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T. Lindsay Buick

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The French at Akaroa

Thomas Lindsay Buick (1865–1938) became interested in New Zealand history while working as a political journalist in Wellington, and became an influential figure in the field. He went on to write twelve books and numerous pamphlets on the early history of the country and was elected a fellow of the Royal Historical Society in 1914. First published in Wellington in 1928, this work describes the history of Akaroa in the South Island, a small settlement on the Banks Peninsula founded by French settlers in 1840. In the same year, New Zealand became part of the British Empire, and much of Buick's account focuses on the interaction and disputes between the French and British settlers. The book, which was published under the auspices of the Board of Maori Ethnological Research, also includes the history of the local Maori tribes.

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KING LOUIS PHILIPPE.

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THE FRENCH AT AKAROA

AN ADVENTURE IN COLONIZATION.

BY

T. LINDSAY BUICK, F.R.Hist.S.,

Author of

"Old Marlborough," "Old Manawatu," "An Old New-Zealander,"

"The Treaty of Waitangi," "New Zealand's First War,"

"The Romance of the Gramophone."

Published under the auspices of the Board of Maori
Ethnological Research.



WELLINGTON, N.Z.

NEW ZEALAND BOOK DEPOT, 80 WILLIS STREET,
AND AT DUNEDIN AND INVERCARGILL.

—
1928.

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Dedication.

—

TO

THE FRENCH PEOPLE,

“OUR GLORIOUS ALLIES,”

I

DEDICATE THIS BOOK.

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NOTE OF ACKNOWLEDGMENT.

TO me one of the most pleasant experiences in connection with the compilation of this book has been the readiness with which all my friends to whom I have appealed for assistance have lent their aid. I am especially indebted to the staffs of the Turnbull Library, the General Assembly Library, and the Wellington Public Library for the freedom with which they have placed the books, documents, &c., in their great collections at my disposal. This has been a wonderful help, and a help greatly enhanced by the extent to which my slender knowledge of French has often been supplemented by their wider learning. For the translation of some of the more important documents I am especially indebted to Professor G. W. von Zedlitz, whose help has been invaluable, and whose courtesy and generosity in this respect are beyond praise. In like manner I have again been placed under deep obligation to Mr. H. E. M. Fildes, whose extensive knowledge of New Zealand history has many times been drawn upon, and whose meticulous regard for detail has repeatedly saved me from error. Rare books from his fine collection have ever been at my disposal with unvarying liberality, and many rough places in the path of research have been made smooth by his generous co-operation. Mr. G. J. Black, of Gisborne, has made me his debtor by placing at my disposal much of the material he has gathered during years of collecting of historical matter about Banks Peninsula; and for the Christian names of such of the original settlers as I have been able to print I am indebted to Mr. W. Stewart, Commissioner of Crown

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Lands for Canterbury. To Mr. R. A. Loughnan and his sister-in-law, Madame Webb, I owe a number of contributions from their store of chatty reminiscences of the original French settlers; the Hon. W. H. Triggs, M.L.C., and Dr. G. H. Scholefield have assisted with valuable suggestions; while Mr. Johannes Andersen, whose writings on Banks Peninsula are well known, and Mr. T. M. Hinkley also have been helpful in the same direction. Extracts from the files of French newspapers in the British Museum have been most obligingly procured for me by Mr. A. P. Cattanach, of London, and Mr. Charles Victor Langlois, Keeper of the Archives Nationales at Paris, has been ever diligent and courteous in answering my inquiries for information. To Miss Jacobson, of Akaroa, I am obliged for one of the illustrations, and to Mr. H. M. Stowell for checking the names of Southern natives.

Finally, I have to make my grateful acknowledgments to the Right Hon. J. G. Coates, Prime Minister, whose interest in, and practical sympathy for, historical research has made the publication of this volume possible.

The written authorities consulted will be found in the Bibliography at the end of the book.

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PREFACE.

IN presenting this volume to the public I wish it clearly to be understood that I have not attempted to write a history of what might be called "Old Akaroa." Much less have I attempted to write a history of Banks Peninsula. It is possible that in these subjects there is material for other books and work for other writers whose courses will lead them along less sectional lines than mine. My purpose has been to endeavour to give some account of that incident in New Zealand history which resulted in a small French colony being established at Akaroa in 1840. Beyond that I have not attempted to go. In justification for such a volume it can with truth be urged that no event in our colonial development has been made the subject of so much romance, or has become so grotesquely distorted in the passage of the years since Captain Langlois founded the Nanto-Bordelaise Company. As it stands, it is hoped this narrative will be more in tune with the facts than any previously published attempt to tell the story, though it is by no means claimed that there are not still missing many illuminating sidelights.

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My attention was first pointedly drawn to this subject when, in 1900, I was engaged in writing *Old Marlborough*. There I came across the fact that British sovereignty over the South Island was proclaimed at Cloudy Bay on 17th June, 1840. The story of the "race" to Akaroa in the following August, for an allegedly similar purpose, was not unknown to me, and I at once became conscious of a conflict in historical statement. Marlborough, and not Canterbury, was, however, claiming my attention at the moment, and I could do no more than draw brief attention to what appeared to be an historical anomaly. For that reason, perhaps, the subject was not without its fascination, and for many years I have been collecting material in the hope that the future would permit of the knitting-together of historical fragments and the solving of apparently inexplicable problems. To some extent this garnering has been utilized in the present work, but its fruits by no means form its basis.

The narrative as here told is founded mainly upon personal accounts of participants in the venture, deposited in the Archives Nationales at Paris. It has not been my privilege to work from the originals, but I have availed myself of copies and translations which were made in Paris for the late Dr. McNab and are now part of the treasures of the Turnbull Library. It was the intention of Dr. McNab to do, one

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day, what I have done, but the Reaper came before the harvest was ripe. Without these documents it would have been impossible to write this book in New Zealand, and I have therefore experienced a melancholy pleasure in taking up and completing the task, since the complexities of the subject and the scope of the work were often discussed between us.

It may be thought that I have quoted with undue freedom from letters and reports, but my purpose in that has been to make the leading figures in the drama play their own parts, and tell their own story with as little interference from myself as possible. Romance and imagination are thus eliminated, and we get down to the bed-rock of fact, so far as it is humanly possible to do so.

For what conclusions I have drawn from the facts as I see them I am entirely responsible, and do not desire in any way to divest myself of that responsibility. This must be particularly so in connection with the dispute as to whether British sovereignty was or was not proclaimed at Akaroa on 11th August, 1840. It is no light matter to destroy the treasured beliefs of a community, or to cast doubt upon the inscriptions graven with loving care upon two public monuments, but I have stated my case—temperately, I hope—and leave the issue to public judgment.

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Gleaning as I have done from a great mass of material, one cannot escape forming individual impressions, and I have come out of this search with the conviction that France showed her lack of colonizing ability at Akaroa as plainly as in any part of the world. Her settlement there could never have succeeded, founded as it was upon a purely speculative and State-aided basis. Still, had it been projected earlier it might have given France a footing on the South Island which would have been ever the source of unpleasant complications, and might ultimately have led to war. It was, therefore, for both nations a happy circumstance which gave the sovereignty of the whole of New Zealand to Great Britain, and the first to admit this now would, I think, be the French. Their settlers must, in the end, have been left to shift for themselves, or would have been repatriated by the State, and it was fortunate for them that they were so soon surrounded by a great British community into which they could be peacefully and imperceptibly absorbed.

The records consulted reveal that the French Ministers of that day had quite high ideals in constitutional government, and one gets an especially favourable view of Admiral Duperré as an administrator. He was not only a fine sailor with a great record, but a statesman evidently inspiring confidence in all parties, since he was Minister of Marine and Colonies

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in three different Administrations. The view obtained of the promoters of the Nanto-Borde-laise Company is less favourable. They were speculators of rather a mean type, who when things were going well were prepared to share the spoils, but at the first sign of reverse were ready to scuttle and run. From this broad censure we may partially exclude Captain Langlois. He was a rough son of the salt sea, who had he lived a hundred years earlier might have made a fine old buccaneer. He smelt perhaps a little highly of whale-oil and raw spirits; he had a hot temper and a sharp tongue, but he had faith in his ideal, and fought to the last ditch to preserve it. In so far, then, as he was staunch and courageous, we may be able to concede to him the meed of respect which is given to men who are strong and resolute in their purposes.

The most abiding impression, however, which comes out of the study of this incident in our history is a profound admiration for Captain Lavaud. Both he and Captain Hobson had difficult roles to play in a rapidly developing drama, but Lavaud's was always the more difficult, because, through no fault of his, he was on the losing side. His letters reveal him as a man blessed with much sense, calm judgment, and a broad human outlook. We may, indeed, be thankful that he, of clear sight and cool brain, had to meet a situation which in more

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impatient hands might have embroiled two great and otherwise friendly nations. Mr. James Hay, who lived the greater part of his life on the Peninsula, once informed me that in the early days of the settlement the French were a greater protection to the British residing there than was the British Government itself. This is very true, and was due entirely to the broad-mindedness of Captain Lavaud, who while in New Zealand was displaying those qualities of fair and even-handed administration which subsequently made him a successful Governor at Tahiti.

In the final chapter I have dealt briefly with an aspect of the history of Banks Peninsula in which the French were not so largely concerned as the British, but which is none the less germane to the subject, as disclosing how the Peninsula was prepared for that larger measure of settlement which could never have materialized under the tricolour, but which has become a living fact under the Union Jack.

THE AUTHOR.

5 Boston Terrace, Wellington,
October, 1928.
