

‘Texted pasts’—the sources of colonial land surveying

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This mythic confidence in a textable past is the ambience in which histories are made. The past itself is evanescent: it has existence only in histories. Histories are the texted past. (Denning 353).

This article considers how the diaries and field books of colonial land surveyors offer a valuable repository of information to the historian of colonisation. These archival sources are significant for two reasons. First, while they contain much detail regarding land surveying—measurements, sketches and brief maps—these texts reveal botanical and ethnological information as well as personal reflection on the processes of land transformation and settlement. Second, as these texts were constructed ‘in transit’, they present to the historian important questions of context, authority, and self-censorship. Field books and diaries constitute an important part of the ‘survey archive’, which includes survey maps, plans, surveyors’ field books, diaries, letters and the landscape itself. As Nola Easdale has shown in New Zealand and Stephen Martin in Australia, surveyors’ diaries and field books are particularly rich historical sources.

The survey diary of Thomas Kingwell Skinner is one such historical source which illustrates these issues of content and context. Skinner worked in the districts of Ngatimaru, Huiroa, Waitara and Omona in Taranaki from 1872 to 1875. The diary of his journey inland from New Plymouth to Ngatimaru from December 1872 to January 1873, held in the New Plymouth City Library, is a particularly informative source, including a record of his surveying, as well as his observations of the local Maori.

Land surveying was fundamental to the European acquisition of territory and to the creation of new definitions of space and place. The work of colonial land surveyors reflects much that is central to the European history of New Zealand, particularly the transformation and domestication of the natural environment. Although physically located on the margins of the settler society, surveyors occupied a central role in

implementing the principles of colonisation on the ground, operating (quite literally) at the 'cutting edge' of colonisation. Given this colonising agenda, it is not surprising that Skinner's diary projects a strong mercantilist vision, where the landscape is seen with the eyes of the future. 'We have indeed come to a land flowing with milk and honey—a land wherein there is no want', he noted in his diary on first inspection of the Taranaki hinterland (12). 'The valleys are particularly rich,' he continued, 'and this is the best land you can find' (29). As Bernard Smith has already shown, Europeans in a 'new land' imposed their own cultural expectations on the environment, and remodelled the landscape accordingly.

Skinner's diary contains much more than survey data. On his arrival at Ngatimaru, he was clearly impressed by the hospitality of the local people:

at the little clearing of about 3 perches half an dozen peach trees have been planted by the maories. [sic] They appear to have been planted entirely for the benefit of persons travelling up and down river. One is reminded I think of the Spanish who are so considerate that they whenever they eat fruit they keep the seed and the first opportunity they have when they see a vacant place is to plant it for the benefit of strangers if not for themselves. (2-3)

His diary narrative, also published in the *Taranaki Herald* in late 1872, reiterated these sentiments:

We were detained on the road by natives belonging to the different settlements up the river banks. Nothing can exceed their hospitality. Food of almost every imaginable description is brought to us, and we ask ourselves sometimes which we shall have—it being a difficult matter to decide out of the abundance of good things. Honey of the very richest quality is brought to us every day. Pork, potatoes, onions, cabbages, eels, &c., are very plentiful, and are at our disposal in any quantity required. I simply mention these facts to show how welcome we are to the natives, and how peaceably inclined they appear to be. They seem to feel quite insulted if you do not accept an invitation to stay with them when they give you one. (*Herald* 4)

Skinner's survey diary also included comments on disease, cooking methods, eating habits, tattooing, and even childbirth (4, 5, 6, 7, 14, 22, 33, 81).

Botanical information frequently appears in survey diaries. In January 1873 Skinner confided to his diary:

Sunday 5th: I am seated on the trunk of a tree—covered with a soft moss, under the shade of a large tawa. Close by and all around, are innumerable pungas with their dead leaves hanging down in a

graceful manner, to the ground, resembling the plumage of a bride waiting for her lord. The clearing is on fire evidently to facilitate the work in line cutting tomorrow. My footstool is wild daisies and clover. Ferns of every description are around me: one in particular much resembling the plumage of an ostrich feather and seeming to beam on the others in its beauty. Here the wild native grass, intermixed with clover and hawkweed is all around and indeed the clearing is covered. This is a perfect paradise in appearance. (32)

These diversions were not unusual. While surveying the Nelson hinterland in the 1840s, Samuel Stephens paused to record the following observation in his journal:

In the open parts of the country we had passed through, the ground was covered with a shrub, which I believe I have before described and called the satin plant, from the resemblance the under part of the leaf, when the skin or epidermis is removed from it, bears to that substance. Its colour is a very delicate straw or lemon colour, and from its being very elastic, properly speaking it may be said to resemble soft kid leather in its texture. I have little doubt ultimately, this substance may be applied to some profitable purpose in manufactures. The plant bears a very handsome blossom about the size of a crown piece, of a white colour with a yellow eye, something like the chrysanthemum in form. The rain abating a little towards the evening, I sallied forth to take a view of the lake and surrounding country, which, although viewing it under very disadvantageous circumstances, was exceedingly interesting and beautiful. (15)

Surveying near Takaka in 1844, John Barnicoat wrote of his fascination with the rata trees in the valley:

It seems that the rata after all is but a creeper that clings to the forest trees and mounts to their topmost branches. It shoots off numberless stems around the trunk and in every direction, and joining with others at last perfectly encloses the original trunk that it gave support which it now destroys. It now increases in bulk and assumes the appearance (which indeed it is) of an enormous tree. The numerous shoots eventually unite into one trunk and becomes a fine timber. This strange account seemed to me to have every appearance of truth about it as we saw the Rata apparently in every stage of its progress. It bears a beautiful crimson flower which at a distance resembles (except in colour) that of a great number of the myrtle. On inspection however it is found to consist entirely of a great number of stamens and one central pistil, being entirely deficient of petals or calyx. The numberless gay flowers crowding the trees, particularly the topmost branches, affords as beautiful a sight as any the woods can boast of.

Survey diaries and field books are also ethnographic texts; ostensibly means by which Europeans represent themselves to their Others. Surveyors like S. Percy Smith and W. H. Skinner were actively engaged both with the transformation of the landscape and the 'conservation' of its native people. Both Skinner and Smith were later active members of the Polynesian Society. As surveyors, they actively modified the landscape; but as ethnographers, were intent on conserving and saving at least the image of the people who inhabited that space. (This contradiction may be partially explained contextually. In the early years of the colony, land was surveyed in response to the settler demand for it. During the 1890s, scholarly interest in Maori culture coincided with the numerical decline of the Maori population.) Similarly, Skinner's Ngatimaru diary contains some ethnological reflection:

They [Maori] open their doors to you and you are welcome, yes, welcome to everything they have in a reasonable kind of manner. As a people, they dislike to be thought or accused of having been cannibals. This seems to touch them on a sore point: seems to remind them of something they would forget. Yet when one considers what a short time [ago] these fellows were cannibals and what rapid strides they are making in civilisation, you pause with wonder, and glance back at our forefathers in the old country. . . . These aborigines much resemble the ancient Britons. They almost worship some of the trees in the forest. . . . (34, 53)

Skinner's diary also records cultural misunderstandings between field surveyors and Maori. 'Sunday spent here today in the bush is wretched,' he wrote. 'Not being a native linguist I do not appreciate it at all' (24). At Ngatimaru, Skinner observed how 'The [Maori] seem to fancy that wherever the line goes there the boundary is, and of course all the land within the line is purchased by the Govt. I explained through Matine and myself as well as I could how I threw away the lines when I had found out the positions of certain rivers and points' (40). He later noted 'They [Maori] do not understand taking another natives land as a gift from the Govt. They do not yet understand Confiscation—which renders the whole of the land the property of Govt. and enables Govt. to deal it out as they please...' (68). Clearly, then, in the absence of commonly held perceptions of landscape, both parties were talking past each other.

Maori opposition to surveying was not uncommon as surveyors cut lines through cultivations and across tribal boundaries. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the surveyor with his theodolite, together with the

Native Land Court, became for many Maori a metaphor for loss and the portent of land alienation. Skinner commented on this opposition: 'I think I was wise in deciding not to go [up the Makino river] for about 12 o'clock Te Whenu sent a messenger to me, from Pai Haa, to tell me that if I stayed at Rongoreti after tomorrow he would burn this house also' (44). Later in the diary he admits: 'There is great opposition down here to my surveying and also the road. Titokowaru sends messages up here nearly every day' (71; see also Byrnes 85-98).

Survey diaries also offered the space for (subjective) reflection. On Christmas Day 1872, Skinner addressed his diary: 'here I am this evening having just returned from a hard days work—surveying, for no holidays are kept in the bush out here at Ngatimaru' (25). Long periods of isolation, with only the company of the campfire no doubt encouraged such introspective thoughts. Skinner's diary entry for 15 April 1873 simply reads: 'Straightened above line with Theodolite. The original line appears to be very crooked. I have made a kind of an average line. Very difficult work this—"traversing straight lines". The more I see of these surveys the greater the confusion appears to be' (65). Skinner also illustrated his narrative with frequent anecdotal portraits. He tells, for example, of an encounter with a deserter he suspects is 'Kimbal Bent', records a visit to Pukemahoe, 'a kind of headquarters of Titoko [Titokowaru]', and describes Titokowaru's 'strong hold' at Tunupo. (3, 7, 48)

While the content of survey journals and diaries is rich and diverse, the circumstances in which they were created also pose interesting issues for the historian. The primary task of the historian is to historicise any given text: to understand a source in its immediate context and to explain it in terms of the conditions under which it was produced. Texts are cultural practices which not only create knowledge but also the very reality they appear to describe: or in Hayden White's terms, texts are 'a complex mediation between various codes by which reality is to be assigned possible meanings' (185-213). Surveying texts are products of particular discursive formations, where surveyors' efforts to possess the land through naming and mapping were part of the larger enterprise of colonisation through language. As Foucault has also argued, conflicts of power are invariably based in conflicts in language and discourse. Survey diaries and field books need to be considered both in terms of their immediate social, political and economic contexts, and in relation to the larger ideological formations to which they belong. In this respect, they are never innocent

sources. While these records are not entirely unreliable, they must be read with caution: diaries, for instance, which appear to be complete and seamless representations of reality, are highly subjective and personalised constructions. Personal diaries—like sketches and maps—while useful for the rich commentary they provide, must therefore be regarded as powerful ideological constructs.

The field book was invaluable to the surveyor. As Westland surveyor Charles Douglas noted, 'its a fine thing a Diary a fellow doesn't need to keep up a connected narrative but just jot down the thoughts that come into his head' (9). Personal perspective was constructed in the process of narration. Skinner's diary was composed while travelling and was part of his inscription of the landscape. The writing of his diary was an active part of his occupation of the country. 'It is not until you really travel through the country,' he wrote, 'that you can form an idea of the immense barriers that are in existence to prevent such an undertaking' (9). There is evidence which suggests that Skinner composed his diary with an audience in mind; his account of the Ngatimaru survey was published simultaneously in the *Taranaki Herald*. The diary itself has a one-way chronology and a continuity which is almost a literary illusion. While most of the narrative is concerned with describing the journey out, the return trip is glossed over. If the narrative account is seen as representation of track-making, then the return journey is not omitted, but is later incorporated into the tale of the outward trip as alterations and minor digressions. These field books and diaries are characterised by a transitory and open-ended quality which reflects the less than ideal conditions under which they were created. As Australian historian Paul Carter has argued, 'the personality of travellers is not something there from the beginning, a quotient of inheritance and environment: it is an identity consciously constructed through travelling' (1987: 100). Andrew Hassam has further discussed the issue of 'self-presence' as a distinctive characteristic of the travel diary. The diary is self-referential in that the diarist uses language to create both the space and the occasion in which to write; it is an intentional act which reflects the motives of the subject and brings that space into consciousness. Carter has suggested that rather than think of such travel writings as 'disguised autobiographies or failed fictions, we should recognise that their true subject is *historical space*—spatiality as a historical experience' (1992: 22). Bearing in mind the historical specificity of Carter's remarks, his observations are significant in the New Zealand context.

CONCLUSION

If histories are, as Greg Denning has suggested, 'the texted past', then much of the history of colonial land surveying (and something of the wider process of colonisation itself) may be gleaned from the diaries and field books of colonial land surveyors. These 'hidden' sources are valuable to the historian because of their content and context and the ways in which these two features are intimately related. These sources are highly subjective and reflective, and contribute to a narrative which challenges the authoritative and seamless self-image the colonial enterprise attempted to project. Together these texts are evidence that colonisation was not an homogenous or uniform process, but one that was characterised by moments of exchange, conflict, and ambivalence.

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