

S. C. BREES, ARTIST AND SURVEYOR

I AN HISTORICAL RECONNAISSANCE

Reproductions of the Melville engravings of early Wellington from the sketches of Samuel Charles Brees have long been familiar to the most casual student of early Wellington. The publication of the Avon Fine Prints reproduction of the Library's hand-coloured copy of S. C. Brees's *Pictorial Illustrations of New Zealand*¹ seems an appropriate occasion for a more careful examination of the background to Brees's work, and the book itself and its various issues as well as the sequel, the *Guide and description of the Panorama of New Zealand*. One can only as yet say hopefully 'more careful', for, apart from limitations of time and domicile, there are still many basic facts which are unknown to us. One feels that there must still be letters and sketches – to fill out the small groups of originals obtained by the Library some sixteen years ago. We know that Brees's diaries unfortunately were destroyed many years ago on the express wish of his niece.

Our sources for the three-and-a-quarter years – February 1842 until May 1845 – which he spent here are in the main the *Pictorial Illustrations* . . . themselves, the New Zealand Company records of his service and official correspondence in the National Archives² in original or on microfilm, and lastly his very rare, almost nostalgically presented epitaph to his antipodean experiences *A key to the Colonies* published in 1851. To these we can add only scattered references in the Wellington newspapers and the still more infrequent comments in the letters and journals of contemporaries. And when all this has been examined we have to admit that Brees the man still eludes us. Why a seemingly successful railway engineer at a period when railway development in England was at its height should have elected to have come to New Zealand – with wife, three children and servant is more difficult to answer than to explain why with wife, four children and servant he should have returned. The expiration of the contract, curiosity about the Company's fairest hope satisfied, frustration or disappointment – we traverse some of the evidence for all these, but without certitude.

What we know of his early life before his migration to New Zealand at the age of 31 is based almost wholly on inference from his testimonials. At the moment we cannot be more specific about his family and education than to repeat the fact from earlier chroniclers that he was born in the United Kingdom in 1810. Appended to the eight testimonials³ submitted in support of his application to the Company on 20 February 1841, is a record of the award of a Gold Medallion of the Society of Arts in 1829–30 'For an original design for a village church . . .' And from the probability that this interest would be