

Artists of the Hobson Album, 1: Edward Ashworth, 1814-1896

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Preparations for the 1940 centenary of British annexation brought into organised focus a sense of the value of New Zealand history and its records. The Under Secretary of Internal Affairs, Joseph Heenan, was a man of exceptional wisdom, enthusiasm and drive. Under his direction a Centennial Branch and an advisory committee were set up and Eric McCormick was appointed editor of centennial publications. Work on an historical atlas was begun. Regional and subject histories were planned and through W.J. Jordan, High Commissioner in London, the return to New Zealand of the visual and verbal documents of our history was actively sought.

The Rendel family, only descendants of William and Eliza Hobson, responded with the donation of letters and a large album which proved to be the single most important visual record of the northern and central landscape of the North Island and the customs of its Maori people during the first three years of British occupation. This album had been presented to Mrs Hobson by her friends in June 1843 when she and her five children left Auckland, nine months after the death of her husband, the first governor. We do not know for certain whether she took the album with her or left it to be completed and brought to her in Plymouth, in 1845, a date inscribed on one of the last drawings. Nor, on looking at the album, was it possible to attribute the work to known artists or writers. Only five drawings had either initials or signatures. These problems of attribution, with background history and catalogue notes, will be presented with the facsimile of Mrs Hobson's Album, edited by Elsie Locke and Janet Paul, which is to be published this year by the Government Printer and the Alexander Turnbull Library Endowment Trust.

It is now possible to name the contributors and to suppose that the impulse to collate such an album may have come from the young architect Edward Ashworth who, from late November 1842, acted as tutor to Mrs Hobson's two elder children. The sepia frontispiece to the Album is the work of Edward Ashworth, as are two watercolour paintings of Government House and two Auckland landscapes done from its vicinity. The other identified contributors to Mrs Hobson's Album are B. Connell, Wiremu