

The Making of a Monumental Biography

Simon Nathan

Email: s.nathan@xtra.co.nz

The Life and Times of Sir Julius von Haast is a monumental biography in every sense. Researched and written by his son, Heinrich von Haast, it weighs 1.8 kilograms and contains 1,142 pages of text as well as several folding maps. It is one of the largest New Zealand books ever published.

Heinrich had a successful career as a lawyer and set about writing the biography in his retirement, almost 50 years after his father's death. He had access to all his father's correspondence and papers that had been retained by the family (and which are now held by the Alexander Turnbull Library). The text is a detailed chronological account of Haast's life after he arrived in New Zealand as well as the events he was involved with and the people he knew. The final chapters deal with Haast's naming of topographic features, and his recognition of widespread glaciation in the Southern Alps, alluvial goldfields and the volcanoes of Banks Peninsula.

Having completed the manuscript of the biography, Heinrich had great difficulty in getting it published, so he funded it himself and sold it by subscription.

The book is so enormous that few people would read it simply as a biography. Today its main value is as a reference book for historical issues in mid-nineteenth century science as well as an account of the development of Canterbury Museum under Haast's leadership. New research and changing concepts have modified some of the conclusions drawn by its author, but it remains the definitive account of the life and achievements of Sir Julius von Haast.

Keywords: Heinrich von Haast, Sir Julius von Haast, *The Life and Times of Sir Julius von Haast* 1948

Introduction

The Life and Times of Sir Julius von Haast is a monumental biography in every sense. Researched and written by his son, Heinrich Ferdinand von Haast (1864–1953) and published in 1948, it weighs 1.8 kilograms and contains 1142 pages of text as well as photographic plates and several folding maps (Fig. 1). It is one of the largest New Zealand books ever published.

My first sight of the biography was as a schoolboy in the late 1950s when surplus copies were being sold off at Whitcombe & Tombs' annual sale in Christchurch. It was a bargain for 5 shillings (50 cents in today's money), but after picking it up I realised that it was too unwieldy to carry home on my bike. It was a decision I have often regretted as the copy illustrated in Figure 1 cost me a lot more when I bought it many years later.

My next interaction with the book was about 15 years ago when I was thinking about writing a biography of Haast's contemporary and rival, James Hector. I looked at the Haast biography and was immediately discouraged. It has cast a long shadow over anyone attempting to write a biography of a New Zealand scientist. I had no wish to spend the years needed to research and write such an enormous book. But discussion with fellow writers was helpful, as they pointed out that while the Haast book was respected as a reference volume, it is difficult to find anyone who has actually read it. I resolved to aim at a book that was readable, and my published book (Nathan 2015) is only a quarter the size of the Haast volume.

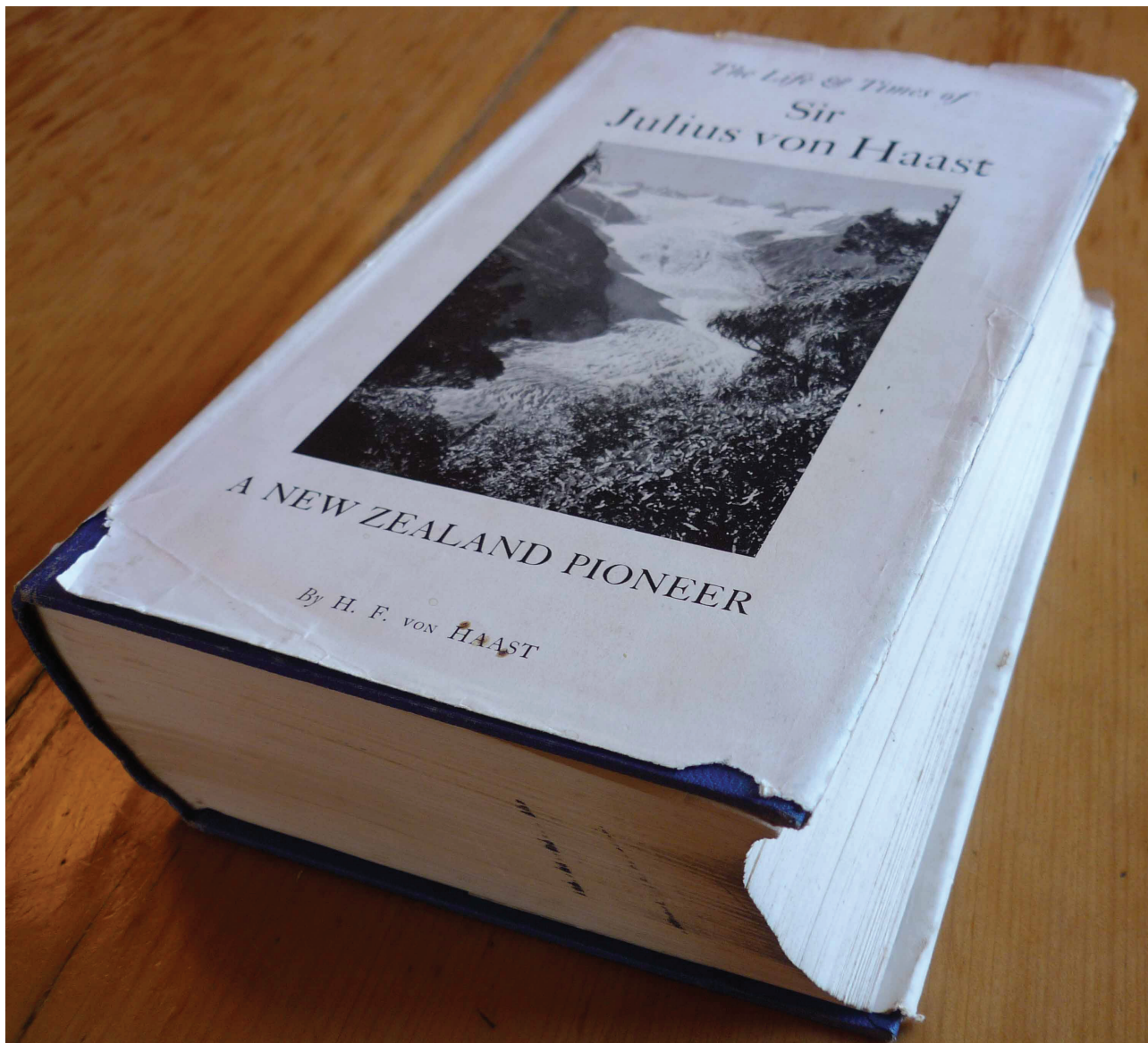


Figure 1. Photograph of the Haast biography. To give an idea of the scale, it is 7 cm thick (Haast 1948).

In this paper I want to summarise the events leading to the publication of this major biography of Julius von Haast, and to comment on how it is viewed in the twenty-first century. But firstly I need to say something about the author, Heinrich von Haast (Fig. 2) and the intellectual climate in which he was working.

Background of Heinrich von Haast

Born in 1864, Heinrich was the oldest child of Julius and Mary Haast. Julius was over 40 when he was born, so Heinrich knew little of his father's German background or early explorations in Nelson and Canterbury. As a teenager Heinrich accompanied his father on some field trips, but had no desire to follow a scientific career. On leaving school, he got a job as a junior clerk, but winning scholarships allowed him to attend university in Christchurch where he studied law, graduating MA and LLB. He also attended his father's geology lectures.

When Julius was given 18 months leave in 1885 to be a Commissioner at the Colonial and Indian (Colinderies) Exhibition in London, he arranged for Heinrich to take over his position as Acting Director of Canterbury Museum. It was a big responsibility for a 21-year-old, but Julius maintained control from a distance through a stream of letters. When his father died suddenly in 1887 a few



Figure 2. Portrait of Heinrich von Haast (1864–1953), taken about 1933 by S P Andrew. Alexander Turnbull Library 1/2-043510-F

weeks after returning from his overseas trip, Heinrich offered his services to the Museum Board, but discovered that they had already offered a temporary position to Frederick Hutton without contacting or consulting him. This undoubtedly contributed to his antipathy to the Museum administration in later years.

Heinrich had a long legal career, starting in Christchurch, moving to London and then to Victoria, Australia, before finally returning to New Zealand in 1903 to set up his own legal practice in Wellington. He lectured in law at Victoria University College and was a senior member of the New Zealand Law Society. In later years he had considerable involvement in public affairs, including serving on the Senate of the University of New Zealand. Like his father, he was an extrovert, regularly singing and involved in theatrical productions as well as being a practised orator and after-dinner speaker (Taylor 1953).

Although he spent many years attempting to escape from the shadow of his famous father, Heinrich gradually became interested in family history. In 1929 he published two articles in the *Press* describing the long-running correspondence between Julius and Joseph Hooker, Director of Kew Gardens (*Press*, 16 November and 23 November 1929). Historian and writer James Cowan persuaded Heinrich that a full biography of his father was overdue and that he was the one to write it. When he turned 70 in 1934, he decided to retire from his law practice and start work on the biography of his father, aiming to complete it in time for the New Zealand centennial in 1940.

Changing Views of Sir Julius von Haast

When Julius died in 1887 he was lauded for his pioneering scientific work as well as the establishment of Canterbury Museum, but as the years passed his reputation declined. He had always been an

unusual personality in anglophile Canterbury, with detractors as well as supporters. As there was strong anti-German feeling during and after World War One, he was quietly overlooked then and in following years. It is to the credit of the Museum authorities that his name was not erased, as happened to others of German descent. Heinrich elected to retain his name and not change or modify it as many others did.

Active criticism came from a different quarter. In the 1920s and 1930s a group of young men, mainly associated with the Canterbury Mountaineering Club (CMC), started exploring the mountainous country of Canterbury, tackling previously unclimbed peaks in the Southern Alps. In many places the best maps available dated back to Haast's explorations in the early 1860s and some of the younger generation were critical. Haast was never interested in climbing, and there were debates about the identification of some peaks shown on his maps. He normally worked with assistants, with supplies being carried in by packhorses, and this "luxury" was derided by the younger generation who carried all their supplies in heavy packs. Writer John Pascoe was an active member of the CMC, and wrote several articles for *Making New Zealand*, a series of illustrated booklets celebrating the 1940 Centennial. In his article on 'Navigators and Explorers', he denigrated Haast's exploration in Canterbury and commented that he had "sprinkled German names liberally all over the landscape. These guttural legacies survive on the map to this day" (Maclean 2003: 108–109). Heinrich was incensed and wrote a letter listing the errors and omissions in Pascoe's account. This and the associated correspondence (Alexander Turnbull Library 1940–1948) illustrate the way that Haast had become viewed by some in the mountaineering fraternity.

Writing the Biography

Most of the information about how Heinrich tackled the research and writing of the biography comes from a talk he gave to the New Plymouth Rotary Club the year after the book was published (Haast 1949; *Taranaki Daily News*, 27 September 1949).

When he settled down to plan the project, Heinrich realised that he had little detailed information on his father's life. Despite growing up in close proximity, he had shown little interest in his father's enthusiasms and overseas connections. As a teenager, Heinrich's passion was rugby football – he captained his university team from 1886 to 1888 – and Julius disdained sport.

Heinrich started by preparing a detailed chronology of his father's life, based on months of scanning newspapers held in the basement of the Parliamentary Library in Wellington, and then expanded his search to cover records of the Canterbury Provincial Council, Canterbury Philosophical Institute and Canterbury University College, as well as published papers and reports written by his father. When Julius died suddenly almost 50 years earlier, Mary von Haast had stored all his papers and correspondence in two large tin boxes, and this formed an additional and unique research resource. Heinrich found that he had an abundance of research material, and sorting and cataloguing it took several years.

Although he had a large volume of correspondence, Heinrich noted that he could find few letters written by his father apart from those written in the last year of his life while overseas. In 1938 Heinrich wrote to the archives at Kew Gardens to see if they could find the letters Julius had written to Joseph Hooker, but only three were found. In more recent years the Kew archives have been sorted and catalogued, and over 70 letters from Haast have been located. The entire correspondence between Haast and Hooker from 1861 to 1886 has recently been transcribed and published (Nolden et al. 2013). An even larger number of letters from Haast to James Hector are held in the archives of Te Papa Tongarewa Museum of New Zealand, but were not accessible when

Heinrich was undertaking his research. The full correspondence between Haast and Hector has also been transcribed (Nolden et al. 2012). Had these letters been available to Heinrich, the final biography might have been even larger.

Heinrich planned the book to be a largely chronological account of his father's life and activities. The published book contains 72 chapters, of which about 60 cover relatively short time periods or events interspersed with chapters on more general topics, for example:

- The People of Canterbury
- Haast's Province and Problems
- Haast's Correspondents and Co-operators
- The Attitude of the Press to Science
- Companions and Collectors.

These general chapters provide an interesting background about life in Canterbury, both of the settlers and the small scientific community. Heinrich had attended Christ's College, a private boys school in Christchurch and was well connected to sons of the leading families.

The biography is really a story of Julius Haast's years in Christchurch, from his arrival in late 1860 until his death in 1887. The first half of his life, before he reached New Zealand, is covered very briefly in the first seven pages of Chapter One. Heinrich had little material to work with except family legend and obituaries, and his attempts to gather more information from Germany were largely unsuccessful. The description of the early work that Julius undertook with Ferdinand Hochstetter and subsequent exploration of Nelson in 1859 and 1860 is essentially a paraphrase of previously published accounts, more recently described by Johnston and Nolden (2011). The Canterbury story starts on page 113 when Haast arrived in December 1860 to examine the geological problems encountered in excavating the Lyttelton rail tunnel.

Work on the biography took over a decade as Heinrich was thorough and painstaking in his research. In writing each chronological chapter he appears to have gathered together every bit of information related to the time period being covered and written it up as a connected narrative. The chapters are not long (generally 10 to 20 pages), but very detailed. The writing is clear and explanatory, with non-technical language. Heinrich was skilled at synthesising information – probably reflecting his experience preparing legal briefs – but he did not summarise. If he found an interesting detail it was always included. For example, if you want to know why the spelling of the name of the Franz Josef Glacier, named by Julius, is different to the way the Emperor spelt his name, you will find an explanation in footnote 8 on page 393.

By my estimation, Heinrich probably took about a month working on each chapter. As he worked onwards, the manuscript grew progressively larger. Not having produced a book previously, nor having any editorial oversight, I suspect that he had little idea how large it had become.

The text is enlivened by personal memories of family life. Heinrich is not uncritical of his father – he mentions his impetuosity and quick temper as failings that often caused problems and antagonised those he dealt with. With wry humour he relates the attempts that Julius made to obtain recognition and honours through his overseas contacts. Julius was a gambler, but gave Mary, his future wife, a promise that he would not play for money after his marriage. Over the years he invested in various business ventures, including land, flax and sheep, on which he invariably lost money, and he had a very small estate when he died in 1887.

Although the text is predominantly narrative, Heinrich devotes space to some topics that he felt required more detailed explanation. For example, Chapter 24, 'Discovery of the Haast Pass', is followed by Chapter 25, 'Charles Cameron's claim to have discovered the Haast Pass'. The facts are laid out in detail, but the commentary makes it clear that Heinrich is acting as his father's advocate by discounting the claims made that Cameron had been over the pass before Haast and his party arrived. For further discussion of this issue, see the article by Bradshaw in this volume.

Throughout the book there are comments on Julius's friends, colleagues and contemporaries. Julius sometimes made enemies from his outspoken comments, but Heinrich tried to be fair to most of those mentioned. From my own research, I am aware of the rivalry bubbling under the surface between James Hector and Haast, but Heinrich's assessment is generous to Hector, who was often exasperated by Julius Haast and resented the success of his museum.

The last chronological chapter (67) deals with Haast's death and burial in 1887. It is followed by four chapters that deal with Haast's major achievements. Chapter 69, entitled 'Haast's Nomenclature', deals with the names that Haast had applied to geographical features in Nelson and Canterbury. One of the longest chapters, it is undoubtedly a response to Pascoe's jibe about the prevalence of German names assigned by Julius Haast. Heinrich lists the names as far as he was able. A quick scrutiny of the names shows the falsity of Pascoe's claim, as the majority of names are either British scientists or prominent Cantabrians. Chapter 70 deals with glaciation as Haast was the first to recognise the widespread impact of glaciation on the Canterbury landscape, and Chapter 71 deals with the alluvial goldfields of Westland where the distribution of gold was largely controlled by glaciation. The final chapter, 'The Volcanoes of Banks Peninsula', describes Haast's recognition that the peninsula was formed by two ancient (Miocene) volcanoes, now deeply dissected by erosion, followed by a younger period of volcanism.

Heinrich decided to include four folding maps in the book, which had been prepared by Haast but were not readily available. The first is the map of Haast's explorations in Nelson and the West Coast that the Nelson Provincial Council had not published. The other three maps are of Canterbury and parts of two of them are reproduced in Figure 3 for comparison. Map A shows the extent of topographic mapping about 1860 when Julius arrived in Canterbury. All the flatter land near the coast had been surveyed and subdivided for farming, but the steeper hill country and alpine regions were almost a blank. Map B, drawn up for the Royal Geographical Society in 1870, shows the progress in mapping the region a decade later, illustrating the complexity and steepness of the top of the topography that Haast was covering. Completing the map of the most rugged part of New Zealand was an impressive undertaking and shows that the later criticism from the mountaineering fraternity was largely unjustified.

Publication

There is little information about events leading to the publication of the biography, but it appears that Heinrich had ineffectual discussions with a number of publishers. During and immediately after World War Two there was a paper shortage and few books were published in New Zealand. Potential publishers were probably doubtful about the likely sales of a book about a German scientist and the manuscript was huge. The negative response led Heinrich to decide to take the financial risk of funding publication himself and to sell copies by subscription. Avery Press in New Plymouth was contracted to undertake the printing project, and did an excellent job of printing and binding the large volume. Heinrich prepared a flier advertising the book and distributed it widely around New Zealand and overseas (Fig. 4). He set a price of 3 guineas (£3.3.0) including postage on the book – equivalent to \$NZ260 in 2022 values. The tome was published in 1948.

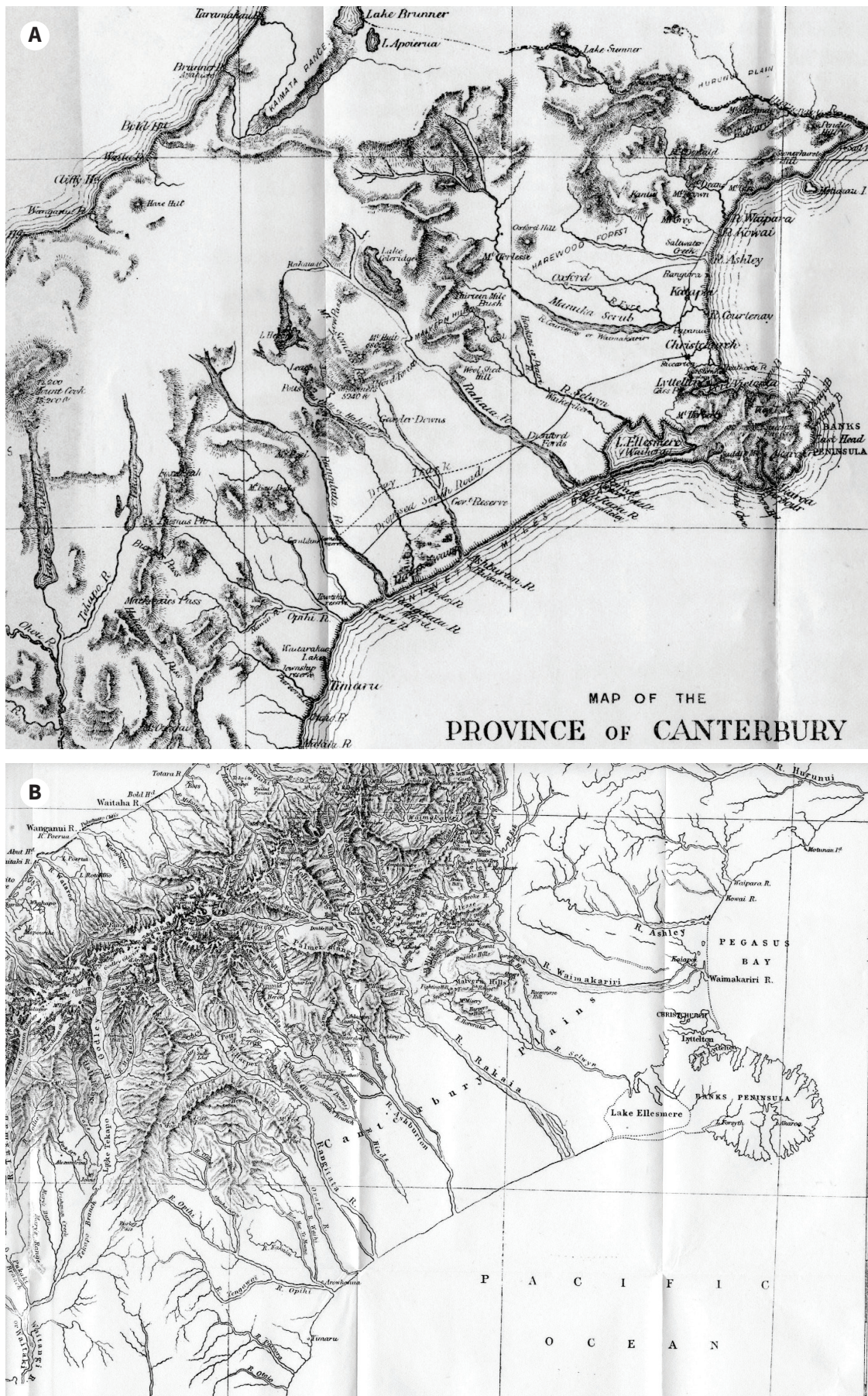


Figure 3. Comparison of sections of two of the facsimile folding maps included in the Haast biography. **A.** Map showing the extent of topographic mapping in Canterbury in 1860, about the time Julius Haast arrived. **B.** Map originally published in 1870, showing the progress in mapping, particularly in the alpine areas (Haast 1948)

A steady trickle of orders came in, and Heinrich and his wife Mary regularly packed parcels and dispatched them by post. By 1949, when Heinrich addressed the New Plymouth Rotary Club, he reported that he had covered the cost of printing and was starting to make a profit.

Heinrich was friendly with Johannes Andersen, the first librarian at the Alexander Turnbull Library, and decided to deposit his research papers there rather than at Canterbury Museum, which he felt had failed to honour his father. After Heinrich's death in 1953 all the remaining papers of both Julius and Heinrich von Haast were handed over to the library by Heinrich's widow and form the Haast Family Collection (ATL-Group-00475). The records of Sir Julius von Haast have recently been added to the UNESCO Memory of the World register as a key collection of records relating to nineteenth-century New Zealand science.

Reaction to the Biography

Heinrich sent copies of the book to potential reviewers locally and overseas, and their reaction was generally positive. Few biographies of New Zealand pioneers had been previously published, and it was recognised that this was an important contribution both to the history of science and to the settlement of the Canterbury region. He also submitted it to the University of New Zealand and was awarded a Doctor of Literature degree.

The one discordant note was from John Pascoe, who reviewed it for the *Press* in Christchurch. While acknowledging that the research was impressive and the factual basis of the book could hardly be faulted, he commented that "Mr von Haast tends to write too steadily as his father's advocate, filially attached to his cause; a measure of judicial detachment was needed and would have been worth the struggle" (*Press*, 2 October 1948:3). Later writers have tended to agree with Pascoe and some have called the book an example of hagiography. I believe this label is inappropriate – it is generally applied to biographies where any negative information is omitted or glossed over. This is

The Life and Times of Sir Julius von Haast

K.C.M.G., Ph.D., D.Sc., F.R.S.

A NEW ZEALAND PIONEER

Written and Published by

H. F. von HAAST, LL.B., Litt.D.

This is the life-story of one of New Zealand's foremost explorers and scientists, told by his son, one of his students in geology, and a former Pro-Chancellor of the University of New Zealand. It chronicles a decade of exciting explorations, mainly as Geologist of the Province of Canterbury, in the then *terra incognita* of the Southern Alps.

His greatest achievement was the conception and creation of the Canterbury Museum in the Antipodean Christchurch, which at the time of his death ranked as one of the world's leading Museums.

Concurrently with the progress of the life of his father, the author traces the growth and advance in civilization of a typically British settlement, a cross-section of English society, the development of the town of Christchurch and province of Canterbury by a nucleus of highly-educated men.

The edition is limited and owners of this volume will have a book of increasing value as time passes.

Size 10 x 6 inches; 1,142 pages + xxii; twenty-five half-tone illustrations; four large maps.

The price, prepaid, is £3 3s 0d (New Zealand currency, plus exchange when payable) delivered post free.

Figure 4. Part of a flyer produced by Heinrich von Haast to promote sales of the biography of his father. Alexander Turnbull Library, Haast family papers

certainly not the case with this book where the problem is information overload because nothing is left out.

Viewed from a twenty-first-century perspective, the biography has some defects. Heinrich grew up in the later part of the nineteenth century and has produced a Victorian biography. It is far too long and suffers from a lack of editorial supervision. The issue of bias is open to debate – almost all biographies are written because the author wants to tell the story of the subject. In my judgement, it is generally a fair (and exhaustive) assessment of Sir Julius von Haast, but in a few places Heinrich gets carried away and, having presented the facts, starts to act as counsel for the defence. Yet the fact remains that 75 years after its publication no-one else has written another biography of Haast, nor are they likely to try because there is little new to be said. Recent theses (Caudel 2007; Cooper 2011) and published collections of letters (Nolden et al. 2012; Nolden et al. 2013) have added information but not resulted in much change to the overall story. Heinrich von Haast's biography still stands as the definitive account of Sir Julius von Haast.

Afterword

Heinrich was bitterly disappointed that Canterbury Museum was virtually unaltered and had been starved of funding since his father's death 60 years earlier, and that the collections had stagnated. There had been plans to build an extension as a centennial project in 1940, but this did not eventuate. In one of the final chapters of the biography, on page 974, he wrote:

While the citizens of Christchurch see their children being taught Natural Science, for which Haast fought so strenuously, by means of the collections that he amassed with such enthusiasm and energy, they dishonour his Memory by allowing his Monument, the Canterbury Museum, to moulder away.

The planned centennial wing, commemorating the establishment of Christchurch in 1848, was not built until 1958, several years after Heinrich's death. It was opened by the Governor-General, Lord Cobham, a descendant of one of the earliest English settlers. In his speech he commended the foresight of the colonists in establishing British cultural institutions such as a museum and university, but the name of Haast was virtually ignored (*Press*, 11 November 1958: 12). The only mention he got was in an article in *New Zealand Truth*, a popular weekly characterised by its lack of respect for authority. Under the heading 'Museum Admired but Founder lies Forgotten' Haast's work as founder of the Museum and other achievements in Canterbury were listed, but the reporter then asserted that Haast now lies, "forgotten, lonely and obscure in Avonside Church of the Holy Trinity" (*New Zealand Truth*, 25 November 1958: 22).

Haast's achievements continued to be largely overlooked, featuring in only a very small number of scientific or historical papers before the 1970s. David Galloway, a young botanist and alpine climber studying in Britain discovered a series of letters in the archives of Kew Gardens that Haast had written to Joseph Hooker describing his exploration of the Southern Alps and his botanical discoveries. The resulting paper (Galloway 1976), with extracts from the letters, reminded readers of the importance of Haast's scientific work. About the same time an article by Janet Paul (1977/78) described Haast's sketches of Canterbury mountains and glaciers which formed the basis for a series of paintings by John Gully. These two papers drew attention to the importance of Haast's work exploring and mapping some of the most rugged parts of the Southern Alps as well as his scientific achievements, and have acted as a catalyst for ongoing interest in Haast's career.

References

- Alexander Turnbull Library 1940–1948. Papers related to Sir Julius von Haast (from John Pascoe papers). File ATL 75-241-55. [Includes letters from H von Haast, J Pascoe and others]
- Caudel ME. 2007. *Julius Haast – towards a new appreciation of his life and work* [MA]. Christchurch: University of Canterbury.
- Cooper EM. 2011. *Julius Haast, the Canterbury Museum and Maori* [MA]. Auckland: Massey University.
- Galloway D. 1976. Julius von Haast's botanical explorations. *New Zealand Alpine Journal*. 1976: 88–108.
- Haast HF von. 1948. *The life and times of Sir Julius von Haast*. Wellington: HF von Haast.
- Haast HF von. 1949. *The adventures of an author and the problems of a publisher*. Handwritten manuscript, 11 pages. Alexander Turnbull Library, part of Ms-Papers 0037-334.
- Johnston MR, Nolden S. 2011. *Travels of Hochstetter and Haast in New Zealand, 1858-60*. Nelson: Nikau Press.
- Maclean C. 2003. *John Pascoe: author, historian, mountaineer, photographer*. Craig Potton Publishing.
- Nathan S. 2015. *James Hector: explorer, scientist, leader*. Wellington: Geoscience Society of New Zealand.
- Nolden S. 2016. The life and legacy of Sir Julius von Haast: exploring archival documentary heritage collections. *Records of the Canterbury Museum*. 30: 65–80.
- Nolden S, Burns R, Nathan S. 2012. *The correspondence of Julius Haast and James Hector, 1862-1887*. Geoscience Society of New Zealand miscellaneous publication 133D.
- Nolden S, Nathan S, Mildenhall E. 2013. *The correspondence of Julius Haast and Joseph Dalton Hooker, 1861-1886*. Geoscience Society of New Zealand miscellaneous publication 133H.
- Paul J. 1977/1978. Twelve watercolours of glaciers in the Province of Canterbury: An account of the collaboration between Julius von Haast & John Gully in the 1860s. *Art New Zealand*. 8: 56–59.
- Taylor CRH, editor. 1953. *Heinrich von Haast, 1864-1953: memorial tributes and a graduation address*. Wellington: Mary von Haast.