

CITY AT THE CENTRE

A city on a plain: the eastern portion of Palmerston North, showing the city's relationship with the Manawatū River and its problematic 'Fitzroy Bend', historically prone to flooding. Steve Bicknell



# CITY AT THE CENTRE

A History of Palmerston North

Tini whetū ki te rangi,  
take rau tāngata ki te whenua

EDITED BY

Margaret Tennant, Geoff Watson and Kerry Taylor



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*This book is dedicated to historian and archivist  
Ian Roderick Matheson (1946–2002)*

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*Tini whetū ki te rangi, take rau tāngata ki te whenua*  
*As there are stars in the sky there are issues on the land*

The title page of the book incorporates the well-known Rangitāne whakatauki (proverb) ‘Tini whetū ki te rangi, ko Rangitāne ki te whenua’, comparing the myriad stars in the sky with the multitudes of Rangitāne people on the land.

This acknowledges both Rangitāne’s place as tangata whenua and the many take (issues) discussed in the following chapters.

OPPOSITE Robert Jahnke’s *Ngā Huru*  
*Rangitira* frames the entrance to Te Marae o Hine,  
looking towards the statue of Te Peeti Te Aweawe.  
Leith Haarhoff, Manawatū Heritage COMM1481682432



The Palmerston North Borough Council 1921–23 and senior staff, all male. From left: Cr Frederick Needham, Cr Frederick Jackson, Cr Meldrum Elliot, Cr Stephen Lancaster, Arthur Spilman (abattoir manager), Roy Jordan (assistant town clerk), James Hardie (town clerk), Peter Black (curator of parks and reserves), Mayor James Nash, John Hughes (borough engineer), Edward Rabbidge (gas manager), George Healey (assistant gas manager), Cr Matthew Oram, Cr Archibald Graham, Cr Charles Spooner, Cr Ernst West, Cr Henry Canton. *Manawatū Heritage* 2010N\_Cc5\_3329



# FOREWORD

This jubilee snapshot of Palmerston North marking 150 years of urban development is a wonderful achievement and a welcome addition to understanding and appreciating the city's origins and its subsequent development.

Rangitāne, the region's mana whenua, first settled here some 400 years ago, so why pick 1871 as our foundation year? It was in 1871 that the small North Island settlement of Palmerston — population around 200 — acquired a distinctive new label for having added the word 'North' to its name. For convenience, the settlement needed distinguishing from its South Island counterpart, inadvertently gifting us the longest English name of any urban centre in New Zealand. It was also the year that the first Scandinavian immigrants arrived, having sailed to New Zealand aboard the *Celaeno* to work as sawmillers, road builders, railway workers and farmers.

That year, George and Louisa Snelson, 'the Father and Mother of Palmerston North', opened the first store on The Square. As postmaster, George Snelson was the settlement's first registrar of births, deaths and marriages, and became Palmerston North's first mayor when the town gained borough status in 1877.

In 1871 came the first boarding house and establishment of the first factory — a sawmill powered by the town's first steam engine. Also arriving that year to the natural 400-hectare Papaiōea clearing in the forest were the settlement's first blacksmith, brewer and butcher; and its first cabinetmaker, carpenter, doctor, shoemaker, tailor and wheelwright. Within a remarkably short period those early foundations of urban life subsequently attracted a school, a newspaper, telegraph connections, more roads and a railway, and by 1877 Palmerston North had a population of 800.

An October 1871 edition of the *Wellington Independent* newspaper prophetically observed that "Go-ahead Palmerston" will be our motto, I trust for some time to come'. It's fitting then, 150 years later, that Palmerston North can still be characterised by its 'go-ahead' opportunities and attitudes. With its diverse economic base, it is poised and predicted to continue growing both in size and stature as a city of significance.

Always a major transport hub and farming centre, the city has become a focus for

logistics, higher education, agri-tech and agri-commerce, food science and research, manufacturing, health and defence. We are a thriving, progressive, multinational, multicultural boutique city, small by international standards but with big ambitions. We are well furnished with amenities, well served by infrastructure and facilities and, at the pivot-point of the lower North Island, well placed for expansion.

As the twenty-ninth mayor of Palmerston North, I wholeheartedly endorse 150 years of progress thanks to the invaluable partnerships established between council, communities, organisations, companies, institutions and central government.

But it has been the city's special and deep relationship with Rangitāne that has helped Palmerston North establish and prosper. From early days of friendship and trading to embracing Christianity and, more recently, development opportunities, Rangitāne have always been welcoming and have shared Palmerston North — Te Papaiōea — with us all.

I thoroughly commend the work that has gone into researching our story, making its various strands accessible, and bringing our past to life in such a comprehensive and readable way. In 50 years' time — 2070 — future historians will have added their interpretations to our rich and varied narrative.

As with the city's progress, those future reflections will be something for upcoming generations to look forward to.

Ngā mihi

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Grant Smith', with a stylized flourish at the end.

Grant Smith  
Mayor of Palmerston North



More diverse than its 1921–23 counterpart, the Palmerston North City Council elected in 2019 poses on the bridge over the butterfly lake in The Square. From left: Cr Zulfiqar Butt, Cr Renee Dingwall, Cr Rachel Bowen, Cr Lorna Johnson, Cr Karen Naylor, Cr Billy Meehan, Cr Leonie Hapeta, Cr Susan Baty, Deputy Mayor Tangi Utikere, Mayor Grant Smith, Cr Aleisha Rutherford, Cr Pat Handcock, Cr Bruno Petrenas, Cr Brent Barrett, Cr Lew Findlay, Cr Vaughan Dennison.  
Palmerston North City Council





# 01 STORIES OF A CITY

MARGARET  
TENNANT  
& GEOFF  
WATSON

The city celebrates an anniversary: the arrival by canoe of Louisa Snelson and her ward, Mathilda Montgomery. Their welcome at the riverbank by George Snelson (later the town's first mayor) was re-enacted on 13 March 1971, with city councillor Ken Wynks playing Snelson. The Māori welcome party in the background included representatives of Rangitāne. The *Evening Standard* reported that 'Palmerstonians seemed to shed their traditionally conservative cloaks of inhibition and joined in the celebrations with abandon.' Manawatū Heritage  
2011P\_J35\_004840

‘Owing to its central position, its splendid means of communication, and the constant influx of strangers, Palmerston North has become an extremely cosmopolitan town. It has escaped the narrowness of thought and action which is begotten of isolation, and the newcomer who desires to cast in his lot with its inhabitants, will find them willing to extend to him a hearty welcome and a fair field for his energies.’<sup>1</sup>

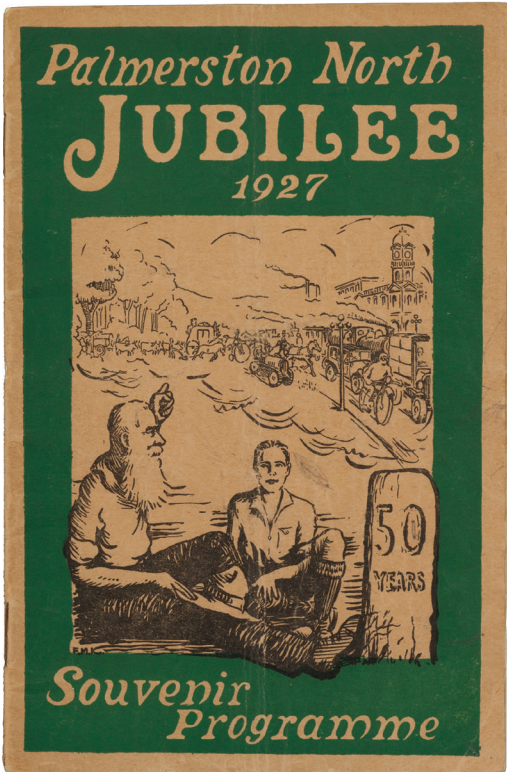
Written in 1903, Lindsay Buick’s penultimate paragraph of *Old Manawatu* encapsulates many key features of Palmerston North’s past history and present aspirations. In an area initially settled by Rangitāne, Palmerston North has become home to peoples from many parts of the world. In this book we seek to explain why people chose to come to Palmerston North, and what they did when they were here: where they worked, how they played, who they chose to lead them, how they were schooled, the organisations they formed, and the ways in which they changed the environment and the environment changed them.

Palmerston North is a provincial, inland city with a university and a military base, and with strong links to its rural hinterland. It is a city which was part of a second phase of urban formations in New Zealand — occasionally subject to the condescension of its older counterparts and to apology from its own inhabitants — but which now proudly promotes its ‘Small City Benefits, Big City Ambition’. Palmerston North offers a testing ground for historical generalisations derived largely from the four main centres, leavened by its own particularities — of time and circumstances of human settlement; of environment and place. Its centrality and key role as a transport hub, first by rail and road, and then by air, inform the title of this volume and so much of Palmerston North’s development since colonial times.

Geography was part of Palmerston North’s naming, one part of its title locating it within New Zealand, the other linking it to an empire based in a far-distant part of the globe. Palmerston North, like Auckland and Wellington, was named after a British luminary long since forgotten by most of its residents. The third Viscount Palmerston was twice prime minister, dominating British foreign policy at the height of imperial power. He was famous enough in his time to inspire the naming of two New Zealand towns, so to



ABOVE A Māori pageant was the star event of the city's 1937 diamond jubilee, but other events were more focused on the struggles faced by European settlers. Winston Davis and Leslie Verry wrote a play, 'The Precious Years', about 60 years in the lives of the fictitious 'Priestleys of Palmerston', 'a family in whom are typified all those hardy adventurers who founded the city'. Manawatū Heritage 2014N\_T14\_009097



LEFT Anniversaries provided ample opportunity to tell stories about place and history, usually with an emphasis on Pākehā pioneers. The illustration on the programme for Palmerston North's fiftieth anniversary in 1927 shows the transmission of the foundation story from old to young, with a heavy emphasis on progress. Manawatū Heritage 2016Pa\_A175-20-1\_013140

reduce postal confusion the North Island settlement's name gained the prosaic geographical qualifier 'North' in 1871. If the overall effect is one of blandness, by the 1890s there was general relief that another, more striking though equally imperial, label had been avoided. In 1871 the two British explorers David Livingstone and Henry Morton Stanley met at Ujiji in what is now Tanzania. It was suggested at a public meeting soon after that Palmerston North be renamed in commemoration of the encounter.<sup>2</sup> The suggestion was not supported: the settlement then and later was not to be characterised by the exotic.

At various times there have been attempts to change the name to 'Manawatu', most prominently in 1895 when the borough council put forward the suggestion. Although this was rejected by the Minister of Lands because of its association with the wider district, 'Manawatu' continued to surface as a possible name, especially in the 1920s when Palmerston North was on the verge of becoming a city, and again in the late 1990s as a new millennium approached.<sup>3</sup> But by then 'Palmerston North' was so well embedded that the difficulties of change seemed greater than any antagonism to a lengthy and increasingly obscure name. There were always those who felt it a pity that a Māori term had not been adopted from the start, and 'Papaiōea',<sup>4</sup> the name of the original forest clearing on which Palmerston North was built, also came up at various times.<sup>5</sup> Confusion over its spelling and meaning made Papaiōea secondary to 'Manawatu' as an alternative, although Papaiōea was adopted by a number of local sports teams by the 1900s.<sup>6</sup> The borough, and then the city, remained 'Palmerston North'. The affectionate abbreviation 'Palmy' has even been utilised recently in official campaigns such as 'Palmy Proud'.

Palmerston North may have had what the *Manawatu Standard* termed a 'not very euphonious' name,<sup>7</sup> but this never held its leaders back when it came to promotion and puffery. Historians sometimes use the concept of 'urban biography' when they turn their attention to individual towns and cities.<sup>8</sup> The characteristics claimed for Palmerston North by booster politicians and, more recently, by public relations personnel, form part of what might be termed its 'autobiography', for they too involve forms of storytelling about place. Early in its existence the little settlement earned a reputation for progressivism, a label based largely on the borough's ambitious borrowing for development (involving a loan that, the newspaper of rival town Masterton noted, 'almost takes one's breath away').<sup>9</sup>

Many New Zealand towns were called the 'Chicago of New Zealand' at some point in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, but the label was especially bestowed on Palmerston North for its progressivism as well as its importance as a railway junction. The 1897 *Cyclopedia of New Zealand* used the term, seeing a parallel with the American city in the borough's annual agricultural show and weekly stock sales (the expansion of facilities for animal slaughter also giving weight to the claim).<sup>10</sup> Playing to a parliamentary audience, MP William Wood, a former mayor of the borough, noted in 1907 that letters were sometimes sent to 'the "Chicago of New Zealand" — viz., Palmerston North, the most progressive, prosperous, best laid-out, go-ahead, and up-to-date town in the Dominion',



when they were intended for that ‘dreary village’ known as Palmerston in the south.<sup>11</sup>

Local body politicians did not hold back on further external comparisons after the establishment of Massey College. In 1927 Mayor Archibald Graham foresaw Palmerston North becoming the ‘Cambridge of New Zealand’,<sup>12</sup> and in 1966 councillor Brian Elwood anticipated the city’s evolution into the ‘little Oxford of New Zealand’, if it could properly promote its image as a university city.<sup>13</sup> When a 1992 National Research Bureau study showed Palmerston North ahead of Hamilton, Wellington and Dunedin as the city with the strongest education and scientific research associations per capita, a new slogan was devised: ‘Get in the Know’, followed by the ‘Knowledge City’ branding which took the city into the early twenty-first century.<sup>14</sup> Subsequent assertions that Palmerston North was a ‘defence city’ were based on the economic contribution to the region of the Linton army camp and the nearby Ōhakea airbase, but this proved more contentious as a label.<sup>15</sup>

Identity was claimed through other slogans promoting the city to outsiders. Many of Palmerston North’s promotional materials have successfully focused on its role as a central transport hub, the ‘Crossroads of the North Island’.<sup>16</sup> When an outside publication like the *Auckland Weekly News* featured Palmerston North, it was with captions such as ‘Palmerston North: A Thriving Inland Town and Important Railway Centre of the North Island’ (1924).<sup>17</sup> In 1952 the city’s seventy-fifth anniversary publication pointed out how the entire railway system of the North Island converged on Palmerston North. It also extolled the ‘rural–urban cooperation exemplified in Palmerston North more strikingly than in larger centres where the tendency is to develop along lines more essentially secondary’. Manufacturers were assured Palmerston North offered ‘the twin possibilities of farm and factory in the prosperity of the district and of the nation’.<sup>18</sup>

Another promotional thread plugged Palmerston North’s ‘liveability’. A publication for the 1940 New Zealand centennial emphasised transport *and* liveability, showing how ‘All RAILWAYS HIGHWAYS AIRWAYS Lead you to PALMERSTON NORTH THE MODEL MODERN CITY’. After the inevitable image of the city fathers (all men in 1940), the lead photograph was of The Square, ‘this beauty spot within the bustle of competitive trade’, an inspiration to private citizens who had emulated its trees and ‘gorgeous profusion of seasonal flowers’: ‘Many of the streets are lined with flowering cherries, chestnuts, planes and other trees which provide a pleasing setting to the cool green of the street lawns.’ (There was little mention of native species, still seen in the 1940s as uncolourful past impediments to progress.)

The garden city motif was a common one from early twentieth-century urban contexts, a counter to wider views of cities as corrupt and crime-ridden.<sup>19</sup> Palmerston North was cautiously labelled ‘A Garden City of New Zealand’ in one publication from the 1960s, hardly a ringing claim to distinctiveness. The ‘Rose City’ logo devised in 1971–72 was a nod to the national rose trial grounds in the Esplanade, but this, too, was seen as insufficiently distinctive or progressive a decade later. Many of the representations of Palmerston North

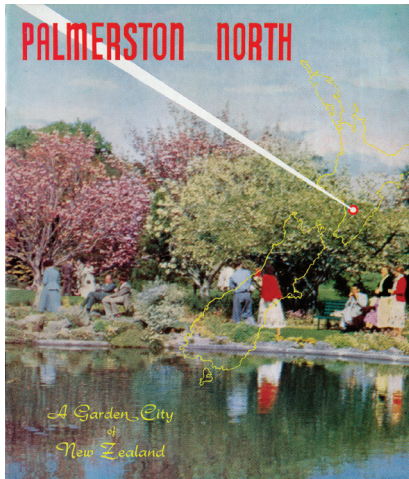
**You must  
come and see  
us too!**



RAILWAYS  
HIGHWAYS  
AIRWAYS

*Lead you to*

**PALMERSTON NORTH**  
THE MODEL MODERN CITY



OPPOSITE This 1940 pamphlet emphasised Palmerston North's centrality by road, rail and air, but also picked up on the notion of modernity — accompanied by a plea to visit. Author's collection

ABOVE LEFT Although the Public Relations Organisation picked up on the established idea of a garden city in the 1960s, this brochure was aimed at attracting industry to Palmerston North, and argued that the city offered most of the advantages, and none of the disadvantages, attached to a metropolis. Manawātū Heritage 2012Pa\_PNCC1-17-5\_006569a

ABOVE RIGHT This tea towel from the 1960s depicted many of the standard features of a large urban centre, including public parks, a clock tower, an art gallery and civic buildings, but also featured the newly built Lido swimming complex. Te Manawa Museum

in this period seem anodyne compared with the extravagant claims of an earlier era: a 1962 brochure advertised 'The City of Friendly Charm'. If a centre's qualities are captured, partly at least, by tea towels issued with its name, Palmerston North's attributes were not of a dynamic kind. 'The City of Space and Grace' said one, probably from the 1960s; 'A Pleasant Place is Palmerston North' indicated another.<sup>20</sup>

City planners added a quantitative take on Palmerston North's stories with a series of citizen surveys in the 1970s. In 1973, for example, respondents were asked to elaborate on what they considered to be the good features of the city. The largest number (40 per cent) said its physical and locational advantages, 35 per cent its 'environmental good points' — quietness, cleanliness and the fact that it was a 'good place to bring up children' — and 35 per cent its amenities; a disaffected 8 per cent said there were no good points. Asked about the 'irritating or disturbing' features of Palmerston North, the largest number (45 per cent) loyally said there were none, 10 per cent focused on traffic problems, and 11 per cent on 'fellow citizens & their attitudes', with specific mention being made of 'students', 'boring people', 'small town attitude' and the 'bikie/mongrel mob element' (this was the year after a major bikie contretemps in The Square, largely featuring outsiders). It was more problematic that 37 per cent were unable to think of any unique features that made the city different from elsewhere, and that those who could, focused on The Square and the Esplanade and gardens, longstanding city amenities.<sup>21</sup>

‘Pleasantville’ emerged as one of the more dismissive epithets directed at the city, a double-edged descriptor, depending on one’s stage of life. Like many provincial centres, Palmerston North had to cope with perceptions that it was boring for the young, at least compared with ‘bigger smokes’ such as Auckland and Wellington. And, in a country where the populace loves its sea and beaches and lakes, Palmerston North could suffer from its inland location. It was not located ‘astride the river’<sup>22</sup> in the way that Hamilton was, and although the Manawatū River had been a transport route in the past, by the mid-twentieth century it was often used as a dumping ground and quarry, and was perceived as a flood threat. Palmerstonians did not fully embrace the potential of the Manawatū until the twenty-first century, after expansion into the Aokautere area had shifted Palmerston North’s residential locus further south-east.

The Māori term ‘manawa’, meaning ‘heart’, and part of the river’s name, provided a basis for the ‘heartland’ label. From the 1950s this had given a more emotive slant to the notion of Palmerston North’s centrality.<sup>23</sup> In 2001, it was incorporated into a new slogan, ‘Young Heart, Easy Living’, the ‘young heart’ referring to the relatively young age profile of the city, with its student and army populations. As one of the slogan’s promoters recalled, ‘We talked to a lot of people from different clubs and the “Easy Living” was the obvious part because everyone was telling us [that] it’s five minutes to get to anything.’<sup>24</sup> Something of this quality was also captured in the 2017 vision of ‘Small City Benefits, Big City Ambition’, which was bolstered by video clips of people extolling the ease, affordability and flexibility of living in a small city.<sup>25</sup>

Council vision statements of the twenty-first century also acknowledged Rangitāne as the local iwi, and expressed an appreciation of Rangitāne support in the ongoing development of the city. The Māori history of the area had never been lost to tangata whenua, but it had featured little in the city’s twentieth-century promotions.<sup>26</sup> By the 1960s this history was sufficiently unsung for the important pā site Te Motu o Poutoa (also known as Anzac Park) to be flattened for a carpark. The 2019 opening of He Ara Kotahi, the bridge and pathway ‘that brings people together’, has, by way of contrast, brought Rangitāne history to a new audience: the much-viewed interpretive panels along the riverbank tell of villages, conflicts and relationships with the land and river, an important contribution to citizens’ sense of place.

The term ‘urban biography’ has already been mentioned, and it is an apt enough concept, for approaches to urban history can be as various as the stories told of human lives. Just as some biographies focus on childhood as the underpinning of adult actions, many of New Zealand’s urban histories are strongest on the foundation years of their subjects: Māori history has often been presented as a precursor to the colonial era and to Pākehā settlement, which generally attracted more attention than the twentieth century.

Palmerston North's 'childhood' has attracted far more coverage than its recent past. This was understandably the case in volumes such as Lindsay Buick's *Old Manawatu* (1903) and George Petersen's *The Pioneering Days of Palmerston North* (1952), for they were written when the nineteenth century was still within living memory. Even Petersen's expanded history for the 1971–72 centennial was published at a time when there were men and women who had direct experience of the colonial town. Written before the availability of online newspapers, and deserving of admiration for its tenaciously detailed research, the centennial history fades in coverage once it hits the 1930s. As well as providing important written material on tangata whenua of the area, Petersen featured the first Scandinavian immigrants to the 1870s township, as has a cluster of more recent publications by local historian Val Burr.<sup>27</sup>

The most significant twenty-first-century monograph on Palmerston North is Ian Matheson's *Council and Community* (2003). Brought to completion by Dorothy Pilkington, this work also has a particular focus, taking the city's history into the more recent past through the lens of local government — although, given both writers' deep immersion in the history of the Manawatū, it goes far

An example of Palmerston North push-back against external negativity. In 2005 British comedian John Cleese visited the city in 'grotty' weather and famously proclaimed it the 'suicide capital of New Zealand'.

Another comedian, Palmerston North-born John Clarke of 'Fred Dagg' fame, suggested renaming the Awapuni rubbish dump as the John Cleese Memorial Tip. In due course a good-humoured sign appeared labelling the landfill 'Mt Cleese'. A view of the sign in 2019, appropriately embellished by lichen.

Photograph: Simon Johnson

