



Scandinavians

by Carl Walrond

There's a piece of New Zealand in Finland – a solitary rock from Pourewa Island commemorating the landing there of the first Finn. In New Zealand there are few signs of those hardy Scandinavians who followed, literally clearing the way: swinging an axe and milling the timber for the new colony. The founders of Dannevirke and Norsewood bade 'farvel' to their homelands long ago, and all too soon to their cultures as well.

1642–1870: first arrivals

Explorers and wayfarers

Sailors aboard Abel Tasman's ships were the first Scandinavians to see New Zealand's shores. Crew lists show one 'Peder Pedersen' of Copenhagen, and other typically Nordic names.

On Captain James Cook's first voyage to New Zealand (1768–71), naturalist Joseph Banks's assistants were Swedish botanist Daniel Solander and Finnish draughtsman Herman Spöring. They were among the first Europeans to land. Solander's botanical collections and Spöring's sketches are a vital window onto the landscape and natural history of early New Zealand. Cook honoured both men by giving their names to offshore islands. Solander Island (Hautere) lies west of Stewart Island (Rakiura), while the Spöring Isles off Tolaga Bay are today known by their Māori name, Pourewa.

Scandinavia's maritime history stretches back to the Vikings. No surprise then that the first migrants crewed Pacific whalers and trading vessels. When gold was discovered on New Zealand's West Coast, some jumped ship. Mining sites such as Westland's Scandinavian Hill and ventures such as the Scandinavian Company in Otago mark their presence. It is estimated that during the 1860s some 500 Scandinavian prospectors were in the South Island. Most left after the rush, but some settled.

Manawatū pioneers

Bishop D. G. Monrad, a former prime minister of Denmark, settled in the Manawatū in 1866. He was accompanied by his family and five young Danish men, and together they successfully cleared the bush at Karere. At the time Palmerston (Palmerston North) had been surveyed, but a swathe of forest stood between it and the port of Foxton. The energetic Manawatū Danes helped convince Colonial Treasurer Julius Vogel that Scandinavians were eminently suitable for the job of clearing the forest.

1870s: assisted migration

In 1870 New Zealand's agent general, Isaac Featherston, toured Norway, Sweden and Denmark recruiting settlers. Prospective migrants were promised free passage and 10 acres of land. In 1871 the first government-assisted Scandinavian immigrants arrived in Wellington aboard the *Celaeno*. The 18 families settled on 40-acre sections between Palmerston and Foxton, opening a road and tramway through the bush that gave settlers access to Palmerston.

The Seventy Mile Bush

Known to Māori as Tapere-nui-a-Whātonga, this forest stretched 70 miles from the Wairarapa to Hawke's Bay. A key part of Vogel's immigration and public works plans was to establish Scandinavian settlements along surveyed road and rail lines through the bush.

So in 1871 the New Zealand government sent Swedish settler Bror Erik Friberg to recruit in Norway and Sweden. Agents like Friberg offered subsidised passage and 40 acres of land at £1 per acre, all of which could be paid off by working on road and rail construction. In May 1872 the ship *Høvding* left Christiania (Oslo) for Napier with 365 Norwegians and 11 Danes. Meanwhile in London, the *Ballarat* (with 71 Danes aboard) also set sail for Napier.

By 1872 the government-named Scandinavian towns of Norsewood and Dannevirke were surveyed. Dannevirke's plans show evocative street names such as Gertrude, Dagmar, Christian and Hamlet. But these roads existed on paper only and the young immigrant families arrived to an expanse of dense forest.

As farms were drawn by ballot, nationalities were mixed throughout the region, although there were concentrations of Norwegians in Norsewood and Danes in Dannevirke. Families often shared crude punga and tōtara bark houses while 'slabs-hus' (slab huts) were built. Men laboured on

Perceptions of New Zealand – 'wild animals, snakes and English people'

Prospective migrants' knowledge of New Zealand was very limited.

To the average 1870s

Scandinavian there was a degree of fascination with a country on the opposite side of the earth, 'with the feet of its inhabitants pointing towards us'. Most knew of Māori, but there were shipboard rumours of 'wild animals, snakes and English people'.

Letters home helped provide a more accurate view. But it was not always easy to convey what it was like – as one Dane who visited his homeland found out. When he enthused about the wonders of the new land, its giant trees, flightless birds, prodigious grasses and the prowess of its sheep-shearers, his mother gravely informed him that his travels had turned him into a teller of tall tales.

roads and railways, often living away from home to pay debts. Women and children remained in rough forest homes growing cabbages, potatoes and carrots among the tree stumps. Fever claimed seven lives by January 1873. When the 1880s depression hit, some unemployed men felt betrayed by a government that had promised them work.

Bushfires helped clear the felled forest but many houses, barns and fences also went up in smoke. In 1888 a massive bushfire razed Norsewood and threatened to do the same to Ormondville until a timely thunderstorm extinguished it. During the 1880s the railway slowly progressed through the bush. Sawmilling began, and tree by tree the land was cleared to become productive farmland.

The Forty Mile Bush

The portion of the Seventy Mile Bush south of the Manawatū River was known as the Forty Mile Bush. In 1872 the first southern Wairarapa settlers arrived in Wellington on the *England*. The ship's doctor was incompetent and an outbreak of measles claimed 14 Scandinavians, who were buried at sea. Crossing the Remutaka Range proved a novel experience for plain-dwelling Danes. At Masterton the greens-starved settlers gathered watercress for their evening meal. Intrigued Māori picked up on the often heard 'Ja, ja' (yes, yes), dubbing them 'Yaya'.

After crossing the Ruamāhanga River they found 1,000-year-old trees looming up from a thicket of ferns, shrubs and supplejack – a far cry from the open silver birch and fir forests of their homelands. Crude huts were built at what was labelled 'the Scandinavian Camp'. Two towns were planned at Mauriceville and Eketāhuna (Mellemskov – 'between woods' in Danish).

By the end of 1873 most settlers were on their 40-acre plots. Because living costs were high, they supplemented sugar and flour with the forest's bounty – eels, honey, pigs, cattle and 'vild-duen' (wood pigeons).

During the early years of assisted migration (1871–76) there were 3,327 arrivals. In 1878 Scandinavians comprised just over 1% of the New Zealand population – the highest proportion they were ever to reach.

Culture

Because Norwegian, Danish and Swedish are similar languages, barriers were minimal among the 'Skandies', as they were nicknamed. Unlike English settlers, their drink of choice was coffee, not tea.

Social events

In the Wairarapa an annually celebrated event was the ringriderfest in which riders tried to pick rings from a row of posts with a levelled lance. And the game of

fugleskydning tested marksmanship as pot shots were taken at an iron bird atop a post in the middle of a field. Among the Mauriceville Danes, Sunday evening dances were popular, especially when Jens Larsen fashioned a fiddle out of maire wood. Young settlers kicked up their heels to the polka, waltz and mazurka until sunrise when they walked home, changing straight into work clothes.

Language

In the early years four periodicals appeared in Scandinavian languages, but they were short-lived. Most settlers were keen to become naturalised as British citizens. With intermarriage and internal migration, languages died with the first and second generations.

Danish was last widely spoken in Dannevirke in the 1900s and Norwegian in Norsewood in the 1920s. Norsewood's centenary celebrations in 1972 revived interest in Scandinavian culture if not language. At celebrations 50 years earlier an old-timer remarked that 'practically nothing but Norwegian would have been heard'.

¹ Today the main vestiges of the language in these original settlements are surnames, street names and gravestone inscriptions.

Churches

Many settlers missed their religion. At first, visiting ministers travelled vast distances to hold services in homes or under towering trees. In 1881 the Scandinavian Wesleyan Church opened at Mauriceville North, followed by Lutheran churches in Norsewood (1882), Palmerston North (1882), Mauriceville West (1884) and Dannevirke (1887).

Churches were community focal points and ministers organised relief funds for bushfire victims. On Sundays processions of fair-haired blue-eyed children skipped along the forest roads, preceding mothers wearing embroidered pinafores and customary kerchiefs. Fathers followed in sombre Sunday black. Scandinavians outside the planned settlements either made do with rare visits from travelling pastors, or changed denominations.

Footnotes

1. From an article in the Dominion, 25 September 1972. > [Back](#)

20th-century migration

1920s–1930s: Norwegian whalers on Stewart Island

During the 1920s and 1930s Norwegian whalers prowled the Southern Ocean. Summers were spent chasing leviathans in the Ross Sea. Over winter, ships headed north to Stewart Island's Paterson Inlet to prepare for the next season. In 1927 machine shops, a huge workshop, boiler room, blacksmith's forge and slipway were built at Prices Inlet. The Norwegian flag was soon flying from the manager's house. The settlement was short-lived as the early 1930s were marked by a glut of whale oil and the economic depression. In 1933 the factory ship the Sir James Clark Ross returned to Norway with her whale chasers in convoy. Today Prices Inlet is littered with rusting propellers, boilers and concrete foundations – legacy of a short-lived enterprise. Some whalers married local girls, but most returned with their ships.

1950s–1960s: Danish assisted migration

A shortage of labour in the 1950s prompted the government to introduce travel subsidies of £50 to unmarried builders aged 20–45 from Denmark. In 1955 this extended to include free passage from England for all unmarried Danes aged 18–45 regardless of profession. The only requirements were 'good health and good character'. From 1956 to 1967, 234 single men and 26 single women received some immigration assistance. Records show that from 1945 to 1968, 2,151 Danes arrived – the largest influx of Scandinavians since the organised immigration of the 1870s.

Finns

Only some 1,500–2,000 Finns have migrated to New Zealand. Early arrivals were mariners who formed scattered coastal settlements. The main Finnish inflow was in the 1950s and 1960s when the growing pulp and paper industry imported Finnish technology. Groups of Finns and their families were recruited by New Zealand Forest Products Ltd. The majority went to Tokoroa and Kawerau where they found the conditions bleak, but they quickly adapted. A sauna was built and sports and cultural activities were organised by the Finnish club. Some chain migration of friends and relatives followed. By the 1970s second-generation Finns had been assimilated, and the Finnish club closed in 1984. In 2013 over one-third of Finns lived in Auckland, which had an active Finnish society.

1970s–2000s: recent migration

In the 1970s immigration slowed with New Zealand's economy. Over the 1990s, as the economy improved, some 1,000 Scandinavians were approved as permanent residents. Swedes have been the most numerous recent immigrants, followed by Danes, Norwegians and Finns. Most are professionals who have arrived through work or marriage.

There are at least a dozen Scandinavian organisations. Clubs based on nationality often speak the native tongue, as

A prize of war

In the Second World War Finland was a 'territory in enemy occupation'. All Finnish ships within Allied waters were fair game. In 1941 the sublime deep-sea square-rigger Pamir was seized in Wellington as a 'prize of war'. The crew were detained, but allowed to work ashore.

members are more recent immigrants. Although members of societies in Norsewood and Dannevirke trace their ancestry to early settlers, they are now totally assimilated. And even if 'farvel' signs and folk dancing have made recent appearances, very little Scandinavian culture is evident. Dannevirke residents recently voted against a proposed giant Viking statue.

From 1942 to 1948 the Pamir sailed across the Pacific. On her tenth voyage she circumnavigated the globe. Many young Kiwis gained their sea legs on the decks of the Pamir.

In November 1948 the Pamir was returned to Finland. Fittingly, her former commander, Captain Björkfelt, flew out to sail her back. Before departing, the New Zealand flag was solemnly lowered and replaced with the Finnish colours.

Facts and figures

Country of birth

The New Zealand census figures listed here show the number of residents born in Scandinavian countries.

Denmark

- 1874 census: 1,172
- 1901 census: 2,120
- 1951 census: 1,191
- 1976 census: 1,588
- 2001 census: 1,434
- 2006 census: 1,491
- 2013 census: 1,410

Norway

- 1881 census: 1,271
- 1901 census: 1,279
- 1951 census: 516
- 1976 census: 368
- 2001 census: 465
- 2006 census: 471

- 2013 census: 420

Sweden

- 1881 census: 1,264
- 1901 census: 1,548
- 1951 census: 389
- 1976 census: 365
- 2001 census: 960
- 2006 census: 1,173
- 2013 census: 1,353

Finland

- 1921 census: 314
- 1951 census: 201
- 1976 census: 298
- 2001 census: 372
- 2006 census: 396
- 2013 census: 495

Ethnic identity

In the 2006 and 2013 censuses, people were asked to indicate the ethnic group or groups with which they identified. The numbers include those who indicated more than one group.

- Danish: 1,929 (2006); 1,986 (2013)
- Swedish: 1,257 (2006); 1,401 (2013)

External links and sources

More suggestions and sources

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