

NEW ZEALAND POSTCARDS 1920 TO 1940

- or an attempt on your editor's part to turn pigs ears into silk purses!

As readers of the Postcard Pillar will vouch, I have in the past demonstrated something of a fascination for New Zealand picture postcards that don't command much attention let alone astronomical sums of money. Collecting cards that are off the beaten track has meant working in a vacuum, trying to determine why they are not collected. My involvement in this aspect of collecting postcards has produced a series of articles about New Zealand photographers and publishers who were active between the two world wars. In this article I'd like to expand a little on some of the reasons why this period of collecting postcards is neglected, and air some of my deductions why collectors shun them.

While most writers on the history of postcard collecting identify the WW1 as the prime reason why postcards fell from favour with the general public, the decline had begun well before the first shots were fired on the Western Front. In New Zealand decreasing numbers of cards through the mail were indicated by statistics from the New Zealand Post Office which published annual figures on the subject. Postcards through the mail hit a peak in 1909 when 14 million cards were recorded. Three years later this figure had dropped to 11 million. However, these figures do not tell the whole story. If anything the war may have been responsible for a revival of the ubiquitous postcard if it is accepted that many postcards exchanged between our servicemen overseas and their families back in New Zealand were despatched inside envelopes and therefore did not figure in the overall statistics. What the war did bring about which may have played a larger part in declining sales was a termination of trade between New Zealand publishers and German suppliers. In one particular instance this may have even led to one New Zealand company terminating their association with the postcard trade. Research by Alistair Robb on the Wellington firm of William Nees has documentary proof that patriotic sentiment forced them to dump their entire stock of cards which had been printed in Germany. I wonder how many other firms were placed in a similar situation?

A more likely reason why postcards fell from favour may have been the simple fact that they no longer occupied a prime position in the public's mind as a cheap means of communication. The fad of collecting postcards as a leisure time activity was definitely on the wane as the 1920s ushered in many

new and exciting distractions like the radio and the "talkies". On top of this was the fact that illustrations were now beginning to appear in newspapers, removing yet another source of revenue for firms who made it their business to photographically cover events which hitherto could not be carried with columns of letterpress text.

In New Zealand, major companies which had maintained such a high profile in Edwardian times like F.T. and Tanner Bros. gradually wound down their role as suppliers to the postcard trade. Photographers of Real Photo postcards were quick to fill this void. Nearly every town or settlement in New Zealand had an amateur or professional photographer who was prepared to sell real photo postcards locally. Some even went on to build up an assortment of views that went beyond their immediate environment. In this respect at least two firms carried on as before. They were F.G.R. and Duncan and Co. They were joined by a new generation of real photo suppliers that included Hugh & G.K. Neill Ltd. of Dunedin who employed a real photo print machine called a Graber. Later the National Publicity Studios also purchased one in Wellington. On a smaller scale two Wellington photographers with slender resources managed a commendable coverage of the country. They were S.C. Smith and H.C. Peart. Peart had his photos sold and distributed under the Royal Series. British firms were still shipping novelty and greeting cards to the New Zealand market albeit on a greatly reduced scale as well as assisting those who couldn't afford their own costly automatic printers by contracting to provide bulk editions of real photos which they printed in England. Nearly all real photo postcards from this era were monochromatic.

Of the pre WW1 major producers, Tanner Bros. were still active in providing a range of goods for the tourist trade while Brett Publishing were involved in providing printing facilities for various firms around the country. Booklets of postcards, wrap around Foldouts, Letter Cards and enveloped selections of "Snapshots for your Album" were readily available in the 1930s. Although these products were not postcards in a strict sense, they filled a gap caused by the reduction of cards (see back cover). On top of this, the Great Depression would also have had a marked effect on the trade in the early 1930s. Stocks of postcards would have been hard to move in a depressed market. This would not have enticed entrepreneurs into launching new and costly

TOP ROW:

Left, "Mt. Ngauruhoe (7500 FT. Volcano N.Z.) Revell Series", was printed by Whitcombe & Tombs Limited in their New Zealand Sportsman's and Tourists' Wonderland Series. Nothing is known about this series other than the fact that it seems to have been aimed at a very sophisticated market. One card has been seen postally used 21 November 1924. **Centre**, "Wellington War Memorial", N.Z. Royal Series. Agents Hicks Smith & Vincent. Real photo. The principal photographer contracted for the Royal Series in the 1930s was Heaton C. Peart who later set up a studio in Hokitika in the 1940s. The Wellington War Memorial was completed in 1927. This photograph shows it framed between the wrought iron gates of Parliament Grounds sometime shortly after its completion. **Right**, "Mt. Cook from Hooker River". Frank Duncan & Co. Ltd. Coloured real photo Tourist Series. This card probably dates from the early 1920s.

MIDDLE ROW:

Left, "A Lower Hollyford View", was printed in New Zealand by Coulls Somerville Wilkie Ltd. Dunedin. The back bears an extended caption which reads "The Lower Hollyford-Okuru Road, already completed several miles below Marian Camp, will open up much delightful country to the motorist". Coulls Somerville Wilkie were one of the best printing companies in New Zealand in the first half of the 20th century. **Middle**, "Wishing Tree, Hongi's Track, N.Z." Published by the Rotorua Post, This coloured postcard has what might be described as a linen textured surface and probably dates from the late 1930s. **Right**, "Bowker Fountain at Night, Christchurch, N.Z." a real photo was printed in England for Tanner Bros. Ltd in their Macriland Photographic Series. This particular postcard has March 1939 written on the back.

BOTTOM ROW:



Left, "Bank of New Zealand, Wellington", real photo by S.C.Smith c.1925. Smith used a step ladder with a platform on it which accommodated his camera. This additional elevation gave a good foreground or lead in for the photograph.
 Right, [High Street, Lower Hutt] real photo c.1939. Smith used a much smaller camera for this study which does not have as much detail or even gradation as his "Bank of New Zealand" study made 15 or so years earlier. However he still used an elevated position for all of his street studies.

editions. Fortunately this state of affairs does not apply to real photo publishers who still managed to keep their heads above the water and continued to produce some really interesting images.

All of these factors led to a retrenchment of postcard production world wide.

When one examines the images which appeared on postcards between the wars, one is struck by a lack-lustre presentation. In a phrase, things carried on as before. Scenes of Rotorua and New Zealand's mountains and lakes dominate, with rather mundane views of our cities and towns. It is obvious that with a reduced clientele publishers were now targeting the tourist market. Another factor which hindered sales was the lack of colour. Previously, this had been applied with some sensitivity in Germany where skilled technicians responded to the challenge to turn a black and white photograph into something that had visual appeal. When coloured editions in New Zealand were attempted, either by hand colouring or through a printing press, it was done very crudely. Then again, when reviewing the sort of subject matter which our producers came up with between the wars, we have to admit they were merely following the same well trodden path as before. In other words, if criticism is levelled against the quality of subject matter, it was only a reflection of the times in which they were made. War time restrictions on the printing trade and the man-power shortage would have had its undoubted effect. Therefore I offer this as a core reason why cards from this period have held little interest for our generation of postcard collectors.

A good example of how postcards echo the times is found with the work of S.C.Smith, whom most Edwardian collectors would admit was one of the best in the field when it came to making interesting street scenes. If you follow his output in postcards which started in the 1900s and finished in the 1950s, there is a tapering off of standards. When he changed over from plac-

ing his camera on the top of a step ladder with a camera platform to the convenience of a hand held Leica, the quality of the resulting black and white photographs suffered immeasurably (see front cover). While Smith seems to have fallen foul of a new technology that had very narrow margins between success and failure, the ageing process naturally took its toll.

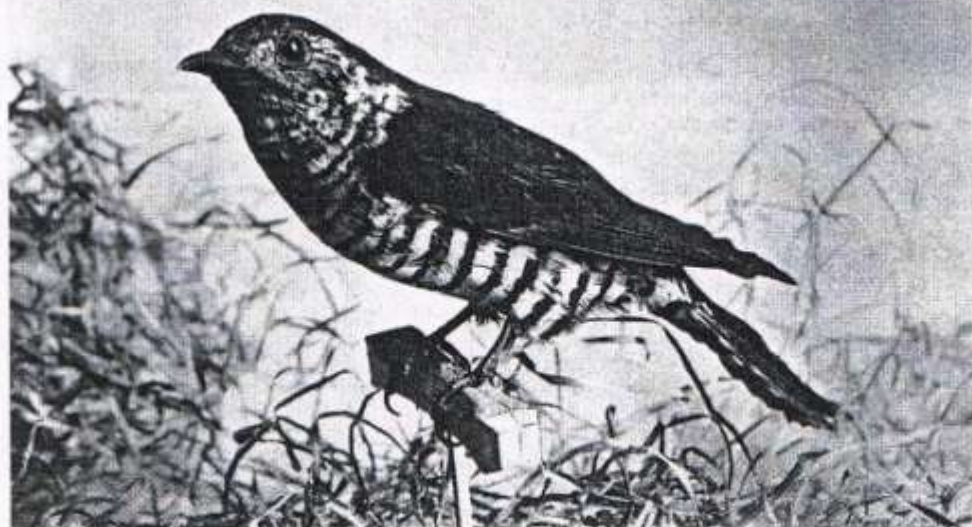
If there was to be a salvation of the postcard industry, then it came with the introduction of colour film in the 1950s. Prior to this, most publishers had accepted monochrome images for decades in the knowledge that tinting could enliven the view if it was applied intelligently. Eventually this archaic process gave way to colour transparencies which could be processed by a colour separation process into printing plates. For a start, this new technology was difficult and totally uneconomic for the requirement of New Zealand with its small population. A company which circumnavigated this obstacle was A.H. & A.W.Reed who ironically engaged German printers to handle their orders. These cards came out in a series which bear a 'D' prefix ('D' for Deutsch?).

Eventually, companies in New Zealand like Pictorial Publications acquired the plant and expertise to achieve a very high standard, thus ensuring success. From here it is another story and one which I hope to cover in a future article.

In conclusion, I admit it is very difficult to drum up interest in postcards between the two world wars because it appears there aren't many of them in circulation. Small editions, a depression and other temptations for the discretionary shilling or penny took their toll. However, I have enjoyed fossicking around looking for cards from this period despite their rather lack-lustre appearance. Therefore, don't expect to be zapped by accompanying illustrations. All told, I don't have more than a hundred cards to draw upon which limits the impact considerably. So the next time you see a pile of postcards that defy description because they don't look old enough, give us a buzz!

FOOTBALL BIRD ALSO KNOWN AS THE SHINING CUCKOO

The Shining Cuckoo, (Football Bird). New Zealand.



I wonder how many readers spotted an entry in the last issue of *The Postcard Pillar* that referred to the Football Bird. At the time I could not make any sense of this because I hadn't seen the card. I now have three different versions of the same image, which appeared in the Gold Medal Series of Fergusson Ltd. I must admit there is a distinct similarity between the birds plumage and a rugby jersey - or would it be more akin to those who follow the round ball code!