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Captain Westmacott's Drawing Book - A Colonial Oddity

Abstract

The annals of New Zealand art from the colonial period are scattered with unattributed works and those by artists about whom precious little is known. The unravelling of this jigsaw is left to art historians, working away quietly in archives, libraries and art museums. One as yet unsolved riddle concerns Captain Robert Marsh Westmacott. In 1929 art dealer and expatriate Kiwi Rex Nan Kivell purchased at auction from the Museum Book Store, London, a drawing book containing sixteen New Zealand topographic views and figure studies. Roughly dated at around 1840, they were part of the estate of the late Captain Westmacott (1801-1870). The majority appeared to be original works by, or copies after, Charles Heaphy, Richard Aldworth Oliver, Cuthbert Clarke and Joseph Jenner Merrett. Westmacott's Drawing Book ended up in the Rex Nan Kivell Collection in the National Library of Australia, Canberra. The circumstances surrounding its compilation remain a mystery, and both the artist and the works contained therein are largely unknown. This article describes the contents of the drawing book and the context in which it was compiled.

Keywords

colonial art, New Zealand, Robert Marsh Westmacott, art history, canoes

Disciplines

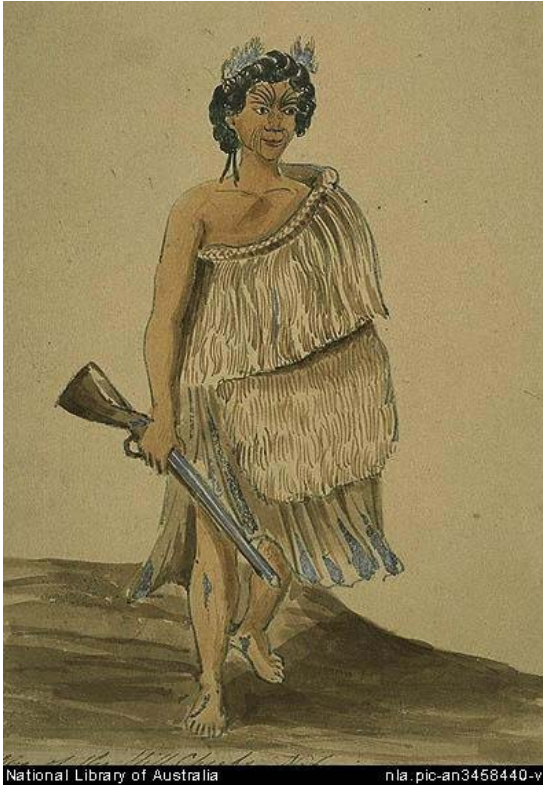
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Captain Westmacott's Drawing Book - A Colonial Oddity

MICHAEL ORGAN



RICHARD ALDWORTH OLIVER (attrib.) *One of the Hill Chiefs, N.Z.*
Watercolour on paper, 245 x 179 mm.
(Westmacott's Drawing Book, Nan Kivell Collection, National Library of Australia)

The annals of New Zealand art from the colonial period are scattered with unattributed works and those by artists about whom precious little is known. The unravelling of this jigsaw is left to art historians, working away quietly in archives, libraries and art museums. One as yet unsolved riddle concerns Captain Robert Marsh Westmacott.

In 1929 art dealer and expatriate Kiwi Rex Nan Kivell purchased at auction from the Museum Book Store, London, a drawing book containing sixteen New Zealand topographic views and figure studies. Roughly dated at around 1840, they were part of the estate of the late Captain Westmacott (1801-1870). The majority appeared to be original works by, or copies after, Charles Heaphy, Richard Aldworth Oliver, Cuthbert Clarke and Joseph Jenner Merrett.

Two similar collections are well known to New Zealand art historians - *Mrs Hobson's Album*, presented to the widowed Eliza Hobson, wife of the late Governor Sir Charles Hobson, on her departure from the Colony in 1843, and containing a collection of local drawings and texts; and Governor George Grey's *New Zealand Pictorial Sketchbook 1845-54*, containing drawings and prints.

Grey's collection was deposited with the British Museum in 1854, whilst Eliza Hobson's album was donated to the Turnbull Library in 1940 and has recently been published.⁽¹⁾

Westmacott's Drawing Book ended up in the Rex Nan Kivell Collection in the National Library of Australia, Canberra. The circumstances surrounding its compilation remain a mystery, and both the artist and the works contained therein are largely unknown.

The Hobson, Grey and Westmacott albums are both a rich treasure trove and a problem. Many of the artworks contained therein bear no signature, whilst others lack annotations which can aid in identification. Are the works originals or copies? Who is the artist responsible? How were they acquired? When were they produced, and precisely what do they portray?

Hundreds of artists passed through New Zealand during the colonial period. They ranged from the professionals attached to British and French exploring expeditions, itinerants such as Augustus Earle and Conrad Martens, and rank amateurs. The task of identifying unsigned works is therefore not an easy one.

When Rex Nan Kivell purchased *Westmacott's Drawing Book* it contained sixteen New Zealand works, with all bar one relating to the North Island. The topographic and ethnographic views and figure studies of Maori such as Honi Heke were neither signed nor dated, though all bore some form of inscription, usually in Captain Westmacott's distinctive hand. Sizes were smallish, on average 10 x 8 inches (20 x 25 cm), reflecting their sketchbook origins. On first viewing it would seem all were original works or copies by the good captain, and most were originally catalogued as such.



ROBERT MARSH WESTMACOTT *Bow of a War Canoe, New Zealand* (c.1851)
Watercolour and pencil on paper, 175 x 264 mm.
(Westmacott's Drawing Book, Nan Kivell Collection, National Library of Australia)

However between the time of purchase (1929) and the time of transfer to the National Library of Australia (1959) the sixteen works had shrunk to ten. Nan Kivell kept precious

few details of his purchases, and over the years various pages had become separated and the Westmacott link severed. Neither the Hobson or Grey albums suffered such an ignominious fate.

With nothing known about Westmacott, and his album partially broken up, questions were raised about his visit to the islands – did it, in fact, take place? Well yes, it did, but the details remain sketchy.

At some point during the 1840s Robert Westmacott stood on the shore at Bastion Point, Auckland, with pencil and sketchbook in hand and drew a view looking west across the harbour. He also travelled further east, to Tamaki Head, where he took a view looking north towards Rangitoto and Tapa. Both works survive in his *Drawing Book*.

Robert Marsh Westmacott is one of those shadowy figures of history - a man who existed on the periphery of important events but did not figure large enough in the political or economic circumstance of his time to become truly historic. Born in 1801, he was the second son of the famous British sculptor Sir Richard Westmacott R.A. Young Robert – or Watty as he was known - pursued a career in the army from the early 1820s and between 1831-7 served as aid-de-camp to New South Wales governor Sir Richard Bourke.

Westmacott subsequently became a landowner and businessman in Australia before returning to England in 1851. His military training included rudimentary drawing and surveying and in 1838 and 1848 he had published in London two series of lithographs of Australian scenery and Aboriginal portraits. He also compiled a collection of sketchbooks recording his various travels from the 1820s through to the 1850s.

Captain Westmacott was one of the last of his generation of soldier-topographic artists to work in Australia. They largely disappeared with the end of convict transportation in 1840, though the military officer-artist is strongly represented in New Zealand from the 1840s through to the late sixties, due to their presence in association with the Maori Wars. Individuals of this class include Lt. Thomas James Grant, Lance-Sergeant John Williams, Lt. George Hyde Page, Major Cyprian Bridge, Captain R.A. Oliver, Lt-Colonel W.A. McCleverty, Lt. H.G. Robley, Colonel Henry James Warre and Major Gustav Fredinand von Tempsky.(2)

Westmacott may have been enthusiastic about his art - it was noted by Governor Bourke's daughter Anne in 1831 that he always carried a sketchbook with him whilst travelling – but his skills were limited. He preferred pencil and sepia wash for his sketches, and landscape over figures.

What, then, were the circumstances of his visit to New Zealand?

Works in *Westmacott's Drawing Book* derive from the years 1839-51, though none are actually dated. They roughly cover his period of residence in Australia whilst owner of the brig *Trial* and a major shareholder in the New South Wales Steam Navigation Company. The opportunity to travel to New Zealand therefore readily existed.

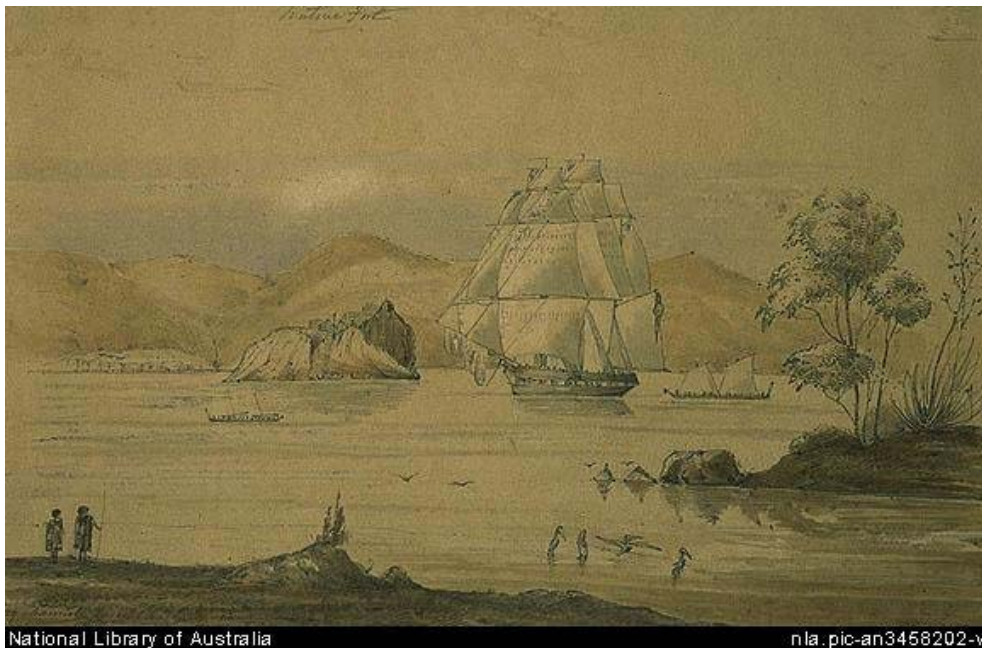
Furthermore, Commander Herbert Patrick Westmacott DSO DSC, a former resident of New Zealand, noted in a letter to the author:

.... I farmed the property my Father left, in the King Country of the North Island of New Zealand, and as described in a book my wife assembled based on my Father's memoirs, ("The After-Breakfast Cigar" by Spencer Westmacott), the Maoris of that locality claimed descent from a Westmacott. I had understood that the Westmacott in question had been a Robert Marsh W., en route to take up his duties as A.D.C. to the Governor of New South Wales. My version had it that his ship had traded around the coast of N.Z. and called into the port of Kawhia, where R.M.W. was able to indulge in a dalliance.(3)

Such scant evidence is supplemented by the information contained within the artworks themselves. Most are associated with coastal and inland areas of the North Island, apart from the view of the *Tory* in Queen Charlotte's Sound, on the northern tip of the South Island.

The Westmacott collection inscriptions tell us the images are of Auckland, the Hutt and Pakuratahi rivers near Wellington, the Mokau and Waikato rivers and Manukau on the west coast, and the former lime springs of Rotomahana near Rotorua in the centre of the island. Drawings of war canoes are most likely from the Huraki Gulf area, whilst Hone Heki was a resident of the Bay of Islands and Massenootea – whose wife is depicted – came from the Taranaki region.

Attribution of individual works is more difficult. Westmacott's pencil and watercolour sketch *Tory Channel, Queen Charlotte Sound, New Zealand [with] Native Fort* is a copy of Heaphy's original of August 1839.(4)



ROBERT MARSH WESTMACOTT *Tory Channel, Queen Charlotte Sound, New Zealand [with] Native Fort*. (c.1839)

Watercolour and pencil on paper, 210 x 338 mm.

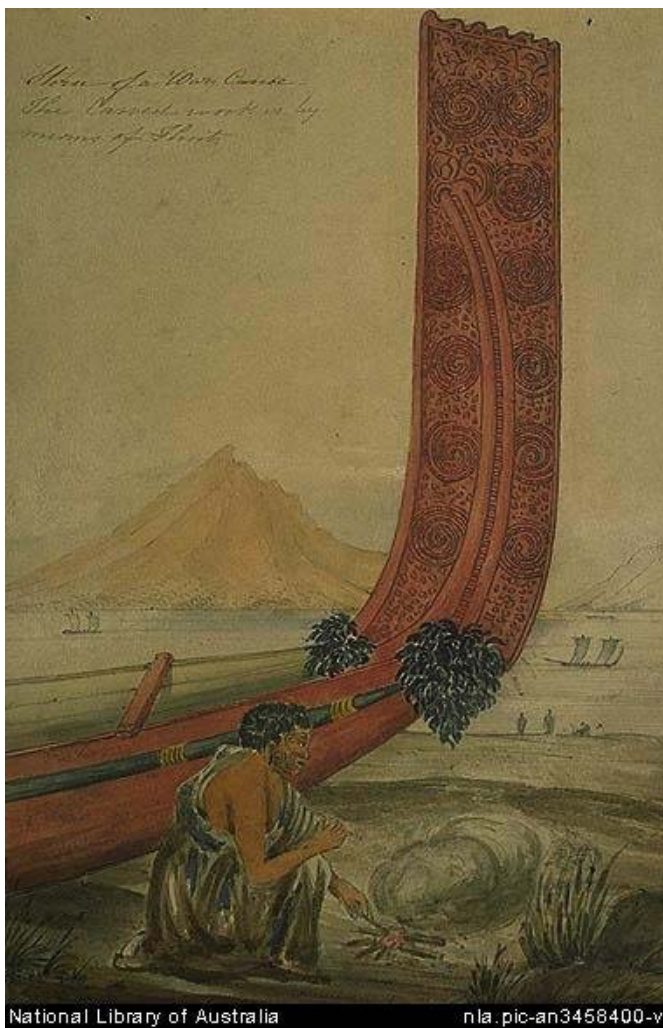
(Westmacott's Drawing Book, Nan Kivell Collection, National Library of Australia).

Four works are copies by Westmacott after Cuthbert Clarke - *View on the Mokau River*, *Hot lime springs of Rotomahana*, and the pair *Bow of a War Canoe* and *Stern of a War Canoe*. These can be dated around 1850-1.

The head and shoulders portrait of *Hone Heki* is by J.J. Merrett, or a good copy, and dates from that artist's visit to the great chief's pa in February 1846, though numerous copies and variants are known.(5)

One of the Hill Chief's is by R.A. Oliver, as is *New Zealand canoe, going to sea as pilots*. Further works by Oliver include two of those which have subsequently been separated from the album - *The Wife and child of the chief Massenoota* and *Chief's Wife, New Zealand*, now both untitled in the Nan Kivell collection, Canberra.

Within the *Drawing Book* some ten works are copies or originals by Westmacott, with the remaining six attributable to Merrett or Oliver. Westmacott may have acquired them though purchase or gift. We can only guess at the circumstances which led him to sit down and make a copy of Heaphy's 1839 sketch of Queen Charlotte Sound.



ROBERT MARSH WESTMACOTT *Stern of a War Canoe. The carved work is by means of flints* (c.1851)
Watercolour and pencil on paper, 350 x 240 mm.
(Westmacott's Drawing Book, Nan Kivell Collection, National Library of Australia)

Of all the New Zealand works in Westmacott's Drawing Book, the pair *Bow of a War Canoe, New Zealand* and *Stern of a War Canoe - The carved work is by means of flints* are perhaps of most interest.(6) Both are part of a suite of watercolours by Cuthbert

Clarke, with variants in the Mitchell Library, Sydney and the National Library of Australia, Canberra. Westmacott's skills as a copyist are at his best with these two works.

Bow of a War Canoe, New Zealand shows an intricately carved prow with a waving, undulating main stem or band passing from the lower to upper corner, surrounded by spirals on either side, the whole painted in red ochre. At its base is a small figurehead looking outwards, whilst two human figurines are also located on either side of the canoe at the point where the connection with the bow piece is made.

It was more usual for a single figure to be carved at the base of the prow, looking ominously inwards towards the crew, as is the case with the 1836 war canoe in the Maori Hall of the Auckland War Memorial Museum collection. Westmacott's example also includes an elaborate wig of feathers adorning the figurative pieces and bow extremity, along with two long wands (*puhi*) resembling the antennae of a butterfly, and elaborately ornamented with albatross feathers tied in a small bunch at intervals of about a foot.

It has been recorded in the region of Queen Charlotte's Sound that when such a canoe was successfully employed in battle, the heart of a slain enemy would be mounted on one of these *puhi*. They were also used for navigational purposes. Along the central and southern part of the North Island the bow and stern were usually painted the same colour as the canoe, namely a fine red made from *kokowai*, a red ochre or oxide, mixed with shark oil, but in the northern districts they were painted black.

The second of this pair, *Stern of a War Canoe*, shows the stern post, elaborately carved and with two bunches of black feathers adorning its base. This piece also features the spirals seen in the prow, situated on either side of two ascending bars and similarly decorated with spirals. These bars acted as strengthening members of the stern piece, with the larger spiral sections completely perforating the wood. A tattooed Maori chief is sitting at the fire close by, smoking, whilst on the opposite side of the river is a high mountain.

Another version of this watercolour is to be found in the Turnbull Library collection. It shows this very same carved canoe, with fire and a crouching man, but adds another man and a different landscape in the background. The location of these views is problematic - whilst the overall red colouring of the bow and stern pieces is indicative of those found in the southern part of the North Island, the background topography suggests the Huraki Gulf region near Auckland.

R.A. Oliver's *New Zealand Canoe - going to sea as pilots* in *Westmacott's Drawing Book* is a companion piece to his *Off Auckland* in the National Library of Australia collection. Both works portray a large war canoe raising sail as it heads out to sea. These watercolours reveal not only the functionality of these large vessels as part of their traditional association with war and ceremony, but also their post-colonial role in piloting European vessels through rocky and dangerous waters to safe anchorage.

Due to their long and narrow dimensions they were unstable in strong winds and heavy swells, and as such were not generally used for ocean-going trips along the coast or between islands, though in calm conditions they could travel up to 75 km per day. An elaborate stern piece adorns Oliver's war canoe, whilst a large figurehead is the main

feature of the prow. The sails (*ra*, or *mamaru*) shown in these works consist of a central mast and boom, plus a triangular mat made in a particular manner from the leaves of the raupo. Such canoes were capable of travelling at a considerable rate when combined with the rhythmical strokes of the paddles used by the crew.

The other significant element of Captain Westmacott's collection is the Maori portraits. It appears that all relate to J.J. Merrett or R.A. Oliver. The head and shoulders portrait of *Hone Heki* clearly derives from Merrett, though whether it is by the artist himself, or a fine copy by another, is unclear.



JOSEPH MERRETT (attrib.) *Heki*. N.Z. Chief. "*Heki*" The Commander in chief during the late War; he died of Consumption in 1849, caused by a blow he received from his Wife in a fit of jealousy. (c.1846)
Watercolour and pencil on paper, 229 X 202 mm.
(formerly Westmacott's Drawing Book, Nan Kivell Collection, National Library of Australia)

Further research is also needed in regards to the Oliver portraits. *One of the Hill Chief's* is most likely by Oliver, as is *Maori woman and child* currently attributed to him in the Nan Kivell collection, though this latter work was originally listed as *The Wife and Child of the Chief "Massenoota"*, she is seldom without her pipe in *Westmacott's Drawing Book*.

Westmacott may have acquired the head and shoulders portrait of Hone Heki directly from Merrett whilst visiting Auckland, for he was a well-known commercial artist and patronised by Governor Grey prior to his death at the age of 38 in 1854.(7)

Westmacott's Drawing Book remains a colonial oddity. Its origins are unclear and the attribution of individual works is tentative. Nevertheless, the portraits and ethnographic works are significant and deserving of further research. Captain Westmacott himself remains elusive.

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14 September 2005