

A Changing Land: Sir Donald McLean's Maraekakaho - 1857 to Today

by Alan Scarfe

Fraser Books (2013, second printing 2014)

ISBN 978-0-9922476-0-7

Reviewed by Brad Patterson

For over three decades Donald McLean bestrode New Zealand administrative and political life. Commencing as a Sub-Protector of Aborigines in Taranaki, he filled a multiplicity of roles, including Chief Land Purchase Commissioner, Superintendent of the province of Hawke's Bay, Agent for the General Government at Hawke's Bay, ultimately Native Minister. McLean, however, was a complex and enigmatic individual, which perhaps for many years discouraged historians from attempting to properly evaluate the man and his actions. In more general studies he has variously been portrayed as saint or sinner. Until Ray Fargher's magisterial *The Best Man Who Ever Served the Crown? A Life of Donald McLean* (2007), almost the sole recourse was to James Cowan's rather superficial and celebratory *Sir Donald McLean: The Story of a New Zealand Statesman* (1940) and, after 1990, Alan Ward's *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* entry. Fargher's emphasis, as the title of his book suggests, is primarily on the public life and career. Very recently (2015) Matthew Wright has offered *Man of Secrets: The Private Life of Donald McLean*, which purports to provide new insights. But until now, a significant 1970 thesis by B.C. Parr apart, McLean's endeavours to ensure personal financial success have attracted little attention. Alan Scarfe's *A Changing Land* seeks to at least partially fill the gap, focusing on McLean's celebrated Hawke's Bay pastoral property, its foundation and its subsequent history.

The genesis of this book is unusual. The author, formerly a builder by trade, had at times built houses and outbuildings on farms carved from what had been Maraekakaho Station, in the process developing a fascination with the property. Compelled in his late 50s to retire through ill health, to occupy his mind he enrolled for extramural papers at Massey University, commencing a scholarly journey which was to occupy a further 20 years, which culminated in the award of BA (Hons) and MA degrees in history. His thesis topic, unsurprisingly, was 'Too much land? Maraekakaho Station, 1877- 1929'. Jocularly describing himself in a 2013 newspaper article as 'a blue collared academic', Scarfe then proceeded to take his thesis study a great deal further, assiduously tracing the experiences of farmers who took up lands on the pastoral property following its subdivision. The result is this unique book, first published in the author's 81st year. To the scholarly rigour and credibility acquired in later life is grafted a deep understanding and affection for this particular tract and those who have occupied it. While a quite different book, with a quite different rationale and emphases, it fittingly stands alongside that other classic study of a Hawke's Bay station, Herbert Guthrie-Smith's *Tutira: The Story of a New Zealand Sheep Station*.

Maraekakaho's story is presented in three parts. After a brief biographical introduction on McLean, and a short account of his first major pastoral investment, Akitio Station on the Wairarapa coast, the first outlines how the founder acquired, settled and farmed the land, for much of the time with the financial assistance of English capitalist Algernon Tollemache. Although largely an absentee owner, his residence was in Napier, McLean was never prepared to farm by the crude free range methods then in vogue. Improvement became the watchword, with fencing, sown pastures, and selective breeding. Wool was always the principal product, although beef cattle were also run, and there was cropping on the station's flatter land. Always careful with money, when Donald McLean died in 1877 the net value of his estate was rumoured to be in the vicinity of £500,000 (although the extent of his mortgages would be of

interest). Maraekakaho was by this time already recognised as one of the colony's great pastoral properties. The second part carries forward the story, with the station coming under the direction of Donald's only son, Douglas, under whom it soon reached its maximum size of over 58,000 sprawling acres, divided into 111 paddocks. Taking over at age 25, although he too chose to reside in Napier, Douglas McLean pushed on vigorously, rounding out the acreage, extending improvements and gaining a high reputation for the breeding of stud stock yielding both wool and meat. The breaking down of Maraekakaho into smaller units began in the 1890s, partly as a response to Liberal government policies, but conceivably also reflecting revised farming and investment strategies on the part of the owner. Over the ensuing 30 years most of the outlying land was sold off, only a core of 12,000 acres remaining by 1926, and following the death of Douglas in 1929 even this was marketed. Part three, occupying nearly 300 pages, surveys the subsequent experiences of a representative group of those who took up land on Maraekakaho, tracing how the pastoral landscape has been transformed into a varied patchwork of cropping and fattening units, vineyards, olive groves, forestry blocks and lifestyle holdings over the past 90 years.

An intriguing feature of Maraekakaho, certainly until well into the twentieth century, was that it constituted a Celtic island in a pastoral sea. Donald McLean had himself been born on Tiree in the Western Hebrides. Given that he was frequently engaged elsewhere on his public duties, and that in any case his primary residence was in Napier, McLean needed help down on the station, and it was to family and homeland that he turned. At a very early point he brought a brother with Scottish experience in stock husbandry from Australia, and other family members, both male and female, came direct from Scotland. Some worked on Maraekakaho, others were associated with kindred ventures, and a number were helped on to lands of their own. The relationships were not always comfortable, but a sense of duty to family and clan was always apparent. A succession of other young Scots folk took up employment on the developing station, many also from Tiree and nearby Hebridean islands. With competent farm workers in short supply in the colony, churchmen in Scotland were encouraged to publicise prospects on Maraekakaho from their pulpits. By 1870 a distinctive village settlement had emerged at the heart of the station, homes being served by a store, church, an accommodation house for travellers, and later a hall, library and school. The Scottish character of the settlement was reflected in the flourishing of Caledonian and Highlands Societies, with sports days a regular feature, attendances of over 4000 being recorded. Following Donald's death, Douglas (known as 'the laird') continued the traditions, intermarriage ensuring that even non Scots were enfolded in the clan environment. A surprising number of the descendants of the imported Scots workers successfully secured farms following the breakup of the station.

A note accompanying the copy sent for review cautions that the book was planned and written in a form that would be accessible to ordinary people, presumably including those who had occupied, or still occupy, parts of the McLean estate. Certainly that objective has been achieved, but the book is far more than a simple exposition of the changing fortunes of a property. This is a significant piece of historical research, no less a further landmark in New Zealand's rural history, an outstanding account of changing farming techniques. While professional scholars might regret the absence of detailed documentation, there can be no mistaking the prodigious amount of research underpinning the text. The extensive bibliography demonstrates that, beyond possessing a firm grasp of the supporting literature, the author has deeply studied the extant Mclean papers held by the Turnbull Library and the Hawke's Bay Cultural Trust, also the records of the Hawke's Bay Agricultural and Pastoral Society, with forays into local newspapers and a range of published official documents. In addition, he has sought access to private papers still held by families and conducted over 50 interviews. A

feature of the nicely presented volume is the extensive reproduction of contemporary photographs, while an unusually large number of maps illustrate the building and subsequent dismemberment of Maraekakaho. And, as a bonus, a roll of those known to have worked on the station, their occupations and years of employment, is included.

For this reviewer, a sporadic traveller over State Highway 50A over nearly 50 years, the substantial old Maraekakaho woolshed, around 19 kilometres south of Hastings, has been something of an icon, a landscape feature invariably stimulating comment. Its sheer size, the massive windlass at its gabled front, are suggestive of the major part pastoralism played in the district's and New Zealand's evolution. But, until Alan Scarfe's labour of love, only scant accounts of this property's story have been readily available. Thanks to his diligence there is now not only a major addition to the literature of New Zealand farming, texture has also been added to our knowledge of one of the country's key nineteenth-century historical figures, his relatives and his immediate descendants. This 'blue collared academic' is to be applauded.