

## Roads are big business



Temple, William, 1833-1919. Deviation on the road to Waikato, made by the Royal Artillery, through Williamson's Clearing. Urquhart album. Ref: PA1-q-250-48. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand.  
[/records/22678558](#)

Roads are big business. New Zealand's state highways were listed in the Crown's accounts as being worth just over \$37 billion in 2020, and the plan is to spend another \$6 billion on improvements and maintenance. Auckland's own roads are worth over \$10 billion once you count bridges, footpaths and cycleways, requiring \$725,000 a day to keep up with depreciation. Whichever way you count it, roads mean serious dollars.

It's not as though this is a new thing. The drive to open up New Zealand's provinces for settlement required significant expenditure on roads – over £1,000,000 was spent by the Crown between 1871 to 1881 to create 2,000 miles of roads and tracks.<sup>1</sup> Historian James Belich makes it clear why such sizeable investments were deemed necessary:

“Roads were a metaphor for progress and colonisation itself in the colonial mind; there was an almost religious respect for their powers.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup> James Belich, *Making peoples*, Penguin, Auckland (1996).

<sup>2</sup> James Belich, *Making peoples*, Penguin, Auckland (1996).

While road building was almost always a public enterprise (and largely remains that way today), its purposes were closely tied to private endeavour and wealth generation. Edward Gibbon Wakefield's plan for the colonisation of New Zealand put both private and public enterprise together tightly to help overcome a growing concern in Britain that colonial ventures were no longer economic. Wakefield's approach released the financial burden of colonial ventures from the home country, funding emigration from land sales rather than taxes or other rents. All that was needed was access to sufficient land, and roads were a key part of doing that.

Emptiness has always had a strong presence in New Zealand landscape art, especially in the 19th Century where the presence of people in the landscape was "an inconvenient reality for land-hungry settlers."<sup>3</sup> But roads have been an equally pervasive element. Cheryl Sotheran's analysis of William Fox's paintings of the mid 19th Century shows us that many of his works were not about how empty the land was, but instead places the emphasis on "potential productivity". Emptiness was one thing to communicate to prospective settlers, but arguably more important is the message of impending prosperity amidst security. A fleeting glimpse of infrastructure-in-place acts as a strong lure to an impending investor, and roads were the perfect visual device.

If we reach back to Enlightenment philosopher John Locke we find the intellectual backing for Wakefield's focus on potential productivity. Locke's labour theory of property posited that a right to property only arose when an individual worked the land, their labour entering into the land and thereby making it their property - it was through labour that land gained value. The full benefits only occurred when the land was cultivated and enclosed – not held in common like in most tribally-based societies.

Enclosure focused on the formal and informal methods of removing communal rights and ownership over land and replacing this with a system of individual ownership and access. Physical separation of the land with fences or hedges often accompanied the act of enclosure, and eventually became synonymous with the original meaning, but was not necessary for enclosure to take place. Surveying was the important tool for enclosure, providing a conceptual delineation that set the foundations for individual claims to identifiable sections and subdivisions, regardless of whether physical separation existed.

Wakefield's settler vision relied on imagery that spoke to Locke's theory of property, enticing would-be settlers to invest in a new life on the other side of the world by making it clear that cultivation and enclosure (which equals prosperity) was well underway.<sup>4</sup> Roads were an important device in this imagery, leading the viewer deep into the picture, hinting at how the potential productivity did not stop in the foreground but stretched beyond to what lies unseen further down the road. Roads were big colonial business.

The full expanse of roads as big business is revealed in William Temple's 1863 photograph of the construction of Great South Road. Yes there is the messaging of potential productivity to attract the prospective settler immigrants, but we also get glimpses into the wider story. The roadworkers toiling away to tame the wilderness are not hired labourers or contractors – they are soldiers of the British Army's Royal Artillery Regiment. Their intended destination is made clear in the title of the image – 'Deviation on the road to Waikato'.

Simon Dench initially places Temple's image in the 'oeuvre of the "literature of invasion"', but then balances this by recognising the layers at play:

"the clearings, roads and bridges had a symbolic importance for the colonists. The creation of farms from a primeval wilderness was driven by ideological as well as economic imperatives, and the construction of roads and bridges served a military purpose while also representing progress in a more general sense."<sup>5</sup>

---

<sup>3</sup> Hamish Keith, *The big picture. A history of New Zealand art since 1642*, Random House, Auckland (2007).

<sup>4</sup> Robin Skinner, *Representations of architecture and New Zealand in London, 1841-1860*, PhD thesis, University of Auckland (2007).

<sup>5</sup> Simon Dench, "Invading the Waikato. A post-colonial review", pp.33-49 in *New Zealand Journal of History* 45(1), 2011.

This is the reality of one of the most travelled parts of our country, a road put in place for military and economic reasons. These are not separate purposes but go hand-in-hand. It is hard to tell whether Sir George Grey always intended to invade the Waikato back when he first put his soldiers to work on improving and extending Great South Road in 1861. It may have been a case of progressing the road to open up the land, and he also had the option of facilitating an invasion if needed.

Art, surveying, and the military. All three are forms of invasion. The likes of our earliest celebrated landscape artists were also surveyors – Samuel Brees, Charles Heaphy, Patrick Hogan. Art reframes the way we see the land, reconstructing it to what we want it to be, making it a landscape. Surveying does much the same, “naming, taming, marking out and mapping of the land were assertions of colonising power” as Giselle Byrnes puts it.<sup>6</sup> A different form of violence than that performed by soldiers, but the same outcome nonetheless. And while an artillery shell may reach ahead one or two kilometres, surveyors reached ahead in time and space. In 1859 the formed part of Great South Road extended to Drury, but even the rough track through the kainga at Rangiriri and down as far as Ngaruawahia – some 70km from Drury – had been named part of the road,<sup>7</sup> despite it never physically being turned into a road for up to a decade later.

Historian Vincent O'Malley tells us that the 'great war for New Zealand' (the Waikato War) broke out less than 50 kilometres from Queen Street.<sup>8</sup> He probably wouldn't dispute that war had even begun right on Queen Street and many years before – Patrick Hogan's published image both celebrated progress to date in 1852 and the road heading south pointed the direction for the decades to come.

Queen Street, Shortland Street, Symonds Street, Hobson, Albert, Wakefield, Wellesley, Grey, Victoria – this was the pattern of naming and claiming via roads in the area. Even Great South Road transported these names, starting near enough to Queen Street (not far from Albert Barracks where the main body of troops were stationed), and ending just before the Waikato invasion at Queens Redoubt (the main fortification securing the southern end of the road at Pokeno). Some twenty stockades, redoubts and blockhouses were situated between the start and the end according to Nigel Prickett,<sup>9</sup> providing security and allowing commerce to flourish as the settlers spread. This was civilisation on the march, following the road up to the frontier. Once the road ended, so did civilisation – beyond that was the wild and the dangerous, untamed by surveyor, artist or the military.

'Pokeno! Pokeno!' shouted the New Zealand Herald on 4 July 1864, 'Capitalists, look at the extent of frontage this property commands to the Great South Road. In a few years the value will have increased 500 fold.' No clearer a shout is needed as to the impact that the Great South Road had on development. Wherever a redoubt or stocktake popped up along a road, the land surrounding it became hot property. Many a local businessman also followed the steady stream of tender advertisements that appeared in the papers in the years before – cutting, forming, metalling, reforming and repairing the Great South Road.

Of course, roads are also hungry business. All this forming and metalling consumes significant resources, with scoria some of the most prized for road building due to its superior drainage attributes. Despite being built on a volcanic plateau, Auckland must today import its scoria from nearby areas since it voraciously consumed its own scoria stores many years ago. The impact of this voraciousness is largely forgotten, since the sources of the scoria have been removed from the landscape. Archaeologists are now the ones who must tell us what used to be – 'Some former cones have been completely destroyed by quarrying; all the survivors have been modified to a greater or lesser extent by quarrying, buildings, military installations, water reservoirs, roads and playing fields.'<sup>10</sup> Mt Smart, previously rising some 57m above the surrounding area, full of scoria, was erased

---

<sup>6</sup> Giselle Byrnes, *Boundary markers. Land surveying and the colonisation of New Zealand*, Bridget Williams Books, Auckland (2002).

<sup>7</sup> Vaughn Yarwood, "The Great South Road: where cultures converge" *New Zealand Geographic* 61:Jan/Feb 2003, online at <https://www.nzgeo.com/stories/the-great-south-road-where-cultures-converge/>

<sup>8</sup> Vincent O'Malley, "The great war for NZ broke out less than 50 km from Queen St": Vincent O'Malley on the Waikato War and the making of Auckland", *The Spinoff*, December 6 2016, online at <https://thespinoff.co.nz/society/06-12-2016/the-great-war-for-nz-broke-out-less-than-50-km-from-queen-st-vincent-omalley-on-the-waikato-war-and-the-making-of-auckland/>

<sup>9</sup> Nigel Prickett, *Fortifications of the New Zealand Wars*, New Zealand Department of Conservation:Wellington, 2016.

<sup>10</sup> Janet Davidson, 'Archaeological investigations at Maungarei: A large Māori settlement on a volcanic cone in Auckland, New Zealand', pp.19-100 in *Tuhinga*, 22(2011).

to feed the urban development machine. The cones that are lucky enough to still stand are simply diverted around, the progress of roads not halted but simply snaking past. A disrupted grid is a small price to pay to continue the big business of roads.

Maybe it is because roads are big business that they do not feature significantly in New Zealand's art history. Perhaps it is because they are just givens, we expect them to be there, we don't question why they are there or how they got there. Today we still see roads as utilitarian devices that help drive the economy, we still see them as signs of civilisation and progress. Even when Robert Ellis' *Motorway City* series from the 1960's explored the transformation of Auckland's landscape by the new motorway system, the history of what was already there was not really questioned or revealed - it was more about what the city had become and was becoming, rather than how it came to be.

Tyson Schmidt