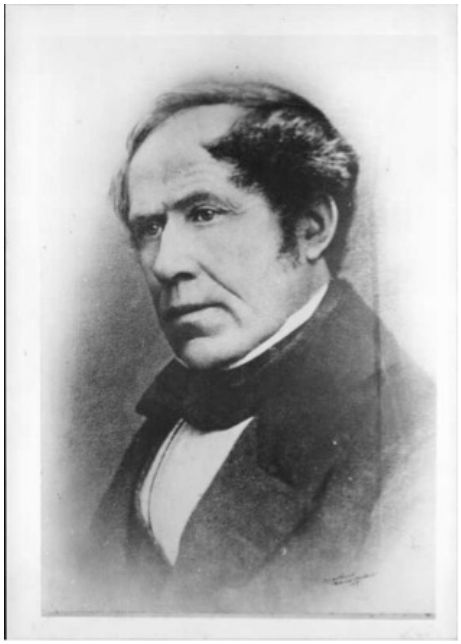
Thesis: A Singular Man: The life of Dr Andrew Sinclair 1794-1861

Exegesis: Weaving tartan: A chronicle of life and death in 19th century British Empire



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A thesis and exegesis submitted to Auckland University of Technology in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree of Master of Creative Writing

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School of Languages and Culture

Contents

Attestation of Authorship

I hereby declare that this submission is my own work and that, to the best of my knowledge and belief, it contains no material previously published or written by another person (except where explicitly identified in the text) nor material which to a substantial extent has been submitted for the award of any other degree or diploma of a university or other institution of higher learning.

Candidate's signature

Cathy Gunn

Acknowledgements

I am grateful to Rosalind Steel for introducing me to her ancestor, Dr Andrew Sinclair, and to Caroline Steel and Graham Shirley for sharing photographs from family archives and details of the family legend I have tried to excavate in this thesis. Dr Sinclair wanted to publish his travel journals during his lifetime. As far as I know he never succeeded, but he lightened my load by leaving a well-marked trail for a researcher to follow. I hope I have done justice to his intention by re-presenting some of his material embellished by my own. Critical feedback and informed conversations about life in the British Navy and New Zealand in the 1840s with my writing buddy Marjan Lousberg helped to shape the work. My long-suffering friends listened patiently for ten years and still politely asked 'how is your writing going?' I thank them all for helping me reach this milestone. Thanks also to Adele Graham for encouraging me to keep going, and to James George, my supervisor.

I dedicate this work to Rosalind Steel, who sadly is not here to read it.

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Abstract

Thesis

Governor Robert Fitzroy appointed Dr Andrew Sinclair as colonial secretary to New Zealand in January 1844. No one in the country knew who Dr Sinclair was, or if he was qualified for a top government job in a troubled colony. Ignorant of the judicious plan and patronage that enabled Fitzroy's choice, the author of Dr Sinclair's entry in the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* attributes the appointment to a chance meeting in Sydney. Other authors have judged Dr Sinclair's political career as unremarkable, yet acknowledged that early European settlement in New Zealand was fraught with tension between missionaries, indigenous Māori, government, independent and New Zealand Company settlers. This biography of the Scottish-born imperial traveller, Royal Navy surgeon, renowned scientist and capable government official uses methods of post critical ethnography and draws on primary and secondary sources to expose flaws in published records. Using the medium of creative non-fiction, the thesis presents insights into a remarkable life touched by major themes of imperialism, industrialisation and colonisation.

Exegesis

The exegesis explains the context, background and aim in writing the thesis *A Singular Man,* how the work draws on the methodology of post-critical ethnography, and uses the chronicle as a storytelling tradition. The metaphor of woven tartan introduces the concept of global themes of 19th century imperial Britain as *warp*, and personal life experiences of the main character as *weft* threads. Writing history through the lens of an individual life story allows the author to examine these global themes as they touch the life of the subject. An summary of relevant literature reflects the richness and complexity of the *pattern* used to develop the thesis.

Exegesis: Weaving tartan, a chronicle of life and death in 19th century British Empire

First encounter

I was introduced to Dr Andrew Sinclair in December 2009, as far as that's possible with someone who died more than 150 ago. A friend from Australia handed me four carbon-copied pages recounting a family legend of an ancestor born in Scotland in the last decade of the 18th century. The story told of degrees in science and law, a career as a medical doctor, three voyages around the world in the *Beagle* with Charles Darwin, an appointment as Governor General of New Zealand, and a gift of land to found a University in Auckland. I worked at that university and was originally from Scotland, so my friend's mother Ros thought I may be able to confirm details of her distinguished ancestor's life. Ros knew I made a hobby of genealogy research for anyone with Scottish connections, and thought a man with such a notable career shouldn't be too hard to trace. Armed with the clues she provided and unrestricted access to well-ordered records of 170 years of European settlement in New Zealand, I began a journey that took ten years to reach the milestone of writing this thesis. Although I found most of the legend untrue, the paths it led down were profound and intriguing. The search is not over yet.

The legend had Dr Sinclair descended from Lord Sinclair of the Isles, a title bestowed on William Sinclair, 3rd Earl of Orkney, in 1449 and passed down to the present generation. The clan genealogist failed to find any connection to this northern branch of Clan Sinclair. Degrees in science and law also proved wide of the mark. In fact, university records show Dr Sinclair studied medicine in Glasgow, Edinburgh and Paris, before sailing to the edges of the British Empire as a Royal Navy surgeon from 1822-1843. His Navy service record shows he never served on the *Beagle,* and there is no evidence he met Charles Darwin, though he was on *HMS Sulphur* for four years completing surveys of the west coast of America where the *Beagle* left

off. Sinclair shared a passion for the natural sciences with Darwin and many other men in his chosen profession, so it's easy to connect roots to the elaborated legend.

Sinclair's arrival in New Zealand in December 1843 marked the end of an unusually long and dangerous career at sea. Most Navy men did not survive so long in the age of sail, uncharted coasts and primitive medicine. Auckland was home for the next 18 years, with his late brother's family from Glasgow after 1852. His appointment in what was then New Zealand's capital did not quite make the rank of governor general. A strict social class system reached out from Britain to keep a man of his status lower down the hierarchy as colonial secretary, a senior but subordinate role. A picture of tall, Victorian wrought iron gates believed to be the entrance to Dr Sinclair's home failed to connect to a gift of land to the University of Auckland, though he is listed as a founding member of that institution. Early hand-sketched titles bound into overstuffed leather volumes show he owned land the university's School of Fine Arts now sits on, but this was bequeathed to relatives and sold long before that time.

Being able to recount an equally intriguing life story lightened the task of presenting Sinclair descendants with evidence of an embellished family legend, and it was not just the intrigue that made me determined to write his biography. My research had discovered more than a family legend that needed updating. Few accounts of New Zealand settler history mention Dr Sinclair at all. Most that do seem to judge him unfairly as an uninspiring character with no particular political abilities. Some sources have got the facts wrong. Others can be challenged with support from convincing evidence. Conflicts of interest between mid-19th century government, the press, land speculators, missionaries, indigenous Māori, New Zealand Company and independent settlers are reasonably well documented. The extent to which these tensions distorted the telling of history is both subtle and contested. An imperialist tendency to focus on indigenous people either as cultural curiosities or sites of conflict exposes one fault line in reconstructions of the past. Troublesome power relations between the hub and remote sites of

empire, the politics and psychology of colonisation, and the almost total exclusion of indigenous, female and working class voices create further distortions. Finding gaps in one individual's story led me to wonder who and what else the power (and bias) of *he who held the pen* had done similar disservice.

Research questions

I began the research with two questions. Could the rich and varied sources of primary data now available provide insights into the life and character of Dr Andrew Sinclair, and could his biography cast doubt on the reliability of the few published accounts of his life and career? The first question produced some insights and left other aspects as mysterious as they were at the start. The second broadened out to include accepted versions of early European settler history in New Zealand. It was this broader question that decreed the work should not deviate from the facts as far as they could be ascertained, even though a work of fiction could have told a more thrilling story. A biography is loyal to the truth as close as any interpretation can come to that slippery concept. In this creative non-fiction thesis, I use narrative devices and added fictionalised elements to lift the story out of the more traditional expositional style of that genre. For example, at one pivotal point, Dr Sinclair writes to tell his niece why he believes telling his version of the truth is so important. This reflects my own view. After reading and transcribing hundreds of pages of Dr Sinclair's writing and selecting scenes to blend with ones created, I took the liberty of writing this into a first person narrative because I had come to believe it is a view he would have shared.

Methodology

Research for *A Singular Man* aligned with post-critical ethnography, using data from a variety of sources spanning 180 years. Most data is in the public domain so access was easy, if time consuming due to the dispersed nature of key sources. Libraries and museums in New

Zealand, Australia and the UK, at the Royal Navy base and Kew Botanical Gardens offer full catalogues and advanced search tools with some original material available online. Some site visits brought the thrill of holding old letters and the fusty smell of water-stained diaries written a long time ago. One challenge was how to delimit a search of people and events in an empire that encircled 24% of the physical world and 23% of its population. Another was how to interpret different types of data created at the time or in later years by people with vastly diverse agendas and beliefs. The methods of critical ethnography encouraged me to look for meaning behind actions and hidden forces that might have influenced my subject's choices. Further study led me to post-critical ethnography, which also considers the positionality of both subject and researcher.

Critical and post-critical ethnography

In *Introduction to Critical Ethnography Theory and Method*, Madison (2005, p4) listed five responsibilities of researchers re-presenting others' lives, all of which apply to my study.

- How to reflect on and evaluate purpose, intentions and frames of analysis as a researcher;
- How to predict consequences or evaluate a researcher's potential to do harm;
- How to create and maintain a dialogue of collaboration in research;
- How the specificity of a local story relates to broader context;
- How our work can make the greatest contribution in terms of equity and justice.

Critical ethnographers have a moral responsibility to look beneath the surface for hidden forces, to know what is implied, challenge assumptions and take nothing for granted. Three broad roles a researcher can play are to; a) transmit information from a neutral position; b) use the subjects' own voices to portray indigenous experiences; or c) be an activist who intervenes, advocates and exposes undercurrents (Madison, 2005). I adopt each of these roles in parts of the thesis to portray indigenous experience using my subject's voice, and to intervene and expose undercurrents as far as a non-fiction writer's loyalty to truth permits.

P*ost critical ethnography* extends the methodology so researchers reflect on their own bias and power, consider what they will do with the research for whose benefit, who grants them authority to make claims, and how the research will affect peoples' lives (Noblit, Flores & Murillo, 2004). These are deep questions in a study context where colonisation was, and still remains, a dominant force in the contested indigenous spaces of Scotland and New Zealand. Another pertinent question is; what difference does it make if the researcher comes from a similar background, though a different time, to the subject of their study? I am not sure a biographer who, like their subject, is indigenous in one space and invader in another can give a satisfactory answer. I chose to curate a collection of images and voices, including my own and Dr Sinclair's, to tell what I hope is a convincing and critical story.

But this is not the place for deep analysis of a research methodology. My simpler task is to position myself as a fledgling, post critical ethnographer writing about a subject with whom I share some common background. Dr Sinclair and I both grew up in the south of Scotland far from our clan homelands, which are collocated in the far north-eastern region of Caithness. We both travelled widely before choosing to settle and pursue a professional career in New Zealand. If travel builds knowledge of the world and professions offer choices, it may be assumed that Dr Sinclair also saw the opportunity of a better life than the insalubrious physical and economic climate of Scotland could offer. I suspect we both made that choice with little consideration for the tangata whenua (people of the land) or indigenous culture, but began learning more about that after our respective arrivals. The effects of colonisation are complex at points of departure and arrival (Mackinnon, 2017). A simple view is that at home the Scots were colonised while in New Zealand they were colonisers and abettors in cultural conquest. The reality is more complex, though it is ironic that the basis of the union between Scotland and England was a treaty like the one that bound Aotearoa / New Zealand to England and her satellite colonies in Great Britain. People dispossessed of their land and culture often migrate to reclaim the right to

define their own identity. With distinctive tribal histories suppressed, the *Scots* became *British* and unequal partners under a complex social code that permeates Dr Sinclair's life story.

Some experiences described in *A Singular Man* would have been shaped in invisible ways by Sinclair's ethnicity and common perceptions of Scottish identity in different parts of the world. This was possibly less of a disadvantage in Aotearoa / New Zealand where the proportion of Scotsmen (they were mostly men) in positions of power was relatively high and the means to impose social distinctions weaker. A researcher from a different cultural background might interpret matters differently. Like Dr Sinclair, I am a product of that class system *raised up the ranks* by education and migration and unable to write from another perspective. I tried to seek evidence first and form opinions later, to challenge and debate interpretations in what Madison (2006) called a *dialogic performance* with the data that held clues to Dr Sinclair's character and inner life. That dialogue does not aim to reach a conclusion but to keep the conversation open for [re] negotiation of meaning, like tartan fabric recycled or its threads reworked.

Genre and narrative style

The title *A Singular Man* reflects Dr Sinclair's peculiar life story, and an aspiring creative writer's journey from the faded image of a grand Victorian gateway in a rough-hewn settler colony to a remote gravesite in a scenic mountain range in Te Waipounamu, the South Island of New Zealand. Along with a richly illustrated map of 19th century British Empire, his biography draws a timeline of social change in an age of imperialism, colonisation, industrial revolution, land clearances, the end of the Atlantic slave trade, curves in a rigid social class system and momentous scientific discovery. Each of these topics has been written about separately, but few works, if any, weave them together to explore how they shaped an individual's life story. My aim was to follow in the footsteps of authors who write about world events as they affected individual lives (e.g. Colley, 2004 & 2007; Ashton, 2015).

I use the motif of a tartan shawl to tell the life story of a man born in a town where most people made a living from the handloom weaving industry that produced the timeless Paisley pattern. Threads spun from raw fibres sourced in distant lands were cut from reels and woven into different sizes, shapes and patterns of cloth. Tartan is a distinctive type of pattern created in the 19th century. It is a romanticised construct, perceived as quintessentially Scottish, frequently appropriated and misconstrued along with the people and country of origin. The Scots have been dispossessed of their whenua tupu / ancestral land and scattered across the world for centuries. Many punched above their weight in global terms, often without accolade for high achievement. Cultural suppression meant anything celebrated tended to be claimed as *English* or *British* while deficits or problems were always *Scottish*. This is the context for Andrew Sinclair's life story.

Like a shawl made up of silk, linen or woollen threads woven into a piece of fabric, every life story is unique. This one is constructed from two first person narratives, one by Dr Sinclair himself, and the other a 21st century researcher writing to one of his brother's descendants. Point of view was a difficult choice to make. I wanted Dr Sinclair to tell his own story, but also to add details and temporal perspectives he could not have described in his letters or journals. I needed to own the work and have an omniscient narrator who saw what he could not. After in-depth study of Dr Sinclair's journals and letters, and many failed attempts to find a point of view, I tried imitating his voice and found it worked for me as a writer. I could move freely between historical scene and retrospective description. The more expositional researcher's voice could pull together information, images and voices from various sources to provide context and patch over gaps in the story. This was comfort in the familiar for an experienced academic writer, if perhaps less engaging than fiction for readers. Bookends in the form of letters introduce readers to the two main narrators and their motives for writing. A third narrator has the final word to show how the family legend might have passed down through generations and how Dr Sinclair's personal files arrived at the New Zealand National Library in the 1930s.

The tartan motif embodies an intertextual narrative of curated historic content, woven together in real and fictionalised scenes acted out by authentic characters. A systematic study of Dr Sinclair's life story reveals both broad and specific areas where accepted versions of history are based on biased or limited perspectives, patchy information and reproduced errors of fact. A simple example is an incorrect date engraved on Dr Sinclair's headstone in the remote alpine region in Canterbury where he died. What kind of work he did for the government and whether he died on Monday or Friday may be immaterial, but a plan to teach New Zealand history in schools does depend on reliable sources and unbiased stories. Currently available digital technologies made it easy to gather threads (of evidence) from scattered sources to weave a strong, functional fabric with global social trends as warp and character, ambition and experience as weft[1] of the tartan. The hard part was for a journalist and academic writer to cut the cloth in a more creative style.

Weaving the cloth

A Singular Man draws on methods from history, biography, ethnography and creative non-fiction to situate a life story in the fabric of 19th century British society, the advancement of western science and machinations of empire. On a personal level, the story is written to inform a Sinclair family descendant about the life of her tupuna / ancestor. The biography sits at the intersection of the general and the specific

In weaving terminology, the warp provides the underlying structure and combines with the weft to complete the pattern and substance of a piece of fabric created on a loom. A life story is similar: a blend of time, place, circumstances and social trends overlaid by individual traits,

[1] The lengthwise **warp** yarns are fixed on the loom, while the crosswise **weft** or woof is drawn through and inserted over-and-under the **warp.**

choices, values and experiences. Warp threads from Dr Sinclair's life story reflect a number of global themes from 19th century history.

- Empire, imperial networks and patronage;
- Colonialism and the workings of British colonial service;
- Slavery, the Slave Trade Act (1807) and later emancipation of enslaved Africans;
- Humanitarianism as a driving force and a convenient façade;
- The industrial revolution in Britain and the growth of global capitalism;
- Land clearances and agricultural improvement schemes in Scotland.
- British social class and shifting ways to move across boundaries, the decline of elitism and the rise of the merchant and working classes;
- The Royal Navy and the *gentlemen's club* at the Admiralty;
- Forces for cooperation and coercion in the imperial project.

The weapons used to enforce law and protect remote settlements were as much a part of life in the colonies as they were products of the society that ruled them. In the same way, the life experience of Andrew Sinclair is a product of these broad social themes as much as it is an individual and family story.

His early life in Scotland was touched by the social effects of an industrial revolution, national land clearances and the state of medical education in Scotland at a time when students robbed graves to provide corpses for their anatomy professors to dissect. Later, he worked on the British imperial project to abolish the Atlantic slave trade and joined the swelling ranks of natural scientists where he nearly missed a listing in Aughton (2007) *Voyages that Changed the World*. During 20 years as a Navy surgeon, Dr Sinclair wrote travel journals for the pleasure of a reading public who roamed the world from the safe haven of a fireside chair. It was not for lack of effort that he did not succeed as an author. He sought advice from fellow Scot A. S. Thomson, who wrote *The Story of New Zealand* in 1859 and Sir William Jackson Hooker,

Director of the Royal Botanical Garden in London and author of numerous scientific titles. With a higher rank and better connections Sinclair might have succeeded. In the end, he left enough unpublished papers to give a biographer a head start on telling a compelling human story.

Other authors added perspective to that story. Dr Sinclair is listed in a book *Botanical Explorers of New Zealand* (Glenn, 1950). Royal Navy surgeons had both the means and the opportunity to travel in a role that did not always add up to a full-time occupation. A classical education, study of Materia Medica (an early form of pharmacy) and broad knowledge of science created a large pool of contributors to natural history collections. Dr Sinclair found pleasure exploring natural history from his first year in the Navy until the day he died, sending large collections to the British Museum and Royal Botanical Gardens. He was rewarded with a Fellowship of the Linnean Society in 1858, and various plants and a mountain named after him. Duty kept him busy for many years of a longer than average life, but his final ones were spent pursuing his lifelong passion for botany in remote regions of Aotearoa / New Zealand. These personal stories all reflect global themes outlined in the biography.

Letters are a guard against the deception of memory (Wells, 2018)

Structural warp threads are traversed by wefts spun from a large collection of Sinclair's personal letters, journals and official correspondence[2], cross-referenced with a variety of published and personal material from other authors. Archives in New Zealand, the UK and Australia contain rich, though untrustworthy sources. Official dispatches reporting day-to-day affairs in the colonies were tainted by underlying influences and agenda of people in positions

[2] Sinclair, (1814-1860; 1823; 1832-34; 1836-61); Sinclair, Clarke & Merret, (1842-53).

of power[3]; letters and journals by the relationship of writer and reader, personal motives, beliefs and expectations. All were subject to unwritten rules of a complex imperial society. Dr Sinclair's life was shaped by circumstances and society and driven by motives that cannot all be known, so he must be treated as one unreliable narrator among many. Furthermore, researcher bias is inevitable, more so with the passage of time. If society is better the more biases we include as 21st century artist and writer Akala[4] claimed, it follows that history will be better the more unreliable narrators we listen to. With that aim in mind, I wove many voices into the work, although the range is far from comprehensive. Women were largely absent, or confined to distinct female roles in Dr Sinclair's spheres of operation at medical school, on Royal Navy ships and in colonial government, so his story is about a man in the company of other men. Indigenous people, African slaves and working class perspectives are also notable by their absence from the narrative. These groups are all underrepresented in imperial age literature so more extensive research would be required to bring their voices into the story. The thesis title *A Singular Man* reflects this imbalance, and the uncontested claim that Dr Sinclair never married.

Setting a pattern

Interpreting the language and culture of the past is a critical step in understanding the lives of those who experienced it as the present. Forming an intimate relationship with an 18th century, middle class conservative man was no small challenge for a mature age feminist 200 years after the fact. Critical social theory, ethnography and the theory / practice nexus offered useful ways to work with different threads of the story.

Ethnography is the performance of critical theory (Madison, 2005) with methods to seek hidden powers and unspoken codes in interpretations of men and material (Strange, 2012). The British social class system and its peculiar subset, the *gentlemen's club* at the Admiralty, were

[3] (Great Britain Parliament, 1800-1899).

[4] Natives, Akala, Two Roads Publishing 2019.

rife with unspoken codes. Growing up immersed in a later version of that *parent* code made the task of interpretation more manageable. The *strait jacket* of social class really has to be experienced to be understood. Societies linked to the British Empire at home and abroad were also rife with unwritten rules that make little sense today. Silence was as significant as words spoken or written on a page. The legacy of empire lives on in various forms, adapted to place and circumstance from an original pattern that was laid out in the formative years.

Reading widely over many years built an impression of an inherently unequal, sometimes delusional society with a few royals and a wealthy elite running a vast empire with a great deal of pragmatism, but few overarching leadership strategies or concerns for individual competence. The main subject's career choices were defined by this broader context. Although not *to the manor born,* Dr Sinclair's university education and respectable profession earned him the right to move comfortably in elite circles, both at home and abroad. He was below the rank of captain or governor in the social pyramid, and no aristocrat would allow his daughter to marry a surgeon, but he was perfectly placed to be a trusted subordinate, companion and advisor to the privileged few. The top tier of society was a lonely place far away from home. A capable, educated employee was a coveted prize at sea and on shore in the more remote outposts of empire where gentlemen were in desperately short supply. In this context, his offer of service to the governor of New Zealand would be a rare opportunity.

Writing history as personal stories

> *History is the story we make of the stories we find. Our duty is to hear these found stories and understand what they meant in their own time, (Thomson, 2012 p104)*

The more traditional focus of historical writing on major events or national heroes was not fit for purpose for *A Singular Man*. Instead, I followed the path of a minority of authors who use

personal stories about ordinary people to explore the lived experience of global events. Grimshaw (2007) called this *close-grained analysis of the meaning of everyday encounters*. The following two examples illustrate the approach.

The Ordeal of Elizabeth Marsh (Colley, 2007) is the biography of a mixed-race African / British woman, conceived in the midst of slave revolts and merciless mortality for Europeans in Jamaica. Elizabeth was born in England in 1735 to a Port Royal bar owner and her ship chandler husband. Navy connections and fearless ambition enabled travel across continents, exposing hers to more personal risk and global drama than anyone else of her gender. As a young woman, Elizabeth fled from a Corsair attack on British territory in the Mediterranean. She was caught and held captive by a North African sheik until diplomatic string pulling secured her release. With her reputation thus destroyed, a *convenient* marriage was arranged. Far from becoming her husband's *chattel* Elizabeth moved between London and India with family and a man who appeared to be her long-term lover. History has judged her an unusual character, supported in an adventurous lifestyle by imperial networks and the dependent role of women. Her biography is an individual, a family and a global story written in the style of a novel by an eminent historian. I aimed to follow the author's example, to *tack between individual and world histories in such a way as to bring them into simultaneous view* (Colley, 2007 pxxxi).

At the Margin of Empire: John Webster and the Hokianga 1841-1900 (Ashton, 2015) is the biography of a Scotsman who, like Dr Sinclair, came to New Zealand to *seek his fortune* in self-defined terms. Scotland in the 19th century was a place of few opportunities. A century of subjection to English rule had reduced a once rich culture to remnants and the economy to dependence on absentee landlords, loyal to a foreign crown. Outside an Anglicised elite, any chance of social advancement involved leaving the country. By doing that, hundreds of enterprising Scots found themselves sucked up by imperial government demand for people to help sustain its underfunded colonies. Webster's biographer saw her subject as:

> *... a useful window through which to view shifting relationships and social boundaries between Māori and Pakeha (Europeans) in an area of New Zealand in the second half of the 19thC,* (Ashton, 2015 p2).

She argued that focus on a subject of national significance such as Te Tiriti o Waitangi / the Treaty of Waitangi, as many writers on have done, decentres the role of settlers. Centring the life experiences of an individual supports deeper analysis and tells a human story that may appeal to a general audience. Webster's biography is a colonial story, though it explores the life of a man who chose to leave the confines of settler society and adapt to indigenous ways. By exploring *the meaning of everyday encounters* his biographer produced a reliable and readable narrative on daily life for a mixed-race Scots and Māori family in an area of Te Ika a Maui / the North Island of New Zealand after the Treaty of Waitangi. Webster was a successful timber trader in one of the few industries operating in the Hokianga Harbour at the time. Success depended on his ability to integrate with indigenous people, and to weave a strong fabric from the threads of his own ethnic background and life experience with new ones found on arrival. Webster's is a story of two cultures, mid-1800s trade, and a class-bound society responding to inter-racial marriage in the colonies, a subject explored further in *Affairs of the Heart* (Wanhalla, 2013). These authors (Colley, Ashton and Wanhalla) aimed to bridge gaps between academic and popular history, a space where Dr Sinclair's biography also fits. His letters and journals offer personal opinions, observations and impressions on global themes from a worldly and observant traveller.

Some critics see personal stories as an unreliable way to write history (Thomson, 2012). My own belief is that well-researched and written ones can add a novel's emotional engagement to the critical analysis of a history book. Using extracts from Sinclair's own and others' writing

to tell his story adds a human aspect to global themes, and is no more or less biased or reliable than any other account.

Distance in time

I believe that distance in time also supports the case for writing history through the medium of biography. Colley noted that individuals like her subject, Elizabeth Marsh were:

> *...seldom aware of the intricate connection between the patterns of their own lives and the course of world history… the interplay of man and society, of biography and history, self and world (Colley, 2007 pxxxi).*

The passage of time allows writers to make connections and interpret lives with the added perspective of hindsight, though this has also been referred to the *deception* of hindsight, (Wells, 2018), as interpretation becomes more difficult over time. I agree with the author who described history as *a contest of interpretations,* commenting that:

> *... assessing the quality of extant work against the evidence, and asking new questions of archives allows historians … to elaborate new visions of the past (Ballantyne, 2012 p12).*

This raises the option to reopen lines of investigation when new information is found, or to revisited existing sources with new aims in mind. None of the sources I used in the research are new, though they are held in different collections and with various classifications. No known study has focused on the life of Dr Andrew Sinclair, so the data from these sources may never have been brought together or reproduced in a single narrative before now.

Existing literature

Andrew Sinclair lived through a time of inordinate disruption. His life story connects to watershed events already performed in many literary genres, and referred to earlier in this narrative as warp threads in the biography. For reasons of space I include here just a few areas and examples of literature I consider closest to his story. With a few exceptions, these are published works that have been through peer or editorial reviews.

Much has been written to both support and contest interpretations of the social impact of the industrial revolution in Britain (e.g. Smout, 1979), highland and lowland clearances in Scotland (Aitchison & Cassell, 2012; Mackinnon 2017), migration and transportation of the British poor to distant colonies (Hill, 2008), the scourge of epidemics and advances in medical knowledge (Lawrence, 2006), the power of the Royal Navy and other elite networks in the British Empire (Laidlaw, 2005), abolition of the West African slave trade and the emancipation of slaves (Ward, 1970), epic voyages of scientific discovery (Stenhouse, 1994), the early settler period in New Zealand history (Wards, 1968), colonisation and humanitarian aspects of government (Lester & Dussart, 2014), the foundation of civil services in British colonies (McLintock, 1958), and the rise of global capitalism (Cain & Hopkins, 1986). This already vast and growing body of literature demanded a selective approach to acknowledge and interpret the influences on an individual life story. My approach was to pick up a clue from what I knew of Dr Sinclair's life story and study the topic as deeply as necessary to form an opinion and support an argument. That is one reason the project has taken ten years and still feels far from finished, though I do appreciate how much I have learned on the journey.

The social history of Sinclair's birthplace in South West Scotland has been written about in more detail than most small British towns (Blair, 1904; Mitchison, 1978; Smout, 1979). This was fortunate, as I found no record of Sinclair's early life. The area was unusually affluent and its people more educated than most. Artisans and traders at the hub of technological innovation

in an industry that dominated the women's fashion trade for 100 years held the power to resist advances that destroyed the livelihoods of many of their contemporaries. The same fate came to Paisley when the scope to adapt looms and patterns was exhausted, but many weavers at the turn of the 19th century were also poets, writers, philosophers and intellectuals who educated their children to succeed in a changing world. Reading about the environment, education, characters and culture in the town offered enough information to fill a gap in the story.

It would be impossible to list everything I have read in ten years researching Dr Sinclair's life. The thesis includes a biography drawn from a 300+ item database compiled from archives in the UK, Australia and New Zealand. Colonial Office papers, voyage records, sketches, diaries, letters and Sinclair family stories add dimension to published material. Sinclair's copperplate handwriting and easy narrative style, sometimes accompanied by sketches, made the search an engaging task. Literature on broad themes helped to make sense of personal stories as much as personal stories pointed to broad themes in the literature.

The chronicle as a storytelling tradition

The Cambridge Dictionary defines a chronicle as *a record of events in the order in which they happened*. In the hands of a creative writer, a chronicle can be moulded into a story as engaging as a novel.

> *The chronicle, like the epic poem, retells more memorably what is already generally known. The novelist beckons the reader into the private home, and there, with fingers to their lips, they watch together. The chronicler tells his story in the market place and competes with the clamour of all the other vendors; his occasional triumph is to create a silence around his words. The novelist and storyteller are distinct, and it is obvious they belong to different historical periods. (Berger, 2018 p77).*

I discovered this storytelling tradition during a long and difficult search for what felt like the right way to tell Dr Sinclair's story. I warmed to the idea of a tradition that would suit a work of non-fiction where all stages of the protagonist's life are *generally known*. Like a collection of once colourful threads in the fading fabric of a bygone age, stories of British Empire can be known from records of a bureaucracy set up to control distant outposts, or through one of many forms of expression that span all literary genres. Letters, pictures, articles, journals, diaries and books of fact and fiction add up to a massive amount of information with visible and invisible bias and multiple contested interpretations. In the circumstances, forming a fair opinion of something that happened a long time ago is practically impossible. In *Chronicle of a Death Foretold*, Gabriel Garcia Marquez (1981) sets out possibilities of what might have been. He does not try to resolve the case, but to preserve the mystery for readers to consider. *A Singular Man* has no central mystery like the murder in Marquez's book, nor would I presume to put myself in the same class as the author. There are similarities, however, when the research arrives at a point in the story where no information is available to answer a burning question. The author can only present what evidence they have, and invite readers to peruse the options. Why was Dr Sinclair sacked from a Navy ship he had already worked on for four years? Who were the powerful men who granted him favours to beat the competition for a prize appointment? Did he crawl from the river alive only to die alone on its banks? If readers share my frustration where sources revealed no definite answers, I will have achieved my objective.

A creative touch

Master classes I attended while writing the thesis introduced me to mythic structure and character archetypes in the *Hero's Journey* (Campbell, 1949). I considered using this to develop a plot for the biography, but found it a step too far removed from my aim to write non-fiction, and beyond my novice's creative ability to reframe characters and scenes that already tell a good

story. The hero's journey may be the aim for a future draft. For now it is enough to align characters and events with stages of that mythical journey.

Dr Sinclair could be the hero on a quest to enter unfamiliar worlds to discover new scientific knowledge. His first mentor would have been John Peddie, the radical minded Rector of Paisley Grammar School, who instilled a love of learning and a belief in the power of every boy to shape his own destiny. As a young medical student, Sinclair came under the influence of Granville Sharp Pattison, a fearless, libertarian professor at Glasgow Medical College (Pattison, 2004). These mentors could have sown the seeds of his values in later life. A third would have been Sir William Jackson Hooker, Director of Kew Botanical Gardens, who Sinclair may have met when Hooker was Professor of Botany at Glasgow University. Hooker became a powerful man when he moved to London, and opened doors for Sinclair to advance his career and reputation.

Many allies enter the story at different times. Some were nameless messmates and some lifelong friends. One constant ally was a younger brother John, who Sinclair called in when he needed a favour. When John died in a cholera epidemic in Glasgow, Sinclair brought his widow and four children out in New Zealand society. Joseph Hooker, a Navy Assistant Surgeon and son of Sir William, was also a close ally in Sinclair's later and post-Navy years.

Captain Sir Edward Belcher of *HMS Sulphur* was an unexpected herald. A man of fiery temper and aggressive ambition, Sinclair suffered dire consequences when he inadvertently challenged Belcher's power hungry whims and wishes. This was a final straw that led him to seek a new life in a safe and predictable profession. Another herald appeared in the form of a letter recommending Sinclair to a newly appointed colonial governor who he meets and pledges to serve. This is part of a careful plan that yields better than expected returns when a small act of service leads directly to the new career Sinclair had been seeking.

The complex workings of the British social class system could make it the shapeshifter in the story. An invisible but usually predictable force with strict lines of cause and effect, it eventually tripped Sinclair up and became the cause of his disgrace. A few years later, Captain Robert Fitzroy becomes the guardian that supports him through a transition to the life he desires.

Shadows appeared at different times: the changeable moods of the sea in the age of sail, fatal diseases that spread quickly in mysterious ways, rising friction between Māori and free settlers, and the harrying anti-government stance of the local press. Men accustomed to hierarchy and obedience in the Navy were at a loss to deal with dissent from people they were appointed to govern.

Antagonistic forces were at play throughout Sinclair's life, some immediate and local, others long standing and distant. Main ones include:

- When Sinclair was born there was already pressure on the British government to ban the Atlantic slave trade. Humanitarians were strong supporters of abolition, though capitalists also lobbied for the ban because transportation and slavery no longer made economic sense. The political fall out from the American War of Independence was also a factor. Imposing one nation's controversial law to ban a widespread and centuries old trade was a dangerous affair, as Sinclair found out when he was sent to the front line;
- Empire as enterprise. Imperial expansion provided raw materials and markets to fuel an industrial revolution that created the urban poor, a class that grew - or fell - out of rising demand for cheap, unskilled labour. These new concentrations of people raised demand for medical care, sanitation, ways to reduce childhood and maternal mortality, and for wider education. Studying medicine and science put Sinclair at the forefront of these advances;
- There was deep conflict between factions in New Zealand - Māori, missionaries, New Zealand Company settlers, government officials, independent settlers and speculators - in the years after the Treaty of Waitangi. An imported political agenda from imperial Britain

raised opposition, revealing the power of the press and people in action. Such tensions were not uncommon in British colonies, and Sinclair found himself on the front line once more;

- This was an age of scientific discovery. New knowledge challenged the authority of the bible and pointed towards natural selection. Technology allowed men to travel and map the world with a degree of accuracy not previously achieved. Sinclair was part of a *revolution* that would change the foundations of human society.

The challenges of combining the genres of historical non-fiction and biography with mythic structure and narrative device were considerable. However, they are far from mutually exclusive, and eventually blended together well in planning and executing the thesis.

Summary

The thesis *A Singular Man* traces the life story of Dr Andrew Sinclair, a man born in fairly privileged circumstances in a colonised western country (Scotland) at the end of the 18th century. The belief that Scotland is colonised is not always shared beyond the country's borders, so I use examples to illustrate how unequal parties to a treaty can lead one culture to dominate while another is actively suppressed. This was the situation between England and Scotland when Andrew Sinclair was born nearly 90 years after the *Treaty of Union*. Like many young Scotsmen, the gift of a good education allowed him to leave to become an obedient servant of empire. Circumstances in his chosen new home in New Zealand were not dissimilar, although as part of the British establishment, his role reversed from colonised to coloniser.

The research is framed as post-critical ethnography, using a range of primary and secondary sources to glean insights into the character of the man as well as the key influences and enablers in his life. As a researcher, I position myself as a partial (i.e. biased) observer in the research space, and present my findings as a chronicle, based on dialogue with my subject and the various sources data that shaped my understanding of him, his contemporaries and events that took place at the time in which he lived. I discuss contextual factors that may have

influenced his actions and encounters, try to understand what motivated him to think and act as he did, and frame his biography with these insights. I do not claim to have solved every small mystery of Sinclair's life as previously understood either by his descendants or as threads in the story of New Zealand settler history. To keep faith with the chronicle as a storytelling tradition, I offer a reasoned interpretation of the findings of my research. In some parts, I present the case for what might reasonably have been if I have insufficient evidence to say what actually was.

Ten years of research to uncover the threads of Dr Sinclair's life led me to conclude that previous authors have tried and sometimes failed to solve these same small mysteries. Some of their stories are easy to challenge, like the popular misconception that Sinclair met the man who changed his life, future employer Captain Robert Fitzroy, in Sydney by chance (Molloy, 1990). Technological advances have raised the bar once more, allowing dispersed and loosely related primary sources of data to be linked together and discovered. Others are more troublesome, as interpreting situations demands deep understanding of *the long 19th century* and both the visible and invisible powers behind Britain's imperial networks at home and abroad.

The thesis presents findings from a long-term, broadly scoped research project with added creative twists to tell what I hope is an engaging and convincing life story. I chose to present the chronicle and interpretation of events through the voices of two main narrators, Dr Sinclair himself and a 21st century researcher, the latter to add an omniscient narrator's commentary, gleaned from the wisdom - or deceit - of hindsight, in a fictionalised dialogue with a Sinclair family descendant. After drawing much of my data from Sinclair's own correspondence, I use fictionalised letters as bookends to the story, one from Sinclair to his niece outlining a plan to write his memoir, another from the researcher telling a friend her family legend is full of holes. A third narrator has the last word to explain how interest in that legend might have passed down through generations, and how a large collection of Sinclair's personal papers actually did come to be preserved in archives and libraries. I will end by returning to the original research

questions; can I use creative non-fiction to offer insights into the life of a man who died 158 years ago, and could I present evidence that published accounts have not given that man a fair hearing? If I have given a convincing answer to the second part of that question, the reliability of early European settler history in New Zealand must be called into question.

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