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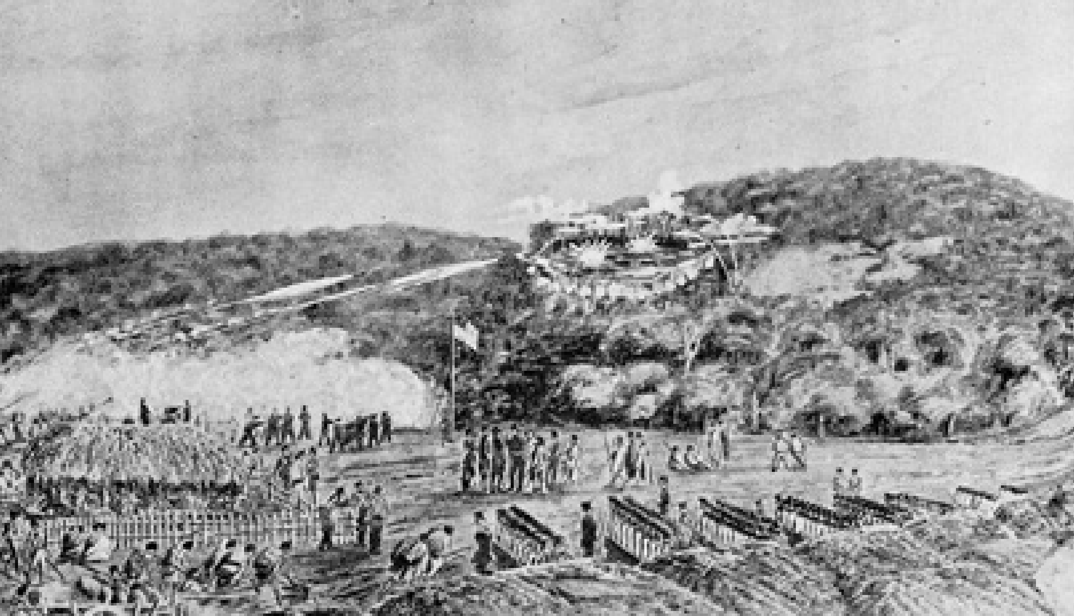
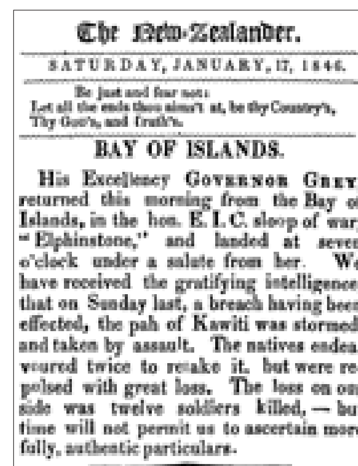
Birth of the *New Zealander*

EARLY ON A SATURDAY MORNING in the summer of 1846, the people of Auckland were woken by the booming of a ship's guns on the Waitematā Harbour. The ship was the *Elphinstone* and the guns were a salute to its very important passenger, Governor George Grey, who was returning from the campaign against Ngā Puhi chiefs Heke and Kawiti in the Bay of Islands. The *New Zealander* newspaper was ready to record the governor's arrival but quickly realised the *Elphinstone* carried more than just a VIP, it also brought the hottest news to reach Auckland since the paper had been founded the year before. Kawiti's seemingly impregnable bush fortress — Ruapekapeka Pā, the bat's nest — had fallen.[1]

A force of 1300 British troops, under the command of Colonel Harry Despard and observed by Governor Grey, had taken five weeks to reach the pā, besiege it and, finally, occupy it. The news travelled a little faster but only just; it took seven days by land and sea to reach Auckland although the pace quickened when it fell into the hands of the *New Zealander*, which rushed it into print. The paper had been caught in a typical bind of journalism: it had the bare bones of a great story but no



The bombardment of Ruapekapeka Pā from a drawing by a British soldier. *PUBL-0054-1-077, ATL*



The New-Zealander.

SATURDAY, JANUARY, 17, 1846.

Be just and fear not:
Let all the ends thou aim'st at, be thy Country's,
Thy God's, and Truth's.

BAY OF ISLANDS.

His Excellency GOVERNOR GREY, returned this morning from the Bay of Islands, in the hon. E. I. C. sloop of war, "Elphinstone," and landed at seven o'clock under a salute from her. We have received the gratifying intelligence, that on Sunday last, a breach having been effected, the pah of Kawiti was stormed, and taken by assault. The natives endeavoured twice to retake it, but were repulsed with great loss. The loss on our side was twelve soldiers killed, — but time will not permit us to ascertain more fully, authentic particulars.

event may have been brought about: but the manner in which possession was obtained of Kawiti's pah, did not, in our opinion, justify the lengthened, pompous, commendatory despatch of Colonel DESPARD, in which a mere casualty—of the defenders being at prayers without the pah, enabling our troops and allies to enter, unperceived and unmolested—is termed,—" the capture of a fortress, of extraordinary strength, by assault, and nobly defended by a brave and determined enemy"— We consider, therefore, that a plain, unvarnished narrative of the facts, from authentic sources, will be acceptable to our readers.

It appears that on the 1st of January, the British forces established themselves in a strong stockade, in the middle of a wood, dis-

The first and second drafts of history. On the left is the report published the morning the Elphinstone *arrived in Auckland and on the right the* New Zealander*'s debunking of Colonel Despard's self-serving account one week later.* New Zealander, *17 and 24 Jan 1846, Papers Past*

time to check the facts or add telling details. The first draft of this history was so brief it raised many more questions than it answered.[2]

In a town anxious about war uncomfortably close to its doorstep, news of the victory came as a great relief. People were eager to know how it had been achieved, who had done what, the names of the casualties and whether it meant an end to the fighting. Such was the clamour that the *New Zealander*, a weekly paper coming out every Saturday, published an extra edition on Monday, printing transcripts of the official despatches from Despard to Grey.[3] Because of the enormous demand for this story, Monday 19 January 1846 went down as the glory day of the paper's history. It claimed to have sold 2000 copies, a huge number in a town with a population of around 3000 and where a paper would normally sell no more than a couple of hundred every week.[4]

But as soon as this first draft had been published the *New Zealander* began work on a second draft, testing the official version. The next Saturday it ran a detailed editorial which concluded the story had been embellished to the point where it was simply not true.[5] It scorned Despard for his long, pompous despatch in which he claimed to have taken the pā by assault when, according to the paper's sources and its analysis of the official documents, the British troops had been able to enter unopposed because the Māori garrison were at Sunday prayers outside the wall.

The Ruapekapeka story fulfils the ideal of journalism as the pursuit of truth, digging behind the official version to tell it like it really is. It may seem an uncomplicated process, a treasure hunt in search of a solid nugget, but, as every journalist and historian knows, the truth is seldom so clear cut and the second draft of a story is not necessarily the final version. A century and a half later, disputes over what really happened continue with James Belich going much further than the *New Zealander* ever did: he claims that the battle was not a defeat for Kawiti

and Heke, not even a fortuitous one, but rather the execution of a ruse to draw the British into the dense bush behind the pā where their advantages in numbers and weapons would be nullified.[6] A counter-argument from Matthew Wright is that the truth was closer to the original despatches.[7] Regardless of what we think about these arguments, one point is certain: the newspaper saw its role as more than just transcriber of the official version.

The *New Zealander* was not the first newspaper in Auckland but it was the first to endure, lasting for just over 20 years. It fought an epic war for newspaper supremacy against the *Southern Cross*, a paper which had been founded in 1843, allowed to lapse in 1845 but revived in 1847. For much of the two decades from the mid-1840s to the mid-1860s, the *New Zealander* was regarded as the 'leading journal' and tried to hold itself aloof from the upstart *Cross* which was smaller, brasher and more aggressive. The war these two papers fought reveals much about the intense commercial and political pressures that all newspapers came under as well as the overriding importance of reader interests in deciding the victor.

The *New Zealander*'s finest hour was its reporting of the Ruapekapeka story. Seventeen years later, in 1863, when it came out as a daily for the first time, the paper reviewed its history and proudly recalled the event as though it was still fresh in everyone's memory. But it omitted the best part; how it had unpicked the self-serving official account. The reason for the omission was that by 1863 the *New Zealander* had long since become an ardent supporter of Governor Grey. To recall one of his great victories was one thing but to recall how the story had been officially distorted was quite another. But for much of the first year of its existence, which coincided with Grey's arrival in the colony, the *New Zealander* maintained a critical editorial line which increased in force as time went by, especially over Grey's attitude to settlers and speculators buying land directly from the Māori.

Yet most accounts of the *New Zealander*'s beginnings say it was pro-Grey and pro-Māori from birth.[8] The proprietor, John Williamson, was set up with a printing press by the Wesleyan missionaries supposedly because he, like his benefactors, was a strong advocate for the Māori. But this is a great oversimplification not only of what the paper stood for but how it changed over the years. The *New Zealander* was a good example of a newspaper bending and adjusting its stance according to the pressures of the political establishment — in the form of Governor Grey — the interests of its readers and the commercial imperative to make money.

The history of the *New Zealander* also undermines another dubious generalisation about the early colonial press, namely that papers were published primarily for political purposes in support of a developing upper class without the need to make profits.[9] This is based partly on the belief that the population was largely illiterate and in any case the working classes could not afford the cover price of sixpence. But statistics compiled for 1857 show 74 per cent of Pākehā living in Auckland could read and the cover price was not so important because each copy of the paper had multiple readers.[10] Moreover, John Williamson was not a great man of colonial politics when he founded the paper, much less the representative of a land-owning class. Rather he was a solid working-class man with ambitions to make a business out of his trade of printer.

Williamson was born in Ireland and migrated to Sydney with his wife and children in 1840 when he was 25 years old. He worked there for the *Australasian Chronicle* and the *Sydney Monitor* for a year, but it was not a happy time because Williamson was an alcoholic who frequently disgraced himself with early morning appearances at the city's police court.[11] In 1841, perhaps hoping to escape from his demons, he crossed the Tasman to work at the Auckland Printing Company. The company printed material for the government and commercial clients as well as publishing the town's first newspaper, the *New Zealand Herald and Auckland Gazette*, which had a brief and controversial career from 1841 to 1842.

The Auckland where Williamson was to make his life was a haphazard settlement. Its setting on the shores of the Waitematā was about as beautiful as it was possible to imagine, spoiled only by the ugliness of the

Auckland as John Williamson first saw it; an ugly little town that failed to live up to the beauty of its surroundings. James Richardson, George Grey Special Collections, Auckland Libraries, 4-9089

town that dignified itself as the capital of New Zealand. The population was only around 1500 in the year Williamson arrived, rising to about 3000 in the middle of the decade. They lived in wood and raupō cottages clustered around the waterfront and along Queen Street, which followed the course of Waihorotiu Stream.[12] It was not a healthy place. One visitor wrote: 'I saw nothing but a beggarly collection of poverty-stricken huts and wooden houses without any of the bustle and briskness that betokens business and prosperity . . . The streets and roads were unpaved and, in some places, knee-deep in mud; and the whole town had a slatternly and neglected look.'[13] Queen Street was especially reviled as being scarcely better than an open sewer.

It was not just the physical surrounds that seemed so unpromising but also the people themselves. Auckland was founded as a government town and was populated not by genuine colonists but by land speculators and others hoping to make a living, or a killing, from government funds.[14] One visitor saw those who were not in government as 'a collection of land-sharks, Pecksniffs, and jackals, who were on the alert for what could be picked up'.[15] But there was some industry. By 1845 there were sawmills, flour mills, breweries, a loom, a pottery, four brick kilns and a tannery as well as a rope-maker.[16] Among all the millers and builders were ten people employed in the printing and bookbinding industries; John Williamson was one of them.

Williamson soon came under the influence of the Reverend Walter Lawry, head of the Wesleyan Mission, who, it appears, was instrumental in helping him get over his alcoholism and converting him into a fierce — if occasionally backsliding — advocate of temperance.[17] He worked at the Auckland Printing Company until it was sold to the government. Most of his workmates were content to go along with their new employer but Williamson 'took a larger view of the public need, as well as of his own interests' and saw that he could make money from establishing a newspaper that represented popular opinion.[18] His ambition was actually much larger than that. What he was really aiming for was a commercial printing business, and it was his old friend and mentor Walter Lawry who helped him achieve this goal by arranging for him to acquire the printing press belonging to the Wesleyan South Seas Mission.[19] By the second week of publication, the prime spot at the top left-hand corner of the *New Zealander*'s front page was reserved for an advertisement for Williamson the printer, who pitched his services by showing off the wide range of typefaces at his disposal.

To make the newspaper part of his business turn a profit Williamson needed readers as well as advertisers, and that meant persuading people the paper was worth buying. A journeyman printer starting out in business could not afford the luxury of an expensive printing press just to further a political cause — especially that of a class to which he did not belong. The first edition of the *New Zealander*, on 7 June 1845, carried an appeal for public approval and support.[20] In return it promised to cover

John Williamson, reformed alcoholic, journeyman printer and proprietor of the New Zealander*, could not afford a printing press just to further a political cause.* 012453, ATL

the affairs of the colony rather than just bringing in news from overseas, contradicting the assumption that the early papers were not interested in local news.[21] It also promised to promote economic development by publishing information to encourage enterprise and by spreading the word in England about Auckland's many advantages. And far from being born pro-Māori, the *New Zealander* adopted the locally popular stand of urging the British Government to send out sufficient military forces to compel rebellious natives to obedience.[22]

Parochialism and progress were the common elements of every nineteenth-century Auckland newspaper's bargain with readers. But other factors varied as the community became more complex in the last three decades of the century, and the papers took sides on the big social questions of the day such as class and women's rights. These issues did not trouble Williamson's paper because it offered a vision of a society in which class did not matter. Rather than reflecting the interests of an elite it aimed to appeal to everyone because, it said, the differences of opinion that divided older, more populous countries could not be allowed to exist in a sparsely inhabited colony. The only sensible policy was for all classes unanimously to promote the advancement, welfare and prosperity of their adopted country.

Importantly, the political dimension of the *New Zealander*, and other papers like it, was not restricted to mobilising public opinion in the colony. Williamson, and just about everyone else in colonial journalism, knew the big decisions about New Zealand were made in England and so they sent copies of their papers to London. The hope was to attract the attention of important people in Parliament and the Colonial Office as well as Exeter Hall, the focal point for meetings of religious and philanthropic groups who campaigned on humanitarian issues. Some battles in the New Zealand newspaper wars were then fought on foreign soil as editors sought to extend their influence overseas and papers challenged each other as well as the official version of what was happening in the colony. There was a strong parochial element to these battles, with Auckland papers vigorously attempting to counter the stories told by papers from New Zealand Company settlements in the south. Thomas Forsaith, who edited both the *New Zealander* and the *Southern Cross*, wrote that it was difficult if not impossible for people in Britain to have a correct impression of events in New Zealand because the company's agents cloaked, exaggerated or perverted the truth in their own interests.[23]

In the mid-1860s the *New Zealander* expressed pride in the influence it claimed over Edward Cardwell, the secretary of state for the colonies. But what the British people thought was just as important to the settlers as what the politicians thought. David Burn, a later editor of both the *Cross* and the *New Zealander*, hoped for a distinct advantage in pushing Auckland's case in London because of his close friendship with Thomas Serle, a prominent journalist and playwright who was editor of the *Weekly Despatch*.[24] But it was a forlorn hope. Serle could detect no interest in colonial matters, even at the most auspicious moments, among London readers.[25]

By the late 1850s the *New Zealander* and the *Cross* were trying the direct approach by publishing monthly summaries prepared specially for readers in England.[26] In 1864 the *Cross* attributed the long distances that separated New Zealand from Britain to making the colonists more sensitive to what was being said about them.[27] This sensitivity was reflected in the nineteenth-century papers which eagerly repeated every complimentary reference from overseas and exploded with indignation at every hint of criticism.[28] Papers that sent pessimistic messages overseas were likely to find themselves accused of being traitors by their rivals.[29]

The *New Zealander* quickly settled into a format typical of all colonial papers of the mid-nineteenth century. For sixpence, the reader got a basic four pages on Saturday. The front page was taken up entirely by advertising which was directed at consumers as well as businesses. For instance, on 13 July 1850 there were ads for food, real estate, blankets, horses, pills and ointments, dwellings for rent, gardening supplies, pianos and cheese. The first editorial content was always the shipping news. Arrivals and departures were important in a place that depended on the sea for most of its trade as well as for its communications with the wider world. This might be followed by some other commercial news and then the leading article or editorial that gave the paper's opinion on some current topic. Next there was a section devoted to notices or short snippets of news. These might be simple announcements of public meetings or comings and goings, or they might be news items such as drownings or fires. On 12 September 1846, for example, the notices included news of a boy killed by a runaway horse and cart in Shortland Street, the arrival of prominent colonist Alfred Domett, an announcement advising all people who had bought land directly from Māori to lodge survey documents with the government and praise for local authorities who were repairing High Street coupled with a pointed suggestion that they should get to work on the 'gulph' that was Queen Street as well.

On a typical Saturday, the rest of the paper would be taken up with various types of news reports. These included verbatim transcripts of public meetings, court cases and the deliberations of the Legislative

A hand-press from the Herald *offices around the turn of the nineteenth century was not unlike the one that printed the* New Zealander. New Zealand Herald

Council. Important reports, especially those of the council, stretched to thousands of words, sometimes occupying a page or more. There would also be material gleaned from an eclectic mix of foreign papers brought to Auckland by ship, usually months out of date but still news to the colonists. These were sometimes selected for their informational value and sometimes because they were merely amusing. Despite Williamson's earnest intentions, someone at the paper fully understood the importance of humour and the promise of a juicy scandal to keep readers

In pride of place on the New Zealander*'s front page was the advertisement that showed John Williamson meant business.* New Zealander, *14 June 1845, Papers Past*

interested. So the paper ran light pieces such as how to cure a drunken husband or the perils of elephant hunting as well as stories with a whiff of scandal. Marital irregularities were a favourite topic. One report told the story of a woman who asked a court if she could marry again because her husband had gone to New Zealand where he had committed bigamy. Another related how a woman was caught out for fabricating a breach of promise suit against a wealthy aristocrat. Sometimes there was not enough space to cram it all in, so the paper would publish a supplement of one or two pages to carry the extra material.[30]

Although the *New Zealander* came out just once a week it was still a large task to produce its 15,000 words or more. The diaries David Burn kept in his years as editor and journalist suggest there were seven people working on the *New Zealander* in its early days. On the editorial side there was himself and possibly one other reporter to cover public meetings, court cases and general news as well as to compile the shipping lists. On the production side there was Williamson the printer, a compositor who set all the type by hand, a press operator who, likewise, would operate the press by hand and possibly a printer's devil, a boy who would help around the shop in the hope of learning the trade. With a full page of advertisements every week, there must have been a business manager who most likely would have been responsible for circulation and subscriptions as well.

In the first few months of its existence, the *New Zealander*, under editor Charles Terry, lived up to its promise of presenting forthright arguments on a wide range of issues affecting the colony, many of which were to burn for decades: relations with Māori, the need for representative government, the location of the capital and, above all, land. Yet its crusading zeal quickly evaporated and, with increasing frequency, it appeared with no editorial opinion at all. It seemed as though the considerable energy required to keep the paper coming out was so great that there was nothing left for the remorseless intellectual work of producing one or more well-argued leading articles every week. Williamson needed someone with more drive and commitment, someone who understood the great questions of the day and was not afraid to express firm opinions. He found such a man in an unlikely place, a general merchant's shop in High Street. The man's name was Thomas Spencer Forsaith. In his brief time with the *New Zealander*, Forsaith made an indelible mark but it was less for his abilities as a leader-writer and more because he was an unwitting catalyst for the paper's conversion from Governor Grey's chief critic to his main cheerleader.