
*Unless otherwise indicated this chapter is based on information supplied by G. Nelson, Havelock North, 16 December, 1955.

As the founder of the freezing industry in Hawke's Bay, only two years after the first experimental shipment of frozen meat had left New Zealand, William Nelson ranks among the province's outstanding pioneers; indeed he was one of the great pioneers of the Dominion. It is important therefore to examine those personal qualities which lay behind his success.

William Nelson, born in Warwick in 1843, came from a comfortably-off, middle-class manufacturing family. "The Lawn", the family's home, was a two storied building surrounded by five or six acres of parkland and gardens. G. Nelson, his father, was the proprietor of G. Nelson, Dale and Company, manufacturers of gelatine and cement. In all probability G. Nelson was a typical example of the rising manufacturing classes of the 19th Century England - one of those enterprising, self-made men who had found their chance during the Industrial Revolution.

William Nelson was one of the many people who emigrated from Europe to the Colonies and the New World after 1830. For the most part these emigrants were men of initiative and ability, who were not afraid of hard work, and who were inspired by the idea of improving their fortunes overseas. Nelson's particular ambition was to become a sheepfarmer, and he came to New Zealand with the idea of taking up sheep farming. To some extent this interest in the land had been foreshadowed by his boyhood interest in gardening* - an unusual hobby for a lad of 12 to 15 years.

Nelson, W., Diary, 1855, 1858, passim.

He was only a youth of 19 when, with his brother Frederick, he arrived in Auckland on the 7 February, 1863.* He remained

*ibid., 7 February, 1863.

in and about Auckland for some five months, inspecting various farm properties and generally adapting himself to life in the colony.* He visited Whangarei and went as far south as

*ibid., 7 February to 25 July, 1863.

Mangatawhiri, only the hostility of the Maoris preventing him from continuing his journey to Raglan.

Nelson's parents were apparently people of some substance. At any rate they were well-connected, for Jane Williams,* wife of the missionary William Williams, was William Nelson's

*Nee Nelson

cousin. Thus on his arrival in New Zealand, Nelson had the advantage of possessing relatives who were already influential members of the colony's society. While he was in Auckland he met William Williams' son, J.N. Williams i.e. his second cousin. This was the beginning of a life-long friendship which culminated in their joint commercial venture of 1880,*

* Vide supra p.

and which was further cemented by Nelson's second marriage to Williams' sister, Caroline, in 1884. No doubt it was due to the influence of J.N. Williams that the Nelson brothers finally settled in Hawke's Bay - but not before William had visited Nelson, Christchurch, and Rangiora, and examined the surrounding country.*

* Nelson, op.cit., 23 July to 21 August 1863, passim.

Nelson arrived in Napier in September 1863,* and for a

*ibid., 9 September, 1863.

few months he stayed with Williams on his station at Kereru. He worked on the estate, visited neighbouring properties and met some of the Province's most prominent pastoralists, including J.L. Herrick, the MacLeans and Samuel Williams,* son of Henry Williams.

*ibid., 9 September to 29 December, 1863, passim.

Thus Nelson's connection with the Williams family proved very valuable: it gave him an immediate entry to a select social group - that of the Province's leading pastoralists.

Early in 1864 the Nelson brothers purchased from Joseph Powdrell a property adjoining Kereru, which they named "Brown's Lodge" -* now known as Poporangi.

*ibid., 17 January, 1864.

After farming "Brown's Lodge" for a year William returned to England to marry Sarah Newcombe Bicknell, the daughter of Henry Bicknell, Bangor, North Wales.* With his wife he

*Clyclopedia of New Zealand, Vol.VI, p.388.

sailed again for Napier in March, 1867.*

*Nelson, op.cit., 8 March, 1867

During his Absence, Frederick had purchased Arlington, a station of some 14,000 acres near Waipukurau, and it was there that William Nelson and his wife settled on their return. After spending a week with Samuel Williams at Te Aute, they moved into Arlington in June 1866.* Their stay

*ibid., 4 June 1867.

was shortlived, however, for the two brothers were soon faced with financial disaster: a serious fall in wool prices, aggravated by a plague of grass-hoppers virtually robbed them of their inheritance. They were unable to meet their interest payments, and when the mortgagee foreclosed on the estate, they had to walk off the property and abandon their equity.

With the financial assistance of their friends, the brothers immediately launched out on another farming venture. Early in 1869 they took over the Mangateretere East block, a property of some 2047 acres within a few miles of Hastings. This new undertaking so soon after such a severe set back, illustrates some of the qualities which made for Nelson's success: a venturesome spirit and the determination to succeed. It was characteristic of the man that he should regard his losses at Arlington merely as a misfortune and not as a disaster, and that he should immediately set about to retrieve his position. The fact that he was able to obtain financial assistance from his friends at such a time emphasises his personal integrity as well as showing the value of his connections.

After the establishment of the freezing industry, Nelson widened his activities as a grazier. Nelson Bros. Ltd., or Nelson by himself or in association with friends, bought and leased a large number of properties in various parts of the Province. In all, he was associated in the control of some 100,000 acres.* These included fattening properties on the Heretunga Plains, and hill-country tracts which provided the stores.

* Properties farmed by Nelson at various times included Titoki near Waipawa, Tuki-tuki near Havelock North, Dartmoor, Hakowhai, Mt. Cameron, Omatua, Eskmount, Glengarry, Otaharao, Waipuria, Hukanui, Chesterhope, Oakleigh, Papakura, Waima,

While Nelson gained prominence as a pioneer pastoralist, his greatest undertaking and his most notable success was the establishment of the Tomoana works and the pioneering of the freezing industry in Hawke's Bay. In 1872, leaving his brother, Frederick, to manage the Mangateretere property, he returned to England and rejoined his brothers, George and Edward Montague, in the family business in Warwick. He remained in and about Warwick for the next eight years, returning to the Hawke's Bay in 1880 to establish the boiling down and meat processing works at Tomoana.

As a pastoralist, Nelson had experienced the difficulties of marketing livestock, but it is uncertain whether he returned to England for the express purpose of making arrangements for, or interesting his brothers in, establishing a meat canning works in the Province. Possibly his return was prompted by the desire to rejoin his father's firm and recoup his losses, or perhaps he felt that he had a greater future in the family business. In any event, it is most probable that plans to establish Tomoana were not made until Nelson had been in England for some time, since it is unlikely that the necessary arrangements would take as long as eight years.

The establishment of the Tomoana works and much of its success can be attributed to Nelson's natural interest in engineering and practical pursuits. This interest in machinery had been revealed early in his life when as a youth of 19, he spent many of his evenings and weekends tinkering with the engine which heated his father's greenhouse. *

*Nelson op cit., 1862, passim.

When he visited a London exhibition shortly before his emigration to New Zealand, he spent all his time wandering about the machinery display. * His liking for carpentering

*ibid., 30 May 1862.

is another example of his interest in practical activities. Carpentry had been one of his activities as a boy,* and while he was in Auckland he spent his spare time making articles of furniture for his future pioneer home.*

*ibid., 1855, 1858, passim.

*ibid., 7 February to 25 July 1863.

Meat-preserving was not the only industrial concern with which Nelson was associated in Hawke's Bay: for example, he pioneered flax-milling in the Province when in 1869 he purchased three mills from Auckland to work the sixty acres of flax swamp on his property at Mangateretere.* Nelson's

*Hawke's Bay Herald, 29 October, 1869.

introduction of the flax-milling industry was hailed enthusiastically in the Province as "the dawn of a brighter and new era."* But these high hopes were not realized;

*ibid., 12 November 1869

prices slumped; the industry failed.

Timber milling was another of Nelson's interests which revealed his essentially practical and constructive mind. Trading under the name of Wilding and Company, he established a saw-mill on his 7000 acre property of bush land at Whenuahou.*

*Wilson, op.cit., p.374.

Another mill was erected on the Mangateretere property to work the "Big Bush", 100 acres of White Pine.*

*Information supplied by R. Sunderland, Havelock North.

While the establishment of the Tomoana works represented the consummation of Nelson's life-long ambition to succeed, it was typical of the man that he was not prepared to remain idle and quietly enjoy the fruits of his enterprise: he immediately found additional pursuits. Characteristically these were again of a practical nature, and illustrate some further qualities which assured his success: energy and resourcefulness. Like the successful Puritan business man, Nelson was essentially a man of action: he enjoyed being busy, and was never happier than when grappling with the problems of his numerous undertakings.

In his fifties, he interested himself in river control and the prevention of flooding, and for some years was a member of the Clive River Board. It was largely due to his financial backing and encouragement that a swampy area bordering the south of Napier - now known as Napier South - was drained and reclaimed. In 1900 he joined C.D. Kennedy and G. Latham in a scheme to lease 1800 acres of the Whareomaraenui Reserve from the Napier Harbour Board, with an undertaking to reclaim 300 acres of swamp. Nelson supplied the largest share of the capital, and gained the controlling interest in the partnership - known as C.D. Kennedy and Company. From January 1901, he employed his son, G. Nelson, as engineer, and the reclamation was completed in 1906.*

*The first sale of sections was made in April 1908.

Nelson was also actively associated with the pioneering of two Napier engineering firms which have since opened branches throughout the country. In 1908, at the request of J.H. Edmunson*, Nelson interested several Hawke's Bay residents* in forming a syndicate to provide the capital

*This paragraph is based on information supplied by C.D. Edmunson, Lower Hutt, 27 April 1956.

*J. Chambers, (Capt.) R. Todd, C.A. Hawkins and one Rome.

for the promotion of the oxy-acetylene welding industry in New Zealand. In 1911 the business was formed into a liability company, the Acetone Illuminating and Welding Company Ltd.,* As chairman of Directors, Nelson was largely

*Now New Zealand Industrial Gases Ltd.

responsible for guiding the policy of the company, from 1911 until 1927. A very large share of the Company's early success was due to his zeal. Nelson was also one of the founders of the well-known engineering firm of J.J. Niven and Company Ltd., Napier, and for a number of years he was chairman of the Company's Board of Directors.*

*Hawke's Bay Herald Tribune, 18 October 1951

Apart from his practical mind, strength of character and an indomitable will to achieve were important factors in Nelson's success. As a youth he had carefully built up a philosophy of life and more particularly, firm views on what were the qualities which a successful and worthy life demanded. For example, when he was 21 he copied into his diary* several verses portraying the ideals and qualities which lie behind a successful career. In his admiration for these verses are foreshadowed the self-reliance and initiative, the courage and determination, the honesty and dependability which were to characterise his own life of achievement.

*Nelson, op.cit., 21 December 1864.

His self-disciplined character was founded on a genuine piety, for Nelson was a man of firm religious convictions: above all, a trust in God was the guiding principle of his life. He always claimed that the 15th Psalm influenced his whole life; so much so that he made sure his own children knew it. His piety was the result of his Christian upbringing, for as a boy he regularly attended church twice each Sunday*; he even attended a service in Auckland on the

*ibid., 1855, 1858-66, *passim*.

day after his arrival in New Zealand.* He never lost his

*ibid., 8 February 1863

early faith in Christianity, and right up to his last days he was a loyal supporter of St. Matthew's Church, Hastings.

Nelson's Christian outlook explains much of his success for piety was a characteristic of the successful middle-classes of Victorian England. As in the case of the early Puritans from whom it had been inherited, it inspired the whole of their lives; for like the early Puritan, too, the middle-class manufacturer and merchant of 19th century England believed that commercial success was the direct reward of their piety. It was accompanied by the doctrine of hard work, a regularity of life and conduct, and a singleness of purpose which little could undermine. This was the atmosphere in which Nelson was reared, and his character and career reflect its influence.

Other important factors in Nelson's success were his ability as an organiser, and his natural gift for enlisting the services of energetic and efficient subordinates. He gained his first experience of men and machines in his father's business, where he was employed from the time he left school at the age of 15 until he sailed for New Zealand.* Later as an

*Nelson, op.cit., 20 July 1858-30 May 1862 *passim*.

employer of labour himself, he displayed the paternalism that was characteristic of the enlightened manufacturer of the 19th Century England. He consistently sought to promote cordial labour relations at Tomoana by a friendly acquaintance with his men and a fatherly interest in their welfare. In his philosophy, these were the real basis of harmonious industrial relations - not governments regulations and trade union activity. For example, in June 1883, he established a recreational and reading room at Tomoana for his employees, and allowed them to control it through the Tomoana Social Club formed as a result.* Later, in recognition of the

*Hawkes Bay Weekly Courier, 9 November 1883.

services rendered by his employees in combating a fire at the works, he instituted a system of Annual Sports at Tomoana, on a day set apart as a paid holiday.*

*Hastings Standard, 20 October 1905

Nelson's paternalism was typical too of the humanitarian outlook of the 19th Century. It is reflected in his generosity also, and to his close associates he was regarded as something of a philanthropist. Many a young man and woman in Hawke's Bay had reason to be grateful to him for a start in life or for assistance in times of adversity, but the details of his generosity were usually known only to those who were directly concerned. His outright gifts included an annual donation of £500 to the Salvation Army during World War 1, and a bonus of £10,000 to Ignatius Loughnan, the manager of his Tuki-tuki property, on the occasion when the estate was sold. Further, he was always a liberal contributor to the funds of St. Matthew's Church.

The key to Nelson's success lies in his background. He was bred of a successful middle-class industrial family of early Victorian England and he himself possessed qualities that were characteristic of the class: a practical outlook genuine piety, ambition, ability and enterprise. He was thus a true representative of the Victorian era, and typical of those Englishmen who turned to the colonies to satisfy their natural ambition.