

Introduction

Life in mid nineteenth century New Zealand was tough for many. Māori were experiencing a world of land dispossession and disease epidemics, while early European settlers were learning to live in a new land with unfamiliar geographical and environmental conditions where they had to carve out an existence for themselves and their families (Holland 2013; Petchey 2018; West 2017). Medical science was just beginning to become recognisably modern, as germ theory gradually replaced miasma theory only in the last decades of the nineteenth century. Mortality rates were high from diseases such as tuberculosis. Childbirth was dangerous for both mothers and babies and injury from accidents, especially on farms and in mines, was common. Drowning was known as the 'New Zealand Death' as it was so common (Ell and Ell 1995: 8). Life in New Zealand was promoted as being better than in the British Isles (Figure 1.1), with healthier

living and greater opportunities (Belich 1996: 297-312), but was this actually the case?

Historical sources can tell us much about the experiences of people in this period, but records were often only kept by the literate and those with time to spare or a world view to promote (Ballantyne 2012: 154; Campbell 2013: 2). To understand the lives of those who did not leave a record behind we must turn to the archaeological record, and the best way to understand many aspects of past lives is to look at the people themselves. Beginning in 2016, Peter Petchey and Hallie Buckley of the University of Otago have been directing a bioarchaeological research project that is studying early European burials in cemeteries in Otago: the Southern Cemeteries Archaeological Project. By using a combination of archaeological interpretation of the burial traditions and associated material culture,

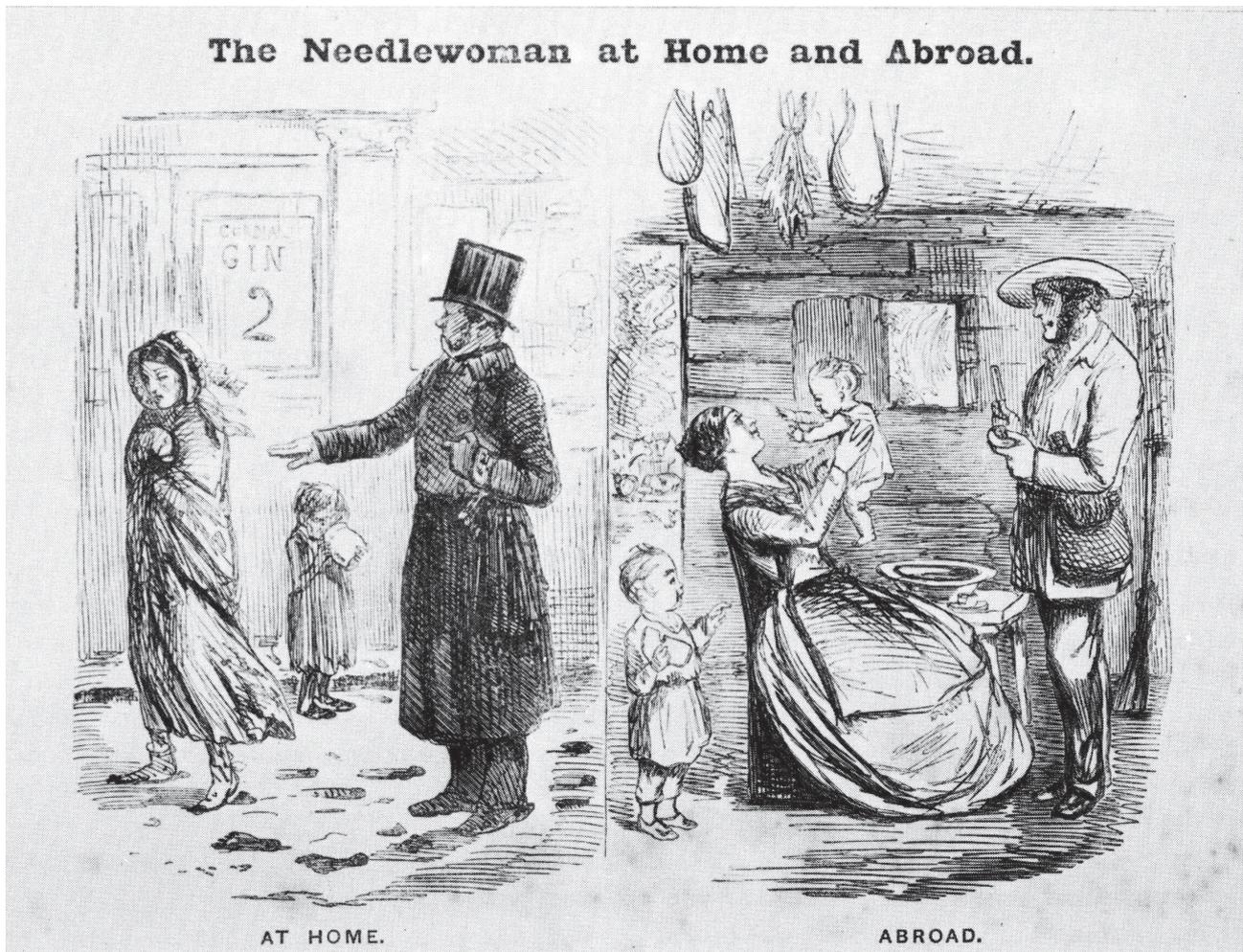


Fig. 1.1. A contemporary cartoon showing the idealised vision of life in the colonies compared with life in the British cities. This was the promise that brought many settlers to New Zealand (*Punch*, 1850, Alexander Turnbull Library).

and analysis of the human remains (including osteological assessment of the remains and chemical and molecular analyses), a detailed picture can be built up of the lives of the individuals: an account of their ‘lived experiences.’ This integrated analysis can provide details of their origins, childhood and adult health, diet, trauma, exposure to environmental toxins, and in some cases the final cause of death. By building detailed osteobiographies of individual early settlers and combining these with archaeological and historical research we can begin to understand how they experienced the New Zealand of the mid nineteenth century both individually and at a wider scale as members of local communities and as part of an evolving colonial society.

In 2016 the Project carried out an archaeological excavation at the old St. John’s Cemetery on Back Road, near Milton in Otago (Figure 1.2, Figure 1.3). The site code used here is ‘SJM’ for ‘St John’s Milton.’ The excavations had a dual purpose: to collaborate with a local community group to assist in their efforts to research and restore the cemetery, and to undertake a bioarchaeological investigation into the past lives and health of this early European farming population.

St. John’s Cemetery is an historic Anglican cemetery (Archaeological site H45/56) that was formally established in 1860 but was probably in informal use three years earlier, has been disused since 1926, and was

officially closed in 1971. Records located to date indicate that at least 75 people have been buried there, but only eight headstones and marked graves remain today (Figure 1.4, Figure 1.5). By the second decade of the 21st century the cemetery had been in a state of disrepair for many years, and a number of descendants of those buried there formed a community group, the Tokomairiro Project 60 (TP60) with the intention of restoring the graveyard (the ‘60’ was a reference to the number of graves thought to be present when the group was first formed, a figure that soon increased as historical research progressed). One particular problem that the TP60 group faced was the uncertainty of the cemetery boundaries, as the existing fence had been installed in the 1950s or 1960s around the visible headstones, but it was suspected that there were unmarked graves outside of that area.

The intentions of the TP60 group were to repair the remaining headstones (which was completed with the help of the Historic Cemeteries Conservation Trust), to identify the extent of graves within the cemetery and ultimately create a well-maintained lawn cemetery. They also carried out extensive research into the history of the cemetery and those known to be buried there, which was collated into a single volume (Findlay et al 2015). The task of identifying the locations of unmarked graves, and in particular those suspected to be outside the cemetery fence, proved to be problematic as remote sensing options were too expensive for an unfunded community group,



Fig. 1.2. The location of Milton in South Otago



Fig. 1.3. The location of the St. John's Cemetery on Back Road near Milton (NZTopo50 CF15 Milton, Toitū Te Whenua Land Information New Zealand).

and the results of such surveys can be equivocal without some degree of ground-truthing (i.e. confirmation of the results by excavation).

To address this issue the group contacted Dr Petchey and Professor Buckley to seek assistance in defining the

actual cemetery boundary and finding 'lost' graves using archaeological methods. The outcome was a collaboration between the descendant community group and academic researchers that provided an opportunity to investigate an early farming community from archaeological, bioarchaeological and social history perspectives.



Fig. 1.4. The St. Johns Cemetery seen from Back Road in 2016.



Fig. 1.5. Some of the gravestones in the St. John's Cemetery in 2016. No marked graves were investigated during the archaeological excavations.

After extensive public consultation, an archaeological authority (No. 2017/171) from Heritage New Zealand and a disinterment licence (No. 17-2016/17) from the Ministry of Health were obtained, and the Anglican Church (still the landowner) gave its permission for the disinterments. The archaeological excavation of part of the cemetery took place between 28 November and 16 December 2016. The excavation was preceded by a brief blessing by Bishop Kelvin Wright and whakawātea by Rachel Wesley (Te Rūnanga o Ōtākou Ngāi Tahu) on 27 November, and closed by a blessing by the local Vicar, Rev. Vivienne Galletly, on 16 December. Each time a new burial was found (generally at the point where the top of the coffin was identified) Rev. Galletly gave a brief service at the graveside. In cases where individuals were not exhumed (generally due to very poor bone preservation) Rev. Galletly gave a burial service prior to the grave being backfilled. The traditional Anglican burial service, as these people would have known it was used (all burials that we could date were from the 1870s).