

## ‘Making us one’: courtship and marriage in colonial New Zealand

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Poets, novelists and playwrights have for centuries regarded love as the quintessential human emotion, the most commanding and demanding of all the subjects they could deal with. Historians have been much more cautious in engaging with such a topic. Love, its encounters and summations, neither seemed appropriate nor amenable to historical analysis and discourse. This has recently changed. Historians, too, largely under the stimulus of family and women’s history, are daring to explore the realm of the emotions. They are beginning to understand what women and men have meant when they have written and talked of love, beginning to chart the processes by which women and men meet and commit themselves to life together.<sup>1</sup>

For women in nineteenth-century New Zealand courtship and marriage was a more common experience than in England at the same time, yet it is an experience we know very little about.<sup>2</sup> Did the migrant women of the time follow women in other western countries, insisting on love as a pre-requisite to marriage and demanding autonomy in their choice of partner? Was the experience different for young women born in New Zealand? Did colonial conditions bring men and women together in a more equal *personal* relationship as has often been suggested?<sup>3</sup> These questions, and many others, about the relations between men and women in the nineteenth century remain to be answered. The following material is presented as one example of courtship and marriage which, by its very detail, provides us with some clues as to the nature of these all-important events and perhaps indicates where future work should be carried out.

We often enter into a small world when studying personal relations. The scenes are local, the movements sometimes barely perceptible, the action often domestic. But the emotions can be intense and the tragedy, or joy, overwhelming. The personal life can spill over into the public arena and the public life has a powerful potential for shaping the private. This was the case in the courtship and marriage of Susan Strang and Donald McLean. Their courtship was lengthy and their marriage brief. It is our good fortune that they left behind a rich store of letters which, although they do not