SELLING THE DREAM
The Art of Early New Zealand Tourism
This book is dedicated to the artistic pioneers who designed and created the inspiring images ahead, pioneers who deserve to be better recognised and admired for their contribution to New Zealand’s art history and pivotal role in shaping New Zealand’s national identity.
These posters are more than just advertising. They make people dream.

Albert Dery, quoted in 'Wishing Vous Were Here', Forbes magazine, 23 April 2007
Vintage New Zealand travel posters are part of my earliest memories. They are as familiar and comforting to me as the view out my window. The rich colours speak of a bygone age, and the spectacular imagery evokes the romance of travel. But beyond the nostalgia they conjure, I have come to appreciate these graphic illustrations for what they are – unique, beautifully crafted works of art.

Miramar has been home to filmmakers and film studios long before the sound stages at Stone Street were built, or Weta Workshop or Park Road Post took up residence in Wellington’s eastern suburbs. Filmcraft Ltd, a private company that built the Miramar Film Studios in the late 1920s, primarily made scenic short films for the government’s Tourist Department. They also became involved in the creation of some of the earliest examples of hand-printed, silk-screen posters to advertise ‘the wonders’ of New Zealand to the world.

As this comprehensive collection shows, these early tourism posters represent a formative part of this country’s search for its own identity. They speak to what we, as New Zealanders, love most – from snow-covered Alpine slopes to bubbling thermal mud pools, from towering native trees to our unique plant and bird life. This is still what draws people to New Zealand today – a life lived out of doors, full of natural beauty.

Back in the pioneering poster days, it was no mean feat to lure people to the bottom of the world; it took the best part of six weeks travel by sea to reach these shores. But such was the power of these images that people did indeed come – they came as tourists, as immigrants and in some cases as refugees from the gathering storm clouds of war in Europe. These images of a green, unspoilt and youthful country, far away from the conflicts of the old world, represented the promise of a new life.

I also think of the many Kiwis who would have happened upon these images whilst overseas – posters which were perhaps hanging in some travel agent’s office in London, or on an ocean liner sailing the Atlantic. Looking at these posters, I can imagine they would have felt that same gentle pull of the familiar that I still feel, that sense of belonging to a place that will forever be ‘Home’.

I am so glad this art has been brought together in this beautiful book. I know a lot of people will get enormous pleasure from rediscovering how the world saw us and how we saw ourselves.

Fran Walsh
Writer
Miramar, Wellington
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This book is brought to you by three people seduced by the publicity used to promote New Zealand until about 1960 - what we’ve called the art of early New Zealand tourism. This was a pivotal period in the history of New Zealand publicity, creating not only a tourism marketing proposition but a sense of national identity as well. Beyond this time, with television and colour photography becoming advertising realities, the print-based publicity landscape would never be the same again.

Our key goal is to celebrate a diverse body of tourism publicity and its associated artwork. We have also, with the help of a number of talented authors, sought to complete a collection of essays to increase the body of tourism publicity research.

Tourism publicity is generally regarded as ‘ephemera’, an unsatisfactory word for published material other than books. It conveys impermanence - the ephemeral - and speaks of things generally produced for a reason external to their own existence (to advertise or sell something) and implied to lack literary or artistic value. For this reason, the survival of ephemera reflects serendipity or someone’s exceptional foresight in being seduced by its visual impact or message. Survival of material for this book - over 50 to 125 years, through wars, Depression and much more - is even more remarkable.

To create enticing images in an age before colour photography and automated large-scale printing the work needed to be beautiful, carefully crafted and clever. Ground-breaking artists - like Leonard Mitchell and Marcus King - simply, it seems, had an eye for it: an eye for the effective use of colour and composition to create timeless representations of the best of New Zealand.

As with most successes, however, the environment was also ripe. While posters and other publicity were becoming more widespread in the 1900s, the ‘art of the street’ would have surely impressed. There was a marked shift in style from typography to eye-catching graphic work. Transportation, including international travel, was also on the rise - itself leading to reciprocal display arrangements abroad. Outdoor advertising was heralded as beautifying railways stations and the increasingly hoarding-laden landscape. New Zealanders, an enthusiastic marketing force, also addressed envelopes to friends and distant relatives with decorative ‘Cinderella’ poster stamps. Publicising New Zealand was ‘in’.

Out of such developments came myriad stories, such as President Roosevelt gifting 10 elk to enhance “The Sportsman’s Paradise” in 1905, alongside the Tourist Department’s own possum importation. Ironically, by 1953 the Tourist Department’s Publicity Division, then providing services across government, was designing posters encouraging the possum’s destruction. You will also read of a savvy publicity workforce impressively focused on value-for-money and innovative ways to sell the dream. This includes the Tourist Department first mentioning ‘poster’ in 1915, at about the same time the Railways Department established a stand-alone Advertising Branch, having not previously discussed publicity in its reports. Amongst these and other stories are landmark events in New Zealand’s art, design and social history.

Let’s come back to the fact that these artworks, with lasting historical significance, were designed only for momentary appreciation. The imagery never possessed high art’s aspiration to outlive its own time, yet it does, often with wider public appeal than high art itself.

Having looked time and time again at the representations - many stripped back to a small number of colours and lines - we still marvel at how warm, intense feelings can emerge from such simplicity. If you think it looks easy, give it a try. In this demoded technique, it is easy to see the conception of pop art (coming decades later) and many facets of modern advertising. We also love the textures of the papers and inks, and the high craft embodied in the images, many produced using artisan techniques now endangered such as stone lithography and silk-screen printing. The contrast between the work of contemporary graphic designers and that of the pioneers is immense. Our tap of a key, meant, for them, the creation of a font, an original painting (perhaps the third iteration), a hand-cut stencil or a careful drawing with greasy ink on a lithographic stone.

Thanks for paying your tribute to the art of early tourism, a body of work pivotal in developing New Zealand’s tourism industry and national identity. We hope you enjoy this book as much as we’ve loved creating it.
This book contains a remarkable collection of art – the art of early tourism – that has not until now been fully recognised. It is a body of work that articulated a national identity to promote locally and internationally, breaking away from painted styles imported during colonialism. As was the case internationally, poster art also blazed the trail for various art movements and artistic production techniques. Even today – decades after many New Zealanders were introduced to art through posters in the ‘gallery of the street’ – the images still arrest and impress. The question of how to do literary justice to the imagery in this book was one that occupied my mind for a couple of years. That gestation included two attempts to write a single super-essay – one by myself and another by Greg Watson – though neither of us could get it convincingly across the finish line. Those two attempts, however, paved the way to the essay collection ahead.

Like many good ideas, in retrospect a collection seems the obvious solution to a very broad topic, share the load and deepen understanding through specialisation, not to mention a team being greater than the sum of individual parts. It is only once as an idea, while dog walking, about six months before the book’s completion (two years after starting the book). The subsequent tight timeframe imposed on the authors, on top of day jobs and other projects, is a cipher for the extent of appreciation owed to them. Fortunately, like so much about this book, the authorship team was a dream. Whether from cold calls, tip-offs or coming forward off the research grapevine, a stunning group of people have worked seamlessly to produce a fascinating body of work. They have given generously of their time and experience to broaden research on a very deserving topic, and done this in an accessible and engaging way.

As a first-time editor with a great team, I feel a bit like Gary Stewart, a highly talented graphic and book designer, was first to come on board, thanks to a chance chat in the wings of a local Miramar project. Dave Bamborough, an experienced tourism consultant and fellow collector, came along much later, and played much harder to get. Once on board, however, he loved telling the tale of how others besides spiders and silverfish could now enjoy his collection. Together we have been a terrific team.

Against this backdrop of passion and hard work, you may appreciate the excitement, a few weeks out from completing the book, of spending time with Alan Collins and one of Marcus King’s silk-screeners, Gerald Phillips from the National Publicity Studio. These are guys who worked daily with my heroes and fellow collector, came along much later, and played much harder to get. Once on board, however, he loved telling the tale of how others besides spiders and silverfish could now enjoy his collection. Together we have been a terrific team. Back in New Zealand these wider experiences percolated away. In 2001 I produced a series of posters, a collection of NZ ID, as my celebration of some iconic New Zealand features and brands. Immersed in old black and white photos used as backgrounds, I revelled in the glory of our past and fantasised about walking the streets in a time before my own, particularly in the Art Deco and mid-century periods. From here it was only a small step to tourism posters – further fuelled by Thosh Thompson’s wonderful Puts up poster book (2001) – and a further small step to my current addiction to collecting tourism publicity.

With an obsession like this inevitably come some heroes. Yet within this body of work are people hardly known, people who pioneered important artistic developments, and people who made a significant contribution to New Zealand’s identity and economic development. While blinkered by my own adoration, it was nevertheless clear that an appropriate degree of recognition for these heroes was missing and deserved.

And so the labour of love called Selling the Dream was born. Gary Stewart, a highly talented graphic and book designer, was first to come on board, thanks to a chance chat in the wings of a local Miramar project. Dave Bamborough, an experienced tourism consultant and fellow collector, came along much later, and played much harder to get. Once on board, however, he loved telling the tale of how others besides spiders and silverfish could now enjoy his collection. Together we have been a terrific team.

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