



Mt Peel, 1861. This photograph shows the first dwellings built on Mt Peel Station. The first house was erected in May 1856 and made from felled cabbage trees. The cabbage trees were planted upright in the ground and the gaps between them plastered with clay. The roof was thatched with snowgrass. The house consisted of two rooms: a 10-foot by 10-foot living room with a fireplace for cooking and a 10-foot by 8-foot room for the Smith family, with a loft above it for stores. Later in 1856 a larger house was built. It also consisted of two rooms and had a 24-foot by 7-foot lean-to behind it. The small building closest to the camera is a whata, a store shed built on stilts to keep the station's supplies away from rats. The heavy flax cover, tall tussock and shrubby plants give some idea of the vegetation that confronted Acland and Tripp on their exploring expeditions to the Mt Peel country. It took several burns as well as grazing with stock to reduce this sort of vegetation to short-tussock grassland. A. C. Barker, Canterbury Museum, 8283

CHAPTER ONE

The Pastoral Frontier: Occupying the Grasslands

AT FOUR O'CLOCK IN THE AFTERNOON ON 4 JANUARY 1855, THE *Royal Stuart* dropped anchor at Lyttelton after eighty-six days at sea.¹ Among the passengers was John Barton Arundel Acland, the youngest son of Sir Thomas Dyke Acland, 10th Baronet, who held the estates of Killerton in Devon and Holnicote in Somerset. Acland, who was thirty years old at the time of his arrival in New Zealand, had been educated at Harrow and taken a degree at Christ Church, Oxford. He had practised law in London, but had become bored with both the law and the city. With his eldest brother, Thomas Dyke Acland, taking a keen interest in the management of the family estates, as well as making a name for himself as an agricultural improver, Barton Acland had to look elsewhere for an opportunity. Encouraged by his friend Charles George Tripp, who was disillusioned by the lack of prospects in England, the two decided to take up the challenge of sheep farming in the colony of New Zealand.

Within hours of arriving, Acland and Tripp walked to the top of the Bridle Path, a steep walking track between the port of Lyttelton and the settlement of Christchurch, to view their new country. Surprisingly, Acland did not record the scene in his diary, but other early visitors to Canterbury did and many of their comments were decidedly unflattering. C. Warren Adams, who arrived in October 1851, trudged up the Bridle Path in a strong southerly soon after landing. Perhaps it was the weather, but he found the view of the plains

‘anything but inviting’. ‘The mountains in the distance were completely hidden by the thick rain’, he wrote, ‘and the dreary swampy plain, which formed the foreground beneath our feet, might extend for aught we could see, over the whole island.’² When Henry Sewell tramped up the Bridle Path on his arrival in February 1853 he found the view from the top ‘imposing’, and the vastness of the plains ‘very striking’. However, after descending to the plains he was ‘oppressed with the dull monotony of a vast flat unbroken by a single visible undulation or a tree’.³ Samuel Butler, who arrived five years after Acland and Tripp, did not find the outlook quite so depressing, but he was hardly enthusiastic about it either. He described the climb up the steep hill as an ‘awful pull’.⁴ On reaching the top the view out over the plains ‘was of the “long stare” description’, he wrote. ‘There was a great extent of country, but few objects to attract the eye and make it rest awhile in any given direction. The plains . . . were lovely in colouring, but would have been wonderfully improved by an object or two a little nearer than the mountains.’⁵

The main difference between the view that Butler saw and that seen by Acland and Tripp was that in the intervening years the nearer country had been cultivated, fenced and ‘squared into many-coloured fields’.⁶ Otherwise the two dominating features of the landscape remained the open, empty, windswept plains and the backdrop of blue, lofty mountains. Like many of the newly arrived settlers, Butler found the view back towards the harbour much superior, and more familiar, but the future of the colony lay in the opposite direction.

On their return to Lyttelton, Acland and Tripp called in to see the local clergyman, Benjamin Wooley Dudley, where they were introduced to Henry Sewell, an official of the Canterbury Association and the parliamentary representative for Christchurch. He noted the arrival of the two men with some scepticism, writing:

Acland is a queer addition to the Colony. Will he stay? I do not know. Whether men like the Colony and stay, depends on their success – and whether men succeed or not depends on individual character. Tripp and Acland talk bravely of going up to Sheep Stations to serve apprenticeships. Whether the reality will be as tolerable as they fancy, I doubt. *Nous Verrons* [we shall see].⁷

By the time Acland and Tripp arrived in January 1855, the expansion of pastoralism through the eastern region of the South Island was well under way. Would-be sheep owners had explored and claimed land in the hills and valleys of modern-day Marlborough, the Canterbury Plains, and parts of North and East



Part of the Great Plains and Canterbury Settlement, 1851. William Fox's painting from the top of the Bridle Path illustrates the scene that the earliest settlers saw as they made their way from the port of Lyttelton to the Christchurch settlement. The painting provides a wonderful sense of the openness and emptiness of the landscape at the time of colonisation. Small pockets of manuka and bush are all that break up the vast expanse of tussock grassland that stretches from the coast to the distant mountains. In the foreground men drive cattle and sheep down the Bridle Path to establish the flocks and herds that were to become the main source of wealth for the region. William Fox, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, PUBL-000-3

Otago, and thousands of sheep were being imported from the Australian colonies. This establishment phase involved an intensive process of environmental learning as pastoralists had to come to terms with the landscape, vegetation and climate of the region. They also had to learn, largely by trial and error, the business of large-scale sheep farming, as most were new to the game. Despite missing these formative years, it turned out that Acland and Tripp were to play leading roles in the expansion and establishment of pastoralism in New Zealand.

Pastoralism Precedes Organised Settlement

Historian John Weaver has argued that exploration by ‘resource hunters’ extended the frontiers in British and American settlement colonies out beyond the reach of formal authority.⁸ That was undoubtedly the situation in the expansion of pastoralism in New Zealand, where people looking for land for sheep farming preceded settlement or soon moved beyond the boundaries of the settlement lands. Formal surveys and the establishment of grazing licences followed the advance of these pastoral entrepreneurs. The distinction between actions of the land hunters and the attitudes of the formal authorities was initially heightened by the underlying ideology of colonisation.

The settlements of Wellington, Nelson, Canterbury and Otago were based on Edward Gibbon Wakefield's theory of colonisation, which arose from his belief that the squatting system in New South Wales, characterised by easy access to land and an industry based on large-scale wool growing, led to the breakdown of the social order. He decided that colonial settlements should be established where companies would buy land cheaply off native peoples and then sell it at a high price to settlers with capital. The high price of land would force workers to work hard and save before they could afford to buy land and set themselves up as farmers. The profit from land sales would fund further immigration and so the colonies would grow. This process, based on the success of agricultural production, would create an ordered system of colonisation in which everybody would have, and know, their place. Essentially, it would transpose a slice of rural agrarian England, with its landlords, tenant farmers and rural workers, to 'new' lands on the other side of the world: there would be no free-for-all.

Wakefield's theory was flawed. One of its significant weaknesses was related to the idea that the economic base of the colonies was to be the production of grain and foodstuffs; but where were the markets for this produce? For all its apparent problems, the pastoral system in Australia that Wakefield so despised had proven to be highly successful. Wool was a commodity that could be stored and shipped without spoiling. It had a ready market in English and European mills, although wool prices were subject to considerable fluctuations. Early settlers soon realised the economic advantage of pastoralism over agriculture. Dr David Munro, who accompanied Frederick Tuckett in 1844 to determine a site for a New Zealand Company settlement in the South Island, wrote that '[p]asture is the natural and great resource of the east coast of this island. Agriculture will be subordinate to it for a long time.'⁹ He went on to suggest that the Port Cooper area, which later became the central core of the Canterbury Block, was unsuited for a Wakefield-type settlement because it lacked trees for fuel and timber. He felt that large-scale farming by settlers 'with considerable capital', with 'each having a range of a good many thousand acres, and thus being enabled to combine the rearing of stock and tillage', would better suit the country.¹⁰

The New Zealand Company had founded the Wellington colony in 1840 and a settlement in Nelson the following year. Both colonies provided the take-off points for pastoral expansion in New Zealand. In 1843 a group of young entrepreneurs – Charles Bidwell, Charles Clifford, William Vavasour, Henry Petre and Frederick Weld – embarked on a venture to establish sheep runs in the Wairarapa on land leased from Maori. In 1844 they landed sheep from Sydney



The Valley of the Awatere with the Inland Kaikouras, 1875. By 1875, when John Gully painted this scene, the lower Awatere had been settled by pastoralists for twenty-five years. In that time parts of this country would have been burned several times. However, this painting illustrates that native shrubs still thrived in places. Cabbage trees, called ti-ti or ti-palms by the early settlers, dot the valley floor and lower terraces along with tall tussocks, manuka, flax and other shrubby plants. Cabbage trees were considered a sign of good land and the lower Awatere was known as good healthy sheep country. Now much of it is planted in vineyards. The Inland Kaikoura Range provides the backdrop to Gully's painting. The highest peak in the range is Tapuaenuku, standing at 2885 metres (9467 feet) above sea level. It was the first major mountain climbed by Sir Edmund Hillary. John Gully, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, PUBL-0010-09

in Wellington and drove them around the coast to stock their new stations.¹¹ Two years later Clifford and Weld leased a huge block of land on the north-east coast of the South Island from the Maori chief Te Puaha of Kapiti. The run, which they called Flaxbourne, stretched from north of the Awatere River to Kekerengu, and in 1847 they stocked it with 3000 sheep.¹²

The exploration of the land outside the Nelson settlement block began only a year after its foundation, and by 1846 Nathaniel George Morse was squatting at Tophouse before Sir George Grey purchased the area from Maori in 1847. Although none of the land had yet been surveyed, Grey's purchase opened the

way for pastoralism, so that by 1849 thirty squatters had set themselves up in the Wairau Valley and a year later both the Wairau and Awatere valleys had been almost completely taken up as sheep walks.¹³ Soon after, the acting Agent for Nelson issued the first licences to pastoralists, which gave them the right to depasture stock for an eighteen-month period from January 1849 to July 1850. This was an example of formal authority reacting to the reality of the situation. Thereafter, pastoralists were not squatters at all, but graziers who held pasturage rights issued by either the New Zealand government or local provincial authorities.

Men looking for sheep country also preceded organised settlement in Canterbury. The Deans brothers introduced the first sheep onto the Canterbury Plains at their Riccarton farm in 1843. In 1847 the Greenwood brothers formed the first sheep station in Canterbury at Motunau, on the easy hills north of the plains; and Captain Mitchell established a cattle station called Mt Grey on the north bank of the Ashley River in August 1850. Several other runs were formed in 1850 before the arrival of the first Canterbury settlers in December. The Deans stocked Dalethorpe and Robert Waitt established Teviotdale, while outside the Canterbury Block Clifford and Weld set up Stonyhurst in addition to their Nelson (later Marlborough) station Flaxbourne; and the Rhodes brothers formed a huge holding, called The Levels, in the region that later became South Canterbury.

Historians have given considerable credit to a group of Australian squatters who arrived in Canterbury in 1851 for establishing pastoralism in the region.¹⁴ One of them, John Christie Aitkin, is supposed to have persuaded the Canterbury Association's Resident Agent, John Robert Godley, to free up the regulations on the lease of 'waste' land (Crown land that had not been sold as freehold) to enable pastoralists to establish themselves in the Canterbury Block. Godley was no fool. He was well aware how precarious the economic base of the settlement was, and in a letter to his father in 1850 he wrote: 'I wish most heartily that instead of two or three, we had twenty or thirty unlicensed squatters with 10,000 sheep or cattle each; if it were so, I should have tenfold more confidence than I have now in the rapid success of the settlement.'¹⁵ However, his hands were tied as he had no authority to change the regulations established by the Association in London.

To get around the problem, in May 1851 Godley issued a temporary 'form letter' that enabled people to take up pastoral land without having to pay the high price of 20 shillings per hundred acres that was set down in the Association's rules.¹⁶ Godley intended this as an interim measure to encourage those with

capital to invest in Canterbury while he waited for official approval to come from the Association headquarters in London. In February 1852, after gaining permission, Godley instituted a system that divided runs into three classes: Class 1 runs were leased with a pre-emptive right of purchase at 20 shillings per 100 acres; Class 11 runs took in blocks over 250 acres with the same rental as Class 1, but with no pre-emptive right; Class 111 runs carried no pre-emptive right and had leases that ran for seven years at cheap annual rentals. These new regulations initiated a scramble for runs in Canterbury, so that by the time Acland and Tripp landed most of the plains and easy hill country had been taken up.

In Otago too the 'resource hunters' preceded organised settlement. Whalers began bringing livestock from Australia in the early 1840s, and by 1844 Johnny Jones had 2000 sheep on 40,000 hectares that he had purchased from Ngai Tahu leader Tuhawaiki.¹⁷ The Otago Block was purchased that year and the Scottish Free Church Society founded the colony in 1848. Pastoralism did not proceed as quickly in Otago as it did in Nelson and Canterbury. Herries Beattie records only three runs within the Otago Block, all applied for in 1853; but runs had been established in East and North Otago, outside the settlement block, by that time.¹⁸ The interest in Crown lands outside the Otago Block slowly increased, and pioneers in search of run country explored much of Otago ahead of official surveyors.

Assessing the Canterbury Plains as Sheep Country

Surveyors and exploring pastoralists, who were assessing the country for its value for farming or running livestock, wrote the earliest descriptions of the landscape and vegetation of the grasslands of the South Island. Consequently, its economic potential shaped their appreciation of the landscape. Samuel Butler, after admiring the beauty of Mount Cook, pulled himself up as it clearly had no use as sheep country. He wrote, '[a] mountain here is only beautiful if it has good grass on it. Scenery is not scenery – it is "country".'¹⁹ This pragmatic view of land begs the question of what made good sheep country. After all, the assessment of what constituted good country could have considerable influence on the outcome of any venture.

John Macfarlane, who had shepherding experience both in the Scottish Border country and New Zealand, arrived in Canterbury in November 1850 and the following year occupied the Loburn Run, listed as Run 1A.²⁰ It was a poor property with a good deal of scrub that made mustering difficult. It was not until Macfarlane bought and drained the smaller Coldstream property in

the 1860s that he really prospered.²¹ One wonders why an experienced hand like Macfarlane chose such a difficult block as Loburn when so much good land was still available.

Another who misread the landscape was Fredrick Tuckett who had been appointed by the New Zealand Company to select a site for the projected New Edinburgh settlement. His employers supposed that Tuckett would confirm Port Cooper as the location, but he judged the land unsuitable for agriculture and chose Otago instead.²² It turned out that, despite being established before the Canterbury settlement, the Otago settlement languished while the former flourished as both farming and pastoralism expanded.

Dr David Munro accompanied Tuckett on his journey south from Nelson in 1844. He landed at Port Cooper and walked to the Deans' farm located near the site of modern Christchurch and described the country that they passed through:

The part of the plain we crossed . . . is uniformly covered with grass of various sorts, mixed with toi-toi and flax in the moister parts, and, in some places, thickly dotted over with the ti-ti. The grass, generally speaking, is a tufty wire grass of a very dry nature, and not relished by stock, but there are finer grasses between these tufts, though sparingly diffused, as well as an abundance of a tufty grass of a larger more succulent species, which I know from experience in this settlement is greedily eaten both by cattle and horses. I should not suppose the pasture to be capable at present of supporting a large amount of stock per acre; but I am satisfied that, by being fed down, its value would greatly improve, and a turf of a much better character rapidly be produced.²³

This piece of writing contains some significant insights: firstly, in regards to the vegetation of the plains and the way early writers saw it; and secondly, concerning the concept of what constituted good pasturage for livestock. As we will read in other accounts, the larger species of the suite of plants of the grasslands dominated the early perceptions. Here Munro named toi-toi (toetoe or *Cortaderia toetoe*), flax (*Phormium tenax*) and ti-ti (cabbage tree or *Cordyline australis*); in other environments, exploring pastoralists, surveyors and settlers would add other species to this list. Munro had no names for the grasses that made up the rest of the plants in his description. The unpalatable 'tufty wire grass' may have been fescue tussock (*Festuca novae-zelandiae*), while the more succulent grass was possibly blue tussock (*Poa colensoi*), which was highly palatable to stock. It is interesting to note that the finer grasses that grew

between the tussocks were not abundant even at this time when the country had not been grazed by stock or recently burnt. Perhaps the most interesting point that Munro raised was his view that the grasslands in their unmodified condition would prove largely unproductive for raising stock. In order to make them productive, the mass of the plants needed to be reduced. This is the first instance we have of the overarching aim of land management in the pastoral era, which was to transform the vegetation of the grasslands from a tall-tussock grassland to a short-tussock grassland.

Munro was a perceptive observer. Later in the journey he came across an area that had once been covered in forest that been destroyed by fire. He described the scene where 'numerous roots and stumps still remaining in the ground, blackened by fire, and holes where others have decayed out', and concluded, 'it is thus we find nothing but stunted fern or grass upon many hills and plains, which, I feel convinced, were at one time covered with primeval forest'.²⁴ John Deans came to the same conclusion, writing to his father in 1845 that 'the plain . . . is pretty much of one character, being all grass land, and I think at one time must have been nearly all covered with wood as we see in many places the roots and other remains of very heavy timber'.²⁵

Charles Obins Torlesse has left us with his assessment of the landscape of Canterbury before the period of organised colonisation. He went to Nelson in 1841 and arrived in Canterbury in December 1848 as a member of the party of surveyors sent out to prepare the way for the Canterbury settlement. At the time of his arrival, the plains were only sparsely inhabited. There were several Maori settlements, chiefly at Tuahiwi, Kaiapoi and around Banks Peninsula; the Deans were well established at Riccarton; the Greenwoods were 60 kilometres to the north at Motunau; and 60 kilometres to the west, John Hay had a whare at Kowai Bush.

Within six weeks of landing at Lyttelton, Torlesse had explored from the Ashley River in the north, to the Rakaia in the south, and to the foothills in the west, assessing the country for its suitability as a site for the new settlement. In a letter to E. W. Stafford in February 1849, his description of the country divided the plains into three strips. The coastal strip, he thought, reached about 10 miles inland, and he saw it as 'first-rate quality', having a great deal of flax, toi-toi and grass growth, but also some sandy areas.²⁶ The middle strip, running north-south, he estimated as 15 to 20 miles in width, characterising it as 'unvarying grass' and having a 'tolerable soil'. The western side of the plain running along the 'snowy mountains' he thought had good soil, though some parts were stony and others sandy, and had a 'strong growth generally'. Torlesse

then went on to describe the region scenically, writing that the peninsula was 'wild and beautiful', and the western side of the plains 'very pretty' with views from the 'snowy mountains' being 'most romantic'. The middle plain, however, he judged 'monotonous in the extreme'.²⁷

Torlesse saw no immediate future in agriculture for the prospective Canterbury settlers. In a letter to his mother in May 1850, before any Australian squatter appeared on the scene, he wrote: 'This is a pastoral country more than agricultural, and we must look forward to New Zealand wool maintaining its superiority over other Australian samples in the English wool market.'²⁸

Colonel Alexander Lean, like Torlesse, found that the Canterbury Plains were varied in their quality as pastoral country. On a trip south from Christchurch in April 1854 to look for sheep country, he described travelling over the area that is now known as Rolleston and Burnham, saying 'for some miles we went over a sterile stony region, apparently ancient river bed', and that further on 'grass began to appear but the country generally dry and certainly poor'.²⁹ Lean travelled on and crossed the Rakaia where he camped for the night on Edward Chapman's Acton Station. The country above Acton was unoccupied, so the next day Lean walked up the south side of the Rakaia assessing the land. He described walking along the high terrace above the river where there was 'a belt of rich soil thickly set with cabbage trees, from whence towards the interior [away from the river] the soil gradually shallowed'. About 120 feet below the high bank lay a flat river bottom half a mile to three-quarters of a mile wide, 'prettily diversified with clumps and single trees of manuka, goi [toi-toi], and koromeka [koromiko], amid which paraquets [*sic*], tuis and bellbirds were frequent'.³⁰ He noted that the feed along the river was very good because 'tussocks [are] not dominant and fern rare'.³¹

Lean took up land here and established a 20,000-acre station that he called Lendon (later it was known as Corwar), but he found the landscape unappealing. In 1889 Lean recalled a trip to the Rakaia Gorge:

My attention was attracted by the successive terraces on the opposite side evidently richly grassed . . . What a contrast the romantic beauty of this neighbourhood to the dull monotony of the plains, to the bare shingle cliff and dusky river bed of my own run. Here was a place where to live, even to breathe the delicious mountain air was a delight.³²

Lean was so taken with this country that he bought the unimproved and unstocked runs off the existing leaseholder for £1,400 and started a new property that he named Mt Hutt after the mountain that dominated the area.³³



River Courtenay Issuing from Hazelwood Forest, 1851. The Canterbury Association surveyors gave English names to a lot of the notable geographical features of the Canterbury Block, but once settlement was established many of these reverted to a form of the original Maori name. The Courtenay soon became the Waimakariri River and the name Hazelwood Forest was dropped for Kowai Bush. The Kowai River in the left of the painting was the route to Porters Pass, which provided access to the Upper Waimakariri country behind the snow-clad Torlesse Range that makes the backdrop to this scene. Charles Obins Torlesse was the first European to climb Mount Torlesse and the mountain and range are named after him. The Waimakariri is one of the great braided rivers that cut across the open plains of the eastern side of the South Island. Before they were bridged, these rivers made travelling a risky business and death by drowning was common. Fox shows a group of people making their way across the river. Kowai Bush was one of several remnant forests dotted along the foothills of Canterbury. The painting illustrates that the vegetation was much rougher in the foothills, where rainfall was higher, than on the lower plains. The banks of the river are clothed in manuka and other shrubby plants and here the tall tussocks would have been denser and more intertwined with shrubs. Etched by T. Allom, from a drawing by William Fox, London, John W. Parker, 1851, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, PUBL-0001-4

Early travellers in Canterbury often remarked on the tedium of the plains. In January 1856 Henry Sewell set out with the Reverend John Raven to take stores to Albury Station in South Canterbury, a new run that Raven was setting up in partnership with Thomas Kinnersley Adams. Sewell described the journey from Christchurch to the Selwyn River as 'one uniform flat' and complained about the 'dreary monotony of the ride'.³⁴ The next day they continued 'across more of the same everlasting plains to the Rakaia [River]'. Station houses that they visited or passed by stood 'solitary and desolate in the midst of a huge wilderness of plain, not a tree or a hillock to relieve them'.³⁵ However, beauty, as the cliché goes, is in the eye of the beholder and not everyone found the plains