

Oceania *under steam*

*Sea transport and the
cultures of colonialism,
c. 1870-1914*

FRANCES STEEL



STUDIES IN IMPERIALISM

general editor John M. MacKenzie

When the 'Studies in Imperialism' series was founded more than twenty-five years ago, emphasis was laid upon the conviction that 'imperialism as a cultural phenomenon had as significant an effect on the dominant as on the subordinate societies'. With more than eighty books published, this remains the prime concern of the series. Cross-disciplinary work has indeed appeared covering the full spectrum of cultural phenomena, as well as examining aspects of gender and sex, frontiers and law, science and the environment, language and literature, migration and patriotic societies, and much else. Moreover, the series has always wished to present comparative work on European and American imperialism, and particularly welcomes the submission of books in these areas. The fascination with imperialism, in all its aspects, shows no sign of abating, and this series will continue to lead the way in encouraging the widest possible range of studies in the field. 'Studies in Imperialism' is fully organic in its development, always seeking to be at the cutting edge, responding to the latest interests of scholars and the needs of this ever-expanding area of scholarship.

Oceania under steam

MANCHESTER
1824

Manchester University Press

SELECTED TITLES AVAILABLE IN THE SERIES

SILK AND EMPIRE

Brenda King

SCOTTISHNESS AND IRISHNESS IN NEW ZEALAND SINCE 1840

Angela McCarthy

AIR EMPIRE

British imperial civil aviation, 1919-39

Gordon Pirie

GENDER, CRIME AND EMPIRE

Convicts, settlers and the state in early colonial Australia

Kirsty Reid

CHILD, NATION, RACE AND EMPIRE

Child rescue discourse, England, Canada and Australia, 1850-1915

Shurlee Swain and Margot Hillel

Oceania under steam

**Sea transport and the cultures of
Colonialism, c.1870–1914**

Frances Steel

MANCHESTER
UNIVERSITY PRESS
Manchester

Copyright © Frances Steel 2011

The right of Frances Steel to be identified as the author of this work has been asserted by her in accordance with the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act 1988.

Published by MANCHESTER UNIVERSITY PRESS

ALTRINCHAM STREET, MANCHESTER M1 7JA, UK

www.manchesteruniversitypress.co.uk

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data applied for

ISBN 978 0 7190 8290 0 hardback

First published 2011

The publisher has no responsibility for the persistence or accuracy of URLs for any external or third-party internet websites referred to in this book, and does not guarantee that any content on such websites is, or will remain, accurate or appropriate.

Typeset in Trump Medieval
by Servis Filmsetting Ltd, Stockport, Cheshire

For my parents

CONTENTS

List of figures — ix
Acknowledgements — xi
List of abbreviations — xv
Maps — xvii

General editor's introduction — xix

Introduction	1
Part I Afloat	
1 Steam's 'magic touch': routes, rivalries and regionalism in the Pacific	23
2 The liner: cultures of maritime technology	47
Part II Aboard	
3 Crew culture: maritime men in an iron world	69
4 Labour, race and empire: debating the 'lascar question'	97
5 Guardians and troublemakers: confining women at sea	126
Part III Abroad	
6 The tropical challenges of the island trades	151
7 <i>Sitima</i> days in Suva: wharf labourers and the colonial port	171
8 Indigenous maritime mobilities under colonial rule	193
Conclusion	215

Bibliography — 223
Index — 241

LIST OF FIGURES

1	Former USSCo. building, Water St, Dunedin, 2010 (Photo: Tom Bond)	2
2	USSCo. building, Water St, Dunedin, 1880s (Gavin McLean Collection)	3
3	Union Company Chart of Routes, 1910 (AG-292-002-003, S07-539, Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hakena, University of Otago)	11
4	View of Levuka, c.1875 (PA1-q-330-42-2, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington)	28
5	RMS <i>Niagara</i> (35-R1164, Sir George Grey Special Collections, Auckland City Libraries)	48
6	The Union Company's steamship <i>Wairarapa</i> (<i>Australasian Sketcher</i> (4 April 1884), A/S09/04/84/60, Pictures Collection, State Library of Victoria)	51
7	<i>Wairarapa</i> , July 1884 (Photograph by Alfred H. Burton, negative number C.010420, Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa)	78
8	Plan of the <i>Rotomahana</i> (MS-1064/675, S10-553c, Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hakena, University of Otago)	80
9	'The Chinaman on top again', <i>New Zealand Observer</i> (6 August 1892) (http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast? a=d&d=TO18920806.1.5&e=-----10--1----0--)	100
10	Members of <i>Aparima's</i> crew, 1911 (AG-292-005-001/101, S10-553b, Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hakena, University of Otago)	113
11	Members of <i>Aparima's</i> crew, 1911 (AG-292-005-001/101, S10-553a, Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hakena, University of Otago)	114
12	Federated Seamen's Union pamphlet, September 1910 (H. O. Roth Papers, 94-106-43/07, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington)	115
13	Photograph of a painting depicting the <i>Wairarapa</i> wreck (D. A. De Maus Collection, G-16394-1/2, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington)	127

LIST OF FIGURES

14	The <i>Wairarapa</i> disaster, <i>New Zealand Observer</i> (17 November 1894) (http://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/paperspast? a=d&d=TO18941117.1.16&e=-----10--1----0--)	130
15	Suva wharf, 1900 (Seddon's trip to the Pacific Islands Album, PA1-0-461-16, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington)	172
16	'Solomon Island boy aged about 14 on the <i>Wainui</i> ', 1888 (E-394-f-069, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington)	178
17	Suva Harbour, Viti Levu, c.1910 (Price Collection, G-1789-1/2, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington)	183
18	Packing bananas for New Zealand, Samoa, c.1890 (Tattersall Collection, PAColl-3799-01, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington)	185

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This book has a lot to say about ships and the people who owned, worked on and travelled by them, yet it was inspired by time in the archives rather than time at sea. I grew up in Dunedin, at the sometimes chilly south-western edge of the vast Pacific Ocean, but only over the course of this research did I begin to think seriously about the historical significance of the surrounding oceanic world. Along the way I have had the very good fortune to be supported and encouraged by many people and institutions in Oceania and beyond. I have a number of debts to acknowledge here.

This book developed from my doctoral research undertaken at the Australian National University. My supervisor, Margaret Jolly, has been an inspiring mentor. Margaret prompted me to place New Zealand history in its Pacific context, guided me through the challenges and complexities of writing about the colonial past, and kept me alert to the colonial legacies in the contemporary Pacific. Her creative energy, spirit of enquiry, compassion and sense of fun demonstrated to me the rich rewards of an academic career. I am also indebted to other members of my doctoral committee. Tony Ballantyne offered many perceptive comments, insights and suggestions. I have been greatly influenced by the work Tony has done to reframe and locate New Zealand history in the context of imperial networks and exchanges. I appreciate his ongoing intellectual generosity. Paul D'Arcy showed ceaseless enthusiasm for this project. His formative work on the maritime dimensions of Pacific history influenced my own turn to the sea. I am grateful to Vicki Luker for her thoughtful engagement with and careful critiques on my many chapter drafts, and Ann McGrath for her ongoing interest in my research. The Gender Relations Centre in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies was a wonderfully supportive and productive place to pursue this research and I am thankful for the collective friendship and collegiality of all the academic and administrative staff and fellow graduate students who worked in the Centre between 2004 and 2007.

I have appreciated the opportunity to present my ideas at a number of conferences and seminars. Graduate workshops hosted by the Australian National University's History Program, Humanities Research Centre and Centre for Cross-Cultural Research were invaluable in the early stages of my research. I was privileged to participate in the final 'Challenges to Perform' workshop held in September 2004,

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

where Greg Dening, Donna Merwick and Carolyn Strange inspired all participants to embrace the essential creativity of the scholarly writing life. Greg's legacy continues to inspire.

The transition from dissertation to book was aided by the comments of my doctoral examiners, Miles Ogborn and Sugata Bose. I am grateful for their insight and encouragement, pressing me to articulate the wider significance of the Pacific lives narrated in the following pages. The book took final shape at the University of Otago and the University of Wollongong. I thank colleagues at both institutions for their support and interest, and Georgine Clarsen, Julia Martinez and members of the Faculty of Arts Writing Group for offering valuable criticisms and comments on various chapters. I also thank Jenny Newell at the National Museum of Australia who made many thoughtful suggestions on aspects of my work.

Others have offered invaluable advice as I got to grips with the book-writing process and I would particularly like to thank Barbara Brookes, Angela McCarthy and Brian Martin. As my honours supervisor at Otago, Barbara was the one who encouraged me to pursue a PhD and to move countries to do so. I appreciate her continued support, advice and friendship. Special thanks are also due to my auntie, Valerie O'Reilly, for her interest in this project and for reading each chapter as I slowly revised it and emailed it through to her. Nicky Page also read the whole manuscript and offered many helpful editorial suggestions.

Research in Australia, New Zealand, Fiji and England was only possible through funding provided by a doctoral scholarship associated with the project funded by the Australian Research Council, 'Oceanic Encounters: Colonial and Contemporary Transformations of Gender and Sexuality in the Pacific', and through supplementary grants from the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies and the University of Wollongong. Helpful service provided by staff at the Hocken Collections, the Alexander Turnbull Library, the Wellington City Council Archives, and the National Archives of Fiji made archival research such a pleasure. I also thank for their assistance the Wellington Museum of City and Sea, Archives New Zealand (Wellington), the Special Collections at the University of Auckland Library, the Auckland City Library, the National Library of Australia, the Fiji Museum, the Caird Library and the Port Chalmers Museum. I am also grateful to Ian Farquhar for his kind and prompt assistance with my jumble of questions about the Union Steam Ship Company's operations.

I have enjoyed working with Manchester University Press and thank staff for their assistance, advice and hard work throughout the production process. I am also grateful to the Press's anonymous

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

reviewers whose suggestions and critiques have helped to sharpen my analysis.

Some aspects of this book previously appeared in my article 'Women, men and the Southern Octopus: shipboard gender relations in the age of steam', *International Journal of Maritime History*, Forum 'Women and the Sea in the Pacific', 20:2 (2008), 285–306; my chapter 'Suva under steam: mobile men and a colonial port capital, 1880s–1910s,' in Tony Ballantyne and Antoinette Burton (eds), *Moving Subjects: Gender, Mobility and Intimacy in an Age of Global Empire* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 2008), 110–26; and 'Via New Zealand around the world: The Union Steam Ship Company and the trans-Pacific mail lines, 1870s–1910s', in Prue Ahrens and Chris Dixon (eds), *Coast to Coast: Case Histories of Modern Pacific Crossings* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2010), 59–76.

Many family members and friends in Australia and New Zealand have offered encouragement and welcome distractions over the years: thank you to my sisters, Amelia, Renee, Hannah and Gabrielle, and to Diana Brown, Emma Dolan, Kirsty Douglas, Greg Dvorak, Susan Engel, Willy Flockton, Dave Haines, Aimee Jephson, Emily O'Gorman, Kumiko Kawashima, Katherine Lepani, Greg Rawlings, Tiffany Shellam and Heather Wilson. In Canberra I shared much domestic bliss with Alison and Mia McCaskie, Anna Paice and Anita Reynolds. Many people were very hospitable and generous of their time and space during my research trips: I would like to thank Katherine and John Dolan, Amelia and family, Renee and Chris, Sione Makasiale, Arieta Rasiga and the Wainaloka community on Ovalau.

I have dedicated this book to my parents, Janis and David, who have supported my research interests and endeavours in so many ways over the years. My father has recently embraced the hunt for steamship company ephemera in junk shops and online with an enthusiasm that appears to rival my own for the textual traces of the maritime world. And, finally, I owe a great debt of gratitude to Tom Bond of Shrimp Lodge for his patience and good humour, for making sure I stepped out of the archives to rediscover the beauty of the Otago coast, and for simply believing in what I do.

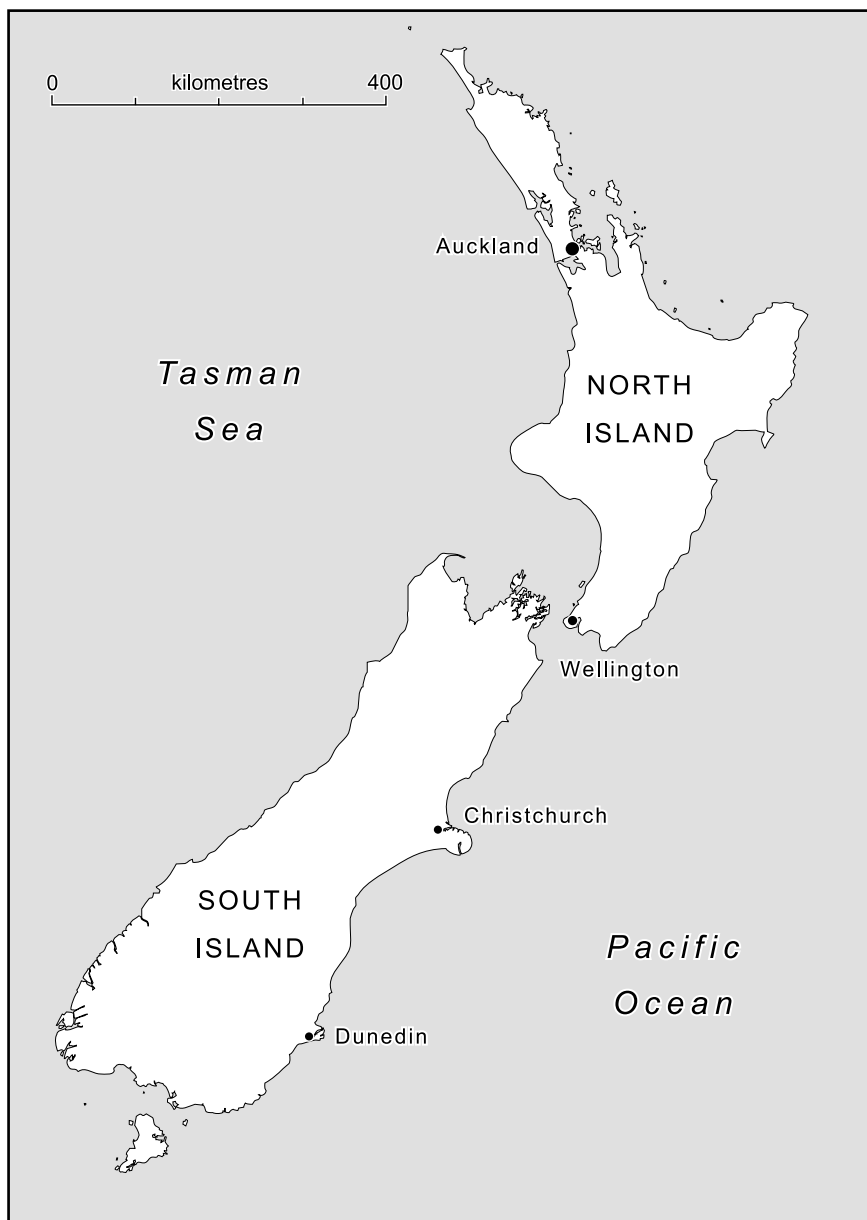
LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

<i>AJHR</i>	<i>Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives</i>
ASNCo.	Australasian Steam Navigation Company
AUSNCo.	Australasian United Steam Navigation Company
CSO	Colonial Secretary's Office (Fiji)
FSU	Federated Seamen's Union of New Zealand
<i>NZPD</i>	<i>New Zealand Parliamentary Debates</i>
P&O	Peninsula and Oriental Steam Navigation Company
USSCo.	Union Steam Ship Company of New Zealand

Archives

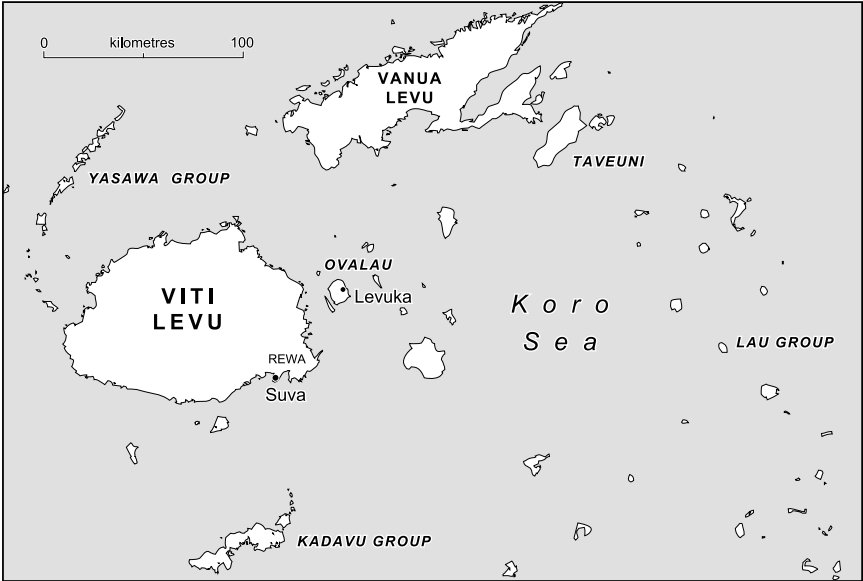
ANZ	Archives New Zealand Wellington (branch)
ATL	Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington
HC	Hocken Collections, Uare Taoka o Hakena, University of Otago, Dunedin
NAF	National Archives of Fiji, Suva
UASC	University of Auckland Library Special Collections
WCCA	Wellington City Council Archives

MAPS
NEW ZEALAND



OCEANIA UNDER STEAM

Fiji



GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

One of the commitments of the 'Studies in Imperialism' series is to a 'de-centred' imperial history, that is, a modern approach which sees the relations of imperialism as constituting something far beyond a set of radiating connections between the metropole and the so-called periphery. This was an image that was regularly perpetuated in the world maps of trade and steamship lines common in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. It symbolised the manner in which empire was a global terrain at which writers and cartographers looked from the vantage point of the so-called 'Mother Country'. But the establishment of colonial rule created something much more complex than this, with 'sub-imperialisms' being set up in various parts of the world, with intercolonial relationships establishing complex webs of economic, social and cultural networks. As Frances Steel demonstrates in this timely book, this was never more true than in the area of steamship histories, not least in the Pacific.

There are a number of new perspectives established in this focus upon New Zealand and Oceania. First, steamship lines are no longer seen as capitalist organisations that connected the centre of European empires to their colonial outposts. Second, the emphasis shifts from the prime concerns of past histories which have examined the Atlantic and Caribbean worlds, as well as steamer connections with Africa, the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent, Australia, South-East Asia and the Far East. Third, earlier works, both popular and academic, have tended to look at the large companies, the high-profile shipping lines which constituted (in the words of the title of an earlier book in the series) the 'flagships of imperialism'. Finally, past studies have invariably privileged ships over people, economics over social and cultural relations.

As I have myself written in the past, there has long been a need for studies of the apparently smaller – and no less significant – enterprises of the empire of steam.

The Straits Steamship Company, the Irrawaddy Flotilla Company, Burns Philp of Sydney, steamers on the African lakes, and many others are as deserving of research as Cunard, P&O, Union-Castle and British India. The Union Steam Ship Company of New Zealand comes into the same category. These companies with a lower profile (at least in Europe) had a powerful impact upon the coastal, riverine, lakeshore and archipelagic areas in which they operated. They were equally

GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

significant in bringing the transformations of the imperial relationship to bear upon indigenous peoples and their multiplicit relationships with Europeans and the British world. Moreover, each ship was itself an imperial microcosm, carrying within itself evidence of new building techniques, of steam technologies, of human class and racial hierarchies, of social and culinary conventions, of working relationships, of the variable mobility of peoples, and of the cargoes which were representative of each regional economic system. Among the passengers and crew of each vessel were to be found varied examples of dominant and subordinate peoples, travelling and working in a wide variety of guises within colonial systems. Moreover, steamships imposed themselves upon indigenous nautical traditions which had transferred peoples and goods along coasts, between islands, around lakes, even across continents (like the Indian Ocean dhow or the Chinese junk). But they seldom achieved a sudden or easy victory. Such older methods survived and coexisted, performing parallel, related or different functions which colonial rule never quite succeeded in eliminating. These rich textures are more than adequately surveyed in this fascinating work.

It is a special pleasure and privilege for me to introduce this book since it is a field that has intrigued me since childhood, even although I have contributed comparatively little to its study. An upbringing near the docks in a great imperial port (Glasgow) provided me with a fascination with steamships, their operations and the people who worked and travelled in them at a time when quaysides were readily accessible, even to schoolchildren, and health and safety regulations were unknown. Glasgow was proud of its ships, shipbuilders and seafarers, although it is true that, as Frances Steel observes, the local press invariably privileged ships over people in its pictures and stories. From the 1950s onwards and over many decades, I have been fortunate enough to travel back and forth by sea to Africa, North America, South and South-East Asia. As an adventurous young academic I travelled on steamers on African lakes. Later, I developed an acquaintanceship with the operations of the British India Line, a high-profile company founded in India, particularly with its vessels which connected Bombay (Mumbai) to the Persian or Arabian Gulf and eastern India to Singapore. This gave me a long-standing interest in the hermetic world of the ship, which continued to reveal its social and racial hierarchies into the post-colonial world. On the BI I found Indian, Goanese, Chinese and other crew member all performing what I have described as 'invented traditions of ethnic specialisms', a phenomenon that was also evident in other parts of the world. Visits to Australia and New Zealand, not least to their maritime museums, introduced me to the companies, people and trades centred upon those territories and

GENERAL EDITOR'S INTRODUCTION

the network of routes that fanned out in the Pacific and Indian Oceans. It is for all these reasons, as well as the quality of the research, the writing, and its many people-centred insights that it gives me pleasure to introduce this book into the MUP 'Studies in Imperialism' series. It should secure an audience well outside its specific hemisphere, for the insights and methodology encapsulated here are readily applicable elsewhere.

John M. MacKenzie

Introduction

A building of particular note stands at the intersection of Dunedin's Water and Cumberland streets. Unlike other well-preserved examples of the city's rich architectural heritage, upgraded for new offices or converted into inner-city apartments, it is now largely unoccupied. Broken windows and grime-streaked paintwork speak of years of neglect (figure 1). This building was constructed in the early 1880s, a time of unparalleled growth and prosperity in Dunedin as the city capitalised on the rush to Central Otago following the discovery of gold in 1861. The handsome solidity of the original structure embodies the certainty and progressive vision of the city's political and business leaders (figure 2). It was from these premises, centrally located in the railway, harbour and exchange precinct, the city's former commercial and transport hub, that the Union Steam Ship Company of New Zealand (USSCo.) commanded a vast network of steamers, port branches and maritime labour in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Today this building stands as a rather tired remnant of what was one of the largest and most important maritime enterprises in the history of the South Pacific.

The company was established in 1875 by a young entrepreneur, James Mills. As a teenager Mills went to work for the local whaler and shipowner Johnny Jones in Waikouaiti, a small coastal settlement just north of Dunedin. Jones soon put Mills in charge of his Dunedin Harbour Steam Company. On Jones's death in 1869, Mills, then aged twenty-two, was appointed leading trustee of his estate. Over the next few years Mills gradually achieved a prominent position in the local shipping industry and in 1874 he travelled to Britain seeking financial backing to expand his Dunedin-based shipping operations into the long-distance coastal trades. By chance he met a prominent Scottish shipbuilder, Peter Denny, managing director of William Denny and Brothers at Dumbarton. Mills's ambitious vision impressed



1 Former USSCo. building, Water St, Dunedin, 2010

Denny, who offered to build the first two vessels and took shares in them himself. Through a series of amalgamations and takeovers, the company went on to play a dominant role in the New Zealand coastal, trans-Tasman, Tasmanian and Pacific Island shipping routes. Vessels steamed to North America on the transpacific mail routes and also traded to South-East Asia, India and Europe. On the eve of the First World War the company commanded a fleet of seventy-five steamers. This tentacular stranglehold over regional maritime transport services soon earned it the disparaging title 'The Southern Octopus'.¹

As with the former head office, now shorn of its original rooftop finery and extensive façade, the historical record of the company's influence is not prominently etched on the land and seascapes of the Pacific. Steamers did not survive beyond their years of active service. Company histories catalogue their often untimely and violent demise: ships were wrecked, grounded, broken up, scuttled, burnt out, dismantled or laid up.² You can still find them preserved in perfect miniature, for some of the original builders' models are encased in glass cabinets in the maritime gallery at the Otago Museum. As a child I remember being captivated instead by the huge fin whale skeleton, which stretched nearly the length of the hall, and the diving suit with the plaster dummy man trapped inside, forever staring blankly out of the bulbous copper helmet. These were two mysterious and slightly eerie

INTRODUCTION



2 USSCo. building, Water St, Dunedin, 1880s

relics of the oceanic world beneath, rather than the more mundane history of industrial activity across its surface.

The physical demise of maritime architecture ashore and afloat catalogues a gradual reorientation away from the ocean and towards the land as a source of collective wealth and identity. Today most people have limited first-hand knowledge of ships and few have experienced lengthy coastal or ocean journeys on anything like a routine basis. Working ports are typically rather uninviting industrial spaces with towering cranes, rows of shipping containers and storage sheds fenced off from the public. Once proximate to the wharf, road and bridge construction and a strip of oversized commercial premises have gradually partitioned the Water Street site from the city's harbour basin. The writing of history has itself reinforced this landwards orientation, for terracentric narratives of imperial expansion, colonialism and nation-building have predominated at the expense of maritime themes. In a region like the Pacific, a vast ocean basin in which many small islands are scattered, studies of the nature and significance of seaborne connections, particularly those networks forged between the white settler colonies of New Zealand and Australia with their closest island neighbours in the western Pacific, are underdeveloped.

Oceania under Steam revisits a period when the sea and the ships that traversed it occupied a more immediate and pervasive presence in everyday life. Throughout I use the historical example of the USSCo. to connect a series of sea-focused stories in colonial history. In doing so, I seek to integrate shipping in the broader cultural structures that have shaped the history of empire and Oceania.

Writing empire and steam

The final decades of the nineteenth century marked a revolution in deep-ocean transport. Steam had been in use in shipping early in the century. In their initial phases of development steamships promised much, but the construction of safe and efficient ships suited to long ocean passages was fraught with difficulty. More efficient propulsion mechanisms, notably the screw propeller in the 1840s, the triple-expansion engine in the 1870s, and the steam turbine at the end of the century, eventually produced more power from every ton of coal, making steam a more reliable and cost-effective technology. Furthermore, the introduction in the 1880s of steel as a structural material opened up new design possibilities. Steel reduced a hull's weight, enhanced its stability and allowed the construction of higher and larger decks. Enthusiasm for larger, faster and more technically ambitious ships gained momentum. All the leading shipowners were ordering steamers of a size 'which some years ago would never have been dreamt of', remarked the *Glasgow Herald* in 1881. They were engaged in that 'peaceful rivalry in the production of big ships'.³

An established literature has examined this new era of industrial innovation. Steamers, together with railways, medicines, weapons and the telegraph cable, came to embody the key values of progressive Europe: complexity, power, precision, discipline and the mastery of time and space. As the self-styled 'titans of technology', Victorian Britons regarded these industrial products as potent evidence of superiority and power, fashioning what Michael Adas has labelled 'ideologies of western dominance'.⁴ These 'tools of empire' fostered a stronger, more confident articulation of industrial achievement with national strength and imperial influence.⁵ The historian J. R. Seeley's *The Expansion of England* (1883), which sold 80,000 copies in one year, presented an influential commentary on the power of the scientific inventions of steam and electricity in collapsing space and drawing together a Greater Britain.⁶ Imperial powers began to extend, consolidate and exploit their overseas territories in ways not previously possible. The marriage of new technical innovations and imperial expansion laid the foundations, as Daniel Headrick put it, 'for a new global civilisation based on Western technology'.⁷