

HISTORICAL NOTE

They Took to the Hills

By Des Dubbelt

Des Dubbelt is a long standing member and supporter of the Historical Society, now living in Auckland. He has sent us this article and the wonderfully evocative accompanying sketch on the front page.

The invention of photography and the European colonisation of New Zealand could not have been timed better. Wellington, with its dramatic harbour setting, tempted professional photographers who, when not making a living from studio portraits of those settlers who could afford them, took their cameras outdoors to record the local scene. From the first known photograph of the township, dated 1857, Mount Victoria is frequently in the picture, if only in the background.

Wellington's photogenic appeal claimed the attention of the country's foremost photographer, Alfred Burton of the Dunedin Partnership Burton Bros. On one of his visits he set up his tripod at the junction of Salamanca Road and The Terrace. The resulting image, a masterpiece bearing the title "Wellington From Catholic Cemetery" has a foreground dominated by a monumental cross with the graveyard's white picket fences and wrought iron enclosures, the cross etched precisely against the calm waters of the harbour below. Like a stage set this is the real focus but the eye is drawn to a steep hillside sweeping down from the wings, from summit to sea. It is Mount Victoria, backing modestly into the limelight.

Noting the portent of things to come, Burton captured the line of a rail viaduct crossing the harbour out from the Te Aro shore. The year was 1883 and an important reclamation project was about to begin. Something of equal interest was taking place on the lower spurs of Mount Victoria where the first houses were appearing, following the contours. In the poster-size enlargement published by PhotoForum Inc. in 1982, Hawker Street is visible, straggling like a country lane and a few hardy pioneers have pegged out claims right up to the Town Belt. Early arrivals in the spectacular auditorium have secured seats in the Gods.

By 1907 the House Full sign was up. This was when, once again, the moment found its man. His name was S.C. Smith and his detailed panorama of the now crowded suburb of Mount Victoria is unique, even in the present age of aerial photography. To get his six linked shots from a fixed viewpoint Smith climbed on to a roof of a building in what was a City Council yard opposite the foot of the Wood Street steps on Oriental Parade. In the left foreground are the Boat Harbour, a solid row of two-storied houses along the Parade front and, on a cliff above them and perched on seemingly flimsy supports, the back decks of houses facing Roxburgh Street. The street's architectural landmark is an Italianate-style, two-storied brick house with contrasting plastered arched facings at windows, upper balcony and entrance. From lofty Shannon Street above and steep flights of steps off Hawker Street such as McIntyres Avenue and Doctors Common, access is gained to the now unbroken top row of the Gods. To the right, Smith's panorama takes in the wide sweep of the terraces Kent and Cambridge right up to the Basin Reserve. With the ordered central planted division it takes no great leap of the imagination to see the resemblance to a famous thoroughfare. Half close the eyes and it is a mini Champs Elysées.

From the parade of historic Wellington photographs, some details have a setting in common stand out. They include:

- The straight line of Majoribanks Street which meets the hill head on, only stopping when the grade became impossible.
- Dominating city and harbour from its prominent site, the church and monastery of St Gerard, an antipodean Monte Cassino.
- Huddling down behind its black wind-break, the maritime signal station on the hill's summit, hanging on for a while even after new technology made it redundant.
- The portal of the tram tunnel at the head of Pirie Street, the tunnel completed only two years after the electric service began.

For almost 150 years Mount Victoria has been a featured player.

NEXT EVENT

Sunday, July 13 at 2.00 pm - Historic Movies at Time Cinema, 191 Sutherland Road, Melrose