

a ride in the darkness

Ann Shelton, 2010

The controversy over 'wastelands' in New Zealand's colonial history was borne out of divergent interpretations of second article of the Te Tiriti O Waitangi. Article two grants the chiefs and tribes of New Zealand full and unencumbered rights to their forests, land estates and fisheries.¹ Regardless of the clarity of this statement, debate raged in colonial New Zealand about the ownership of these lands. To many Pakeha at the time they were considered waste or wild lands, uncultivated and therefore of no value and part of the domain of the crown. After several years it was reluctantly ruled that these lands were Maori lands according to article two and must indeed be purchased from Maori. The crown, as per their right of pre-exemption had the first rights to purchase any of these lands that were for sale. Not without its own potential for manipulations, this pre exemption became the key to governmental control of land title.²

The photographs in this ongoing series take the notion of wastelands as a jumping off point to discuss European land occupation in early Aotearoa, New Zealand. Settlers and in other instances soldiers returning from The First World War were offered parcels of hinter-land for purchase, some of these were extremely isolated, unproductive and in some cases

¹ See Adams, P. (1977) *Fatal Necessity: British Intervention in New Zealand 1830-47*, Auckland University Press.

² Ibid

downright deadly. They held in their promise for a future the inherent possibility of failure. “a ride in the darkness” looks at the social context of this particular use of land and takes this contested ground as a jumping of point for a discussion of these narratives in context. Towns like Arawhata, Mangapurua and Martins Bay are extreme examples of this attempt to tame lands that are isolated and extremely difficult to access.

As with much of Shelton’s work these are wide and seemingly empty vistas of place. They use an empty image as a kind of index to a presence or narrative. Testimonial in part they point a viewer to a loaded nothingness which one attempts to fill. Shelton is interested in obscured or lost discourses, little-known histories, urban mythology and the many displaced narratives that circulate in relation to a given place. This recent series in particular mark out the tensions, anxieties, and violence palpable in the histories of these so-called ‘wastelands’.
