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Horseracing In The New Zealand Colonial Community, 1841-1911

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for
the degree of Master of Arts in History at Massey University

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INTRODUCTION

Apart from the victory of a New Zealand horse at the Melbourne Cup or a million dollar offering paid at the yearling sales, horseracing no longer fires the wider public imagination. This was not always the case. For most of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth, horseracing did play a central role in the life of the New Zealand people. It was one of the earliest organized sports introduced to the colony and the first to attract large numbers of participants. Unlike many other horseracing countries, the popularity of horseracing was not limited to certain areas, rather the sport flourished throughout the country. All levels of society found opportunities to participate in the sport and its appeal crossed gender, age and racial boundaries. Men, women, and children, Maori and Pakeha came together at special times of the year to enjoy the colour and excitement of horseracing. Every early colonial race meeting, whether held at a nearby beach, a publican's paddock or at a specially created course on the outskirts of a burgeoning town, reflected the character of the community that created it.

There are two key arguments to this thesis. Firstly it contends that the sport of horseracing can be used to gain insight into the colonial community and secondly that horseracing created bonds within that community.

It is because of its unique position in colonial life that horseracing can be regarded as a lens through which New Zealand society can be glimpsed. It reveals the aspirations and values of the settlers who embarked upon a new life in this country. Their belief in progress combined with an attitude of self-reliance and a democratic spirit shows in the way horseracing developed. The sport also offers a look into the power relationships within the community; which individuals or groups were able to influence decisions and outcomes and what forms did this take. Tensions within the community are brought to light as well, not only between Maori and Pakeha but also between those rugged individualists who sought freedom from the restraints of the

Old World and those who saw the future of the colony as a civilized place replicating the social structures and rituals of Mother England. Racing also reveals the settler attitude towards the physical environment. To transform the landscape into lush pastures for prize thoroughbreds and to enclose some of it with the gleaming white rails of traditional European racecourses became the collective ambition of many colonial communities. Horseracing demonstrates the shift in colonial consciousness from a highly local focus to one more regional in outlook and then in the closing years of the century, an emerging nationalism.

The other contention is that horseracing in early colonial New Zealand played an important role in bringing members of the community together in a shared focus of activity. It provided a source of community pride and a chance to show off a locality's progress, whether in terms of high valued prizes, fast horses or a beautiful environment graced with splendid facilities. The local press played its role in promoting its community's race meeting and engendering rivalry between competing communities, both local and provincial. Later it became an important element in the establishment of horseracing as a national sport.

Miles Fairburn in the *Ideal Society and its Enemies* argues that horseracing and other 'community festivals' did little to create bonds in the community.¹ He is quite correct in his statement that events like this may have taken place in the local community perhaps only once or twice a year. But this fails to take into consideration the months of planning and organization needed to bring such an event to fruition. Horseracing events were organized at the local level and involved much in the way of pooling community resources. They were planned for the local population but also in anticipation of visitors from other districts. The work ethic and the belief in progress that Fairburn attributed to the colonists contributed to the success of community based horseracing. Almost every local community organized at least one race meeting a year and excursions were commonly arranged to neighbouring events. Although as Fairburn points out, interest in a particular meeting waned from time to time, that did not signify a decline in horseracing or the loss of the sport to the community. The financial insecurity of some of the early

¹ Miles Fairburn, *The Ideal Society and its Enemies: The Foundations of Modern New Zealand Society 1850 – 1900*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 1989, pp.161-3, 52-4.

racing clubs or the loss of key individuals meant that organized racing may have stopped for a time in some localities but inevitably others came along with renewed enthusiasm to reinvigorate the sport in their community. The story of colonial horseracing in New Zealand is one of adaptability, a high degree of resourcefulness and of vibrant community life.

Horseracing in the early colonial period was not just a spectator sport. Members of the community participated in many different ways. Some were involved in the organization of the event; others contributed by way of making a site available or providing facilities or race prizes. Horsemen and occasionally horsewomen displayed their horses and their skills as they raced against their neighbours. Part sport and part social occasion, all members of the community joined together to enjoy a day's racing. Plentiful food and drink were part of the festivities as were games of chance and other fairground amusements. The race meetings had a strong local character and depending on the locality, boat races, foot races and other athletic contests often took place along with the horseracing.

The period covered is from 1841 to 1911. The starting date has been chosen, as this was the first anniversary of the settlers' arrival to present day Wellington. With the inclusion of horseracing as part of the celebrations, this set the pattern for other settlement's anniversary festivities. The first five chapters look at horseracing in the early colonial period from 1841 to the early 1880s. No study of New Zealand horseracing can be undertaken without first examining its British heritage. The first section of Chapter One gives a brief survey of the sport as it evolved in Britain. Despite its strong association with the military and the aristocracy, it was also a sport with a wide popular appeal. Horseracing was a traditional rural pursuit but by the time the first British emigrants were arriving on the New Zealand shores, it had acquired a recognizably modern face. Urbanization, industrialization and increasing commercialism had made their mark on the sport. The horseracing that the colonists introduced, however, was more reminiscent of the rustic community event of an earlier time. The second part of the chapter describes how the sport was introduced and integrated into New Zealand community life. The purpose is to show how the British sport was modified to suit the colonial environment and its people.

The thesis then examines four key aspects of horseracing in the early colonial period. Chapter Two looks at horseracing as a Maori sport. One of the unique features of New Zealand colonial horse racing is the high degree of Maori involvement. Maori acquired horses very early and quickly became recognized for their skills of horsemanship. Some local race meetings held races restricted to horses owned and ridden by Maori but also Maori controlled racing clubs were a feature of the period. Maori horseracing was recognized for its informal and lively atmosphere, warm hospitality and high degree of community involvement. Some of these elements are recognizable in the horseracing that took place in the frontier regions of the country. Chapter Three examines horseracing as a frontier sport. At its most basic level, horseracing required little in the way of organization; at least two horses and a reasonably flat stretch of land. The fast and dangerous nature of horseracing appealed to the predominantly young, male frontier population. Its association with alcohol, gambling and yarn telling also assured its popularity on the frontier. But from the earliest years, there was another element that sought to civilize the land and its people. Chapter Four shows how some communities used racing as a means to duplicate the class and gender distinctions associated with the British sport. Certain racing clubs and meetings, particularly those in the urban centres, provided the colonial elite with opportunities to demonstrate their power, wealth and status. Men were active participants in the sport while women were relegated to a passive role. Another aspect of horseracing's civilizing function explored in this chapter is how the landscape was altered and buildings erected to create racecourses resembling the grand racing parks of Britain. But more than just a picturesque site, the racecourse became a community gathering meeting place at a time when few other social institutions existed. Chapter Five demonstrates how horseracing played a role in developing a community consciousness. It helped create and maintain the social bonds essential to the welfare of the community.

Chapters Six and Seven deal with the later colonial period, from the 1880s to 1911. This was a time of immense social, technological and political change and Chapter Six will show how these were reflected in the sport. Chapter Seven discusses horseracing as a national sport. It survived the many moralist assaults on it and emerged from the turbulent years as a sport very different from the informal local community event established by the early colonists. The year 1911 has been chosen

as a concluding date for it was at this point that horseracing cut the last ties with its British tradition and made itself into a distinctly New Zealand sport. It was the last year that bookmakers appeared on New Zealand racecourses and the year that the first government appointed racing commission delivered its report that was to define the form horseracing was to take in the years to come.

A rich literature of horseracing exists in this country and has provided the starting point for this thesis. Most of it has been written by 'insiders', those within the horseracing industry or, as in the case of racing club histories, closely associated with the organization. Because of this, the literature is by nature celebratory, and is concerned with key individuals and their horses. The aim of this thesis is to look beyond these 'racing worthies' to the mostly nameless men, women and children who attended community race meetings as part of their holiday celebrations. The approach taken is a social history of colonial New Zealand horseracing. To this end, a primary source of material has been local newspaper accounts of horseracing events. The colonial newspapers reflected and in part shaped the perception of the early colonial sport. Because racing was such an important part of early community life, selected local histories as well as some published memoirs contain valuable information on the sport. For comparative purposes, this thesis has also made use of some material pertaining to horseracing in Britain, Australia and Canada. Finally, the wealth of visual material pertaining to the topic should be mentioned. The Alexander Turnbull Library was the source of the photographs and reproductions used in this thesis.