of seeing and experiencing, but broken down into data which they could fit into their own geographical scheme.¹⁹

This is also true of surveyors in

colonial New Zealand whose maps imposed a foreign nomenclature and system of navigation on a landscape that was already named and known by Maori. Although Europeans might attempt to see the world in terms of alternative cultural conventions, and although there might be moments of mutual understanding, these insights were sporadic and limited. What happened most of the time, Belyea concludes, was that:

European mapping dominated and marginalised [indigenous] convention, reducing its conceptual structure to 'information' and its world view to a negative 'absence', or 'failure' to show what Europeans maps showed'.²⁰

The existence of both Maori and European names in New Zealand is further evidence that these landscapes were often products of negotiation. One commentator has noted of the New Zealand map that:

'in the end, what emerged was the unique amalgam of European and Polynesian place-names and feature-names that make up our map-idiom. We all live with it comfortably and find nothing strange that the Waimakariri flows into the sea near Christchurch and that Gordonton ... is just up the road from Taupiri.²¹

Further, the idiom of British cartography has strangely transformed many Maori place names. The Maori names Waikaremoana, Rotoiti, and Rotorua, which all include a reference to a lake, have been re-presented on surveyors' maps as *Lake* Waikaremoana, *Lake* Rotoiti and *Lake* Rotorua.²² In 1945 Herries Beattie, in the introduction to *Maori Place Names of Canterbury*,

wrote:

A visitor to New Zealand, or a resident of another land studying our maps, would, if of an observant mind, note the preponderance of Maori names in the North Island and of European nomenclature in the South Island.²³

It has been shown that the distribution of European and Maori names in New Zealand indicates that there is a greater frequency of European names in the more prominent geographical features, with a greater concentration of Maori names in the less significant geographical features; and with regional variation, place names tend to reflect the distribution of the pre-European Maori population. Compared to the European transformation of the physical landscape – which included the acclimatisation of introduced species of flora and fauna – the European impact on New Zealand place names has been only moderate.²⁴

How then, does the inscription of European names account for the existence of, and often the reversion back to, Maori place names in New Zealand? Maori names were retained in some areas simply to avoid confusion. As early as 1850 it was reported in the *Lyttleton Times*:

When it can be done, the Maori names of objects, points, or rivers, & c., intended to define the boundaries of runs applied for, are to be used in preference to any other designations, which too often lead to confusion and disputes among the applicants.²⁵

In this early phase of resettlement, Maori names presented obstacles to prospective runholders: the names

had to be clarified and codified in order to facilitate *further* settlement. For the next generation of European settlers searching for their own sense of identity, Maori place names often carried the sense of history their own itinerant culture lacked. Pakeha have felt free to appropriate Maori names in the construction of their own cultural identity. Often, where an English name would sit uncomfortably in the local surroundings, a Maori name was considered to be more appropriate, as it was believed to more aptly convey the sense of the 'frontier'. For example, the name Waitara was kept in preference to 'Raleigh'; and the Waikato town of Tirau was known as 'Oxford', until it reverted back to the Maori name in 1895.

The reasons for renaming were clearly expressed in The Designation of Districts Act of 1894. This Act assigned to the Governor the authority to name and alter the existing names of localities, boroughs, counties, towns, rivers and mountains in New Zealand, with the provision that 'in all such alterations and future naming, preference shall be given to the original Maori names'.²⁶

When the bill was first introduced into the House in June 1894, its stated objective was:

to obviate a very great difficulty which the postal authorities met with from time to time in connection with postal matters.

This was an attempt to address the confusion that had arisen between places in New Zealand with the same or similar names. When the bill was read in the Legislative Council, it was

also suggested that:

the names of many places should be changed to Maori names, and in future it was proposed to do so when practicable.

The reason given for this harked back to the colonial appetite for the exotic; one Member thought there was nothing 'more euphonious than some of the Maori names, and it would be of very great interest to those who came after us to know that we kept in view the original Maori names of places'.²⁷ But as Carter suggests, if it is implied that "[indigenous] names are more poetic, truer to the spirit of the country', then they are no longer words, 'but simply the record of environmental sounds'.²⁸

The effects of colonial naming and map-making – the legacy of the surveyor-explorers – are still being felt in the post-colonial present. It has been argued that the reversion back to indigenous place names is a latent, if not manifest, form of cultural appropriation.

Carter has suggested that in Australia, even when European explorers preserved an indigenous nomenclature, the name was located 'not within an aboriginal context, but within the rhetorical ambit of a white geo-historical discourse'.²⁹ The namer, not the informant, retained linguistic, and hence, political authority.

In this context, an indigenous place name is, according to Carter, 'preserved out of context in a linguistic environment quite foreign to it, a stuffed bird in a museum case'.³⁰ Despite earnest attempts to redress the past in the aboriginal renaming of sites, this process Carter argues:

incorporates a white myth, that names name places. Yet place-names name histories ... To blank out English names that bear witness to the rhetorical nature of European occupation whitewashes [indigenous] ... history.³¹
... [These] 'euphonious, foreign-sounding names do not repossess the past, except as the land of the exotic. They bear witness to the current phase of the [indigenous] people's drawn-out struggle for historical recognition. But what value will this long overdue victory have if it is achieved through the same rhetorical sleight of hand used in the historical campaign against them?'³²

Tony Birch has also commented on urban renaming. He argues that in Australia:

houses, streets, suburbs and whole cities have indigenous names. This is an exercise in cultural appropriation, which represents imperial possession and the quaintness of the 'native'. For the colonisers to attach a 'native' name to a place does not represent or recognise an indigenous history, and therefore possible indigenous ownership.³³

He also argues that 'it is when names are restored to recognise earlier histories and cultures that the threat to ownership occurs'.³⁴ It is this last point – that indigenous and imperial history cannot equally co-exist – that is of particular relevance in New Zealand. As long as the history of a white settler society fails to recognise indigenous histories in the past *and* in the present, the power of claiming, naming and possessing rights of 'ownership' over the landscape will remain unresolved. While the

renaming of places with indigenous names continues to be determined by the limits of the dominant discourse, the autonomy of an indigenous nomenclature will continue to be thwarted.

An example of this was the project launched by the Victorian Tourism Commission in 1989 to reinstate the indigenous name Gariwerd to the Grampians National Park in western Victoria. As Tony Birch has recently noted, this initiative provoked a great deal of opposition: 'Europeans in the district feared the indigenous name restoration project threatened their own history of 'pioneer settlement'. ... [and] the recognition of a Koori past in the area incorporated the reality of a *living* Koori community in the western district. In turn this raised the spectre of the squattocracy's worst nightmare, the possibility of a land rights claim'.³⁵ There was no consultation with the local Koori community over the renaming issue, and that the primary imperative for the name change was the attempt by the then Labour Victorian Minister of Tourism to promote the region as a tourist site, 'Victoria's Kakadu'.³⁶ The project resulted in something of a compromise: the National Park was officially known as The Grampians (Gariwerd),

'the Koori name was therefore linguistically subordinated, 'hand-cuffed' in parentheses'.³⁷

A further case which illustrates the difficulties of the reappropriation of indigenous names is the renaming of the Custer Battlefield National Monument to the Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument. In a recent review of James Welch's and Paul Stekler's *Killing Custer: The Battle of the Little Big Horn and the Fate of the Plains Indians* (1994), Will Karkavelas discussed the politics surrounding the renaming of the site and in particular, the refusal of the Custer Battlefield Historical and Museum Association (or 'Custer buffs') to recognise the Little Bighorn name.³⁸ As Karkavelas notes, 'from a Native American point of view, the Battle of the Little Bighorn had far less significance [than its mythologised 'Custer's Last Stand']. Many of the bands that had taken part in the fighting that June didn't even record the event in the wintercounts for the year 1876. Things they felt were more important were for example the theft of a prize horse, the severe winter conditions for that year, or the deaths of close relatives'.³⁹ Karkavelas concludes that 'the importance attached to events in history, their remembrance and portrayal is

relative, like the names of monuments. It all depends on who, where and even when you are'.⁴⁰

Survey expeditions in colonial New Zealand were, therefore, exercises of invasion, inspection and inscription, where writing over and about the land was central to the processes of colonising New Zealand. Just as maps and survey pegs may be read as symbols of appropriation, place names can be appreciated as ways of re-presenting and possessing the land. Like the surveyor's culturally-specific and texted perspectives of landscape, their naming efforts should be read as products of encounters located in the in-between spaces of cultural contact. Moreover, the mapped landscape – with names drawn from both metropolitan and local societies – reflected the identity of the colonial migrant, caught between two worlds. In 'affixing names to places' colonial surveyors transformed 'space' into 'place': their enduring legacy is the texted landscape itself. ✎

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NOTES

1. This paper, presented as a Stout Research Centre Seminar in September 1997, is from a larger study on colonial surveying and the construction of cultural space.
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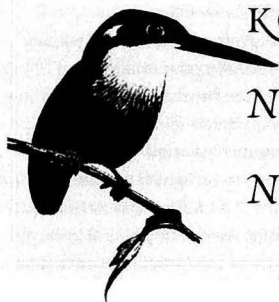
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39. Ibid.
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