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THE ART *of* TOURISM



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GO ARTS

CHASING THE DREAM

In the Golden Age of New Zealand's tourist industry, art was used to encourage travellers to explore the delights of Godzone.

CHRISTOPHER MOORE reports on a new book of classic travel posters.

The book is about selling an evocative dream. The images it contains reflect the decades when travel was a glorious lingering adventure; a world apart from today's homogenised, sanitised quick-fire "if this is Tuesday this must be Akaroa" experience.

Its authors, Peter Alsop, Gary Stewart and David Bamford, admit without a blush that they have been seduced by the art of early New Zealand tourism. This was a pivotal period in the publicity of New Zealand, creating not only tourism marketing but a potent sense of national identity. *Selling the Dream* celebrates the posters, brochures and magazines used to promote New Zealand tourism before 1960.

The realities might not have exactly matched these Arcadian images but as a part of our social and artistic history, they are an enduring and fascinating facet of how we once projected ourselves to the world and to each other.

Consider a 1935 poster produced by the Railways Department. The sun-drenched image of dreaming spires, cascading willows and shadowed hills framed by classical arcades transforms Christchurch into New Zealand's very own Aix-En-Provence. Pushing home the message was the punchline "Christchurch: With the Wonders on the Doorstep!"

The story begins in 1928 when a private company, Filmcraft Ltd, built Wellington's Miramar Film Studios to make scenic short films for the Government's Tourist Department. By 1936, the department had leased the studios. Three years later posters advertising New Zealand and the Centennial Exhibition, held in nearby Rongotai, were also being produced by the silk-screen process in the studios. What

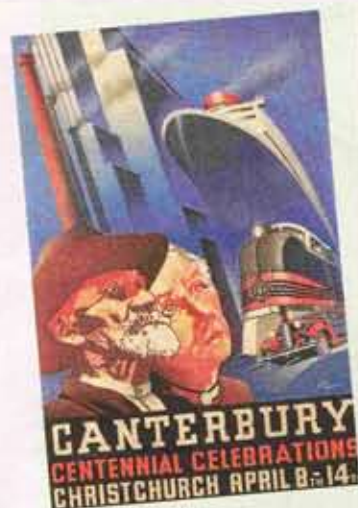
emerged during the 1930s, 40s and 50s is today much more than a fleeting moment of commercial art.

"Tourism publicity is generally regarded as 'ephemera', an unsatisfactory word for published material other than books. It conveys impermanence – the ephemeral – and speaks of things generally produced for a reason external to their own existence [to advertise or sell something] and implied to lack literary or artistic value. For this reason, the survival of ephemera reflects serendipity or someone's exceptional foresight in preserving material so seductive in its visual impact or particular message. Survival of material for this book – over some 50 to 125 years, through wars, the Depression and much more – is even more remarkable," the

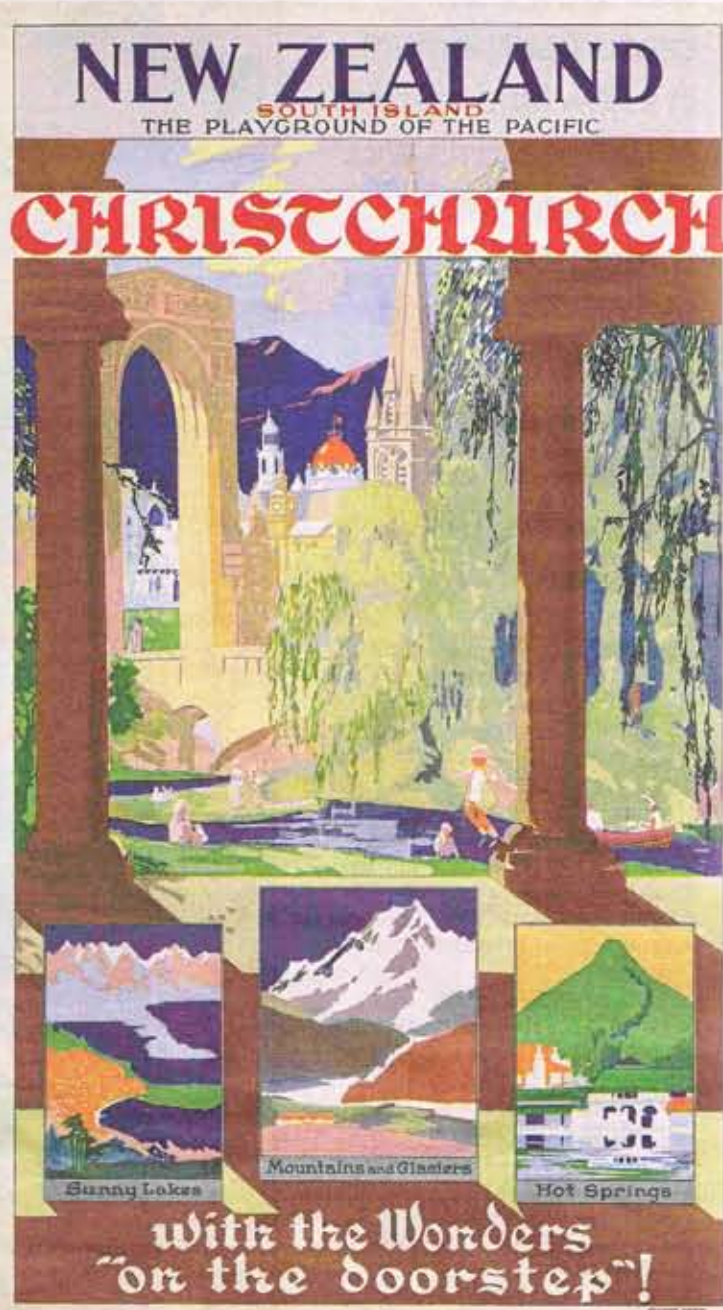
A fascinating facet of how we once projected ourselves to the world.

authors write.

"To create enticing images in an age before colour photography and automated large-scale printing required the work to be beautiful, carefully crafted and clever. Ground-breaking artists – like Leonard Mitchell and Marcus King – simply, it seems, had an eye for it: an eye for the effective use of colour and composition to create timeless representations of



the best of New Zealand." The Golden Age of the New Zealand tourist poster also saw a shift in style from typography to eye-catching graphic work. Transportation (including international travel) was increasing – itself leading to reciprocal display arrangements abroad. "Outdoor advertising was heralded as beautifying railway stations and the increasingly hoarding-laden landscape. New Zealanders, an enthusiastic marketing force, also addressed envelopes to friends and distant relatives with decorative 'Cinderella' poster stamps. Publicising New Zealand was 'in'. There are other stories surrounding the selling of Godzone. In 1905 President Teddy Roosevelt gave 10 elk to enhance our "The Sportsman's Paradise" alongside the Tourist Department's own importation of possums. "Ironically, by 1953 the



Evocative: Clockwise from top left, Canterbury Centennial Celebration, I Major, c 1940; Christchurch: With the Wonders on the Doorstep!, Railways Department, c 1935; Cinderella stamp, Douglas Badcock, 1948. Image: Private collection; Speedo, Gilbert Meadows, c 1930. Image: Ron Meadows.

Tourism Publicity Division, then providing services across government, was designing posters encouraging the possum's destruction," the authors add.

All these marketing projects were run by a savvy publicity workforce focused on value-for-money and innovative ways to sell the dream. This includes the Tourist Department's first mentioning "poster" in 1915, at about the same time the Railways Department established a standalone advertising branch, having not previously discussed publicity in its reports.

"Let's come back to the fact that these artworks, with lasting historical significance, were designed only for momentary adoration. Instead, a brochure or poster found its way under a bed where it waited for a second life to rework its magic. A new gaze finds the age, allure and context of these images evocative, particularly those invoking a deep inner sense of place. Paradoxically, the imagery never possessed high art's aspiration to outlive its own time, yet it does...

Having looked time and time again at the representations – many stripped back to a small number of colours and lines – we still marvel at how warm, impactful feelings can emerge from such simplicity.

"If you think it looks easy, give it a try. In this denuded technique, it is easy to see the conception of pop art [coming decades later] and many facets of modern advertising. We also love the textures of the papers and inks, and the high craft embodied in the images, many produced using artisan techniques now endangered, such as stone lithography and silk-screen printing. The contrast between our job and that of the pioneers is immense. Our tap of a button or dropdown menu meant, for them, creation of a font, an original painting [perhaps the third iteration] or an engraving on a lithographic stone."

■ *Selling the Dream. The Art Of Early New Zealand Tourism.* Craig Potton Publications. Hardback. 400 pages (illustrated) \$79.99