

# Pictorial Record of Wellington's Bush at the Time of Settlement

**Marian Minson**

There is, of course, no pictorial record of Wellington and its bush prior to European settlement because we are dependent on European traditions of topographical painting and drawing for such records. We can assume that prior to 1840, Maori modified the bush covering to some extent, with their kainga and pa around the harbour. But the changes with the arrival of European settlers from 1840 were dramatic, starting with the initial division and sale of all available land as town and country acres. Although photography was invented around 1840, there are no known photographs of Wellington in the 1840s and almost none in the 1850s, so for the first two decades we are dependent on artists and what has survived of their records. Fortunately there is a large number of drawings, watercolours, prints and paintings of Wellington in the 1840s and 50s, most dating from 1841 onwards, with amateur artists especially concerned to show a fairly realistic view.

One reservation about the usefulness of these paintings and drawings is that many artists in the 1840s and 50s omitted or reduced the bush in their records of Wellington's appearance, for a number of reasons.

Firstly the bush could be viewed as an obstacle to settlement and was better not emphasised when an artist was trying to show friends and relatives what life was like in New Zealand, or trying to persuade potential immigrants how little work might be required to clear a section.

Secondly, many artists, like modern photographers, wanted to show Wellington at its best and the most picturesque views were obtained by climbing a hill and looking out towards the harbour and distant hills, rather than drawing studies of individual plants. Most professional or trained artists emphasised the picturesque, and thought nothing of rearranging some details to fit their view into the compositional norms they had been taught. Amateurs, on the other hand, were more often concerned to draw their own or their neighbours' houses and gardens or to record plants that were new to them.

Thirdly, a patch of bush seen from a distance was likely to be reduced to a homogeneous area of green paint or cross-hatched pencil, darker than a grassy surface, but not identifiable as a particular species.

Fourthly, people typically drew or painted things that were new and strange only when they were newcomers to Wellington. The familiarity acquired by residence here for a few years might mean that the bush was no longer considered of interest or a fit subject for one's pen or brush.

These attitudes, combined with the extensive clearing that went on from 1840, mean that the earlier the drawings and paintings are, the more useful they are for establishing the nature of the bush coverage of Wellington at the time of settlement.

Allowing for artistic licence, the early artists can, at the very least, give us broad and sometimes surprising information about the appearance of four major areas of Wellington in 1840 and shortly afterwards. They show us that Mount Victoria was almost completely bare of trees; that the flat land at Te Aro and Thorndon, along with the lower hills above them were lightly covered with quite low scrub and clear patches; that Tinakori Hill and the other hills west of the fault line to the Hutt were heavily-bushed; that Brooklyn Hill was already mostly cleared by 1841; and that the higher hills of upper Kelburn through to

Karori were densely bush-clad.

There are only about a dozen known drawings of Wellington before 1841, with three being of particular interest. (All of the images discussed are from the collections of the Alexander Turnbull Library).

James Courts Crawford's watercolour **Dr Taylor's house, Tiakiwai, Wellington, 1839** is the earliest known Wellington drawing, apart from maps of Wellington Harbour produced during the 1930s by the crews of visiting ships. Crawford was in Wellington late in 1839, buying land for farming from the New Zealand Company. His watercolour shows part of a house perched on a bank above a path or road with bush around the house. The scene is located at the base of what is now Stowe Hill, at the bottom of Tinakori Road, just above what was then the beach. It is a very simple work but it indicates that there were good-sized trees behind the house on the lower slopes of Tinakori Hill and that the house was sitting on top of a bare clay bank above the beach

Two further pre-1841 drawings are by William Mein Smith, the New Zealand Company's first surveyor.

Smith's **From the Pah, Pipitea, Port Nicholson, December 1840**, a pen and ink drawing, is intriguing because it gives a close-up view of vegetation and shows the thus far unchanged pre-European appearance of the largest of the harbour pa sites. Pipitea Pa occupied the land above modern Thorndon Quay from roughly where the marae is to around Davis Street, at the end of Hobson Street. The drawing shows a section of the Pa looking towards the harbour. A spiky plant right in the centre could be flax or a large clump of grass, while several little bushes look most like manuka or kanuka. They are unlikely, given the location and the very early date, to be anything other than native plants.

William Mein Smith's pen and ink drawing **Mount Victoria and Lambton Harbour from from the Tinakore**, probably drawn late in 1840, was also published in Wellington as a lithograph around 1841. There are slight differences between the drawing and lithograph but both show that the artist is standing part-way up Tinakori Hill at the edge of the bush, looking down onto an almost treeless Thorndon Flat, with a few burnt-off tree trunks dotting the land below. Mount Victoria, opposite, is shown as bare of vegetation. A tree frames the view in the right foreground. In the drawing it has foliage, while in the lithograph it appears to be a classic large dead New Zealand native tree, complete with its remaining epiphytes, perhaps suggesting that it has not been burned and has died naturally. On the other hand, smaller trees on the flat with darker outlines look as if they could have been burned off to clear the scarce flat land for settlement. William Mein Smith consistently left dead trees in his drawings and watercolours and even occasionally made them a central point of study. Other artists were more inclined to edit them out.

A slightly later close-up view of part of the same area is John Wicksteed's 1841 drawing **Thorndon showing Colonel Wakefield's house**. William Wakefield's house, (now the location of the Beehive) is in the centre of the view, and the surrounding bush is given scale by the house. The drawing is too early for any of Wakefield's exotic plantings to have grown to the size shown in the drawing, suggesting most of the bush is manuka. The identity of a small single tree in front is unknown. A line of road up the hill beyond Wakefield's house is The Terrace, treeless on the lower side, bush-clad on the upper side. Again, the bush is low enough not to swamp the few houses shown. There are also burned-off tree trunks to the right as part of someone's front garden, with steps rising probably to a house next-door.

The steps possibly rise to Sir William Fox's home in Hill Street, on the site of what is now the Parliamentary Library. An 1843 watercolour by Fox **Sir William Fox's first home on Hill Street** provides a strong contrast with a view of much the same spot that Wicksteed drew, but seen from a different angle, with Wakefield's house to one side, Fox's house in a central position, and a new and very European garden,

complete with the common Victorian circular flower bed in the front garden. There is a conservatory behind the house, ready for exotic plants.

Another view of Thorndon is William Swainson's **Kiwarra (Kaiwharawhara) from Thorndon Flat**, a pencil drawing from 1841 or slightly later. It looks north along the gully that is now the motorway, and is alongside Tinakori Hill and close enough to Kaiwharawhara to show the hotel located there. Typically for drawings of this early period, there are sections of the trunks of large trees that have been felled. Swainson was a botanist and ornithologist and his depiction in this drawing of a single large standing tree is likely to be accurate in scale and style. He identified many of the trees he drew in Hutt Forest, surrounding his home, but has not identified this fine specimen. An example of one of his botanical drawings is one titled **Rata throwing out a supporting hand**. It shows a distinctively shaped rata vine with arm- and hand-like shoots of a rata vine around the trunk of a larger tree, but it is located at Alzdorf's farm in Hutt Forest, not in Wellington.

Charles Heaphy's two well-known views of the settled areas of Wellington in 1841 are both taken from the same spot, one looking north, one looking south from Clay Point, above modern Stewart Dawson's at the corner of Lambton Quay and Willis Street. Both were done for the New Zealand Company and sent back to England. They were painted with the intention of promoting Wellington as a colony. They therefore give a rosy picture of the small colony and are known to include some false details, such as the large number of ships all in the harbour together.

The earlier of the two, **Thorndon Flat, April 1841** looks north along the beach line (modern Lambton Quay), with Tinakori Hill on the left and the hills above the Hutt Road in the distance. Heaphy was more concerned to record a European presence and the impact humans had had already on Wellington, than to record the botany of the area. However, from a botanical point of view, he has included a flax bush at the foot of the flagpole (but that may have been put there by the artist for ornamental reasons, with the flagpole giving an indication of the size of the flax). There is also a kanuka or manuka, growing on a bank above the houses lining the hill side of the south end of Lambton Quay. Heaphy may have placed it there as a representative specimen of what was actually a larger number of such trees along this low cliff, or it may have been a real single tree. There is more low bush, probably also manuka, above the houses further along the beach, at the north end of Lambton Quay. Other interesting features are two large clearings in the bush on Tinakori Hill and indications that much of the more distant western hills has been cleared. Heaphy produced a key to the lithograph version of this watercolour and identified the clearings and other cleared spots on the distant hills as 'native potato plantations'. The clearings on Tinakori Hill have the look of areas dug over for potatoes after a fire. Other paintings a little later suggest that the more distant hills had not, in fact, been cleared as extensively as this work suggests. They may simply be lighter for contrast. There is also at least one large tree on Thorndon Flat at what is now the location of the Beehive. That again appears to be a fiction, from the evidence of other drawings of this period and location

Heaphy's **View of a part of the town of Wellington, September 1841** looks from the hill above the corner of Lambton Quay and Willis Street to the south east, incorporating part of the harbour (now reclaimed land) and the beach (lower Willis Street, modern Manner's Street and Courtenay Place), with Mount Victoria in the background, but at no great distance. Mount Victoria is completely bare or grassed apart from an indication that there could be scrub in the valleys, whereas the more distant Mount Albert (Melrose) is shown as bush-covered. Brooklyn Hill is shown partly cleared and with some remnant bush, probably of the manuka / kanuka variety, with a more substantial fringe showing at the top of the hill, and presumably continuing down the other side. It is likely that Europeans would already have done some clearing for farming given the fact that this view was taken a good year after the surveying of the area and after European settlement on this side of the harbour had begun.

Less beautiful, but in some ways more reliable is George Hilliard's **Panorama of Port Nicholson, 1841**, a long pencil drawing in six sections, taken from the ship Lady Nugent in March 1841, while the artist waited in the harbour for several days to be taken to the shore. Hilliard's intention was to make a record of the appearance of the settlement, not to beautify the ordinary. Perspective was not his strong point, but the landforms are readily identifiable.

From the left, the view takes in the Te Aro foreshore (Courtenay Place) with a treeless Mount Victoria behind it, moves along Manners Street, lower Willis Street and Clay Point. A dominant feature is the line of The Terrace with bush remnants on the uphill side. The panorama continues along Lambton Quay, with the hills behind it. A deep valley to the right of the Lambton Quay section, with bare hills to the left and denser bush beyond it marks Glenmore Street and the site of the lower part of the Botanical Gardens. The section showing the land above Thorndon Quay, with Tinakori Hill continuing in the background is the last of the sequence. Also noteworthy are the visible trunks of the trees showing at the edge of the bush suggesting that cutting back and clearing has taken place. Overall this drawing gives excellent evidence of the vegetation closer to the shore in Wellington, with the treeless Mount Victoria side of Lambton Harbour, the predominant scrub on most of the lower hill slopes, and the more heavily bush-clad western hills.

Of similar length, from a similar harbour viewpoint, and also from 1841, this time done from on board the ship London, is Luke Natrass' panorama **City of Wellington 1841**. Because this is a lithograph and there is no record of the original drawing, some of the details may have been altered by the English lithographer, especially detail of bush cover, since printmakers did not always find it necessary to copy such 'secondary' information accurately. Natrass' panorama clearly shows the line of The Terrace above Clay Point (the corner of Lambton Quay and Willis Street), and, at the north end of Lambton Quay, a valley to the right moving back into the hills, which is likely to be heading towards the area of the Botanical Gardens.

Samuel Brees is another well-known artist recorder of early Wellington. He succeeded William Mein Smith as chief surveyor for the New Zealand Company and was living in Wellington from 1842 to 1845. There are watercolour and engraved versions of **Mr Brees' cottage, Wellington** (or 'Karori Road') showing the Hawkestone Street / Tinakori Road area in about 1844. A clearing on Tinakori Hill is possibly another of the native potato plantations Heaphy mentions. It looks more like a slip than a clearing in the engraved version but in the Library's watercolour original it is just a lighter area suggesting a grassy or cultivated area. The picture is notable for a very large single kahikatea spared the axe for longer than most. This same tree features in three of Brees' watercolours and related engravings. It appears again in a watercolour looking in the opposite direction towards the harbour - **View looking down Hawkestone Street with Mr Brees' cottage**. This seems to have been drawn from the junction of Tinakori Road and Hawkestone Street.

Brees' engraving **Catholic Chapel, Wellington, ca 1843** can be compared with the original watercolour, owned by the Society of Mary in Wellington, to check the accuracy of the redrawing undertaken for the engraving process, which took place in London. It shows the site of St Mary's in Boulcott Street and includes several of the recent European imports responsible for the destruction of a certain amount of the bush cover - three goats browsing industriously. The bush on the hills behind is clearly not of large trees.

Drawings and watercolours also provide evidence of further bush clearances in Wellington in the 1850s.

John Pearse was a solicitor who lived in Wellington between 1852 and 1856. He drew his surroundings in great detail to send back to his wife and family who had remained in England. His **Wellington Harbour from Cemetery back of Government Domain** is from the Bolton Street Cemetery and reveals what is probably a mixture of native and introduced trees. A slender tree in the centre inside the cemetery fence must be a yew or pencil cypress, but the graves look as if they have been excavated from surrounding scrub.

The same Government Domain or Government Reserve features in Pearse's **Government Reserve for Botanical Garden Karori Road near Wellington - Rimutaka range of mountains in distance**. For 'Karori Road', read modern Glenmore Street. The height of the viewpoint and distance from the harbour, along with Pearse's description 'near Wellington' suggests that the view is likely to be some way back from the water's edge and most probably from outside the Botanic Gardens on Glenmore Street. It is not possible to speculate about the types of tall trees shown in this view, except to say that they must be mature natives. The drawing suggests that a good deal of the surrounding underbrush has been cut back leaving a few tall specimens standing.

Pearse's **Wellington Harbour from road leading to the Barracks** shows the scenic harbour in the background, and the western hills along the Hutt Road, but also, as is typical of Pearse's work, includes realistic foreground detail with two Maori children walking towards the artist, dwarfed by the flowering flax bushes on both sides of the road leading to the barracks. The barracks that this road led to were on Mount Cook, suggesting that the view is in Tory Street with part of Mount Victoria to the right. This view gives a good indication of the natural vegetation of swampy Te Aro flat, close to where the Waitangi Stream meandered through it before the uplift of the 1855 earthquake.

Pearse also drew a number of scenes in Karori, including a view of Homewood surrounded by large trees. Early Karori drawings and paintings consistently show a multitude of trees with Karori Road cut through bush. The section of road known as Karori Road in the early years of settlement includes modern Glenmore and Chaytor Streets as well as Karori Road itself.

The Turnbull Library has a newly acquired C. D. Barraud oil painting of Wellington, dated 1849; and it almost certainly shows Homewood in Karori, when the grounds were first being cleared, since Barraud lived there in 1849. The Library also has two studies by Barraud called Rata tree, Karori Road, dated 1854, both of the same very large notable tree at the side of a narrow road curving round a steep hillside.

Finally I would like to discuss several examples of the work of Colonel Charles Gold.

Gold was commanding officer of the 65th regiment and was based in Wellington between 1847 and 1858. His painting is naive and he rarely titles his work to indicate exactly where he was or what the date was, but he took an unusual interest in native vegetation - witness his view of **The entrance to Wellington** looking down from perhaps Tinakori Hill or Wadestown, towards Evan's Bay, Miramar, and the harbour entrance. There is careful detailing of tree ferns in the foreground, the skeleton of a large dead tree rising above the bush canopy with dead vines curling down from the branches, and another living tall tree, perhaps a rimu again showing vines drooping from its branches. The vines could be rata, while a hillock of lower bush with lighter foliage in bunched shapes might be ngaio. Similarly with his **Wellington Harbour**, which he has dated 1856, we can distinguish rimu rising above lower trees, tree ferns, cabbage trees and flax, the latter convincingly at the edge of the bush. Both of these suggest plenty of bush on the higher hills around Wellington with larger trees emerging from a lower canopy. The latter view with Cook Strait visible in the background may be of Evan's Bay.

In his **Bush scene with flowering rata and young rimu** it is possible to distinguish one tree from another, something that is quite unusual among nineteenth century artists, other than botanists. The view appears to be from a high point on Karori Road, looking towards the harbour and western hills in the background, across a sea of bush, with almost no evidence of human devastation.

Two images from outside central Wellington, and still the work of Colonel Gold, are good records of native plants. **Flax and toetoe, Wellington Heads** is a rare view of coastal scrub; and **Wellington Harbor New Zealand** can be located and dated quite precisely, despite Gold's vague title. This is a view from the Petone

foreshore, looking back towards Wellington along the western hills. The large slip on the second hill along is from the 1855 earthquake and is the area where the petrol station now sits on the Hutt Road, close to Petone.

Finally, an enchanting view by Gold **Bush scene with tree ferns, ferns and rimu** is unidentified but may be of the Karori or Wilton areas. It is even possible to identify the central tree-fern as a mamaku, and the drooping juvenile foliage of a rimu decorates the top of the watercolour. There is also supplejack curving up the tree trunk to the right. The composition is very European-looking - a romantic glade in a forest, but constructed of nothing but New Zealand plants. It is as a delightful example of an artist's appreciation of local vegetation but with European notions of aesthetics imposed upon it.

The evidence supplied by artists in the 1840s and 1850s is quite mixed. There are botanists' drawings of specimen plants, but none of the earliest ones are from the central Wellington area. Few landscape artists drew plants in such detail that they are identifiable. If one assumes that the dominant plants outside the heavily-bushed areas were either manuka or kanuka, no early artists found them aesthetically pleasing enough to draw them clearly, unlike flax, cabbage trees and tree ferns. However, in combination, balancing one artist's interpretation against another, we get a surprisingly good overall idea of how our original bush cover looked. And in terms of visual records, it is all that we have.

### Slide list

All originals are from the collection of the Alexander Turnbull Library Reference numbers follow details of artist, title, date and medium.

- James Coutts Crawford: **Dr Taylor's house, Tiakiwai, Wellington, 1839.** Watercolour (A-229-021)
- William Mein Smith: **From the Pah, Pipitea, Port Nicholson, December 1840** Pen and ink drawing (C-011-005)
- William Mein Smith: **Mount Victoria and Lambton Harbour from the Tinakori [late 1840?].** Pen and ink drawing (C-011-006)
- John Wicksteed: **Thorndon showing Colonel Wakefield's house. 1841** Wakefield's house. Pen and ink drawing (A-155-011)
- William Fox: **Sir William Fox's first home, Hill Street, Wellington, 1843.** Watercolour (A-195-003)
- William Swainson : **Ki-warra from Thorndon Flat.** [Between 1842 and 1845]. Pencil drawing (E-295-q-046)
- William Swainson: **Rata throwing out a supporting hand, Alsorf s farm [ca 1845].**Pencil (A-189-008).
- Charles Heaphy: **Thorndon Flat, April 1841.** Watercolour (C-025-010).
- Charles Heaphy: **View of a part of the town of Wellington, September 1841.**Watercolour (C-025-009).
- George Hilliard: **Panorama of Port Nicholson, 1841.** Pencil drawing in 6 sections (C-012-005)
- Luke Natrass: **City of Wellington 1841.**Lithograph (two sections)
- Samuel Brees: **Mr Brees' cottage, Karori Road [ca 1844].** Engraving. (E-070-022)
- Samuel Brees: **View looking down Hawkestone Street with Mr Brees' cottage, [ca 1844].** Engraving. (A-109-021)
- Samuel Brees: **Catholic Chapel, Wellington [ca 1844].** Engraving. (E-070-003)
- John Pearse: **Wellington Harbour from Cemetery back of Government Domain [ca 1854].** Watercolour (E-455-f-036-3)
- John Pearse: **Government Reserve for Botanical Garden Karori Road near Wellington - Rimutaka range of mountains in distance (ca 1854).** Watercolour (E-455-f-036-l)

- John Pearse: **Wellington Harbour from road leading to the Barracks [1852?]** Watercolour (E-455-f-034-1)
- Charles Gold: **The entrance to Wellington [ca 1850]** Watercolour (A-288-032)
- Charles Gold: **Wellington Harbour, 1856.** Watercolour (A-288-004).
- Charles Gold: **[Bush scene with flowering rata and young rimu, ca 1850]** Watercolour (A-288-016).
- Charles Gold: **[Flax and toetoe, Wellington Heads, ca 1850].** Watercolour (A-288-024)
- Charles Gold: **[Wellington Harbor New Zealand, ca 1850].** Watercolour (A-288-008)
- Charles Gold **[Bush scene with tree ferns, ferns and rimu, ca 1850]** Watercolour (A-288-037)