

Kedgerree Meets Kai:
Sir John Cracroft Wilson in Cashmere

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“I know full well, that almost every retired Indian official is difficult to please and that he is generally disappointed with England. Nay, I know that he never really amalgamates with the good people of Old England.”

Sir John Cracroft Wilson, *Recollections of Canterbury 1850s*, 1854-55

Having spent the better part of his career in India as a judge, civilian soldier, and debt collector for the East India Company, in 1854 Sir John Cracroft Wilson was in ill health and in need of a sanctuary from the hardships of tropical India. In part, he was in search of a home away from home, an England that was somehow not England itself. But he was also looking for a bit of India that was somehow not quite India. He purchased a valley in the Port Hills in the predominantly English settlement of Canterbury, and named his new home the Cashmere Estate after the scenic Kashmir Valley in India.

Cracroft Wilson’s evocation of India in the naming of Cashmere is not surprising; he had a very long personal history there, and the story of those years reads like a Kipling novel with its tales of heroism, violence and passionate commitment to England’s civilizing mission. While employed primarily in the seemingly mundane roles of Magistrate and collector for the East India Company, he didn’t hesitate to pick up a gun in times of need. He was commended for suppressing Thugs, members of a powerful and murderous Indian cult, in the 1830s “in the attempt to suppress this great evil, with which India had been for so many ages afflicted” (Wilson Collection, 1837). He also gained acclaim during the Indian

Mutiny of 1857-58 which threatened British rule on the subcontinent, and was credited by Lord Canning, the India Governor-General at the time, with having “saved more Christian lives than any man in India”. As Canning went on to explain, “He did this at the repeatedly imminent peril of his own life.” (Wilson Collection, 1859)

In short, Cracroft Wilson was a hero in the finest Victorian sense of the word, and by 1854 he was thinking of retirement and in search of a suitable location. When he arrived in Canterbury and assessed the valleys and ridges of the Port Hills, like many other English settlers in Canterbury he surveyed the landscape in order to see how he could convert it to farm and pasture land. The journals he kept during the time indicate he was strongly motivated by the possibility of financial gain. He was a compulsive bookkeeper, and both his narrative account of his role in the Indian Mutiny of 1857-58 (1858) and his “Recollection of Canterbury 1850s” (1854-55) are teeming with intricate calculations of assets, costs and risks. Debt collecting in Moradabad during the Mutiny takes first equal place with tales of military triumph: “We remained at Hauppur three weeks, and during that time I was engaged in collecting revenue, punishing rebels, restoring order, etc., etc., etc.” (Wilson, 1858: 17). Likewise, his account of the passage from India to New Zealand is overflowing with financial details of fares for passage and temporary lodgings, as well as head counts of livestock who survived or perished and their estimated value. And upon arrival at Cashmere Estate his focus on financial gain remained astute; he was particularly preoccupied with the rate of forest growth and the number of animals that could potentially be slaughtered per annum.

But Cracroft Wilson’s story is not purely a tale of avarice, and he did not simply replace one field of bounty, India, with another, New Zealand. An additional

factor that informed his vision of Cashmere relates to questions of European identity, as well as of Britain's place in the world in the mid-nineteenth century. India had a significance that was felt well beyond its boundaries for Cracroft Wilson and his contemporaries, regardless of their geographical location. Gautam Chakravarty refers to India as "the centre-piece of British expansion following the loss of America." (2005: 3-4), and the Mutiny in which Cracroft Wilson was so heavily involved posed a direct threat to British imperial control. It took several months to quell, was marked by significant violence against British soldiers and settlers, and prompted the British to institute direct rule by the Crown in place of administration by the East India Company. Such a strong jolt to the political landscape would have reverberated throughout the Empire and impacted on enactments of English colonial identity in India and elsewhere. In bringing India to New Zealand in 1854, just prior to the rebellion, Cracroft Wilson brought a performance of imperial "Englishness" along for the ride; the need to be a staunch and proud Englishman would only have heightened after 1857-58, the years of the Mutiny.

The way he enacted "Englishness" at the Cashmere Estate involved an engagement with Indians, Māori and the landscape itself in complex and sometimes contradictory ways. His choice of property on which to found the Cashmere Estate was an unlikely paradise; it was swampland surrounded by tussock-covered ridges, and in need of substantial work in order to become productive. Yet fuelled by colonial zeal, Cracroft Wilson forcefully reworked and reconstituted the landscape according to his pastoral vision. As Douglas Cresswell wrote about Cracroft Wilson in 1949:

There was a swamp near Christchurch. A swamp that no-one had even glanced at; impenetrable, full of flax, toi-toi and niggerheads.

“All right,” said Wilson to himself, “I’ll take the swamp. I have what no-one else in the province has – manpower. My own manpower. If I work with these Indians of mine they’re quite as good as any labour in the world.” (Cresswell, 1949: 108)

He drained the swamp and built a homestead for his family with the dozen or so Indian servants he brought with him to New Zealand, sometimes referred to as “Wilson’s Hindoos”. Yet while he admired “his” Indians’ capacity for work and laboured side by side with them in draining the swamp, the evidence suggests that he did not consider them his equals as they were not included in his social circle. As for Māori, they didn’t present an immediate concern; he reputedly settled on the South Island in part because there were fewer Māori than on the North Island (Tolmie, 1982: 16), and the Cashmere Estate wasn’t a place of settlement for the Ngai Tahu that resided in Canterbury, although there were trails and *mahinga kai* (food-gathering) sites in the general area (Tau, 2005).

Thus it seemed that within the space of a few short months Cracroft Wilson had built a homestead in which everything and everyone were in their proper place. Indeed, he was described by some as “Toryism upon 2 legs” (Lyttelton Times, cited in Tolmie, 1982: 34). He returned to India in late 1854 for what was meant to be a short tour of duty before retirement, only to get caught up in the rebellion. Nonetheless, things appeared to carry on uneventfully at Cashmere Estate in his absence and subsequent to his return in 1859.

Cracroft Wilson’s engagement with Indians in New Zealand extended beyond the role of the Indians he employed at Cashmere, however, and reveals a more

complex relationship to India and Indians than is immediately apparent. His respect for a particular group of Indians produced a repeated wish to employ them to deal with the so-called “Māori problem”. While Māori were largely absent from Cashmere Estate in the literal sense, they nonetheless comprised a significant and menacing presence in Cracroft Wilson’s imaginings of the future of the New Zealand colony. His views were extreme even at a time when most Europeans believed Māori to be an inferior race (Tolmie, 1982: 37), and “[he] stated once that it was ‘one of the maddest experiments that humanity has ever tried’ to attempt to govern, by means of free institutions, a land in which ‘seven-tenths of the landed gentry were barbarous (sic) savages and three tenths of them were cannibals.’” (Tolmie, 1982: 8) He became a Member of Parliament in 1861, and as he declared in Parliamentary debates that year, at a time when there was open warfare between Māori tribes and English settlers on the North Island, “We wish to help you; but we will bring you to your senses if you resist Her Majesty’s authorities.” (NZPD, 3/7/61, cited in Tolmie, 1982: 18). The means by which Cracroft Wilson proposed to subdue Māori was once again “his” Indians, in this case Indian soldiers or “ghurkas”. As reported in New Zealand Parliamentary debates of 1862, “if the Indian Government placed three regiments of Ghoorkas at his disposal with fifty European officers, ‘he would cut his way through the country from Auckland to the Cook Strait or leave his bones to whiten on the earth.’” (cited in Tolmie, 1982: 12). Cracroft Wilson never got his regiments, although he invested substantial energy in this proposal that earned him ridicule in Parliament, something that speaks of considerable respect for Indians as fighting men and their relative merit vis-à-vis Māori even if they weren’t his equals.

He also had a more complex relationship with the Indians at Cashmere than is immediately apparent; they were never simply compliant with his wishes. A number of Wilson's Indian labourers left his employ prior to the expiration of their contracts when they found higher wages elsewhere. They were duly taken to court by Cracroft Wilson, in spite of the fact that he gave them land and livestock of their own and granted them independence once their contractual terms had been met. Many found the Canterbury climate unbearably cold; some were sent back to India as a result, and others died (Roberts & Roberts, 1991: 12). There was a reported death by tutu poisoning (a native shrub), possibly self-inflicted, and reputedly a ghost in the Old Stone House, built as quarters for the Indians in 1870, as a result of a jealousy, murder, and the disruption of the murdered man's bones in the baker's oven (Roberts & Roberts, 1991: 32).

At first glance, Cracroft Wilson appears to be almost a caricature of colonial propriety, and he brought to Canterbury a strong vision of paradise that demarcated the proper place of Englishmen, Indians and Māori, as well as a mapping of landscape as primarily an engine of economic prosperity. Yet Cracroft Wilson repeatedly revealed hints of respect for Indians, an attitude that taints such a purist view. Indian people themselves also posed an ongoing threat to colonial harmony through acts of resistance to Cracroft Wilson, as well as by means of ordinary human foibles and misfortune that disrupted the smooth running of the estate. And while Māori were intentionally absent from Cracroft Wilson's estate, they too lurked as a powerful and ever-present threat around the edges of his vision.

Traces of Cracroft Wilson's colonial project persist into the twenty-first century. The homes on the ridge surrounding the original estate are amongst the most

affluent in Christchurch, and as one proceeds downhill towards the valley residents still drive on suburban streets named Shalamar, Bengal and Lucknow, even though the generous boundaries of the original estate have long since been subdivided. The Old Stone House built for “Wilson’s Hindoos” still stands, albeit transformed into a Community Centre. Sir John hasn’t entirely disappeared yet.

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