

Kororareka

'The hell-hole of the Pacific'



Looking down on
Kororareka
(Russell)

The missionaries divided the wave of Europeans who came to New Zealand in the first half of the 19th century into two groups: missionaries were the agents of virtue, and almost everyone else qualified as the agents of vice. By the time Samuel Marsden conducted the first Christian service in New Zealand, at Oihi Bay in the Bay of Islands for Christmas 1814, many of these agents of vice – sealers and whalers – had been operating in New Zealand for over 20 years. They left an indelible imprint on New Zealand in the opening decades of the 19th century.

The impact of these men was perhaps strongest in Kororareka (Russell) in the Bay of Islands. By the 1830s, Kororareka was the biggest whaling port in the southern hemisphere. It became an important provisioning and rest and recreation centre for whaling and trading ships. With over 700 vessels visiting in 1840, each with a crew of around 30, Kororareka was a significant point of contact between Europeans and Maori. Whalers, seafarers and merchants mixed with adventurers, deserters and escaped convicts from Australia. These were hard men used to hard living.

In *Adventure in New Zealand* (first published in 1845), Edward Jerningham Wakefield presented a more sympathetic view of whalers. A great admirer of their 'active, hard-working lifestyle', he summed up their character as 'the frankness and manly courage of the sailor mingle[d] with the cunning and reckless daring of the convict'. Though prone to drunkenness (a vice Wakefield shared) and with a 'general inclination towards vice and lawlessness', he concluded they redeemed themselves through their generous and noble qualities.

The missionaries were troubled by what they saw in Kororareka. Prostitution was one of the Bay of Island's main industries, and sexual favours were used in the purchase of many things, including muskets. Three-week marriages were commonly negotiated, and many local women bore the tattoos of their itinerant lovers.

In 1834 Edward Markham described how 30–35 whaling ships would,

come in for three weeks to the Bay and 400 [to] 500 Sailors requires as many Women, and they have been out [at sea] one year ... These young ladies go off to the Ships, and three weeks on board are spent much to their satisfaction, as they get from the Sailors a Fowling piece [shotgun], ... Blankets, Gowns etc.

Another observer at the time described Kororareka as a 'Gomorrah, the scourge of the Pacific, which should be struck down by the ravages of disease for its depravity'. Its reputation as a lawless town with numerous bars and brothels saw it dubbed 'the hell-hole of the Pacific'.

After the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi in 1840, New Zealand's first capital was established at Okiato (Old Russell), 7 kilometres south of Kororareka. In 1845, after the signal flagstaff on nearby Maiki Hill was cut down by Maori on four separate occasions in a protest against British authority, war broke out in the north. During the fighting, Kororareka was attacked and many of its buildings were destroyed.

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