

Richard Aldworth Oliver

British, 1811-1899

The Māori Settlement, Purau Bay, Port Cooper

1850, watercolour, 26x38 cm

Purchased with assistance from the Olive Stirrat Bequest 1983



About the work

Purau Bay lies on the southern shore of Lyttelton Harbour (first named Port Cooper), across the water from Lyttelton township, though 35 km by road from Christchurch. In this watercolour sketch from 1850, Richard Oliver carefully recorded the Māori settlement with its three large waka (canoes) drawn up on the beach. This sketch is the only pictorial record of Purau, which at that time had only 10 inhabitants and was probably a seasonal fishing settlement.

Oliver was the Commander of the Royal Navy frigate *HMS Fly*, which was engaged in hydrographic survey work around the New Zealand coast. Although an amateur artist, he was an accomplished draughtsman, concerned with accuracy and detail in his observations. In the 19th century, prior to the invention and widespread use of photography, most people were taught to sketch and paint in watercolour as part of their general schooling. Oliver would have been expected to further develop these skills. As a naval officer he would have been expected to draw topographic charts in which it would have been important to accurately record details of the coastline.

Oliver was obviously impressed by the rearing volcanic hills around Purau Bay, capturing the craggy details of the rocky outcrops with considerable care and filling the drawn forms with single layers of watercolour wash. That he had some training is evident in his deliberate modifications of the washes to suggest the aerial perspective of the distant forms. The tussock covering and the lack of native forest on these

slopes are very interesting and truthfully recorded.

One of the early European settlers, Dr A.C. Baker, in his letters home wrote of "the mountains that wall the harbour have an air of almost savage grandeur" and in this watercolour there is a sense that Oliver has been interested to capture this romantic aspect.

In 1850 Governor George Grey visited the Auckland Islands to the south of New Zealand and, on the return trip, the *Fly* put in to Akaroa Harbour and Port Cooper. They arrived at Port Cooper on 13 December 1850 and were present when the first of the Canterbury Association ships arrived three days later. During the week the ship was there Oliver entertained himself with small watercolour studies such as this.

Most of the time the *Fly* was based in Auckland, but it was frequently used by Governor George Grey to visit other European settlements in New Zealand.

Back in London Oliver intended to publish his drawings and paintings. In England there was considerable interest in the new colonies and in the nature of the 'virgin' lands in which they were being established. The naval presence would have been seen as a sensible safeguard in case of trouble with the indigenous inhabitants, although the presence of early New Zealand Company officers and surveyors had already confirmed that the settlers would not be met with any protest.

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About the artist

The son of Admiral Robert Dudley Oliver, Commander Richard Aldworth Oliver entered the Royal Navy as a cadet in 1825, at the age of 14. In 1847 he was given command of *HMS Fly*, which carried out surveys in New Zealand and the Pacific region between 1847 and 1851. In 1849 the *Fly* was escort to the *Undine*, the schooner of the Bishop of New Zealand, the Right Reverend George Augustus Selwyn, on his visit to New Caledonia and the New Hebrides.

Oliver returned to England in 1851 and the following year a number of his sketches were published by Dickeson Brothers, London, as *A Series of Lithographic Drawings from Sketches in New Zealand*. Oliver subsequently became an Admiral of the British Fleet.

Oliver stands as an important amateur artist during the colonial phase of New Zealand's history. He painted throughout his life but is best remembered for his paintings and sketches of New Zealand in the late 1840s and early 1850s. He died in 1889.

Other works by the artist in the Collection

There are no other works by the artist in the Collection.

Further reading

Early Sketches and Charts of Banks Peninsula 1770-1850,
P.B. Maling, A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1981.

