

Romance of the Rail

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Abstract

James Cowan wrote promotional literature and guidebooks for the New Zealand Railways Department. In them he mixes historical and progressivist discourse, revealing tensions between contradictory ideas about New Zealand: its celebration as a modern and technologically advanced state, epitomized by the railway, and nostalgia for the culture and history that the railway aimed to erase.

Christmas 1980. Martin Edmond revisits the country of his childhood, Waimarino, Ōhākune, country that James Cowan also wrote about. Like Cowan, Edmond's arrival at Ōhākune Junction was by train, and also like Cowan he is focussed on the past. For Edmond, Ōhākune and its surroundings are layered with personal experience, history and change—the paddock where his sisters kept their horses is now the site of two kitset houses, and he visits the railway bridge at Tangiwai where the only signs of the 1953 disaster are a rusty bolt on the sand and a cross made of two bits of wood nailed together, painted white, and bearing the inscription “In memory of those who died here.” Reflecting on the train stations and journeys of his youth provokes Edmond to a more general reflection on memory, memory as palimpsest, overwritten and reiterated. He writes:

When we remember we revisit and in the process revise a site we have been to before.... [I]f this is so, each enactment becomes a re-enactment, each indulgence a re-indulgence, iteration piled upon iteration ... a dizzying maze of revisions and reversions....¹

As Chris Hilliard has said, the need to remember was a recurrent theme of James Cowan's writing.² Not only was oral testimony a structural part of his historical methodology; his intellectual project, even when producing commissioned work of rather different purposes, was to ensure that memory was the province of history, not imagination. But as Lucy Lippard has noted, memory, like nostalgia, is personal and subjective, dreamlike, while history is purportedly specific and evidential.³ This essay will consider some of the ways in which history and memory surface in Cowan's travel and guidebook writing, and what seems to result from these surfacings, in particular the work he produced for New Zealand Rail and for the Department of Tourist and Health resorts, which employed him from 1903 until about 1909.⁴ His first published work was a short guide to Taupo, and guidebooks formed the bread and butter of his writing income for most of his life.

In 1928 Cowan wrote a tourist guide and publicity brochure for the Railways on train travel.⁵ *Romance of the Rail* has a heroic and modern cover. It doesn't actually show you a train or a rail track, but metaphorically suggests the strength and power of modern transport. What strikes me though is the way this image figuratively transforms the industrial and mechanical dimensions of rail into a rearing horse leaping over the country. Taking the train, the cover implies, is not that different from being a horseman, so it pictorially preserves the idea of travel as something individual, heroic, and free.

The back cover of the brochure is more conventionally targeted to what you might think of as government department promotional objectives—safety and sun.



Fig. 1. *New Zealand Railways brochure 1928 Front cover*



Fig. 2. *New Zealand Railways brochure 1928 Back Cover*

Romance of the Rail.

From Auckland Southward.

The Plain of Tamaki-makau-rau.

THE train traveller leaving Auckland City by the Main Trunk line quickly finds himself out in the widespread residential districts that leisurely cover practically the whole isthmus between the twin harbours of the Waitemata and the Manukau. As one leaves the city levels there are glimpses of the glistening expanse of the Waitemata Harbour, here a calm steel mirror, there a river of blue oil, great reclamation works on its southern side, green rounded hill cones and clustering white buildings along the North Shore; steam liners and white sails; and the dark blue of the outer waters, the Hauraki Gulf; the white cliffs of Motutapu and Motuihi topped by dark groves and verdurous slopes; far beyond the whaleback and ram-bow ranges of the outer wardens, islands and shadows of islands. Old Rangitoto—that perfectly circular mountain island of lava—dominates all; its blue-peaked crater rim cuts the sky beyond the soft-green foreland of the North Head.

In the foreground are the pretty homes and gardens of the suburban dwellers, and the gentle undulations of the Remuera and Orakei slopes, terminating in pohutukawa-fringed headlands. Those soft slants of Ohinerai, the place of a Hundred Maidens, going down in delectable lines from Remuera's little mountain—called Mount Hobson after New Zealand's first Governor—are a perfect picture of peace, wealth, and beauty to-day, with the homes of modern comfort and luxury, shaded by plenteous tree-groves and with gardens of subtropic blaze and loveliness. It is curious to learn, as one does from the old records, that all these Remuera and Ohinerai slopes where Auckland's wealthiest homes now stand were bought from the Maori chiefs of the Ngati-Whatua tribe some eighty years ago for £200.

Commanding all this garden and orchard land is Remuera Mount, one of the smaller volcanic cones of the Auckland plains; we see it on our left just after we pass the busy railway-station and workshops at Newmarket. It was the view from this little mountain-top that Sir John Logan Campbell, the "Father of Auckland," found so entrancing in 1840, as he gazed over this all but unpeopled isthmus,

Fig. 3. *New Zealand Railways brochure 1928 P.1*

In his commentary Cowan picks up the heroic aspects of industrial and rail development before diverging from them to something that is much closer to the cover image. The train traveller leaves Auckland on the “iron road.” Extolled as an “emblem of progress” that has occurred in the “span of a single lifetime” (which is presumably Cowan’s lifetime), the rail road is an epic example of scientific industry and endeavour. As the train figuratively rolls out, Cowan describes the landscape for his implied reader and companion, a landscape that reflects industrialisation: Waitematā Harbour is a steel mirror and a river of blue oil, distinguished by “great reclamation works.” It is a tribute to effort and efficiency, the traveller safely gliding on the iron road which the landscape echoes. But as Cowan’s traveller continues to gaze from the window it does not take long for the view to morph into a palimpsest. The traveller gazes at a landscape articulated by progress and modern transport which progressively reveals within it the shapes of history and memory. Gazing out at the “perfect picture of peace, wealth and beauty” that is composed by the homes of modern comfort and luxury in Remuera and on the Ōhinerau slopes, Cowan’s narrator/guide makes the following interjection:

It is curious to learn, *as one does from the old records*, that all these Remuera and Ohinerau slopes where Auckland’s wealthiest homes now stand were bought from the Maori chiefs of the Ngati-Whatua tribe some eighty years ago for £200. (My emphasis.)

Perhaps Cowan’s imaginary traveller might receive this remark as an example of thrift and a good bargain, but Cowan’s opening of the archive, his declaration of himself as the archon of the old records, opens the way for a counter-narrative that runs through the brochure, a narrative of dispossession and alienation, of nostalgia and memory, of the ineradicability of time past, no matter how modern or safe or comfortable the technological advance of the present. The railway, or to be more precise, the Main Trunk Line, is a journey in several dimensions.

As the train progresses into Waikato and the King Country, Cowan’s sense of conducting a traveller through a landscape speaking of history grows—even the land on which the railway runs starts to shift its ground. Reaching Taupiri he observes that before the Waikato war, “all travellers along the bank where our train now runs were forbidden to tread on this sacred soil which was tapu to the water’s edge.” While he declaims that the King Country has been “wonderfully transformed” he simultaneously evokes it as a vanished scene of glory, colour and life—processions of waka on the Waikato and a territory marked off by a non-European taxonomy—the prohibitions of customary law. As Chris Hilliard has shown in *The Bookmen’s Dominion*, both Cowan’s voice and his discourse are deeply mixed. As he shows off a land of fat cattle and sheep and butterfat and a river confluence which he says reminded Selwyn of the Rhone, he is also pointing to military settlements, the dwindling population of Māori whose absence left a great silence over the land and the vanished bush. While his rhetoric is determinedly progressive and colonialist, his memory evokes a different set of impressions and implied emotions, driven by what Lippard refers to as the “overly discredited” emotion of nostalgia, and it is always obvious that when his sentences begin to flow with energy and apostrophes he is recalling and evoking the 1860s.

Part of the distinctive character of Cowan’s historical work, which is connected to the difficulty of reading it as evidential history, is how he holds these conflicting drives in tension—progressivism and nostalgia, colonialism and cultural sympathy. In his travel writing there is constant interplay between these emotional forces in his metaphors and set descriptions, and they are particularly evident as Cowan promotes the Main Trunk Line, which runs along the path of some intense personal experience.

In 1916 Cowan published a piece in the *Canterbury Times* called “The Bush Explorers.” It is symptomatic of the layerings that characterise his writing that the piece has two subtitles—“A Memory of the King Country” and “Swag and Camp in the Rohepotae Forest”—which reflect the different impulses of his text. It is an account of a journey he made with Charles Wilson Hursthouse and seven other men, including the then Minister of Native Affairs, Alfred Jerome Cadman, other surveyors, an Auckland lawyer, Julian, a bush Guide and Puhi, who Cowan refers to as a “Maori packer.” In his published account Cowan dates this journey as about 1891 or 1892, which would make him 21 or 22, as he says, the youngest of the squad. The point of their trip, which started in Te Kuiti and headed for Stratford, a journey of 135 kilometres as the crow flies, was to adjudicate in the “battle of the routes.” As Cowan writes, in his inimitable boys-own style, fleshed and coloured with romantic imagery:

Our jumping off point that summer morning of long ago was Te Kuiti, a rough shop in those days when it was the Head of the Line, and when the big beyond of the Rohepotae lay wrapped in mystery to all but Maoris and pakeha surveyors and the tough men of the out-of-doors whose business it is to build roads and railways. Not an acre of King Country land had passed into white settlers’ hands, not a pakeha farm redeemed the wastes of fern and manuka southward of the Puniu, the old Aukati pale.... Otorohanga and Te Kuiti were the Ngati Maniapoto headquarters and there we used to see the old chiefs whose names were writ large in the story of the Kingite struggle, swart old heroes who eschewed the trousers of the pakeha and stalked free-limbed in blanket and waist-shawl. Now the pakeha was coming and presently his iron rail and his steam “taepo” would lay the trail that was to conquer and finally extinguish the mana of the Maori.⁶

What is fascinating about Cowan is I think illustrated in what is going on in this passage. Partly it is a question of tone and register. The “summer morning of long ago” is a kind of rote description that sets a nostalgic mood and signals what Lippard has called the “complex emotions we harbour about the past, about childhood, about loss and return.”⁷ It introduces the romanticized, adventurous, even heroic past. It is a past also suggested by the title and one of the subtitles, a place in rhetorical memory, on which other flourishes are drawn—it is a rough shop, the Head of the Line, it is wrapped in mystery except to certain categories of men. Cowan’s use of negative parataxis in “Not an acre of King Country land, not a pakeha farm...” works syntactically against what he is actually saying. As the negative clauses pile on each other they build a sense of volume and breadth; you seem to hear the acres piling up and the emotional freight, the rhythm, of the syntax works against the sentence’s meaning. You feel the heft and loss of the land at the same time as you’re being told it is a redemption.

My point is that here, where memory is working to re-enact the scene of Cowan’s youth, which his heroic register invests with emotion, the tensions between his contradictory impulses are structurally enacted in his prose. Another example: just as the image of the iron rail and steam “taepo” is brought into play as an image of conquest, it is countered, or rather the reader is reminded, of what is being conquered, by Cowan’s reference to the mana of the Māori, which has just been evoked for us as an image of freedom and historic struggle. H.W. Williams defined “taipo” as “goblin,” and also noted that it is a “ghost” word, “used by Maoris believing it English, and by Europeans believing it Maori, it being apparently neither.”⁸ Who or what is the “taepo” haunting? While Cowan seems to suggest that the steam train is a monster, conquering the “mana of the Maori,” he is also haunted by that conquest, compelled to remember and describe the “swart old heroes” and their mana.

These countervailing rhetorical currents are so looped into Cowan’s writing style that it becomes almost impossible to know what his primary objective is—to mourn the lands of

mystery and the heroes of the past or to celebrate the arrival of the conquest? This is the problem of his tone and his historical narrative.

Cowan's syntactical ambiguities and the countercurrents of his prose, his tonal ambivalence, reflect a deep and irresolvable conflict he experiences at an emotional level, between loss and progress. As the party of surveyors and tough railroad building men travels far into the Rohe Pōtae, the purpose of their journey and the admiring descriptions of Hursthouse, or Wirihana, with his double-barrelled gun over his shoulder are contextualised by some of Cowan's most lyrical prose about the bush:

The music of the bush is about one all day long—bird song and twitterings on the track side, the inquisitive little fantail flirting around you and even daring to perch a moment on the very muzzle of Hursthouse's gun. The freedom of the bush is one's heritage for another day.... Town and office and streets and tramcars are very dim and distant, thousands of miles away; this is the real life.⁹

These nostalgic and deeply felt recreations of vividly-remembered experience are interspersed, in conventional travel writing fashion, with comic or dramatic sketches, suitably headlined as "How we lost our pig dogs" or "The horses that went mad" and with one of the favourite travel tropes of colonial writers—projections of future globetrotters. When Anthony Trollope visited the Pink and White Terraces and bathed in Rotomahana he envisioned a future when there would be a "sprightly hotel" with a "table d'hote and boats at so much an hour and regular seasons for bathing," rather forgetting he was sitting in a volcano.¹⁰ In just the same way Hursthouse declares to his toiling King Country party, imaged by Cowan as struggling through the wilderness like so many insects through grass, that "one day" this will be a famous spot and "the globe trotter will put up his ivory-mounted opera glasses at his railway-carriage window and say 'Damme, this is rather pretty—where's the camera?'"

Travel writing is the art of repetition, especially rhetorical and set piece repetition, and Cowan's incorporation of such set-piece conventions as the projection of the future tourist and dramatic anecdotes imply a newspaper reader who is aware of them. The music of the bush is itself a pastoral set piece, but evokes a subjective response and attentiveness which tends to tie it to the young Cowan rather than his implied reader. But it raises what is always a question for me—who is Cowan writing for? Himself? A traveller? An armchair traveller? The generic newspaper reader? In a piece like "The Bush Explorers" the question of who it is written for is connected, it seems, to why it is written, a question brought into focus in his final evocation of the bush:

Far below we saw the first signs of the coming settler, the half-felled and burned ruins of the grand old wild wood, the blackened outposts of the northward-making wave of dairy farmers and fat stock raisers; then the half cleared country merged again into the thick forests of rata and pine; and ascending in a grand, slowly curving swell, massive, but of delicious beauty of line and form, out of the purple hazed woods that swarthed its hips as in a soft Maori mantle.¹¹

The affective rhythm of this long sentence in which Cowan re-enacts lifting his youthful gaze to the hills, is clearly nostalgic, but also and more sharply, expresses loss, the loss of his past self and its past landscape and the people who lived there, who are tenderly evoked as the soft Māori mantle of the purple-hazed woods. This kind of eulogised and emotively imaged memory is everywhere in Cowan's writing, though sometimes no more than a spectral hint, quickly repressed in favour of his assertions about the colonial present. They are particularly apparent in "The Bush Explorers" because Cowan is recalling a time of happiness and youthful adventure as a personal narrative, but the complex of emotions so apparent here—admiration for the men who drive progress and a figurative horror at what they have caused—also shadows

his more “official” writing. Partly this is because Cowan is never an impersonal observer, and even when he is telling his reader admiringly that the railways cover 2,500 miles and the carriages have reversible seats like American saloon-cars, the spectres of old battles and warriors crowd his descriptions.

In his more formal guidebooks, such as *New Zealand* (1907) and *The Dominion of New Zealand* (1911), which is a decorative presentation copy of the same text with more illustrations, or *The Tongariro National Park* (1927), his attention slides off the Main Trunk Line and its engineering wonders almost as soon as he raises his head from the facts.¹² So advising his reader that a run over the Main Trunk Line can be combined with a trip on the Wanganui River leads him, of course, straight to the wars, and it is not so much that he thinks his reader will be interested in these events—a perfectly reasonable supposition—but the detail that then pours out of him, often very eloquently and evocatively, is a kind of submerged pointer to his complex and ambiguous attachments to the world he inhabits. It is a return of the repressed.

A brief example. Announcing that at Mercer the train traveller gets his first glimpse of Māori life, Cowan segues into a loving description of the “slender Maori canoes, cocked up with a graceful sheer bow and stern” and offers the reader/traveller the information that prior to the Waikato War of 1863 no vessel or boat of European construction had ever floated on the waters of the Waikato; “Maori canoes alone navigated its strong current.”¹³ Cowan’s descriptive scene setting and historical detail exceeds what the traveller might be presumed to want to know, because he is driven to reproduce the landscape with its past still there.

And this I think is what Cowan’s travel and guidebook writing is really about. You might call it deep time, the view of history that the Centre for the History of Emotions in Australia is currently pursuing. Or you might, like Martin Edmond, see Cowan as endlessly possessed by repetitions and reenactments of the past that occupy the sites he is writing about. In either case, the Main Trunk Line is not, for him or his reader, a linear experience.

I am going to finish with a few words about Cowan’s guide to the Tongariro National Park which shows how he nativises the Main Trunk Line. The booklet opens with a reference to Sir Francis Younghusband, who told the Royal Geographical Society that geographers should take a less material, more spiritual view of the Earth and its many wonders. The guide pays tribute to Te Heuheu Tukino (Horonuku) who gifted the park, and tells the story of his father and brother’s death, as well as recounting more ancient whakapapa stories and waiata. The history of European mountain ascents is framed by a more general discussion of breaches of tapu, and the railway line is absorbed into the bush. The traveller will see:

A clear sunny moving vision from the forest-bordered rails, with the soft green rimu and beeches and the broad-sword-leaved toi as a foreground and framing for the tender blue and white fires of the volcano-king... a picture not to be obliterated from the pages of memory.¹⁴

The guide includes a suitable illustration—the railway has become part of the bush, in a kind of emotionally pressing recovery of time, landscape and history that is continuously re-enacted across Cowan’s writing.



IN THE WAIMARINO FOREST, MAIN TRUNK RAILWAY LINE.

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Fig. 4. "In the Waimarino Forest, Main Trunk Railway Line"
Cowan, *New Zealand, or, Ao-teä-roa* (1907).

¹ Martin Edmond, *Waimarino County: & other excursions* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2007), 44.

² Chris Hilliard, *The Bookmen's Dominion: Cultural Life in New Zealand, 1920-1950* (Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2006).

³ Lucy R. Lippard, *On the Beaten Track: Tourism, Art and Place* (New York: New Press, 1999), 154.

⁴ David Colquhoun, "James Cowan," <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/biographies/3c36/cowan-james>

⁵ *Romance of the Rail: Through the Heart of New Zealand: The North Island Main Trunk Railway; A Descriptive and Historical Story* (Wellington: Govt. Printer, 1928). The brochure's copy appeared in a series of features, also entitled "The Romance of the Rail," published in the *New Zealand Railways Magazine* in 1928 and 1929.

⁶ James Cowan, "The bush explorers: a memory of the King Country, swag and camp in the Rohepotae forest (about 1891 or 1892) [and] Mount Egmont; further reminiscences," *The Canterbury Times*, 5 April, 1916.

⁷ Lippard, 153.

⁸ H. W. Williams, *A Dictionary of the Maori Language* (6th edition, Wellington: Govt. Printer, 1957).

⁹ Cowan, "The bush explorers."

¹⁰ Antony Trollope, *Australia and New Zealand*. 2nd. edition (1873; London: Dawson's of Pall Mall, 1968), 484.

¹¹ Cowan, "The bush explorers."

¹² *New Zealand, or, Ao-teä-roa (the long bright world): Its Wealth and Resources, Scenery, Travel-routes, Spas and Sport* (Wellington: Dept. of Tourist and Health Resorts, 1907); *The Dominion of New Zealand: Its Characteristics, Resources, and Scenery* (Wellington: J. MacKay, Govt. Printer, 1911); *The Tongariro National Park, New Zealand: Its Topography, Geology, Alpine and Volcanic Features, History and Maori Folk-lore* (Wellington: Tongariro National Park Board, 1927).

¹³ Cowan, *The Dominion of New Zealand*, 64.

¹⁴ Cowan, *The Tongariro National Park*.