Surveying the Hocken’s Surveyors

Surveyors played a major, though generally unsung, role in the settlement and development of pakeha New Zealand. In European society, where land is owned individually rather than communally (as was the case in Maori New Zealand) the need to set the boundaries of properties, to lay out lines of communications and, of course, to know exactly the form and features of the land, was and is of paramount importance.

While the Hocken Library was acting as Otago-Southland repository for official archives, its holdings included several hundred cartons of Land and Survey Dept. material. Now that this material has been transferred to the Dunedin office of National Archives (which, incidentally, has upwards of 400 linear metres of land records), and the early New Zealand Company records relating to Dunedin are held in part at the Otago Early Settlers Museum, it would be easy to assume the Hocken might have little to offer in the field of surveying.

That is quite wrong. It has, for instance, the most complete run of the New Zealand Surveyor south of Wellington. It has such important primary manuscript documents as Frederick Tuckett’s letters and Peter Proudfoot’s 1850s diary. Complete runs of parliamentary and Otago Provincial Council journals carry a full range of annual published survey reports. And its printed book holdings included all significant works relating to surveying in New Zealand. In addition to its marvellous holding of J. Turnbull Thomson’s paintings, it has important art by other notable surveyors and draughtsmen, such as Buchanan — though there has not been space to list these art works in this bulletin.

The Hocken, in fact, is as proud of its holdings in this field as the province of Otago — thanks largely to Thomson — is of its survey record. Major Palmer’s 1875 report to central government, while scathing in its criticism of — is proud of its survey record. Major Palmer’s 1875 report to central government, while scathing in its criticism of some provincial survey departments, praised the quality of work in Otago. In this, the 150th anniversary year of the first official European purchases of Otago land, it seems opportune to summarise the range of the Hocken Library’s holdings and to remind the community of the library’s active interest in this subject.

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