SCENIC PLAYGROUND
THE STORY BEHIND NEW ZEALAND'S MOUNTAIN TOURISM
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INTRODUCTION

When news came in 1953 that a beekeeper from Auckland had climbed the world’s highest mountain, New Zealanders were naturally delighted and impressed. But many were also probably not terribly surprised. After all, tramping and climbing mountains was what New Zealanders did, wasn’t it?

As Lee Davidson reveals in ‘The Story’, these early European surveyors and explorers – such as Julius von Haast – were in fact pivotal part of our nascent tourism promotion. The colourful accounts of their feats and adventures were eagerly read; their sketches proved the promise of inspiring vistas and challenging climbs; and the first maps were worshipped as beacons of mountain access. Watercolour paintings were turned into treasured lithographs and, akin to Instagram images of the day, used for promotional ventures in London. The secret of New Zealand’s mountains and the potential for mountain tourism was out.

Once New Zealand’s mountains had been ‘discovered’, the race to conquer them was on, with a particular focus on Aoraki/Mount Cook. And publicity fanned the flames. A respected Irish climber, the Reverend William Spotswood Green, had previously contemplated an expedition to the ‘farthestmost part of the Outer Empire’, but only in 1958 did he feel in possession of sufficient information to commit to the daunting trip. While he was at a meeting in York focused on the advancement of science, Green was swatred by photographs of the Southern Alps, concluding that the unclimbed Aoraki/Mount Cook was ‘a splendid peak . . . well worth the trouble of a long journey’.

Surprisingly, perhaps, Green failed to reach the summit; but as publicity for New Zealand the visit was a new high. Green’s sketches were immediately in demand by the media (examples are shown on pages 53, 58 and 60) and on his return to London he wasted little time in generating profile for New Zealand’s mountains in the press.
Nonetheless, it would be twelve years before there was a successful ascent of Aoraki/Mount Cook – achieved on Christmas Day 1904 by New Zealanders Tom Fyffe, George Graham and Jack Clarke.

Green can perhaps be regarded as New Zealand’s first tourism ambassador (or ‘third party endorser’ in today’s marketing vernacular). Freda Du Faur was a mother, becoming the first woman to summit Aoraki in December 1910, and a likely inspiration for the large body of subsequent mountain publicity aimed at attracting women. The use (or fictitious efforts) of overseas visitors to promote New Zealand’s mountains was a publicity technique employed to very good effect by the Department of Tourist and Health Resorts following its establishment in 1910. Strategic placement of written content in high-profile magazines such as National Geographic sat closely alongside. Today, the technology and campaigns are different – Bear Grylls appearing in an Air New Zealand inflight safety video or the Right Honourable Jacinda Ardern and comedian Edify Durby ‘putting New Zealand on the map’ for Tourism New Zealand – but the publicity tactics and fundaamentals are much the same. Then and now, mountain tourism publicity has involved government and business; there is a long history of sharing the load, collaborating, and leveraging respective strengths.

Green personified a phase of mountain tourism characterised by challenging alpine adventure. But while such adventure appeared exciting to many people, it was in reality accessible only to mountaineers. If the mountains were to become available to all, some important changes would be necessary. The story of the mainstreaming of New Zealand’s mountain tourism is one of infrastructure development – building a rail network, the arrival and increasing use of the car, and the development of hospitality facilities at important tourism nodes. It was a simple formula – access plus accommodation – but challenging given our geography and early twentieth-century technology. It also meant that the Tourist Department had to learn to take risks, and to diversify its interests away from Rotorua, the then bustling epicentre of New Zealand tourism.

Challenge presents opportunity, and a number of keen people and organisations rose to the challenge of ‘bringing’ the mountains to all. The Railways Department can be credited with a praiseworthy and self-interesting drive to get visitors and New Zealanders out and about – so much so that the church leaders complained to the government about Sunday travel. Railways Studios, the department’s design studio, gave dominated outdoor advertising across New Zealand from 1920, producing arresting posters and enamelled signs, along with large-format billboards painted by hand. Often working hand in hand with the Tourist Department, the Railways Studios’ production was prolific, increasingly complemented by work of the
National Publicity Studios (evolving out of Filmcraft and the Tourist Department’s own design studio of the 1950s. Among the slogans and catchphrases of the day were ‘Scenic Playground’, ‘Playground of the Pacific’, ‘See your own country first’ and, with reference to a visit to Aoraki/Mount Cook, ‘Thousands of feet above worry level’. In a wider context, Aoraki/Mount Cook was only above worry level because of progressive road development into the Hermitage—the first car made it there in 1906—and the increasingly comfortable facilities to be enjoyed once one was there. While the Hermitage had been in existence since 1854 (see the painting on page 62), its later popularity was owed mainly to businessman Rodolph Wigley, an avid mountaineer and relentless promoter of mountain tourism. Wigley’s Mount Cook Motor Company took over and extended the Hermitage in 1912 and embarked on vigorous publicity campaigns to entice more and more visitors, including such diverse draws as European ski instructors and table tennis. Not satisfied with the Hermitage alone, in 1910 Wigley went on to build the Chilton, still perhaps New Zealand mountain tourism’s most prominent architectural landmark. While other notable accommodation and facilities followed, it would take close to three decades for New Zealand to really face up to its tourism accommodation shortcomings and establish a suite of hotels under the banner of the Tourist Hotel Corporation. With access and accommodation momentarily in hand, the job of enticing people to the mountains fell to commercial artists, the unseen heroes of this book. To some degree the virtue of their work speaks for itself. But behind each image are little-known stories about the creators, the studios, the circumstances, the mediums, the technology— and more. Given that the history of publicity and commercial art in New Zealand has been largely neglected, a fuller picture will take time to emerge. Recently, for example, a publication on Leonard Cornwall Mitchell revealed that it was not until the final few months of his life that he travelled to the South Island, bringing new images to the creation of his many master South Island scenes such as Milford Sound and Mt. Cook on pages 124 and 150. A large number of accomplished artists and creators are represented in this book—painters, graphic designers, photographers, lithographers, screenprinters, hand colourists and more. In many cases, the people behind the publicity are not known. A large debt is owed to their creativity and its role in building individual and national well being. The dedication of this book to those people is a small down payment on what is truly owed. Like the twists and turns of mountain tourism development, this book has had its own interesting journey. It started in 2012 with publication of selling the Dream: The art of early New Zealand tourism. It was
then I met Lee Davidson and Dave Bamford, and our collaboration on a topic of mutual passion began. At that time, the potential for publishing more deeply on particular threads of New Zealand’s tourism wasn’t particularly clear. And yet a deep dive book like this is a natural evolution, benefiting from accumulated research and additional imagery and providing for a fuller exposé of the story. Along the way, a number of people and events – such as the Selling the Dream and This is New Zealand art exhibitions – have lent weight and support to the ongoing rediscovery of New Zealand’s publicity post.

Beyond enjoyment and visual stimulation, by allowing the material to communicate again we can take the opportunity to learn from the past to forge the future. As New Zealand’s tourism faces new challenges, such as those noted by the Right Honourable Helen Clark in her foreword, both validations and lessons are embedded in this book. Stuff Playgrounds is celebratory, demonstrating New Zealand’s impressive record in tourism development and its success at showcasing mountain experiences – both old and new – to the world. But it also highlights what might need to change. As we face a rapid rise in tourist numbers, and the range of pressures that brings, capacity management, investment and management planning must surely be enhanced. This book also reveals that early mountain publicity all but ignored Māori culture, despite the special significance of mountains to Māori. Publicity is seldom the full story – it exists for its own purposes – but the near absence of a Māori perspective can only have harmed the interests of tangata whenua over time, particularly as the accumulating subconscious effects of mainstream messaging and imagery took hold.

This is worth reflecting on as New Zealand’s mountain tourism looks ahead. It may help here to explain the architecture of the book. The opening section, ‘The Story’, by Lee Davidson, proceeds along chronological lines, employing five chapters to traverse the key strands – discovery, alpine adventure and democratising access – summarised above. The following parts, ‘The Gallery’, is divided into ten parts based on the different mediums that characterised the publicity landscape. The period of focus runs from the beginning of publicity through until the mid-1950s, after which there was a marked aesthetic change away from graphic art into a prevalent use of colour photography, by then an affordable production technique. Following its introduction in New Zealand in 1956, television also became increasingly prominent and alluring for consumers, and a much higher premium was placed on moving pictures than on the static images of the past. The structure of ‘The Gallery’ enables a deeper appreciation of the role of each medium, and a more rounded picture of the publicity effort overall. Photographic, for example – essentially hand-coloured...
photography in print (as printing evolved) to allow colour overlays on black-and-white photographs - have practically no attention in New Zealand’s an art and social history, yet they played a prominent role in bringing colour images into people’s daily lives. The other mediums also had their special time, place and role, and are briefly summarised below.

Posters - From the early nineteenth century, posters became the pinnacle of mountain publicity. Large in format, and with striking images, their job was to catch the roving eye in the hustle and bustle of city life, connecting viewers with an alpine dream. Posters led from the front for well over fifty years, and now offer some of the most striking and poignant images of the days of early mountain tourism.

Covers - Magazine covers took majestic mountain scenes into mainstream circulation. It was a coup for the tourism industry; the media was so taken by mountain magic that it ‘promoted’ mountain pursuits on a range of covers, which found their way into living rooms, tea rooms and bedrooms across the land.

Photographs - Even in today’s world of seductive video, a well-composed photograph can still cmd. From the late nineteenth century, photography took New Zealand to the world, from its inclusion in other publicity mediums to its use in large promotional installations. Before the days of colour, photography, translucent, was illustrating colour was meticulously applied to photographic prints by hand.

Glass slides - The ‘big screen’ of their era, glass slides were illuminated by a basic projection device called the magic lantern. Without sound - apart from gasps of audience approval - viewers were immersed in New Zealand’s Scenic wonders captivated by the beauty beaming out in a hand-coloured glow. Given their impact, New Zealanders were encouraged to take slides with them when travelling abroad.

Brochures - At a briefing-friendly size for enjoying and discussing at home, brochures and booklets played a key role in promoting New Zealand’s mountains to the world. Some years, tens of thousands of copies went abroad, with many more distributed locally. On the inside were functional details and seductive stories; on the outside, it was the job of their beautiful covers to keep travel dreams alive.

Advertisements - If alluring images such as posters were the frontline eye candy, advertisements played an important complementary role, providing backup detail to prospective mountain tourists. Often linked to wider campaigns, though typically less glamorous in presentation, advertisements ran in mass-market magazines, and took mountain tourism into nearly every waiting room and home.

Photoram - From early times, there was no shortage of beautiful photographs of New Zealand’s mountains, but turning them into mass-market colour prints remained a challenge. In the 1960s, advances in lithography and printing created photorams, which shared an aesthetic with hand-coloured photographs. These printed ‘colour’ photos had an important place in the mountain tourism publicity armory.

Lithographs - The mass-market circulation of promotional images - illustrations and supplements in books, magazines and other printed matter - is owed to lithography, a layered colour by colour printing process. High-quality lithographs remain impressive today, and so their publicity impact in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries is easy to understand.

Paintings - Paintings were the first colour record of New Zealand’s mountains, and arguably our first publicity technique. The moulded European discovery, entered other explorers, and provided the marketing collateral that encouraged emigration. Displayed at international exhibitions, they also became some of the most viewed promotional images of New Zealand, something that would continue well into the twentieth century.

Other ephemera - Then as now, the search for new publicity angles, mediums and channels is endless. Early publicity and artists displayed impressive innovation in their constant drive to position New Zealand’s mountains as the best in the world. Within this catch-all collection, postcards, billboards and stamp artwork stand out as playing significant promotional roles.

In closing, I would like to thank some key people. It was a great privilege to have Helen Clark, an avid trekker and mountain enthusiast in her spare time, write the foreword. She has a deep knowledge of the various dimensions of the tourism sector, and is the perfect person to reflect on both the past and future of New Zealand’s mountain tourism.

Lee Davidson, a senior lecturer at Victoria University of Wellington, did an excellent job assembling a large volume of material across decades with valuable research assistance from Cindy Jen (met with writing the ‘Story’, her engaging account of the development of mountain tourism publicity. Dave Huminoff, a tourism adviser and a curator of an important mountaineering and mountain tourism archive, co-conceived the idea for the book and has supported its development in generous ways. Gary Stewart has again been a fantastic designer to work alongside, exceeding generous with his time and commitment to reach the production standard herein. And Nicola Legat of Tri Paga Press has been an absolute joy to work with, immensely encouraging and supportive to publisher. And thank you for your interest in Somi Playground, I hope you enjoy the book as much as we’ve enjoyed its creation.
CHAPTER 2
ALPINE ADVENTURE

After his visit to Mount Cook in 1873, Governor Bowen reportedly drew the attention of the Royal Geographical Society and the Alpine Club, London, to the ‘fresh field for exploration afforded by the Mountains and glaciers of the Southern Alps’ and assured them of ‘every aid and encouragement from the Colonial Government’.1

In this, Bowen was already aware of the potential publicity that might come from encouraging a relatively recent type of mountain tourist.

From the mid-eighteenth century, again not the backdrop of scientific discovery and Romanticism, a handful of hardy souls had begun climbing in the European Alps. By the 1870s, English climbers dominated what became known as the golden age of European mountaineering. Founding it as a modern sporting tradition, the English launched the first alpine club in 1850, and by 1856 they and their continental guides had climbed all the major peaks in the Alps.2 Armed with newly developed techniques and accumulated experience, they began to look abroad for fresh challenges.3

While mountain climbing acquired a certain cultural cachet thanks to new trends in art and science, mountaineers were a minority in Victorian society, open to both admiration and a measure of ‘good natured chaff’ for their ‘mountain mania’.4 They called upon widely embraced nineteenth-century values to defend their exploits, particularly the desire to overcome difficulties cheerfully for some higher ideal than material gain. Mountaineering, they argued, also provided an antidote to the escalating moral decay of urban society.5 At the same time, mountaineers extended the colonial project by becoming a new breed of explorers seeking out first ascents. New Zealand’s first mountaineer-tourist was the Reverend William Spotwood Green. A lover of ‘wild sport’, with several years’ experience in the European Alps and a coveted membership of the Alpine Club, Green was the quintessential Victorian gentleman mountaineer. He had earlier considered an expedition to the ‘farthestmost part of our Outer Empire’ but had failed to find sufficient information for such an undertaking. Then, in 1888, while browsing the geographical section at the jubilee meeting of the British Association for the Advancement of Science in York, he came across an exhibit ‘by a gentleman lately returned from New Zealand’. Captivated by its photographs of the Southern Alps, he became convinced that the as-yet unclimbed Mount Cook was a ‘splendid peak’ and its conquest ‘well worth the trouble of a long journey’.6

Eager to learn more, Green made his way from York to the Royal Geographical Society library in London, where he found Haast’s Geology of the Province of Canterbury and Westland. Published just two years earlier, this volume had created ‘considerable interest’ in the Southern Alps, at home and abroad.7 Along with Haast’s suprerior descriptions of the incomparable sublimity of the mountains were photographs by Burton Brothers and Sealy, and a ‘wonderful map’, which Green found ‘invaluable for estimating the nature of the work to be expected in New Zealand Alpine exploration’.8

With six months at his disposal, Green set out for New Zealand on board the Orient steamer G mounted and arranged passage for Swiss guides Emil Boss and Ulrich
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