

THE ARISTOCRACY OF NEW ZEALAND

The Wellington *Evening Post* of 15th May had an informing review of Mrs W. E. Woodhouse's book *George Rhodes of the Levels and His Brothers*, published by Whitcome & Tombs, which is a family history of her ancestors. "It has often been emphasized especially by Professor Condliffe," says the reviewer, "that the history of New Zealand is mainly economic rather than political, and that it is more important to know how the land came to be settled than how it was governed. There could be no more striking illustration of the validity of this attitude than the impression made on the reader by this book."

George Rhodes, who died at the comparatively early age of 47, ran the great sheep station of "The Levels," extending over 155,000 acres back from Timaru, and including the major portion of the site of the business centre of Timaru, of which pleasant little city this member of the Rhodes family might legitimately claim to be at least one of the founders.

Pre-empting New Zealand

The Rhodes brothers, William B., George, Robert Heaton, and Joseph, the four who came to New Zealand, were members of the large family of fourteen of William and Theodosia Rhodes, of Plains House, the Levels, Yorkshire. The eldest, William Barnard, a ship's captain, with a third share in the brig *Harriet*, voyaged over the world until in 1836 she was sold in Sydney. W.B. promptly invested his share of the proceeds in land and stock in New South Wales, and sent for his brother, Robert. Before Robert arrived William was on the water again in command of the whaler, *Australian*, with the idea of trying his fortune in New Zealand. This was in 1836, four years before the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi and the creation of New Zealand a British colony.

W. B. Rhodes, on behalf of his partners, Cooper and Holt, of Sydney, set up trading stations in several parts of the North Island and proceeded to buy land from the Maoris for the firm. In 1839 he purchased 100,000 acres at Akaroa for £325 from one Captain Leathart, who claimed to have bought it from the Chief Taiaroa for £40. In a letter to his brother, Robert, dated 13th October, 1839, after announcing the purchase of "the fine harbour of Akaroa," he says: "My principal object on arrival in New Zealand will be to purchase all the land I can from the Chieftains for the purpose of reselling again in small portions hereafter to parties who are expected in great numbers from England."

One of our Conquerors

This appears to be the first authentic reference in history to a policy in regard to land which has been popular in New Zealand ever since. W.B. was not the only speculator, even at the time he wrote, for he mentions in the same letter that "most of the leading men in Sydney are entering into it." He is fully aware of the perils, for he tells his brother: "You will perceive that it will take a great deal of cash and that I have risked my all on an uncertain speculation, for should I even be able to purchase large tracts of land, the British Government may some time dispossess us of it. I shall either be ruined totally or make a good thing of it in twelve months."

On 27th January, 1840, W. B. Rhodes wrote to Cooper and Holt, Sydney, reporting that he had purchased "a total area of 2,587,800 acres," including 1,401,600 acres in Hawke's Bay, for which he paid "about £150." This part he described as "the largest

extent of level land I have seen in New Zealand." The family historian adds that the "two and a half million acres which Rhodes claimed to have purchased from the natives consisted of almost, if not all, the coastal lands of Hawke's Bay, from Wairoa to Cape Turnagain, together with territory at Poverty Bay, Waikanae, and Kapiti, as well as areas at Cloudy Bay and Akaroa in the South Island."

Mrs Woodhouse is quite honest about it when she writes: "It might, perhaps, be thought that Rhodes and his partners were guilty of trying to annex an undue proportion of New Zealand, but their efforts faded into insignificance beside those of some of the other early arrivals, as witness the following extract from a letter written to W. B. Rhodes by Cooper and Holt in 1840: 'Johnny Jones states that he with Messrs Wentworth and Campbell have purchased the whole of the Middle Island (S.I.), excepting Akaroa and Ports Cooper and Levy, which belong to us.'"

Vast Territory

These purchases by the "early birds," of course, were fantastic enough, but later it cost the New Zealand Governments fairly large sums to settle the claims. "W. B. Rhodes never gave up hope," says the historian, "of receiving some indemnity for the 1,000,000 acres or so of Hawke's Bay land that he claimed to have purchased from the Maoris, and in his will left the deed to his brother, Joseph. The claim was finally disallowed by the Statute of Limitations, though £3,000 was granted as compensation, and Joseph eventually presented the deed to the Government."

A series of maps at the end of the book gives some idea of the actual holdings of the Rhodes brothers in both islands. Nothing could be more impressive. And yet when George of "The Levels," died in June, 1864, it became necessary to dispose of the partnership properties and wind up the estate. This was done in the 'Seventies, when the colony, under the impetus of the Vogel public works scheme and borrowed money, was advancing rapidly.

So the vast areas came on a favourable market and were sold to advantage. The moneys so obtained were often reinvested in broad acres and town property, but it is the constant regret of the authoress that of the original estates hardly any remained to the family, and its descendants, at the finish. Still, though chance played its part, the upshot was not unlike the idea, foreshadowed by W. B. Rhodes, in his letter of 1839, already quoted, of purchase in bulk and resale "in small portions." The Rhodes brothers were not, strictly speaking "pioneers" in the sense that "with their own hands" they cleared the bush and sowed the seed and built the homestead. They employed others to do that; but theirs was the keen, energetic, shrewd, enterprising brain that directed others. The family motto was "Robur Meum Deus," which might be interpreted "My strength is my God," as well as "God is my strength," both of which are highly appropriate to a family which dug its roots deep and early in the soil of New Zealand.

"Mrs Woodhouse's book," the reviewer says, "is an interesting and valuable original contribution to New Zealand's real history"—but it is not the history taught in the school books; nor are the implications of the land grabbing, thus laid bare in all their nakedness and sin, ever taken to the tables of Imperial and other Conferences on the welfare of the common people, for the lessons they teach.