

Empire City: Wellington becomes the capital of New Zealand

By John E Martin

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Reviewed by Brad Patterson

It is one of those quirks of historiographical fate that while Wellington was chosen as the site of the New Zealand Company's 'first and principal settlement', becoming the colony's capital and seat of government within 25 years, it has fared relatively poorly at the hands of professional historians. Despite a plethora of publications on particular suburbs, families, businesses and social institutions, soundly-researched overviews of the evolution of the city and its hinterlands have been at a premium. Beyond Louis E Ward's idiosyncratic, but still invaluable, assemblage of historical fragments, *Early Wellington* (1928), and journalist Alan Mulgan's centenary contribution *City of the Strait* (1940), the most useful near contemporary contributions have been David Hamer and Roberta Nicholls' edited *The Making of Wellington 1840-1900*, essays collected for the ill-fated sesquicentenary celebrations, and Redmer Yska's commissioned City Council History *Wellington: Biography of a City* (2006). The irony is that the building blocks for much deeper interpretative studies have long been there, in the capital's research libraries and archives repositories, not least in the surprising number of deeply researched post-graduate theses. John E Martin is to be congratulated in bringing some of this material together in a big book which merits a wide readership.

A small cavil at the outset, or more a pondering. While the title is catchy, and reflects local nineteenth-century usage, was Wellington ever in fact an 'Empire City'? A literature search indicates some confusion. Dictionaries suggest a sprawling metropolis at the hub of a number of territories under a single authority. Even so, curiously the appellation appears to have been most frequently applied to New York, although also adopted by a surprising number of small towns spread across the United States. It has also been appropriated for several novels, more recently video games. Without question, the designation was early and enthusiastically advanced by Wellington boosters, but a great deal of wishful thinking was involved. Indeed, even the editor of one of the most enthusiastic advocates of the styling, the *Wellington Independent*, was moved to question in October 1873 whether it should be regarded as uttered in boast or in irony. The long-expressed desire for Wellington to become the colonial capital had at last been met, it was recognized as a central point for maritime services and telegraphic communications, but in most other respects in his view, in population numbers, in its buildings and services, in the town's very appearance, it still lagged behind Auckland, Dunedin, Christchurch, and even Nelson. For much of its first three decades Wellington more closely resembled, first, a North Sea oil base, replete with seasonal workers, brothels and booze barns, then for a limited period a military cantonment, with all that entailed, ultimately a 'sheep town', analogous to the ubiquitous American 'cow town', attention largely focused on the pastoral properties of the hinterlands. It was only from the late 1870s that Wellington began to acquire new functions, to consolidate, solidify, and assume a social patina more fitting its ascribed status. Yet, as late as 1901, in terms of population alone (according to *Te Ara*) Wellington remained a clear fourth in the colony's urban hierarchy. And, as a facetious aside, a quick search of Wellington newspapers for 'Empire City' over the three decades in Papers Past suggests probably as many references to a racehorse of that name, and to a similarly branded hostelry, as to partisan claims for city eminence.

Rather than a 'from the beginnings to the present' history, the book essentially scrutinizes Wellington's first four colonizing decades, the emphasis necessarily on the evolving town, but with regular excursions into the hinterlands to the north-west and the north-east to help explain

changes in urban character and form. The narrative speeds along at a lively pace, with a shifting kaleidoscope of themes and topics. Martin is at his best with people. Through deft pen portraits, in some instances simply a telling phrase or two, life is breathed into the actors in this colonial drama. There are the already tolerably well known, those with acknowledged principal roles, for instance in the New Zealand Company years the four Wakefields, all flawed and with limited impact after the establishment phase. Alongside them officials such as William Fox and Francis Dillon Bell, both destined for significant later colonial careers. Once a measure of self-government was conferred Wellington Province's first Superintendent, Isaac Earle Featherston, emerges as a peppery local colossus for nearly two decades, while his successor, fellow sometime medico, later merchant, William Fitzherbert, was influential on both the provincial and national stages. In the identified supporting cast, including runholders, large farmers, professionals, and business folk, are a number whose influence has not hitherto been fully recognized, arguably foremost members of Wellington's mercantile corps. Ensuring the town and settlement's long-term viability were the likes of former Australian-based whaler Barney Rhodes, almost indisputably the wealthiest citizen by the 1870s, aspiring young Company migrants such as George Hunter, Kenneth Bethune, Nathaniel Levin, and John Johnston, also lesser lights such as Charles Pharazyn and Waring Taylor. Most intriguing, however, are those with essentially walk-on parts, a panoply of rough whalers, labourers, artisans, small farmers, and not least the town's apparent deviants, such as murderer William Good, arsonist George Angell, and mother and daughter prostitutes Margaret and Mary Quilty. While understandably there is a male and settler bias, major players in the Māori community are sympathetically portrayed, and there is a determined attempt to rescue a number of the town's independent women from obscurity. Inevitably, in a book of this scale there will be minor errors, for instance the founding Hunter partner in the firm of Bethune and Hunter was not Wellington's first mayor but his 18-year-old son, and 1840s working settler Henry Jackson and the province's later chief surveyor were quite different people.

As might be anticipated from a specialist in historical sociology and a former parliamentary historian, the analyses of colonial society and politics are particular strengths. A tenet of Wakefieldism was recreation of the English class system, perhaps with more than a slight glance back to the eighteenth century. The intent was to establish a model arable economy, with substantial capitalist farms, owned by a colonial gentry, the fields tilled by imported rural labourers. It was with this in mind that candidates for the Company's assisted immigration were supposedly chosen. It was not to be. When the vaunted agricultural estates failed to materialize the would-be gentlemen, those actually choosing to migrate, were soon displaced by assertive middle-class town dealers, professionals, and skilled tradesmen. In the vicinity of the town, with a few exceptions, small farmlets became the norm, and if it was not quite a case of Jack being as good as his master, the few remaining masters often had difficulty finding Jacks. By the 1850s a new social order had developed, an emergent town mercantile elite establishing almost symbiotic relationships with those taking up extensive pastoral runs in the out-districts, only a few of whom were from the founding capitalist class. It was a partnership that was to survive until at least the early 1870s, when new social groupings began to present. That the prevailing social order should also determine the nature of Wellington politics was axiomatic. From the outset it had been the ambition of the erstwhile colonial gentry that Wellington should without delay become the colonial capital, the centre of decision making. The illicit nature of the settlement's founding, coupled with early hostility to Crown officials soon put paid to that dream. Aspirations, however, were hard to extinguish, and well before the 1840s were out the Wellington settlers were perceived as the most strident in the colony, fiercely agitating for severance from the Company and a measure of self-government. When this was granted in 1853 the Wellington Provincial Council, with one notable short interlude, became the

instrument of the new men of property, responsible for the distribution of lands, immigration, and the other developmental functions essential for settlement and self-advancement. Until debt levels escalated the concerns were heavily parochial. Though the provincial partisans consistently pushed Wellington interests in the colonial legislature, it would be too much to argue that their campaigning heavily influenced the decision to transfer the colonial capital from Auckland. This, in the end, had more to do with the logistics of safely assembling parliamentarians from the extremes of both islands. The decision might well have been for Nelson instead.

A key to understanding how the town developed is a strong grasp of colonial economics. While the author correctly identifies the broad trends, some important nuances might perhaps have been given greater attention. It was always recognized that only by securing a reliable export staple could the viability of town and settlement be ensured. When the launching vision of antipodean granary was dispelled, it was fortuitous that the already existing whaling industry offered breathing space, oil and bone accounting for over 80% of Wellington's minuscule exports until the mid-1840s. Of greatest long-term significance was that the trade enabled a small number of ambitious merchants to establish footholds which they were to long hold, enlarge, and diversify. When crisis again threatened, the whale catches plummeting through overfishing, they were again to the fore when a convenient armed conflict with local Māori brought troops to the settlement, substantial money being made through the supply and servicing of the regiments. Just how important military expenditure was in underpinning the town's short-term survival is often underestimated, outlays still comfortably exceeding all returns from exports in 1851, the foundations for a clutch of mercantile fortunes being thereby further built upon. Within a few further years, however, Wellington, the province, was well on the way to emulating the Australian colonies as yet another 'sheepwalk of empire', grazing for wool offering substantial rewards. The system which initially developed, pending finalization of the tenure of runs, was animal husbandry of the crudest kind, little more than the cramming of every procurable sheep on to every available free-range acre. As early as 1861 wool exports over Wellington's wharves exceeded £120,000, and in this trade the town's foremost merchants, already an attenuating group, were pivotal, advancing credit, arranging shipments, and most eventually acquiring interests in pastoral properties on their own account. It has been common to laud the pioneer pastoralists of districts such as the Wairarapa, but the question rarely posed is just who held their mortgages? With all attention focused on sheep, in most respects the town stagnated, in some even regressed, with only a limited population increase, little spatial expansion, a noticeable contraction in the secondary sector, and a reduction in other forms of farming. Yet progress was more evident in the town's mercantile hub, with more substantial offices and warehouses, and concentration on infrastructure conducive to promoting the new staple. Arguably it was not until the 1870s were advanced that a more sophisticated urban economy began to emerge, alongside more innovatory sheep farming and more diversified mixed properties in the rural districts. Despite the burgeoning presence of the colonial government, however, a case might be made that locally disproportionate influence, political and economic, remained reposed in relatively few hands. The story of Wellington's merchant hegemony, the mainspring of town and province's particular brand of settler capitalism, remains to be fully told.

Encouragingly, in this study the Māori inhabitants are given much clearer and more sympathetic attention than in most earlier accounts. Hapu and iwi figures generally less well known than Rauparaha and Rangihaeata – the likes of Te Puni and Te Wharepouri in the early years, later Wi Tako and Te Whiwhi – are introduced and weighed up. Throughout, Māori aspirations and experiences are viewed alongside those of the settlers. The outline commences

with the intertribal upheavals arising from the incursions of northern tribes from the 1820s, proceeds through the precolonisation forging of trading relationships with the Australian colonies, then highlights the early Māori roles as primary food providers, builders of shelter, and guides to the lands lying beyond the harbour. At first the interactions were harmonious, yielding mutual benefits, but it was probably inevitable that tensions would arise, both indigenes and the newcomers becoming ultimately dependent upon the possession and exploitation of the same resources, in particular land, whether for living space or cultivation. It was this contesting that led directly to the outbreak of armed conflict in 1845. It has become common to portray the aftermath of the clashes as a period in which Wellington Māori largely retreated from the town to the hinterlands, in one instance en masse to another province, and into an embattled existence. In this there are elements of truth, certainly numbers in the town pa steadily reduced, but hardship or ennui was by no means immediately universal. Indeed, by the early 1850s, particularly on the western coast, Māori cultivators had become the province's main grain producers. A split also occurred between a younger, increasingly Europeanized, Māori elite and traditionalists. It was the former group which sought further accommodation, including active involvement in provincial and colonial politics. As colonization extended, however, increasing settler numbers building the pressure for alienation of additional land, further conflict loomed. Although the fighting of the 1860s was for the most part external to the province, it nevertheless sparked new tensions, including in the main town. By this time iwi were further split, between those wishing to seek further engagement and those genuinely wishing to withdraw, between land sellers and opponents, with the once promising Māori economy imploding.

This book provides many fresh insights, but a note of caution is in order. While the broad trends identified are persuasive, there may be misgivings as to the reliability of some of the detailed statistical evidence advanced. This is not intended as a criticism of the author; it is a reality all researchers in the period find hard to surmount. As Huf has recently demonstrated for the then closely linked Australian colonies, official statistics, even those in the much-cited Blue Books, may vary greatly in accuracy and comprehensiveness. There is little approaching the regular time series considered standard today. Several examples must suffice. It is, for instance, suggested (p24) that the 1840-42 New Zealand Company migrants numbered 'something over 3000', with cabin passengers, the elite, around 5%. A re-examination of the Company migration registers, together with passenger lists and published newspaper returns, suggests the number was more likely in excess of 4000, with cabin passengers nearer 10%. Similarly (p164), it is recorded that some 600 troops were present in the settlement in the 1840s. While the size of individual regiment detachments were constantly changing, military rolls indicate that at peak personnel totaled over 1000, with possibly up to 300 otherwise unrecorded dependents. At a time when the settler population of Wellington and Whanganui numbered less than 5000 these augmentations held appreciable economic significance. Just as difficult is determining just how many were based on Wellington-linked shore whaling stations during the 1840s. There have been estimates of around 600 mid-decade, but in the absence of documentation this is impossible to verify. Equally, it is difficult to establish just who benefitted most from the New Zealand Company's Lands distribution without extended searching of the body's manuscript land registers. Allowing for considerable private section trading in the first decade it might surprise that the largest holder of rural sections in 1851 (38), and second largest of town sections (28), was largely unknown Yorkshire woolens manufacturer William Rawson. Only slowly were these holdings realized. This may seem like nitpicking. Rather it is intended to demonstrate that much laborious basic research relating to Wellington's early decades remains to be done.

Handsomely printed and bound, liberally illustrated, with many reproductions in colour, unusually with informative maps and plans, this book is a credit to the publisher. It is a pleasure to handle and read. If by no means the last word on Wellington's early decades, Dr Martin has shifted the story many steps forwards, doing future researchers a signal service by bringing to attention much otherwise dispersed information. The feeling, however, is that the book is intended for a much wider general readership. If this be the intention, there may be some disappointment, for its sheer size (700 plus pages) is likely to deter those more attuned to short sound bites and essay length summaries. That would be a real pity. It should be an essential resource for tertiary classes and those charged with developing and teaching the new schools history curriculum.