

VINCENT PYKE (born Pike), 1827 –1894

Daphne Lawless

Vincent Pyke's main contribution to the history of colonial New Zealand was as a politician, a tireless advocate for the Central Otago goldfields and their mining and smallholding population. It is from that experience that he drew much of the inspiration for his fiction. Although described by modern critics as 'crude', 'simple', and 'melodramatic', his works hold the distinction of being some of the earliest New Zealand-produced and New Zealand-themed fiction to find a mass market in New Zealand itself.

Pyke (whose family name was originally spelt 'Pike' until changed after his marriage) was born in Shepton Mallet, Somersetshire, England, the son of a tinman and ironmonger. Working as a linen draper in the regional centre of Bristol, he married Frances Elizabeth Renwick in 1846. The couple had four sons and a daughter, who mostly went on to careers of distinction in New Zealand.

A significant turning point in his life was his initiation in 1850 into the Royal Clarence Masonic Lodge in Bristol. He was later to become a prominent figure in New Zealand freemasonry, and his political career was distinguished by his advocacy of the middle-class and upwardly-mobile working class sectors of society from whom Masonry largely recruited in the 19th century.

The Pykes emigrated to Australia in 1851. Landing in Adelaide, Pyke learned of the discovery of gold in Victoria, where he spent two years as a miner before setting up a store in Castlemaine. His political career began as an advocate for the 'diggers' of the Victorian goldfields. His skills as an orator led to the miners of Mount Alexander nominating him for one of the eight seats reserved for goldfields representatives on the colonial Governor's nominated Legislative Council. In the aftermath of the Eureka rebellion in 1854, Pyke lobbied for an assembly elected by secret ballot which could better represent the goldfields. Thanks to miners' support the proposal was forced upon a hostile government, and in 1856 Pyke was elected to the first Legislative Assembly as the member for Castlemaine Boroughs. Pyke's first published text is a lecture on Australian exploration given at Trades Hall, Melbourne, in 1860.

Pyke suffered from recurrent financial difficulties throughout his lifetime. His first visit to Otago in 1862 was undertaken, by his own account, 'in pursuit of health' – Pyke suffered from poor health for most of his life, often exacerbated by overindulgence in alcohol and food. However, 1862 was also the year of the first Otago gold rush. James Crombie Parcell says that Pyke was sent by the Victorian government 'following a request by the Otago Provincial Government... for a man who could undertake the goldfields administration'. Whether he went seeking the position or whether the matter arose fortuitously, Pyke was offered and accepted the position of head of the Otago government's new Goldfields Department. (The official title of Pyke's position was 'Goldfields Secretary', but he was often styled 'Goldfields Commissioner', in analogy with similar positions on Australian and Canadian fields.) The new position entailed a two-thirds cut in Pyke's Australian salary, but Morton suggests that it had the additional benefit of getting him out of the way of a court-case concerning rent on office space in Melbourne.

By June 1862 Pyke had submitted a proposal for regulations for the Otago goldfields, only a week after his appointment as commissioner. T. J. Hearn comments: 'Based largely on Victorian precedents but modified to meet Otago's particular conditions and requirements, these regulations formed the principal basis on which the goldmining industry in New Zealand developed.' The unworkability of the previous mining regulations – including the requirement for claims to be marked with wooden pegs, when wood was extremely scarce in Central Otago – was later satirised in Pyke's goldfields novels.

In August 1865, Pyke set off from Clyde with a small expedition to discover a practicable land route from the Lake Wanaka region to the West Coast; the goal was to encourage transient West Coast miners to adopt a more settled life in Otago. The expedition reached the West Coast and returned safely, though not without its adventures – much of their provisions were lost on the homeward journey and the famously portly Pyke's newly svelte figure attracted popular comment on his return to Dunedin. Pyke's narrative of the voyage, contained in a letter to Provincial Secretary Frederick Walker, was later published. The narrative shows off Pyke's skills with descriptive language and flair for the dramatic. A summarised version of this narrative appears in Appendix N of Pyke's *History of the Early Gold Discoveries in Otago*.

Pyke lost his job as Goldfields Secretary in 1867, a casualty of a power struggle between the General (national) and Provincial Governments over

control of the goldfields. Pyke had prospered while his Masonic brother John Hyde-Harris was Superintendent of Otago Province – Hyde-Harris was a founding member of Pyke's Lodge Otago Kilwinning. But he felt he had been ignored and under-utilised by later Provincial administrations. This experience doubtless contributed to Pyke's later support for the abolition of the Provinces as a member of the colonial Parliament.

Pyke does not seem to have borne any particular grudge against the Province of Otago for his ouster as Goldfields Secretary; his first published book was a guidebook to *The Province of Otago* (1868) which sets out to paint an inviting picture of the Province for potential immigrants. The text contains many historical ironies, such as Pyke's satisfied statement that 'rabbits have been turned out in several localities, and have already increased so largely as now to constitute a recognised item of food'. He also comments that the flesh of the kiwi is 'unlike any other bird... [but] most pleasant and tender' – a discovery apparently made on his West Coast expedition.

Pyke's affection for Otago extended to a keen interest in the Scottish language and culture of the original settlers. In 1870, according to George Griffiths, Pyke

had a friendly dispute with a Scottish settler named George Brodie. Though himself an Englishman who had never strayed further north than Cheltenham, Pyke boldly asserted that he understood the Lowland Scots idiom well enough to write in it. To Brodie, such a claim was absurd. Pyke issued a challenge. He would write a story for Brodie to inspect before sending it on to Messrs Chambers, in Edinburgh, for publication. If accepted, Pyke would win the day. The multi-talented Pyke soon produced 'Lost at the Goldfields: A Tale of the Otago Diggings', which in due course appeared in *Chambers Journal*, and was later republished in Dunedin.

James Burns' annotated bibliography of New Zealand novels gives an incorrect date of 1868 for the first publication of 'Lost at the Goldfields' – the correct date of first publication is yet to be ascertained. The story was republished in 1875 in *The Southern Mercury*, a journal edited by Pyke himself. It prefigures Pyke's goldfields fiction in concentrating on strong, idiosyncratic characters, and alternating exaggerated sentimentality with broad humour – the narrator's 'mate', apparently lost in a snowstorm on the Dunstan Ranges, finds his way home only to cause his colleagues to flee in terror from a 'ghost'.

The year 1873 was momentous for Pyke. It was the year his career as an elected politician began – he took leave of absence from the position of goldfields warden and, after losing an election for the provincial council seat of Tuapeka, was elected to the colonial House of Representatives as member for the Wakatipu region. It was also the year in which his career in journalism began – moving to Dunedin, he founded the *Southern Mercury* in late 1873 (and the *Otago Guardian* in the next year). But it was also the year in which his first goldfields novel – *Wild Will Enderby* – was published. This ‘sprawling, vigorous and vulgar’ novel, according to Patrick Evans, ‘sold out three editions in its first year’. In an ‘Exordium’ to the 1889 reprint of the novel, Pyke makes it clear how much of the character and setting of the novel is based on his personal experience on the goldfields. The most important character – George Washington Pratt – is based, by Pyke’s account, on the American prospector George Hartley, one of the discoverers of gold in the Molyneux (Clutha) river. The chapter where Pratt follows a band of prospectors to their ‘secret’ workings along the Arrow River is also based on an actual event (narrated in Pyke’s own *History of the Early Gold Discoveries in Otago*, Additional Chapter III).

The novel, like all Pyke’s fiction, follows a conventional masculine romance plot. The titular character – who confusingly goes by the pseudonym ‘Harry Grey’ for most of the novel – is the headstrong son of a Victorian pastoral family, who goes to seek his fortune on the Dunstan goldfields. He forms a prospecting partnership with the more experienced Pratt, and the plot of the novel is driven by their need to protect their winnings from the attentions of a gang of ruffians, picturesquely named ‘Ginger’, ‘Tripes’ and ‘Flash Jimmy’. In a common theme in Pyke’s fiction, both men are motivated by the necessity to ‘provide’ for a future marriage to a ‘pure’ bride, presented as the epitome of virtue – in Enderby’s case, this is complicated by his infatuation with another, decidedly less pure woman. Also of note is an element of ‘courtroom drama’, as Pratt is mistakenly accused of the murder of his partner.

The style of the novel is described by E. H. McCormick as ‘crude in the wrong way’. The plot is overcomplicated and seems to lack focus – perhaps because its main focus is around Enderby, a character less interesting and not so well depicted as Pratt. The narrative voice continually intrudes to point the moral lessons of the plot at the expense of the action. As if to emphasize the distance of this cultured literary voice from those of the unsophisticated miners whose life it portrays, the prose is weighed down with what McCormick calls ‘heavy jocosity’ – often in the form of portentous circumlocutions.

McCormick gives as example the scene where Enderby's uncle orders 'his sister's son to depart for a region, the atmosphere of which is popularly supposed to be excessively sultry' – i.e., to go to hell. However, the patronising tone of the narration is balanced by a sympathetic portrayal of the 'democratic Yankee' Pratt, and his disrespect for the pompous and incompetent goldfields administrators and police. The educated liberal reformer Pyke reveals himself in a novel which both champions and condescends to the striving lower orders. Evans considers it a partly successful attempt to create a 'democratic frontier tradition'. In New Zealand along the lines of that which existed in America and Australia.

In response to the novel's runaway success, Pyke rushed out a sequel – *The Adventures of George Washington Pratt* – in the next year. This sequel is mainly set in and around the Arrowtown and Queenstown goldfields. While setting out with new companions for these as-yet untapped fields, Pratt becomes guardian to a wife and child cruelly neglected by a mercenary husband. The gang from the previous novel encourage the jealous husband to take revenge on Pratt, who must also fend off the attentions of the grateful wife to remain faithful to his intended bride back in Iowa. Among other incidents, Pratt saves a man from a lynching, survives a direct lightning strike on Lake Wakatipu, and becomes lost in the uncharted bush. The novel ends with the happy ending – return home and marriage – denied to Pratt in *Enderby*. The second novel, while not as popular as its predecessor, has a less intrusive narrative style and a more straightforward plotline, at least partly due to its concentration on Pratt as the central character. The main return to the 'heavy jocosity' of the original is an 'Envoi' where the narrator pretends to consult a medium to find out what became of Pratt.

Pyke's political career began in earnest in 1875, when he was elected to the colonial parliament for the goldfields seat of Dunstan. He was a leading voice in advocating the abolition of the Provincial governments and their replacement by a system of counties and other local councils. The Dunstan district became part of Vincent County – named after Pyke by the House of Representatives when, according to David Hall, 'an opponent's ironical remark was taken seriously'. (The House, however, declined to name the county 'St. Vincent'.) Pyke was elected to the Vincent County Council and served as its chair until 1882. His stewardship was marred by a controversy over whether Cromwell or Clyde should be the seat of the county administration. Pyke was sympathetic to the claims of Clyde, but Cromwell residents claimed that he had promised them the honour in return for their agreement to merge their own borough into Vincent County. When the council

made its decision, Pyke initially voted for Cromwell – thus tying the vote – and then used his casting vote as chair to choose Clyde. An outraged *Cromwell Argus* described him as ‘a fresh-water shark’; his effigy was hanged before the Cromwell Town Hall and thereupon tossed into the Kawarau Gorge ‘to the accompaniment of a suitable dirge from the town’s brass band’ (Hearn).

Pyke continued to write short stories – or novellas – during the 1880s, which all follow the familiar romance plot. ‘Under the Wattles: An Australian Pastoral’, published in the *New Zealand Illustrated Magazine* in 1880 and described in the *Oxford History of New Zealand Literature* as a ‘truncated novel’, has an essentially similar plot to Pyke’s second notable work in Scottish dialect, *Craigielinn*. Both works revolve around a poor but honest young man seeking to win the heart of another ‘pure’ bride, the daughter of a rich landowner who disapproves of his suit. ‘Under the Wattles’ takes place in the lavishly described Victorian countryside, and ends with the young suitor inheriting wealth and position, marrying his beloved in secret and then presenting his father in law with a *fait accompli*.

Craigielinn, on the other hand, is a story of the pre-history of the Otago settlement. The unwilling father-in-law in this novel is a traditional Scottish ‘laird’, who initially rejects the hero’s suit for his daughter and his plan to seek his fortune in the Antipodes. The laird, in severe financial difficulties, instead plans to marry his daughter off to the son of his major Edinburgh creditor. His mind is only changed when a catastrophic flood reveals his preferred candidate to be a cowardly, unmanly creature. In this way, the ‘new Scotland of the South’ redeems the traditional social structure of the homeland. The novel is published under the name of ‘F. E. Renwick’ (Pyke’s wife’s maiden name), and a ‘Mr Renwick’ appears in the novel as one of the leaders of the Otago settlement mission. The style of the novel and the accuracy of the ‘Doric’ dialect were enough to win the Ayrshire Association’s prize for Scottish stories – the introduction, from Otago High School rector W. MacDonald, praises ‘the excellent knowledge of the Scottish language which it displays’ and compares it to the work of prominent Scottish novelists such as George MacDonald. Unlike any of Pyke’s other works of fiction, it is narrated from the point of view of the female romantic lead. As in ‘Lost in the Goldfields’, Pyke’s tendency to show off at his characters’ expense sometimes shows through, with occasional lapses into polysyllabic jargon which intrude on the illusion of a rural Scottish voice.

Pyke’s final major work of fiction is another goldfields romance, *White Hood*, published in a compendium with Thorpe Talbot’s *Blue Cap* in 1886.

This story, once again set in the Arrowtown goldfields, is a melodramatic tale of romantic betrayal and murder which revolves around a pair of miners, 'Handsome George' and 'Dusky Jim'. When George is murdered, Jim assumes that his beloved Mary has committed the crime to protect herself from George's attentions and takes the blame. He spends a year in jail before the real culprit – a local barmaid whom George had made pregnant – is revealed when she tries to kill Mary as well. The courtroom scene from *Wild Will Enderby* is reprised, along with a character who suffers false imprisonment rather than betray a trust. It is the most 'sensational' of Pyke's fictional works, which reprises *Enderby* in balancing the 'pure' female lead with a 'fallen woman' adversary.

Pyke's parliamentary career was devoted to two major causes – the future of permanent land settlement in the goldfields areas, and a Central Otago railway. Hearn notes that 'he resolved a dispute over possible routes [for the railway] in favour of the Strath Taieri route, marshalled local support, and turned the first sod at Wingatui on 7 June 1879.' On the land issue, Pyke's championing of small farmers led him to strongly oppose practice of 'dummying' – whereby large freeholds would be acquired and subdivided by the Government, only for the original landowners to reacquire most of the subdivisions under assumed names. In both these causes, Pyke's goal was for Central Otago to be settled and populated, rather than remaining the 'absolute desolation' which he saw under the domain of the large run-holders.

Pyke continued to make enemies in the course of his parliamentary work. The people of Tapanui in 1884 resolved to emulate Cromwell and hang Pyke in effigy; at the last minute, to Pyke's reported amusement, it was discovered that the effigy had gone missing. However, Pyke attracted more note for the style of his interventions in Parliament than their substance. He was noted for gambling and heavy drinking, and political cartoonists always caricatured him with a swollen red nose. In a debate on his beloved Central Otago railway in 1880, Pyke pleaded his case with such vehemence that the Speaker ordered his arrest, and the House adjourned to let him cool down. Richard Seddon – initiated in 1870 into a West Coast Masonic lodge which Pyke had founded – was a continual adversary. On one occasion, according to John Martin, 'Pyke threatened Seddon with his walking stick but struck another MP by accident before being hauled – still shouting – out into the lobby'.

Pyke's journalistic career continued during the 1880s. He became editor of the Dunedin *Morning Herald* in 1882, and contributed humorous columns and 'old identity stories' to papers such as the *Southern Mercury* and the *Tapanui*

Courier. Carol Cheesman, writing in the *New Zealand Illustrated Magazine* in 1903, also mentions a 'lost novel of the Land Wars' entitled *Eustace Egremont*. No trace of this last work seems to exist. From the 1880s onwards, Pyke concentrated his attention on non-fiction. His concern for the small capitalist and the small landholder determined his subject matter, for the most part – he wrote two guidebooks to mining law, two on land law and one on the law of local bodies, as well as a pamphlet giving his theory on the extinction of the moa. His non-fiction magnum opus, however, was based on perhaps the formative experience of his life – *History of the Early Gold Discoveries in New Zealand* (1887). Still considered a definitive history of the Otago gold rush, the style retains a lot of the colour and bravado which made Pyke's goldfield novels stand out – although in a much subdued form.

One further creative work of Pyke's presents something of a puzzle – the patriotic song '(Grand) Old Flag', written and published in 1885. James Parcell states that it was originally set to music by 'Leonard Cox, a fourteen-year-old Dunedin boy who was later well known as a musician'. No trace of this version seems to exist today, although settings of Pyke's words by at least four other composers were published. The song was adopted by the conservative Primrose League in England as a national song – presumably omitting the last verse with its reference to the Southern Cross. It seems to have gained some popularity in New Zealand, especially (after Pyke's death) during the patriotic upsurge around the Boer War, and was performed by some popular singers.

Vincent Pyke's name is still associated with Central Otago in many different forms. The Clyde Town Hall and Masonic Lodge, which he personally consecrated as local Grand Master in 1870, still stands. Many of the place names of the Dunstan and Wakatipu regions remain from his days as Goldfields Secretary. One of the rivers which he crossed on his Haast expedition in 1865 is still known as the Pyke River. The rivers of the Ranfurly area, on the other hand – 'Wedderburn', 'Kyeburn', 'Eweburn', 'Swinburn' – were, according to one website, 'named by Pyke in a fit of intense sarcasm' after his careful work discovering the original Māori names was rejected.

From 1883 until 1890 Pyke lived in Dunedin, where he was a regular contributor to the *Otago Witness*. Pyke was defeated in the Wakatipu seat in the 1890 Parliamentary elections, but was re-elected to the Tuapeka seat in 1893. It was in the town of Lawrence in this electorate that he died, on 4 June 1894, aged 67. His tombstone in Dunedin's Northern Cemetery is marked by a monument 'in Grateful Memory of his many public services'. Although a prolific and not untalented author, Pyke's achievements as a fiction writer

were dwarfed by his skills as a politician. His work as goldfields administrator and Member of Parliament shaped the society of colonial Otago with more power than his fiction depicts it.

LINKS

[Dictionary of New Zealand Biography](#)

[Te Ara – 1966 Encyclopedia of New Zealand](#)

[Caricature at New Zealand History on line](#)

[New Zealand Electronic Text Centre](#)

[The Northern Cemetery – Dunedin's Buried History](#)

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