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PICNICKING AND WELLBEING IN COLONIAL AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND: THREE HISTORICAL SCENES

Joanna Cobley

INTRODUCTION

Picnics are a social practice widespread across classes and continents (Battiscombe, 1949; Davidson, 2014; Katz & Weaver, 2003; Levy, 2014). Food is packed, people travel to a chosen place, and ordinary routines are temporarily suspended, allowing conversation, recreation, scenery, and anticipation to distinguish the outing from an everyday meal (Mitchell, 1995). Because the practice appears familiar, its historical significance can be overlooked. While historical sources cannot establish individual psychological states, they reveal the social conditions through which connection, pleasure, belonging, and engagement with place became possible (Brickell, 2008; Ross, 2008). Contemporary scholarship on commensality, wellbeing, and nature connectedness provides a restrained vocabulary for considering why shared food, sociability, and particular environments may have mattered historically (Capaldi et al., 2014; De Neve et al., 2026; Jönsson et al., 2021; Le Moal et al., 2025), suggesting that collective outdoor dining was intimately tied to emotional and communal survival.

To explore how these dynamics of wellbeing and spatial belonging evolved, this article analyses three scenes from nineteenth-century Aotearoa New Zealand: Augustus Earle's Christmas picnic at Te Puna Bay in 1827; James Crowe Richmond's 1851 picnic at Ratanui; and the Māori-hosted gathering at Tīpapakuku, Wairarapa, in 1896 (Waitangi Tribunal, 2010), followed by a return Pigeon Bush picnic. Spanning the pre-colonial maritime frontier to the late colonial period, these specific scenes capture a critical century of rapid social and political transformation. Across these cases, the picnic shifts from an early cross-cultural maritime encounter, through a mechanism for settler community-making, to a highly charged political occasion involving Māori hosts, settlers, and Crown representatives. Ultimately, this article uses the micro-history of the picnic to examine how shared leisure and outdoor commensality served as vital yet contested sites for anchoring social networks, negotiating political authority, and enacting collective wellbeing across a changing colonial landscape.

What counted as a picnic?

Eating outdoors is not necessarily a picnic (Csergo, 2003). This article defines a picnic as an arranged social meal held outdoors, away from ordinary domestic or working routines, in which recreation, shared provisions, travel, and location form part of the occasion (Levy, 2014; Mitchell, 1995). The term originally referred to a contributory indoor meal before becoming associated with

pleasure-oriented outdoor dining in nineteenth-century Britain (Battiscombe, 1949; Levy, 2014). By the end of the nineteenth century, picnicking had become a widely recognised leisure practice across a range of social classes and national settings. Crucially, Levy (2008) cautions that these events were not always harmonious; underlying social tensions, illness, or political frictions could disrupt the gathering, meaning that conviviality and wellbeing were never guaranteed outcomes.

In colonial Aotearoa New Zealand, picnics became family and community rituals associated with holidays, churches, workplaces, and voluntary organisations (Clarke, 2007; Mitchell, 1995; Simpson, 2008). Travel, games, conversation, scenery, and release from work made picnicking a distinctive leisure practice. Through these events, settlers expressed a sense of community and temporarily domesticated the local environment for their enjoyment.

The three scenes draw on different sources. Earle's account reflects the perspective of a British visitor; Richmond's watercolour is a retrospective representation; and the Pigeon Bush account combines photographic, newspaper, biographical, and historical evidence. Together, these sources illuminate how picnics were organised, represented, and remembered, while also reflecting the perspectives and priorities of their creators. The Waitangi Tribunal's *The Wairarapa ki Tararua Report* (2010) is an invaluable secondary source; it synthesises Māori oral traditions and testimonies that were largely absent from the settler record and situates the final gathering within the contested history of Wairarapa Moana.

SCENE ONE: TE PUNA BAY, 1827



Figure 1. Augustus Earle (1827),
Tepoanah [i.e. Te Puna] Bay of Islands, New Zealand, a church missionary establishment.
[Watercolour, 327 x 632 mm]. Trove. National Library of Australia. http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-134515608.

On Christmas Day 1827, travelling artist Augustus Earle joined a picnic at Te Puna in the Bay of Islands. Earle and his Scottish companion, Mr Shand, were staying at Kororāreka, where European residents, visiting crews, and Māori communities intersected through trade, alliances, and chiefly protection (Moon, 2011). In his narrative and journal of the event, Earle recorded that the party travelled across the bay in two whaleboats and contributed provisions to a "pic-nic feast" (Earle,

1832/1966). The party included Captain Duke of the whaleship *Sisters*, who, while recovering from illness, secured the protection of the rangatira Te Whareumu through a temporary marriage arrangement (Ballara, 2003).

From a Māori worldview, this arrangement operated through the logic of tuku, where gifts, whether fine feather cloaks, carvings, land, or kinship alliances through wāhine (women), could not be refused, and carried obligations (Metge, 2002; Wharepouri, 1994). Duke's presence highlights the cross-cultural dependencies underpinning European life in the Bay of Islands. It was this deeply embedded relationship that facilitated the picnic scene itself, where Earle described the journey as delightful and the scenery as beautiful. Their destination was Te Puna, near Rangihoua, where a Church Missionary Society settlement sat below the pā of the rangatira Waripoaka. The gathering served as a Christmas celebration and a visit to an English resident and ship captain (Earle, 1832/1966; Moon, 2011). Earle's watercolour does not depict the picnic itself but shows the mission establishment below a much older Māori landscape (Figure 1). Its value lies in showing the proximity of the mission cottages, bay, hillside, and Māori settlement. The Rangihoua Church Missionary Society farm operated through relationships with Ngāpuhi rangatira and depended upon Māori protection, labour, food, and trade (Ballara, 1990, 2003; Middleton, 2007; Parsonson, 2013). Earle and other visitors likewise moved within Māori-controlled networks of travel and access, although Earle's interpretations (such as this painting) remained shaped by nineteenth-century assumptions about civilisation, race, and progress (Earle, 1832/1909; Moon, 2011).

The Christmas picnic exposes a tension between cross-cultural exchange and social division. Earle expected the local missionaries to welcome fellow British subjects during a season associated with home, family, and hospitality. Instead, the missionary men withdrew and declined to join the gathering. After dinner, provisions for punch were sent up the steep hill to the rangatira at Rangihoua pā (Earle, 1832/1909). Although Earle observed that Māori preferred tobacco and tea to alcohol, he shared the punch with Waripoaka and his circle. The missionaries later arrived uninvited to preach and curb the picnickers' behaviour, prompting Waripoaka to reproach them for their lack of festive hospitality on his ancestral ground. The circulation of provisions was meant to foster social alliances. The picnic party provided the initial feast and later sent punch to the Ngāpuhi hosts, creating expectations of reciprocity. Food clearly carried social obligations rather than passing as a neutral commodity.

Rowing, shared provisions, holiday recreation, and contrasting forms of hospitality gave the gathering its sensory and social character. The sources record Earle's enjoyment but cannot establish the experiences or wellbeing of other participants (Earle, 1832/1909, 1832/1966). They do show that European recreation at Te Puna depended upon Māori governance, alliances, hospitality, and control of land and resources (Ballara, 2003).

This initial scene establishes the broader argument of this article: picnicking generated sensory pleasure and social cohesion within networks of authority, material contribution, and protection that European visitors did not control. Those pleasurable experiences were inseparable from the social relationships and power structures that made them possible (Smith, 2007). However, by 1896, colonial expansion, land acquisition, and political change had repositioned such local networks of reciprocity within structures privileging settler dominance and accelerating Māori dispossession (Ballara, 2003; Waitangi Tribunal, 2010).

SCENE TWO: RATANUI, 1851



Figure 2. Richmond, James Crowe, 1822–1898: Picnic near Ratanui. December 1851. Ref: B-163-006. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. https://natlib.govt.nz/records/22872785.

Twenty-four years after the Christmas gathering, James Crowe Richmond recorded a picnic hosted by Charles Brown and his wife, Margaret, at Ratanui, in a remote bush settlement on Brown's land near New Plymouth. Richmond described it as "a picnic or something of that description" (Richmond, 1851). His uncertainty is revealing: the gathering involved travel, shared food, sociability, and recreation, but its connection to an emerging settlement also gave it the character of a temporary encampment.

Richmond recorded 95 visitors, in addition to bullock drivers and Māori working for Brown. Guests rambled through rough clearings, inspected the proposed sawmill site, watched or assisted with tree felling, listened to singing and speeches, and, in Richmond's words, made "a pleasant day of it" (Richmond, 1851). Māori presence is documented, although Richmond's wording places Māori workers and bullock drivers outside his category of "visitors." Whether they shared equally in the meal or recreation cannot be determined. Richmond's watercolour shows two long tables and a large tent in a forest clearing (Figure 2). Brown had the tables and benches constructed from boards intended for a future house, turning building materials into temporary picnic furniture before permanent settlement. Food is indistinct, and the image cannot identify the menu or who prepared it.

Provisioning a gathering of this scale required considerable organisation where access to food and ease of transport were uncertain (Halse, 1851). Sourcing and hauling provisions, processing timber, and constructing tables depended upon the labour of bullock drivers and Māori workers. Domestic food preparation relied on gendered divisions of labour typical of colonial households, although the surviving record leaves individual contributions uncredited (Halse, 1851; Pickles,

2009). The tranquil atmosphere captured in Richmond's watercolour ultimately rested upon a vast network of coordinated labour that his artwork only partially acknowledges.

The landscape was not a neutral setting. The clearing anticipated further felling, milling, and construction, while settler enjoyment of the bush was entwined with plans to transform it into productive property. Wider pressure for Māori land in Taranaki was also intensifying. Pickles (2013) describes colonial engagement with landscape as embodied and sensory but also shaped by possession and environmental change. Mitchell (1995) identifies picnicking as one of the practices through which settlers occupied landscapes, and Ratanui shifts the interpretation of these events from relational encounter to settler community formation. The gathering reveals how sociability, labour, and environmental transformation were intertwined in the everyday making of colonial space.

SCENE THREE: TĪPAPAKUKU PIGEON BUSH, 1896



Figure 3. Māori Picnic, Pigeon Bush, Wairarapa. Hogg, F M:
Photographs from the papers of Alexander Wilson Hogg. Ref: PAColl-4411-1. Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, New Zealand. https://natlib.govt.nz/records/22900090.

By 1896, the railway network firmly linked Wellington, the colony's political centre, with the rural Wairarapa, carrying people, livestock, and goods between the two regions. In January of that year, this transport infrastructure enabled Premier Richard Seddon to travel to Tīpapakuku, connecting local negotiations over Wairarapa Moana (Lake Wairarapa) with the wider politics of colonial government. The 1890s marked the heyday of picnic excursion culture (Atkinson, 2007). Yet Māori and Pākehā often occupied separate social and political spheres (Ballara, 1993b). Public gatherings such as picnics brought these worlds together, although reports of such encounters were filtered through a Eurocentric lens.

The picnic hosted by Ngāti Kahungunu leader Hāmuera Tamahau Mahupuku and the iwi he represented at Tīpapakuku in January 1896 was larger, more formal, and more political than the earlier scenes. Contemporary reporting identified Māori as hosts and described the occasion as marking a settlement concerning the ownership and use of Wairarapa Moana. Seddon attended with members of his family, politician James Carroll, and other visitors, while local settlers also participated ("Maori and Pakeha," 1896a).

The *Wairarapa Daily Times* presented the gathering as a friendly conclusion to hostility between Māori owners and settlers whose lakeside land faced seasonal flooding ("Maori and Pakeha," 1896a). That celebratory framing requires scrutiny. Water levels in Wairarapa Moana were not merely an inconvenience awaiting technical management. The lakes and wetlands sustained Māori food gathering, travel, resources, and cultural relationships, with tuna (eel) holding central importance. Settlers, by contrast, envisioned a drained landscape planted with pasture grasses. Crown policy favoured agricultural development while weakening tino rangatiratanga (Royal, 2011; Waitangi Tribunal, 2010).

The eels prepared and served at the picnic belonged to the world at stake in these negotiations. Control of the lake opening affected surrounding farmland alongside the ecology and accessibility of a fishery of continuing importance to tangata whenua (Waitangi Tribunal, 2010). Their presence at the feast should not be burdened with meanings the sources do not make explicit, but it does connect the food served at the picnic to the environmental and political history of the gathering.

The event was hosted by Hāmuera Tamahau Mahupuku. As historian Angela Ballara (1993a; 1993b) notes, Tamahau was a major Wairarapa rangatira and political leader whose activities extended beyond the picnic. His role as host matters because it prevents the gathering from being interpreted as a Crown occasion at which Māori merely appeared (Waitangi Tribunal, 2010). Māori organisers created the event: they received visitors at Tīpapakuku, prepared the meal, delivered speeches, and directed the sequence of hospitality and entertainment.

The *Wairarapa Daily Times* focused closely on what the hosting couple wore, recording the cultural blending and high status of the occasion ("Maori and Pakeha," 1896a). Tamahau Mahupuku wore a white suit beneath a feather cloak, while his wife, Alice Mahupuku, wore a European-style white cotton gown beneath her own feather cloak—both garments serving as visible expressions of their mana (Ballara, 1993a; Figure 3). The *Times* reporter's focus remained superficial. For instance, while Tamahau welcomed Seddon alongside other rangatira whose speeches structured the event, the reporter admitted their names were too difficult to remember, rendering the other Māori speakers anonymous ("Maori and Pakeha," 1896a). This selective reporting extended to Alice; by reducing her presence to a fashion observation, the record overlooked her political significance within the world of wāhine Māori.

The speeches were not only ceremonial. They addressed how the transfer concerning Wairarapa Moana was to be understood and what relationships Māori would retain with the lakes and fisheries ("Maori and Pakeha," 1896a). The Waitangi Tribunal's examination of the negotiations gives weight to contemporary statements concerning continued access to the lakes, fishing, and reserves (Waitangi Tribunal, 2010). The significance of the speeches extended beyond the convivial form of the gathering to what was declared before the assembly. Specifically, the language of tuku framed the transfer not as a finite commercial transaction, but as a mechanism establishing permanent relational obligations. Through this relational logic, a gift cannot be uncoupled from the

donor because it retains the spiritual life force of the giver. Much like the early marriage alliance at Te Puna, where the gift of the daughter as a wife became living personification of the rangatira's power, the gift of the lake was an extension of Tamahau Mahupuku's mana. By accepting it, the Crown was bound in a perpetual cycle of reciprocity that guaranteed ongoing tribal stewardship, rather than an absolute alienation of Māori customary title.

After the speeches, Seddon proposed that the gathering turn to food. Tablecloths were spread across a natural terrace for the afternoon luncheon, where Māori men wearing pinafores served the meal and exchanged jokes with Māori and Pākehā guests ("Maori and Pakeha," 1896a). This service brings the infrastructure of hospitality to the foreground. Rather than a passive colonial encounter, the interaction reflects the relational dynamics of tikanga, where the playfulness of the shared jokes and the deliberate visibility of the male food distribution functioned to express manaakitanga and establish cross-cultural connection. The men serving in pinafores disrupted the reporter's expectations sufficiently to attract comment, providing unusual evidence of visible male food preparation and distribution ("Maori and Pakeha," 1896a).

Seddon and his wife were presented with woven feather cloaks, which was followed by young women performing haka and another group dancing to concertina music ("Maori and Pakeha," 1896a). The associated photograph (Figure 3) captures this staged environment, featuring Seddon in his cloak alongside Tamahau, Carroll, entertainers, and an accordion. Crucially, it anchors the visual record to the labour at the luncheon; the server wearing a floral pinafore or apron is the very man holding the large tuna (eel). While this image illustrates the day's event, it cannot disclose how Māori participants themselves interpreted the gathering (Waitangi Tribunal, 2010, p. 682). The reporter described apparent enjoyment and "good fellowship," yet the same account criticised the length of Seddon's speech and recorded settler doubts about whether the dispute was truly resolved ("Maori and Pakeha," 1896a). Conviviality and scepticism occupied the same event.

Several weeks later, a return picnic was held at Pigeon Bush, reversing the direction of hospitality. The *Wairarapa Daily Time*s described a Pākehā-organised meal featuring foods characteristic of a substantial colonial picnic: poultry, ham, pies, sandwiches, puddings, cakes, and sweets ("The Pigeon Bush Picnic," 1896b). Both events included haka, song, and dance, signalling shared enjoyment and the performative dimensions of cross-cultural encounter. The exchange of hospitality demonstrated goodwill and mutual recognition, but did not alter the unequal political context in which the gatherings occurred. Questions concerning land, fisheries, reserves, and the future management of Wairarapa Moana remained unresolved, despite the convivial atmosphere of both occasions.

When the final agreement was reached, contemporary participants described the transfer as a gift rather than a sale, but Māori gifting (tuku) did not constitute an unconditional surrender of ownership and relationship. Tuku could contain expectations of reciprocity, responsibility, and continuing connection, making assurances about access, fishing rights, and reserves especially significant (Waitangi Tribunal, 2010). The alliance through which Captain Duke lived under Te Whareumu's protection provides an earlier example of exchange creating continuing obligations rather than completing a simple transaction (Ballara, 2003; Metge, 2002; Wharepouri, 1994).

The agreement concerning Wairarapa Moana formed part of a longer dispute over fisheries, wetlands, and access to resources central to Māori livelihoods and identity (Royal, 2011; Waitangi Tribunal, 2010). The social pleasures of January 1896 therefore unfolded against a background

of ongoing uncertainty about the future of the lake environment and its customary fisheries. The subsequent drainage and modification of the wetland system supported settler agricultural development while affecting Māori access to tuna and other resources (Waitangi Tribunal, 2010). Pigeon Bush is the culminating scene in this article because it exposes the infrastructure beneath social connection. Shared food, humour, and recreation created opportunities for conviviality, but they occurred within an unequal negotiation over land, water, and resources. The picnic reveals both the possibilities and limits of social connection, demonstrating how wellbeing, reciprocity, and belonging remained shaped by unequal authority over the future of place.

WELLBEING AS A HISTORICALLY SITUATED POSSIBILITY

Shared food was central, but commensality should not be idealised. Contemporary research associates meal sharing with life satisfaction, positive affect, and social connection, while acknowledging that the direction of this relationship remains unclear, namely whether shared meals drive wellbeing or happier people simply eat together more often (De Neve et al., 2026). Critical scholarship on commensality demonstrates that eating together can carry obligation and represent hierarchy, exclusion, and unequal labour as much as it does connection (Jönsson et al., 2021). The historical evidence supports this cautious interpretation: shared meals created social occasions, but not on equal terms. At the Tīpapakuku picnic, as an illustration, Māori hospitality and labour were mobilised to host Crown representatives and settlers under the heavy weight of local obligation. The subsequent return picnic did not constitute diplomatic reconciliation; instead, it masked starkly unequal distribution of political power. The eating together did nothing to disrupt core colonial hierarchies, as questions of ownership, fisheries, access, reserves, and future custodial responsibilities endured long after the food was cleared (Waitangi Tribunal, 2010). Ultimately, the return picnic acknowledged a relationship without fulfilling the obligations associated with tuku.

As expected in a picnic setting, place shaped each scene. Te Puna Bay, Ratanui's forest clearing, and Pigeon Bush's lakeside setting were not passive backgrounds. They actively dictated the movement, atmosphere, and sensory character of eating outdoors; the pull of oars across water, the dense enclosure of bush, and the heat and smoke of cooking stones, the textures of ground cloths and woven garments, and the sounds of speech, singing, and concertina music were experienced through culturally constructed bodies (Pickles, 2013; Smith, 2007). While contemporary psychological research identifies a clear association between nature connectedness and subjective wellbeing (Capaldi et al., 2014), the historical evidence suggests the meanings and wellbeing value of these environments were neither universal nor politically neutral. What settlers experienced as a pleasing, recreational landscape for temporary leisure was, for Māori, ancestral whenua under active colonial pressure (Park, 1995). At Pigeon Bush, the setting was connected to a wetland economy and fishery under negotiation. Wairarapa Moana sustained vital food gathering, cultural relationships, and access to tuna—indigenous resources the Waitangi Tribunal identified as central to Māori survival and concerns regarding the settlement (Royal, 2011; Waitangi Tribunal, 2010). The environment was not merely a setting for leisure, but the literal ground upon which cross-cultural relationships and territorial displacements were physically enacted.

Wellbeing emerged through relationships and material conditions. At Te Puna Bay, European conviviality depended upon Māori authority and hospitality. At Ratanui, settler sociability relied upon labour and anticipated environmental transformation. At Pigeon Bush, these strands

converged. Māori hosting and labour enabled a large gathering where food, recreation, and good fellowship occurred alongside negotiations concerning a resource of enduring importance to tangata whenua. Synthesising the Māori testimonies preserved in the Waitangi Tribunal's reconstruction demonstrates why social connection must not be confused with equality of outcome. Relationships to whenua, water, fisheries, and ancestral resources remained fundamental to Māori wellbeing, identity, and continuity across generations (Waitangi Tribunal, 2010). Ultimately, the claims made across these three scenes concern historical conditions and social possibilities rather than measurable psychological outcomes. While contemporary wellbeing research helps identify why shared food, sociability, recreation, and place are universally significant, this framework cannot retrospectively diagnose individual historical participants (De Neve et al., 2026). The picnic created brief windows for cross-cultural connection, but it fundamentally reveals how historical wellbeing was bound to unequal authority over land, resources, and the future of place.

CONCLUSION

Picnicking may appear a light historical subject, yet its ordinariness is revealing. The picnic brought together food, movement, recreation, labour, social relationships, and place in a temporary but culturally recognisable form. At Te Puna Bay, a Christmas picnic created conviviality within a Māori-controlled world of protection, commerce, and hospitality. Contributions to the feast and provisions sent to the rangatira show giving extending the social life of the meal. At Ratanui, tables assembled from the boards of a future house transformed a forest clearing into a social space while anticipating settlement, milling, and environmental change. At Pigeon Bush (Tīpapakuku), these relationships became explicit and consequential. Māori hosts used food, speeches, performance, and tuku to receive Crown and settler visitors during negotiations concerning Wairarapa Moana, an act of hospitality later answered by a return Pākehā feast. The language of tuku carried expectations of relationship, reciprocity, and responsibility for the future, while the power to define and subsequently honour those responsibilities remained unevenly held.

Taken together, these scenes demonstrate that picnics were more than occasions for leisure. They were social events through which relationships were negotiated, communities affirmed, resources exchanged, and claims to place expressed. The practices that produced conviviality depended upon labour, hospitality, access to land and food, and meanings attached to giving and receiving. Seen in this way, picnics offer a distinctive lens on the dynamics of human wellbeing because they amplify how ordinary pleasure, belonging, and social connection were embedded within wider networks of environmental, economic, and political relations.

Asking who prepares the food, who controls the place, who is invited, who is represented, and who benefits turns a nostalgic image of a picnic into an archive of relational life. The Waitangi Tribunal's reconstruction of Wairarapa Moana reminds us that wellbeing cannot be separated from enduring relationships with whenua, water, resources, and cultural continuity (Waitangi Tribunal, 2010). As the nature of these gatherings evolved across a critical century of rapid social and political transformation, how wellbeing emerged through collective practices remained deeply shaped by unequal distributions of power and authority. Reading picnics through this relational lens shows how these temporary suspensions of routine can illuminate the historical foundations of wellbeing, exposing the conditions under which it flourishes or is constrained.

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