

# FARMER SETTLER WILLIAM GORDON BELL

Fifty million people left Europe for other parts of the world during the nineteenth century. Most were English, Scots or Irish who left their homes as immigrant settlers or army personnel. Escaped or released convicts from Australia joined sealers, whalers and traders operating in New Zealand from around 1800. The few that chose Aotearoa to settle in changed the nature of the country altogether.

New Zealand's natural environment was dramatically transformed after 1840. European settlers fired tussock grassland, cleared forests, drained swamps and introduced exotic plant species.

The introduction of sheep and cattle permitted a largely pastoral economy to develop, with wool becoming a chief export earner and frozen meat becoming an important commodity from the 1880s. Today exotic grasslands cover twice as much of our country as native forest, and sheep outnumber people by around seven to one. Many descendants of the well-known local families who helped develop this pastoral landscape still live in the region.



Looking across the Whanganui River to what was the Good Hope Estate, later Sedgebrook Estate. Photo: W J Harding, 1860s. WRM Ref: WV/EP/7

One such farmer settler who did not stay long in Whanganui was William Gordon Bell senior, born in Dumfries and Galloway, Scotland in 1784. He married a widow, Alziere Cervantes Bell, and they had five children. In 1840, the whole family, the children now adults, decided to migrate together. After a couple of months of fruitless search for land in Australia, the Bells finally arrived in Wellington on the *Lady Lilford*, on 16 March 1840. Bell searched Wellington for arable land, but finally purchased a block in Whanganui from the New Zealand Company, across the river from the nascent town of Petre, later renamed Wanganui. Bell and his two sons, James and William Gordon junior, journeyed overland from Wellington to Whanganui in May 1841 with a team of six bullocks. They sent their "... ploughs, drays, bags of seed, and other implements and articles of bulk" ahead on the schooner *Sandfly*. Bell started farming land that is now the site of Kōwhai Park in Whanganui East, despite opposition from Māori.

*During the progress of the ploughing, E Waka used to come and watch, and keep walking by the side of the old farmer, telling him he should plough no more. But Bell pretended not to understand him ... The patience of E Waka soon got exhausted and he retired ... after putting in some pegs a few yards behind where Bell had got to, pointing to that as his ultimatum. The next morning he would be afoot ... early to besiege the pakeha ... But he was never early enough, and the first sight that met his eyes was... the team of bullocks and the old man trudging steadily along the fresh furrows. E Waka would search for his pegs but the plough had gone over them.*

[*Adventures in New Zealand* E J Wakefield, 1845]

Bell persisted and managed to get about 50 acres under cultivation and started sending wheat and grass seed to Wellington for sale. He became prosperous, calling himself the "Laird of Wanganui" and held annual harvest festivals. His farm was named the "Good Hope Estate".



William Bell's plough, made around 1840s. WRM Ref: TH.1313

Bell used an iron plough, believed to be the first ever used in the Whanganui area. It is an iron swing plough made by British farm implement manufacturers, Ransome & May. Originally, it could be dismantled for easy transport, and was shipped in this state to Wellington in 1841. Drawn by bullocks, the plough required an experienced ploughman to keep it balanced. It was used to cultivate land for staple European crops such as wheat and barley. Today, the plough is a reminder of the changing use and ownership of land as European colonisation of New Zealand gathered pace.

Bell did not stay in Whanganui. He opposed the placement of some of the reserve lands in the new land sale being negotiated with Māori and was unconvinced that he would ever achieve title to what he considered to be his land. In 1847 he left for Nelson where he bought more land in Richmond and started another farm with his family, where they prospered. He died in Nelson in 1864.

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