

ITALIAN SETTLERS IN JACKSON'S BAY SPECIAL SETTLEMENT, NEW ZEALAND 1875-1879 — GOVERNMENT WRONG EXPECTATIONS AND ETHNIC STEREOTYPES

by Adriano Boncompagni

The author has recently completed a PhD on the emigration of people from Tuscany to Australia at the University of Western Australia, Department of Geography. Prior to his settlement in Australia, Boncompagni gained an Arts degree majoring in Historic Geography at the University of Florence.

The aim of this essay is to look into the reasons for the failure of the New Zealand Special Settlement of Jackson's Bay, South Island, established in 1875 and which continued to function until the late 1870s.

Historians Hargreaves and Hearn ascribed the failure mainly to the mixture of nationalities of the settlers — and their incapability to communicate with each other — as 'an obvious breeding ground for discontent',¹ although they acknowledged that the government choice of the geographic area for the settlement was taken without regard to the inhospitable environments and their economic base. Literature available for the period stresses the circumstance of the presence of some Italians in Jackson's Bay as one of the major reasons for the decay of the settlement, although the examination of the Appendices of the Journal of House of Representatives (AJHR from now on) suggests a different interpretation.

In the late 1860s, the gold fields that had attracted many European miners to New Zealand, became less productive.² Together with the wool production industry, gold had been an important source of income for New Zealand. By the 1870s, the gold boom was over, while, at the same time, the rate of growth of the sheep stock was diminishing. Many miners and prospectors had left New Zealand by May 1867, so that the Colony faced economic stagnation. In order to address these circumstances, the new Premier, Sir Julius Vogel, carried out a wide scale programme to provide new ways of expanding the size of the country's economy. His policy resulted in a combination of government and private borrowings to facilitate the expansion of immigration, providing large public infrastructures in transport and converting more land into pastures. A long term development plan of public works and immigration was 'aimed at reviving the flagging economy'.³

With the establishment of the 'Immigration and Public Works Act', Vogel allocated considerable

funds to assist migrants by paying their passage to New Zealand, while selected agents were sent overseas — mainly to Europe — in order to induce prospective workers to migrate. In addition, the Minister financed a study to identify within the country isolated areas suitable to promote as immigrant settlements, and to be known as 'special settlements'. Such settlements were intended to encourage the economic development of areas less profitable because of their geographic position and, at the same time, to maintain control over a significant number of foreign workers. It was an ambitious political plan that, between 1873 and 1879, brought over 100,000 new settlers to New Zealand.⁴

Table 1 — Nationality of Immigrants to New Zealand 1873-1879 (Derived from AJHR, 1880, D3, 'Immigration Returns')

English	51103	50.97%
Irish	24895	24.83%
Scots	16711	16.67%
French	284	0.28%
Germans	3034	3.03%
Danes	1953	1.95%
Swedes	686	0.68%
Norwegians	703	0.70%
Italians	312	0.31%
Others	582	0.58%
Total	100263	100.00%

However, the number of Italian workers who reached New Zealand under this immigration policy was small, according to the 'Immigration Returns' tables published in the Appendices of JHR from 1873 to 1879: they increased from a few dozen in 1874 to 312 in 1878 (see Table 1), while during the same years the total population of New Zealand rose from 344,985 to 458,007.⁵

Geographically, the countries to which the New Zealand Government chose to send agents were those with a surplus of labour during mid-nineteenth century, such as England, Scotland, Sweden, Norway, Switzerland and Italy. The Italian agent, one John Glynn, an Englishman long resident in Italy,⁶ was established in Leghorn, a port town on the Tuscan coast of Central Italy. His task was to recruit peasant manpower from inland Tuscany to send to the German harbour of Hamburg to be embarked for New Zealand. Hamburg and Bremen were, in fact, the only ports (outside of Great Britain) of direct embarkation for the Colony: the prospective emigrants had to reach Hamburg during the months between May and November, a few days before the usual scheduled departure of the ships. The passage would take from 70 to 100 days.⁷

Contrary to expectations, the job of Mr Glynn was not easy. Just a decade after the unification of Italy, central Italian rural conditions included a widespread sharecropping agrarian system that offered a decent continuity of food supply in the Tuscan region. Consequently, the prospective migrants for New Zealand were those 'excluded' from this Tuscan economic pattern, such as unemployed wage earners and farm hands, as well as the representatives of the newly-born urban proletariat: semi-skilled craftsmen and labourers.⁸

As recorded in the Parliamentary debate:

From Switzerland and Italy many emigrants could be produced, but the people are also poor and not many can raise the heavy coast [sic] of the journey to Hamburg. The Italians are the best railway labourers on the Continent. My Italian agents state that they can supply several hundred navvies.⁹

The reputation of the Italians as good railway labourers has its explanation. Italy had arrived at its political unification in 1860, but the social and economic conditions of the country were still those of a very poor country. Since the 1870s, many thousands of Italian workers had begun to migrate to Northern European countries, where they were employed in urban areas in industrial activities and the construction of the railway system.¹⁰

With regard to the New Zealand settlement of Jackson's Bay on the south western coast of the South Island, the government reports were quite clear:

Some Shetlanders would be suitable immigrants, as there is an abundance of fish on the coast. My attention has also been drawn to the fact that a number of Pomeranians can be obtained, and would be specially suited for such a settlement. No special knowledge is required, but active energetic men.¹¹

As well as being an isolated area, Jackson's Bay was chosen as a 'special settlement' because the gold rushes of the 1860s had brought hundreds of miners to the Haast River region, thereby giving a new importance to the whole area.¹² The intent of such a choice was therefore probably to revitalize the area, which was considered, together with a few others in the South Island as a very secluded one.¹³

The bay has been described as a 'gloomy country, silent, desolate and dreary'.¹⁴ Close to the Alps that run as a backbone all through the South Island, Jackson's Bay had remained wilderness for the whole of the nineteenth century, with a thick subtropical forest that bordered the beaches and formed swamps, in a continental-like climatic environment, characterised by year-round heavy rains.¹⁵ Although the area had seen the presence of a few miners in the previous decades, neither roads nor other infrastructure had been built before the coming of the settlers in the mid-1870s,¹⁶ while the coast had only been sporadically reached by sealers.¹⁷

Few government surveyors had explored the bay, as requested by Vogel.¹⁸ The surveyors thought Jackson's Bay would be suitable for such a special settlement, because of the fertile soil of the area, although probably they minimised the time necessary for the reclamation of the swampy coastal strip. Surveyors and government officers acted like many promoters of immigration to New Zealand had done in the previous decades with prospective migrants from Britain and Continental Europe: they had measured the fertility of the soil in terms of the height and growth of the vegetation.¹⁹ The luxuriance and the size were seen as evidence of the fertility and richness of the land; an assessment that probably was only based on the visual appearance of the vegetation cover. Wrong assessments and expectations that were so common in the first period of European settlement of New Zealand,²⁰ were repeated by Vogel's agents. These mistaken perceptions of the area may be seen as the primary cause of the failure of Jackson's Bay special settlement in the years to come.

The whole area, approximately 30 km long and 5km wide, would have been easily cultivated: 'What I have seen is sufficient to justify my stating that the bulk of this land will prove very stable for farming'.²¹

Also:

Very excellent land is to be found along the banks of all these rivers. Report speaks of Jackson's Bay in the best terms as a good fishing-ground. The anchorage[s] in Jackson's Bay are perfectly safe for shipping.²²

Officially included in Vogel's special settlement plans in 1871, Jackson's Bay was divided in lots in the first months of 1875, although it was still to be reclaimed and made arable. The first settlers began to arrive within weeks. The reports of the government agent of Jackson's Bay are obviously marked by optimism:

I am pleased to report that the majority of the settlers are going into the business of settling with considerable spirit, and I anticipate that by next harvest we shall be able to show good returns.²³

The tasks would have been heavy for the first settlers: deforesting, ploughing, building dwellings, planning a road network and a wharf to load for the markets the future products of the land and logging.

Meantime, the agent Glynn in Leghorn had been able to gather a considerable number of Italian workers as prospective emigrants for New Zealand.²⁴ However, something was already going wrong, since some of them, even before reaching New Zealand, had pleaded with the Italian Consul in Melbourne — where the ship had stopped — to be sent back to Italy. Some Italian workers were disappointed with wage expectations, which, as they discovered on board, were different from those Mr Glynn had promised them.²⁵ The General Agent of Immigration in Europe himself criticised Glynn's behaviour: '... the prospects held out by Mr Glynn were no doubt to a certain extent exaggerated...'.²⁶

Nevertheless, New Zealand immigration officers began to revise their opinion of Italians, no longer believing them to be hard workers but promoters of trouble and disputes:

The Government have [sic] however stopped Italian immigration, finding the great difficulty of obtaining persons of a suitable class ... [some are] unwilling or physically incapable of performing the work required in the colony.²⁷

Notwithstanding this, a group of about a dozen Italian families and single men — approximately forty altogether — reached Jackson's Bay in mid-1876.²⁸ There were fifteen men, seven women and fifteen children.

Table 2 — Nationality of Settlers in Jackson's Bay and their composition. (Based on AJHR, 1879, H9A 'Names of Settlers at Jackson's Bay', pp. 73-74)

	Men	%	Women	Children	Total	%
English	28	21.05%	10	19	57	16.72%
Irish	13	9.77%	4	10	27	7.92%
Scots	18	13.53%	9	23	50	14.66%
Germans	35	26.32%	27	61	123	36.07%
Danes	9	6.77%	1	4	14	4.11%
Swedes	5	3.76%		3	8	2.35%
Norwegians	1	0.75%	1	3	5	1.47%
Italians	15	11.28%	7	15	37	10.85%
Canadians	3	2.26%	1	4	8	2.35%
Prussians	1	0.75%			1	0.29%
Victorians (AUS)	4	3.01%	1	4	9	2.64%
New Zealand	1	0.75%	1		2	0.59%
TOTAL	133	100%	62	146	341	100%

The Italians came mainly from Tuscany: there were several couples from the Leghorn area, a number of Florentine peasants and a smaller group of farm hands from the Pistoia Apennines not far from Florence.²⁹ They joined a considerable number of other settlers (around 300) coming from England, Scotland, Germany and Scandinavian countries³⁰ (see also Table 2).

The Italian group kept together and chose a peripheral area of Jackson's Bay, at the mouth of the Okuru River.³¹ Although disappointed about wages and weather — July is full winter and, in the Westland, rains are incessant — the small Italian community was employed in deforesting and in the construction of a coastal road and the jetty.³²

In 1877 the report to Parliament of the Resident Agent for the Government was still optimistic and reflected the expectations about the future of the settlement:

The Italian settlers are looking forward to be able to grow grapes [sic] and other fruit, as well as being anxious to secure a number of mulberry trees, so as to enable them to engage in sericulture. They appear to be satisfied that several varieties of the grape will thrive here and ripen, and I am sure that all our home fruits will produce abundantly.³³

The reality was slightly different from the report. If we compare the monthly work tables of each settler of Jackson's Bay for the period 1876-1878, we can deduce that the average employment of each adult Italian had never been more than an average six months per year, with low points of two months and high peaks of nine months. This was insufficient to support the large families of the immigrants.³⁴

The earlier wrong assessment of the fertility of the soils came out with the first crops. Despite all the optimistic forecasts, the first potato crop was lost because of the heavy rains.³⁵ Signs of failure of the settlement can also be found in the rare correspondence between some Italian settlers and other Italians who had migrated elsewhere. Pietro Tofanari, a 35 year old Florentine, who wrote:

We live very badly. There is scarcely anything left in the government store. We have had plenty of rain. Dear Ferdinando, the beginning I find very bad in this bushy bushy country.³⁶

Another Italian, Carlo Turchi, 44, who, with his wife and seven children, a few years later settled in New Plymouth wrote: '... we had floods and the water was about three feet deep in our tent.'³⁷

The sworn declarations made by another Italian testifying in front of the Commission, appointed in 1879 to investigate the failure of the settlement, revealed the difficulties which many settlers faced in Jackson's Bay. Aristodemo Franchi, a 40 year-old Tuscan peasant with wife and three children, who later moved to Wellington, declared:

I have been here three years next July. We all came together — Fortunato Lucchesi, Calamai Egisto and myself. We prefer to leave because we do not see any possibility of obtaining a livelihood. The soil we believe to be good, but we do not see that we can cultivate it with profit. I do not consider that any quantity of employment I could get would be sufficient to support myself and my large family.³⁸

The Officer for Immigration in Wellington wrote to the Minister Sir Julius Vogel in 1877:

B ... tells me that he has heard from Leghorn that the workmen in the arsenal are giving two or three hours every Sunday morning to build a vessel which they intend sending to New Zealand to take home any of their countrymen who are destitute'.³⁹

Apart from this statement, which probably was just a rumour, the report reveals the discontent

of the Italians as well as of the whole community of Jackson's Bay. Some thought that one reason for such discontent and, later on, for the failure of the Jackson's Bay special settlement, was the cocktail of too many ethnic groups, often incapable of understanding each other or the government officers.⁴⁰ The ethnic factor might have played its role, although the major components of the settlement were English, Scots, Irish, Germans and Scandinavians. A major reason is related to the irresponsible manner in which the Government went about planning the settlement. Forecasts on the settlement's development were too optimistic and unrealistic. The government officers had put unlimited confidence in the settlers' ability to exploit the soil, without much environmental and climatic awareness, although the annual rainfall for the period 1875-1879 was the highest of the whole nineteenth century.

The agents had foreseen a development in crop and log production, but, on the other hand, they had never actually investigated the possibility of the building of a wharf in the shallow waters of the bay, which would have harboured ships to carry the products to market. Two schools and a church were built, but no doctor settled permanently in Jackson's Bay, so that the settlement had an extremely high rate of infant mortality.

In addition, in the late 1870s, the strong economic recession pushed the Government to abandon its immigration policy. The New Zealand economy was saturated with debts. Vogel resigned as Premier and consequently there was a deterioration in the management of the special settlements. Meanwhile, the government officers in Jackson's Bay began to look at the Italians in a different way:

These people have evidently been led to expect too much of the good things of this life. They objected to eating salt beef, to getting their feet wet. The few unreasonable ones among the Italians have evidently seen the error of their ways, and I do not anticipate any further trouble with them, but rather look forward to their proving themselves settlers of the proper stamp.⁴¹

Somehow, the Italians in Jackson's Bay became scapegoats for the failure of the government's policy. The Resident Agent in the bay wrote his 1878 annual report to the House of Representatives:

With regard to the Italians, I'm sorry to say my experience with the majority of them has

been anything but satisfactory: the same want of knowledge, the same lack of resource, but possessing far less of the will to work which characterises the others: there is too much of the *dolce far niente* spirit about them ever to become successful settlers. Their unfitness to act as pioneers of settlement may be ascribed to climatic influences, or to their previous habits of life; at any rate, they have not been a success in this district.⁴²

In a political and social context dominated by a nineteenth-century Victorian attitude, we can easily detect a perception of the 'other', in this case the 'dark' Mediterranean ethnic pattern represented by the Italians, as a threat to the British and Colonial institutions. It is worth mentioning that in those years of economic crisis, the Government issued the 'Chinese Immigrants Act' (1881) which restricted the entry of coloured immigrants to the Colony.⁴³

Jackson's Bay special settlement was doomed. In 1879, Italians, as well as Germans and a considerable number of Scandinavians, left the settlement. The number of settlers dropped from almost 400 in 1878 to 160 in 1881.⁴⁴ Some of the Italians returned to their home country, while most of them settled in Christchurch and Wellington, concentrating on cropping and fishing activities. This occupational trend underlines the unfairness of the judgement of the Government officers about the 'unsuitability' of the Italians for activities such as farming and fishing.

The Government opened an inquiry to investigate the failure of the settlement and to identify the responsibilities. After much investigation, taking the declarations of settlers and special reports, the Commission arrived at a final verdict in which the blame related to the government officers' behaviour is minimised, while major charges are made against single officers of the settlement, such as the manager of the government store.⁴⁵ In addition, the Commission reported that the end of the settlement was also due to unspecified 'enemies [sic] of the settlement who did not desire its success, and who by constant disparagement... have contributed something to its failure'.⁴⁶

Although the Italians constituted about 10 per cent of settlers at Jackson's Bay, they were singled out as the principal authors of the failure, while the officers stressed once again the suitability of a more reliable and strong British ethnic group:

A large number of the Okuru settlers were Italians, and we think their unfitness for the work and the life was to some extent the cause of the abandonment of the place. We do not think that the Italian settlers at Okuru were the class of men best fitted for the work of settlement in such a locality. We believe that British colonialists would have been less easily discouraged, and would have been far more likely to persevere with the undertaking. A careful selection of British and, perhaps, Germans settlers should have been made, and had this been done we think the failure of the scheme would have been far less signal.⁴⁷

In the geographically and historically specific context of Jackson's Bay, the 'others' were the Italians and, once the collapse of the settlement was evident, the attempt was to obliterate their 'trangeness'⁴⁸, as if they were the major cause of the failure, which should be ascribed solely to the government's unrealistic expectations of success of the special settlement.

NOTES

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- ¹⁸ *ibid*
- ¹⁹ J.A. Johnston, 'Image and reality: Initial Assessment of Soil Fertility in New Zealand 1839-55', *Australian Geographer*, Vol. 14, 1979, pp. 160-166 and 'The New Zealand Bush. Early Assessment of Vegetation', *New Zealand Geographer*, Vol.37, 1981, pp. 19-24.
- ²⁰ *ibid*, 1979.
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- ²³ *ibid*, p. 19.
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- ²⁶ AJHR, 1876, D1, p. 16.
- ²⁷ *ibid*

- ²⁸ AJHR, 1876, H9b, pp. 2-15.
- ²⁹ Register of Aliens, Minister of Immigration, Wellington, 1917.
- ³⁰ AJHR, 1877, H28.
- ³¹ *ibid*.
- ³² AJHR, 1879, H9b, pp. 2-15.
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- ³⁴ AJHR, 1879, H9a.
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- ³⁶ *ibid*.
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- ⁴² AJHR, 1878, D6a, pp. 5-6.
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- ⁴⁴ R.P. Hargreaves and T.J. Heran op. cit.
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- ⁴⁶ AJHR, 1879, H9, p. 12.
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Verzeichniss

der Personen, welche mit dem *Hamburges Dampf-Schiffe* unter *Deutscher* Flagge, Capitain *Boyer* nach *Neuseeland* zur Auswanderung durch Unterzeichnete engagirt sind.

R. P. H. Reuter

Abgang des Schiffes, d. 12 April 1876

N. 19
11/476

Nr.	Die an einer Familie gehörenden Personen sind unter einander zu notiren und durch eine Klammer als zusammengehörig zu bezeichnen.		Geschlecht		Alter.	Bisheriger Wohnort.	Im Staate oder in der Provinz.	Bisheriger Stand oder Berof.	Ziel der Auswanderung, Ort und Land (wo angegeben).	Zahl der Personen	Davon sind		
	Zuname.	Vorname.	weiblich	männlich							Fremdsprache und Kinder über 10 Jahre	weir 10 Jahre	weir 1 Jahr
1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.	9.	10.	11.	12.		
1	Küttel	Louise Loui	1	29	Christiana	Hamburg				1	1		
2	Larsen	Henr. P.	1	29						1	1		
3	Milner	Anna	1	22						1	1		
4	Pedersen	Augusta C.	1	17						1	1		
5	Olson	Hans Peter	1	53			Arbeiter			1	1		
6	Samundsen	Andreas	1	22						1	1		
7	Stenberg	Ulrich P.	1	19						1	1		
8	Stenberg	Lars Olav	1	20						1	1		
9	Tennison	Carl H.	1	19						1	1		
10	Andersen	Nicolai	1	24						1	1		
11	Sunderen	Niel	1	25			Arbeiter			1	1		
12		Boyehald	1	44			Arbeiter			1	1		