

Life in the borderlands:

Learnings from “A Lady Colonist’s Experiences” in early New Zealand

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Historian Lord Macaulay said: “A people who have no pride in their remote ancestors will never achieve very much that will be praised by their remote descendants.” (Austin, 2011)

This paper recounts the story of my great-great-great grandmother Elizabeth Brown nee Muir who arrived on the Bengal Merchant, the first New Zealand Company ship from Scotland, in February 1840. It is two hundred years since she was born, in Paisley Scotland, on August 18<sup>th</sup>, 1816. On the ship’s log were recorded the details of all passengers including: Peter Brown: labourer - age 27, wife - age 21 (sic), child - age 1. She was, as it were, ‘without a name.’ In New Zealand where she lived from age 23 years until her death some 61 years later, in Akaroa, Canterbury, she became a highly-regarded community and church figure and business woman. By the end of her long life she was revered, as ‘a noble lady’ and ‘pioneer sister.’ It was in colonial New Zealand that Elizabeth Brown forged her identity.

In “A History of New Zealand Women,” Historian Barbara Brookes comments “being born female or male has, for most of our history determined life’s trajectory”. She questions how our angle of vision shifts if women are put “fully at the centre of the history of Aotearoa/New Zealand” (Brookes, 2016, p. 2). The trajectory observed by most New Zealand Pakeha women was directed by beliefs about gender where women were defined in relation to men, as mothers,

wives or daughters. This stands in contrast to Maori who looked to both female and male ancestors for their genealogy. Further, that although stories of Maori women in inter-racial marriages are well known, the stories of other women who had key roles in their communities are less so. Brookes tells how settler women in New Zealand “saw great prospects for their children” in a country that provided the chance for land ownership, a chance denied in their country of origin (2016, p.2).

A letter from William Bruce who was a neighbor of Elizabeth Brown’s in Akaroa and who interviewed her in her later years reads:

It would be both interesting and inspiring if more of the personal or individual experiences could be recorded of many of the noble pioneers, especially the noble women who have played such helpful and stimulating parts in all phases of the life of our Dominion (Bruce, 1939).

This biographical paper tells the story of a “noble pioneer woman” who had a key role in early Aotearoa/New Zealand. In writing it, I am impelled by the words of Ernest Regan: who said: “A nation bound together not by the past, but by the stories of the past that we tell one another in the present” (Belich, 2001, p. 120). I seek to give voice to the experiences of my ‘remote ancestor’ who travelled to and made a new life in the borderlands (Anzaldúa, 1987).

Recent news reports reveal emigration from the United Kingdom to New Zealand has reached a new height. Massey University’s Professor Paul Spoonley comments: “My guess is that we are starting to see the effects of Brexit and the Trump presidency as push factors” (Tan & Singh, 2017). La Barbera comments that travelling to the borderlands, although painful, provides the chance to better one’s life, and that for many mobility is principally a quest for improved conditions viz: “food, love, and shelter; in other words, a search for happiness.” Such

a belief enables migrants to persist in a process that often deteriorates their living conditions initially (2015, p. 4). As Bornholdt, O'Brien and Williams stated, "Our position in the world is both central and bordering depending on how we choose to construe it" (1997, p. xxx). Post-Brexit, a new life in the borderlands—in New Zealand—is being viewed as a viable alternative as it was two hundred years ago.

It has been well documented that poverty was the main reason for Scottish emigration in the 19<sup>th</sup> century; the majority of the land is harsh and wind-swept. Emigration of Scots was to Africa, the Far East, either as explorers or traders or as missionaries. However, for the impoverished, the destinations of New Zealand and Australia were viewed as "the lands of opportunity." Further, it was seen by trade unions and other groups as a solution to economic depression, unemployment, and overcrowding; as a result, emigration was at a height when economic depression was at its most harsh (John Gray Centre: Library Museum Archive, n.d.). So, people "left their 'homeland' in search of freedom, longing for adventure, but primarily to satisfy their basic need for food" (Manson & Manson, 1962, p. 11). These forces were described as 'push' factors as Scots were "propelled by an urge to escape economic depression and its effects" (King, 2003, p. 170).

The flow of emigration was initiated by a London businessman: Edward Gibbon Wakefield who formed a company, chartered ships, and advertised for colonists. The latter were a mix of gentlemen, tradesmen, mechanics and craftsmen, and Wakefield sought to mirror English society in all but one respect – that none would go hungry or live in poverty. William Hobson was sent as negotiator by the British Government, and it was while the first New Zealand Company ships were in transit, that Hobson's ship, the *Tory* arrived (Jacobsen, 1914).

Pulled by their mutual desire to forge a new life, Elizabeth Brown and her husband Peter were some of the impoverished Scots who chose to leave their homeland—and the couple joined

their minister Rev McFarlane—as emigrants to the ‘new land.’ They had been told that ‘babes in arms’ would not be allowed on board and they had twin daughters just six weeks old. However, a week before sailing one twin died, so Elizabeth smuggled the remaining tiny twin, her daughter Catherine, under her ‘plaid’ to secret her onboard ship. But the captain heard about the young stowaway and called for the Browns. On seeing the little infant, he retorted, “Anyway we will be pitching that brat overboard in a day or two.” Wee Catherine (Kitty) lived until she was 73 (Jacobson, 1911).

Just before the ship departed from Glasgow, the Lord Provost went on board accompanied by a large party and told them “that they were about to lay the foundation for a colony which in time might become a great nation, a second Britain” (Dickson, 1899). The Bengal Merchant departed from Glasgow on 30<sup>th</sup> October 1839 and the 116 passengers spent 100 days onboard before disembarking at Port Nicholson, Wellington on 20<sup>th</sup> February 1840, just two weeks after the Treaty of Waitangi had been signed.

Diverse perspectives and locations alter the significance people make of the year 1840. For the colonists to New Zealand, 1840 was a formative and distinguished year marking the creation of a separate colony by treaty; for loyalists, it marked the marriage of Queen Victoria to Prince Albert of Saxe-Coburg and Gotha. In Ireland, the potato famines pushed people out and in Scotland the Church was split in two by the disrupting split between the Church of Scotland and Free Church Presbyterians (Dickson, 1899; King, 2003).

The largest parishes in Renfrewshire, Angus and Aberdeenshire—Paisley, Dundee and Aberdeen parishes—were among the top twelve highest population parishes between 1841 and 1881 and were in the top six sending parishes to New Zealand in the NZSG data (Lenihan, 2001). In contrast to the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Methodist churches there were no missionaries sent to New Zealand by the Scottish churches. Rather, Presbyterianism was

established in the fledgling colony after colonization had begun as what was known as “the Scotch Kirk”: a transplantation of both Scottish culture and religion and small ‘fragment’ from the settlers’ homeland in the north.

It was Elizabeth and Peter Brown’s minister, the Rev John McFarlane who was the first ordained Presbyterian minister to arrive, in Wellington. Rev McFarlane was quick to hold a service on the Petone foreshore just days later, but it was four years before he had a church building in Lambton Quay, in which he held services in: English, Gaelic, and Maori. Deteriorating health and his voiced dismay—and lack of support—of the way the Māori were treated meant he returned to Scotland in 1844 (Redding, 2012).

Many letters written by the early settlers to New Zealand emphasized the plentiful supply of food: “please tell all young men and their wives to come to New Zealand... for they will soon get fat” (Manson & Manson, 1962, p. 11). Elizabeth Brown’s husband, Peter, in a letter written on April 5<sup>th</sup>, 1840 and published in a London newspaper on September 12, 1840, wrote about their arrival at Port Hardy:

At last we saw a canoe coming from the shore straight for our vessel and were surprised to find it filled with natives, all apparently men from 5 ft. 10 in to 6 ft., well made and proportioned and mostly naked, which caused some consternation among the women; but their fears were soon at rest. They brought us presents of pigs, pumpkin, fish and fowls, and were quite delighted to see us and signed to us that they would like us to go on shore and remain with them. But we could not stay. We drew up our anchor and made sail for Port Nicholson.” (Manson & Manson, 1962, p. 106)

The new settlers were convinced that life had never been so good.

Peter Brown wrote to his father:

I have no wish to return to the land of the birth of my forefathers. My wife and child are happier than ever in their lives. No tyranny rules in this blessed land.

When it pleases us, we can take our gun or rod and stroll along the shores and in the woods and shoot as much fowl and take as much fish as we like. No taxes are levied here to press us. Little Catherine is growing stout and healthy and not, as she was before we came to this blessed country, sickly and dying. She is growing tall as a poplar. We may well say with Tell: *Blow on ye winds, This is the Land of Liberty* (Manson & Manson, 1962, p. 108).

No name, initial or title was provided for the wife of Peter Brown in the ship's log. Yet, soon after her arrival in Petone, on the foreshore it was "Mrs. E. Brown" whose name began to appear in the writings as she described the landing on Petone Beach to William Bruce. J.P. where "practically no provision had been made for shelter from wind and rain." Further that "not a place to put their head in, and as their goods were not landed, scarcely anything to eat" (Bruce, 1939).

Although assured by the New Zealand Company that provisions would be made for their arrival, in the form of land, buildings, and supplies, instead none of these was forthcoming for the new settlers and the early days on the foreshore at Petone, Wellington were harsh.

Bland points out:

All new countries are experienced as being somewhat surreal by settlers from an older land. The sudden change of lifestyle and location brings with it a dislocation that both excites and disturbs. The ordinary seems extraordinary. Normality is on edge (1994, p. 44).

Indeed, disturbance and dislocation was marked, and the young family endured hardships of Biblical proportions: a severe earthquake, a fire that same night that razed their small whare (huts) to the ground, and a flood on June 1<sup>st</sup>, 1840 that floated the bed of Elizabeth Brown who had just that day given birth to her first son, Peter.

That night the river overflowed. Inside the small hut the flood waters were over two feet deep and Elizabeth Brown's bed began to float. As she couldn't be moved the suggestion was made to suspend her bed from the flimsy rafters of the house. Given that it was a very makeshift erection, assembled from scrub tied with flax and held together with mud, she cried out in objection that the whole place would collapse and she would be drowned. So they agreed to leave her where she was. As luck would have it, the tide soon turned and the river began to subside: tragedy was averted. But the flood had damaged much of the early settlers' provisions and with no fires able to be lit the next few days, the situation was pretty miserable (Jacobson, 1911).

Still hardships did not deter these hardy Scots. Mrs Brown recounted to William Bruce an incident she never forgot that happened whilst in the camp at Petone. By all accounts Mrs Brown was a petite woman, barely five feet tall, and at that time she was aged in her early twenties. Going to get water with a companion from the Hutt river with a bucket on a rope, she had to go through a group of Te Rauparaha's men who had come into the camp allegedly to trade. Her bucket slipped and she gestured to one of the Maori paddling his canoe nearby to use his paddle to hook it up. Throwing off his clothing he jumped into the river and seized the bucket saying he wouldn't give it back without "utu" (a price). Mrs Brown and her companion, could not understand him and offered him food, which he refused. So, she grabbed the bucket off him, and started running but on turning around she saw the highly tattooed Maori man following her, completely naked and with his tomahawk raised. She threw down the bucket

shouting at him that she would tell “Wideawake” which was the Maori name for Colonel Wakefield. Finally they were able to negotiate the bucket in exchange for a flannel shirt. A few days later the Maori, laughing loudly, told Mrs Brown’s husband, Peter about how he frightened her (Jacobson, 1911; Bruce, 1939).

Another story Elizabeth Brown recalled tells of a journey she took from Petone around the Harbour several miles to Ngahauranga. The road from Petone to Thorndon was described as “very wild” with a few Maori settlements dotted along it. Returning from town to Petone rather late one day, she came to a place called Wharepouri and discovered the tide was in. At that point, at high tide the muddy track was inaccessible and she had to—as was custom—barter a ‘piggy-back’ ride across the river. Normally a local Maori might be obliged to offer a ride for a few pence. However, on this occasion, Mrs Brown offered all the money she had to no avail. The Maori would not relent and kept pointing to the sky to indicate nightfall was imminent. Explaining her children were at Petone and she needed to get home resulted only in taunts. Frustrated, she picked up her skirts and leapt into the river, up to her waist, wading through the current to get to the other side. At this drama, the Maori were disgusted at losing their ‘utu’; they came out of their pa and shouted at her saying the “tuna (eel) would seize her by the legs.” Drenched and bedraggled she arrived back at the camp (Jacobson, 1911; Bruce, 1939).

After over two years living in Petone on the Wellington Harbour, Peter Brown was offered a job by William McConnell as a baker in Akaroa, a picturesque coastal town initially settled by the French on Banks Peninsula, east of Christchurch. The young family of four set off in the schooner, Scotia to journey to the South Island a trip that took 14 days. On arriving in the seaside town Elizabeth Brown was most taken with the beauty describing it as “in all its primeval loveliness.” Straightaway, Peter Brown began to work as a baker and used a small coffee mill to grind his own flour (Jacobson, 1911).



But drama was not over yet for the family as shortly after, William McConnell left for Nelson, and left the Browns unemployed. So, they were persuaded by a Paddy Ryan, to go as cooks and bakers, to a bleak and inhospitable bay: Oashore, an early shore whaling station, to eke out an existence. Here, in a bay described as rugged and desolate surrounded by shingle beach with the 'thud' of the Pacific ocean beating onto it, they spent three 'wretched' months. Getting there the day was initially peaceful and quiet but a storm blew up before they reached their destination. Stepping ashore, drenched and seasick they discovered the only fuel for cooking was whale blubber. There were little other provisions and the men were downcast and dispirited.

Yet, even during this torrid time, Elizabeth Brown's kind heartstrings were pulled when she heard of the plight of Mrs Hempleman, the wife of a pioneering whaling captain who was very ill. For three years she had not seen another European woman, since her arrival from Sydney. Elizabeth Brown said to the crew "get your boat out as quickly as possible and take me round to help the dying woman." This meant another rough trip down the Akaroa Harbour and Elizabeth suffered from sea-sickness the whole time arriving just in time to be able to "minister service and comfort" to the dying woman. The Browns were no doubt relieved to return to Akaroa after three months and to some sense of civilization. Shortly afterwards, their next baby was born November 12, 1842: the first European baby to be born in Akaroa, a daughter, Elizabeth (Jacobson, 1911).

Five years later in 1847, Governor George Grey visited Akaroa. For some time there had been a problem in the town of 'loose pigs' who roamed freely around the streets causing havoc and dismay. It was Elizabeth Brown that the local townsmen asked to tell the Governor about the problem so that a petition be formed and the pigs penned. Mission accomplished and the pigs and other livestock were taken to higher ground. Elizabeth was tasked to also ask Governor

Grey for land on which to settle on the Peninsula hillsides to which he replied bluntly “Go and breed children and cattle as fast as you can.”

In the 1850s Elizabeth Brown managed a guest house in nearby Pigeon Bay, owned by Ebenezer Hay, a fellow passenger on the Bengal Merchant. Mrs Hay had no milk to feed her babies, and so Mrs Brown breast-fed them as well as her own babies. The Browns enjoyed several settled years in Akaroa and Pigeon Bay and their family expanded with six more children born between 1846 and 1856 (McIlroy, 2001).

Elizabeth Brown was a devoted Presbyterian and from 1857 the first Presbyterian services were held in her house in Church Street, Akaroa by Rev Charles Fraser who preached in English in the mornings, and French in the evenings. With no building big enough to accommodate the parishioners for Sunday worship, Elizabeth had a wall removed in her house so that an early ‘home’ church could meet there. She led the Sunday School, collected offerings, and hosted visiting ministers, sometimes for up to two years until the first Presbyterian manse was built in Rue Balguerie. She became known as ‘the church moderator’—or chairperson—of the church committee who offered “Christian consolation and instruction to all needing her advice and counsel.” Later she led the charge to establish the Akaroa Presbyterian Church building on the foreshore (McIlroy, 2001).

Yet tragedy lay ahead for the Brown family. Like so many others, in 1860, Peter Brown journeyed to the Otago goldfields to seek his fortune. Rumour has it that he did find gold, but he never returned, and it has always been supposed that he met a deadly end or was perhaps drowned. At 45 years old, Elizabeth Brown, was widowed: there was no widow’s pension at that time, and she needed to continue the Bakery business in order to support herself and her large family. However, she was active and resourceful and under her management the business thrived, and her bread and other products became widely known throughout the town and

surrounding countryside. An advertisement reads: “E. Brown, Baker, Confectioner, Pastry cook, Orders for wedding cakes and every description of Confectionery executed with despatch. Tea Meetings and Picnic Parties furnished on the shortest notice.” In 1867, she bought land in Rue Balguerie where she built a cottage, and lived there for some years; today the quaint historic cottage is named after her. She also purchased other properties including the bakery building in Church Street (McIlroy, 2001).

My great-great grandmother Agnes, born in 1846 was Elizabeth’s 4th child and her second to be born in Akaroa. At 22, Agnes married an Englishman Henry Billens who had emigrated from Knightsbridge, London. Agnes and Henry had four daughters including Fannie my great-grandmother. However, in 1876, aged 30 years, Agnes died several weeks after giving birth to her fifth child, leaving Henry to raise the young family. Fannie was seven years old at the time and recalls that grandmother Elizabeth was on hand to assist with the raising of her four granddaughters (McIlroy, 2001).

Pre-deceased by three of her nine children and her husband, Elizabeth Brown went on to live a further twenty-five years in Akaroa. A daughter-in-law Matilda (Tilly), herself a mother of 13 became a midwife and tells that it was from her mother-in-law Elizabeth that she learnt midwifery. It was said of Elizabeth Brown that “she was always ready to render assistance.” Elizabeth died at her home in Church Street, Akaroa on 17 December 1901 leaving four sons, two daughters and many grandchildren. Her pre-eminent grave in the Akaroa Protestant cemetery records her long life.

This is a historical paper, and it is also a deeply personal paper. In my own doctoral research, I used interpretive hermeneutic phenomenology, and sought to find meaning in women’s career stories. I find myself asking what Elizabeth story means.

In “Making Peoples: Paradise Reforged” Historian James Belich says:

the purpose of history is not, as too many historians imagine, to faithfully photograph chaos. We need to detect and understand processes that cause change and continuity in apparent chaos, or at least impose meaning on it. To do this we have to speak of rough patterns and categories, ideally at minimal damage to the facts. (Belich, 2001)

One pattern I observe, recurring in the story of this remarkable woman is that she was simply fearless and quite fiercely independent. The local Maori at Petone called her “*Ka pai te Wahine e pai ana tana.*” (Good woman and she does good). It was she who said: “Let’s get around to assist the dying woman round the bay”; the townspeople in Akaroa sought her out as their spokesperson, to request land from Wakefield on their account.

Second, although disrupted from her own family and history by geographic isolation, her story reveals that her trajectory was not directed or constrained by gender beliefs (Brookes, 2016). She was a mouthpiece for men and women, a community leader, a protagonist who drew people together, to the extent that she removed a wall so that people could gather together to worship. Although living in the borderlands she was very much at the centre; it was in colonial New Zealand that she forged her identity and had a key role in the early settler community (Bornholdt et al, 1997). This feisty, little Scots woman who managed a Bakery, established a church, raised a large family, purchased land and built houses, and was always available to lend a helping hand to any person in need.

Her story moves and inspires me. As a pioneer woman, she lived a quite extraordinary life with spirit and grit. I can almost hear her broad Scotch accent “Get me round there to help the poor woman.”

This is the story of my great-great-great grandmother: Elizabeth Muir Brown - ‘A lady colonist’ and pioneer woman of indefatigable spirit and fortitude - the facts as minimally damaged as I can make them. Born August 1816 in Paisley Scotland, died 1901, in Akaroa, New Zealand, aged 84 years (Jacobson, 1911, p. 126).

Obituary: We regret to record the death of Mrs Elizabeth Brown who died shortly after eleven o’clock last night. The deceased lady was one of the earliest settlers on the Peninsula and throughout her long life she has been revered by all who have known.

She: Sailed to the edge of the universe.

Leaving behind no paradise.

A Scottish lass.

Wife - 21.

She: Boarded the ship, to sail with a hundred others.

A wee bairn secreted beneath her plaid.

Arrived to no provision or protection from wind or rain.

Little Mrs Peter Brown.

She: Snatched the bucket, ran from him. *Kia kaha.*

Grabbed the tomahawk.

Picked up her skirts and waded through the river.

Fearless Mrs Brown: *Ka pai te Wahine e pai ana tana*

He: In search of gold.

Set off.

Never to return, last seen in Dead Man’s Gully.

Widowed Mrs Brown.

She: Active and resourceful

Mother of seven.

Confectioner of fine baking, business owner,

Mrs Baker Brown.

She: “Always ready to render assistance and Christian consolation and instruction to all  
Needing her advice and counsel”

Removed a wall, chaired the meetings, began a church

Moderator Brown

They: On her death, gathered, to testify their deep respect and

“A crowd like never before seen, in ‘an affecting scene.’

Settlers, whose faces bore the imprint of hard struggle in the  
conflict with nature to turn glowing forest into fertile farm.

Their faces softened in sympathy.”

For she: had been very dear to them

Our pioneer sister.

Revered by all who knew her.

Our noble lady.

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