



REPRESENTATIONS OF THE DESERT ROAD

HISTORY, NAME AND USE IN MEDIA

INTRODUCTION

The primary aim of the research was to collect a wide variety of representations of the Desert Road from the past to the present day, both written and visual. Tracing the history of representation also involved establishing the origins of the name "Desert Road" underpinning a cultural history of the road's place in media and popular culture. Ascertaining the genesis of the name can tell us about our cultural and apparently "intuitive" understandings of the Desert Road and our experiences of it as a space, place and mediated text.

METHODS AND APPROACH

The research was split into stages: historical and written documents, visual representations, and new media. Each stage involved different archives and methods for gathering information. Historical material about the road was gleaned from books in the Beaglehole Room, The National Archives and Library, Appendices to the Journal of the House of Representatives and the Papers Past database. Looking for visual representations involved sifting through books and information on New Zealand art, searching Timeframes, the Film Archive, Jonathan Dennis Library and the Alexander Turnbull Library manuscripts. The final stages of research involved collecting material from online sources, predominately message boards and YouTube.com. A timeline of the development of the road and work on themes and patterns drew these disparate sources together.

HISTORY AND ORIGINS

The "Desert Road" refers to the Rangipo Desert, which it crosses. The origins of the name are in the Ngāti Tūwharetoa history of the area, which recounts the journey of Ngātoroirangi to the summit of Tongariro. On the way, another tohunga, Hapekituarangi, was approaching with the same goal. Ngātoroirangi warned him and his people to turn back, and when he refused, Ngātoroirangi summoned a storm of snow and ice that killed his rivals on the Rangipo desert (Greenaway18). Rangipo translates to "dark-day". The "desert" comes from early European settler accounts of the area, notably William Colenso, who said: "we crossed the sandy desert call Te Onetapu- a most desolate and weird-looking spot... a fit place for Macbeth's witches!" (40). Historian James Cowan stated: "at the heart of Rangipo, the desert region is Onetapu, the sacred or enchanted sands. It is a black, shivering land," and he refers to the "Waiouru - Tokaanu Road" as traversing a "sterile waste" (77-78). Early letters to newspapers show that the area was often called a desert, and represented as inhospitable with terrible weather. The road was initially referred to as simply a "coach road" and later as the "Waiouru - Tokaanu Road," until newspapers picked up the colloquial "Desert Road" in the late 1920s when reporting on the state of the road for tourist traffic ("Holiday Reports").



Still from Pikowae



Image of strata on the Desert Road by flickr member Juergen

THREADS AND LAYERS

Art historian Francis Pound states that the European "invention" of New Zealand rested on the projection of meaning into a "land perceived as silent and empty" (31). Here, Cowan's assertion that the road traverses a "sterile waste" is indicative of the important role arable land played to colonization and the European settler's projection of meaning; that is to say, physically fertile land came with a ready use usually bound to farming, while arid land did not. The stories attached to the Desert Road imbued meaning in what was ostensibly useless, hard land to settlers. Although the name begins with the Māori history of the area, it has become a way of explaining the presence of the colonial past in current understandings of New Zealand nationhood. In media, invoking the Desert Road suggests a particular state of mind and history. From John Mulgan's novel *Man Alone* to the wealth of amateur tourist photographs and film in archives, representations of the Desert Road reveal this layering of cultural memory. Viewing these processes as a continuum, one end consists of events in mainstream news, and the other of stories in film, photography and other visual representations. News media tends to focus on events around the Desert Road; mainly the weather, deaths and car crashes; events that resonate with the history of the area. Visual representations - particularly films such as *Smash Palace* and *Pikowae* - tell fictional stories that present the Desert Road as a dangerous place, a "badland" that appears uncoupled from history yet nevertheless relies on a tacit knowledge of how the Desert Road "is". Yet between these representations an excess of discussion and media production is ongoing, ameliorating harsh distinctions between fact and fiction about the road. For example, a message board about ghosts in New Zealand discusses ghostly hitchhikers on the Desert Road - much like the spectre in *Pikowae* - while a Youtube video *Road Flight* speeds through the road, recalling the car chase between Al and the Police in *Smash Palace*. These amateur texts draw on cultural knowledge while placing questions of truth and fiction to one side.



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"Storm Road" by Brian Stock

CONCLUSION

The Desert Road is a name that marks the constantly negotiated understanding of the space as a place with layers of mythologies and meaning, both Māori and Pakeha. As the construction of the road itself wrote a story of colonization on the landscape of the Central Plateau, news, film and other media texts about the Desert Road continually carve a path for expressing and constructing a version of nationhood steeped in the ever present past. Tracing the history of the name through the varied representations reveals the intense production of meaning around the Desert Road that occurs in a myriad of ways.