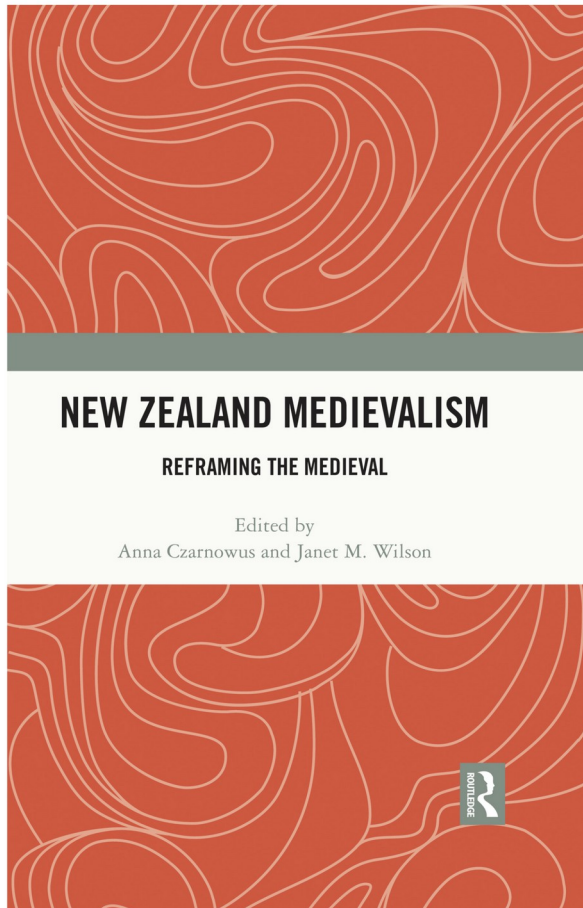


NEW ZEALAND MEDIEVALISM



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Havelock North***Embodied medievalism
in an Aotearoa New
Zealand village****Ellie Crookes*DOI: [10.4324/9781003287407-15](https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003287407-15)

New Zealand was advertised to potential settlers through the idea that it was a paradise-like place where an ideal community could be founded. One aspect of this utopianism assumed that the country could come

to resemble an imagined medieval Europe, by drawing on the notion inherent in Victorian medievalism: that medieval life was closer to nature and socially more cohesive and fulfilling than life in 19th-century England. Given the early imagining of New Zealand as a utopian space, it was believed that recreation of the Middle Ages was possible through adopting a “medieval” way of life. Havelock North was an example of such medievalism: Arts and Crafts were practised, anti-industrialism was propagated, and “medieval” occultism became popular. Like other colonial medievalisms, these practices were reinforced by the sense that European medieval culture was superior to Indigenous cultures. The displacement of pre-existing cultures could then be seen as a form of white supremacy, because for Māori peoples the existence of such practices ostensibly meant their erasure in Havelock North.

This chapter surveys a complex temporal/spatial exemplar of medievalism, namely the interwoven elements of medievalist activity that were embraced in

Havelock North in the early 20th century. It builds upon the accepted and established conception of medievalism, which, as Louise [D'Arcens \(2016\)](#) delineates, entails the “reception, interpretation or recreation of the European Middle Ages in post-medieval cultures” (1). The chapter supplements D'Arcens's definition by examining not merely the “recreation” or “interpretation” of the Middle Ages but rather its cultural, spiritual, and even magical continuation in the post-medieval world. This is a case of what might be called “embodied medievalism”, that is, an earnest effort to generate a medievalized identity or mythology within a post-medieval person or community – in this case a village and its residents – that encompasses the immediate and corporeal (Crookes [2021a](#), [2021b](#)). Essentially, the residents of early 20th-century Havelock North conceived of themselves and their community *as* medieval when they practised pre-industrial skills like medieval-style printing and bookbinding, venerated their small community as a medieval “Merrie England”, or engaged in magical rites

and rituals said to connect them on an astral plane to medieval figures. Ultimately, for many residents, the temporal and spatial boundaries between medieval Britain/Europe and 20th-century New Zealand were profoundly blurred.

Early 20th-century Havelock North seemingly existed in a kind of temporal stasis, as documented by local historian Matthew Wright in *Havelock North: The History of a Village*. [Wright \(1996\)](#) draws on an interview conducted with an unnamed older resident in the 1990s: “Victorianism really held its grip on society until after the first world war” (97).¹ The cultural lethargy of early 20th-century Havelock North manifested in a reluctance to move past Victorian habits and fashions, which included the Victorian cultural movement of medievalism. The poem “Our Village” by Havelock North resident Eleanor Adkins was written in the 1940s and yet it weaves together ideological strands – utopianism, the Arts and Crafts Movement, the Occult/Spiritual

Revival, and a magical uptake of the past – that were adopted much earlier in this small New Zealand village:

We study drama, arts and crafts,
And philanthropic schemes
Discuss the latest theories
On scientific themes.
Societies would link their names
And awe-inspiring views
Find votaries of every age
Who learnedly enthuse.
Some seek descent from Jewish tribes
While others claim to be
Re-incarnated folk, who died
Some thousand years BC.

(quoted in [Fowler 2009](#))²

Adkin's poem hints at the pervasiveness and longevity of a type of "medieval-mania" in the town.

The vision created for Havelock North as a natural,

rural, partially communal utopian society was perpetuated in increasingly strange and inventive ways, many of which were imbued with a distinctly medievalist flavour. Such utopian elements, however, had some precedent in New Zealand Victorian culture; for as Lyman Tower [Sargent \(2001\)](#) argues, "[f]rom its founding, New Zealand had been a site of a series of utopian projects" (1). Studies of the importance of utopianism to New Zealand's history and identity trace its influence to the mid-1800s ([Olssen 1997](#), 201; [Alessio 2008](#); [Brand 2017](#), 308, 311, 331). In this chapter utopianism is defined as a complex, multifaceted mode of philosophical thought centred on the imagining and/or implementation of an idealized society. New Zealand utopianism, moreover, was often bound up with the Anglocentrism associated with the vision disseminated by Edward Wakefield's New Zealand Company (the British joint-stock company responsible for much of the country's early settlement), as in the following advertisement from 1839:

[Our] object is to transplant English society with its various gradations in due proportions, carrying out our laws, customs, associations, habits, manners, feelings – everything of England, in short, but the soil.

([Sargisson and Sargent 2004](#), 13)

The “Havelock Work”, a social organization founded in Havelock North in 1908 and later functioning as an intentional society, focused on the principles of peace, education, and the celebration and adoption of an idyllic notion of a pastoral past. It was the principal vehicle by which the utopian vision was implemented. Members were inspired by the broader trope of New Zealand as a “better Britain/England” as fostered by the Wakefield Company; however, the customs, manners, and habits that the society venerated and implemented were not just “British/English” but also “medieval”. The villagers adopted the “Merrie/Merry England” trope, an ideological construct with roots in the 19th century, to

engage in nostalgia for medieval England as a utopian space of social cohesion, patriotism, pastoralism, and moral rectitude ([Judge 1991](#) 131–148; [1993](#), 124–143; [Simpson and Roud 2003](#)). This utopianism, however, extended far beyond a merely aesthetic appreciation for the Middle Ages to encompass increasingly eccentric instances of an idealized understanding of the medieval, even further than the uptake of Arts and Crafts (A&C) motifs and modes of fabrication. As this chapter will argue, the transplantation of an Anglophone worldview can be read from a critical postcolonial perspective, in terms of colonial appropriation of the land and suppression of Indigenous culture and society, as a form of white imperialism.

The “Havelock Work” and the Arts and Crafts movement

Havelock North is built on land that was for centuries

owned and is still occupied by Ngāti Kahungunu *iwi* (tribes).³ Established in 1860 and located in the Hawke's Bay region, at the turn of the 20th century the village was a relatively prosperous community populated mostly by upper-middle-class British free settlers ([Worrad 2020](#), 267). The concentration of "educated, creative, well-off people" ([Sargisson and Sargent 2004](#), 29) made it a cultural hub in the region, culminating in the creation of the "Havelock Work" (later known as "The Work"), an organization that began as a cultural and social club but became the well-spring out of which flowed all the town's Anglocentric, imperialistic, mystical medievalism. Central to the formation of The Work were Reginald and Ruth Gardiner, who began hosting meetings on matters academic, economic, philosophical, spiritual, cultural, and artistic in 1908 ([Worrad 2020](#), 273). Over 100 people, all Pākehā (of European descent) and mainly drawn from the local landowning class, attended the first meeting in the Gardiners' home ([Worrad 2020](#), 274). From around 1908

to the late 1910s, The Work functioned as an intentional though not fully communal society, structured around the tenets of education, peace, and harmony ([Sargisson and Sargent 2004](#), 28; 58). Weekly meetings, held in a church hall, mostly centred on reading canonical works of English literature ([Worrad 2020](#), 274) and were chosen, according to Timothy [Worrad \(2020\)](#), to help new settlers and white New Zealanders "reconnect" with their British cultural roots (274). In other words, the Havelock Work was from its inception an Anglocentric and colonial exercise. Its influence was seemingly so widely and meaningfully felt in Havelock North that, according to [Wright \(1996\)](#), "with its fervent, enthusiastic, deeply religious undercurrents [The Work] became an all-encompassing community movement that engulfed the entire village" (10).

From the very beginning a distinctly medievalist flavour undergirded this Anglocentric impulse. First, the Havelock Work was a proponent of the Arts and Crafts Movement, the decorative and fine art movement

that arose in England in the 1880s and flourished in Europe, America, and their colonies until the 1920s, and which drew inspiration for its artistic style and modes of production “from an idealised medieval past” ([Livingstone and Parry 2006](#), 148). Arts and Crafts leaders William Morris, Augustus Pugin, and John Ruskin famously venerated folk art and medieval designs ([Ibbotson 2020](#), 524–525), and many participants took up medieval-style practices, modelling their workshops on medieval craft guilds and venerating pre-industrial methods ([Livingstone and Parry 2006](#), 14, 86, 230–231; [Ibbotson 2020](#), 524). In the first issue of the Havelock Work’s self-published magazine *The Forerunner*, dated May 1909, an article by Emily T. Hamilton testifies to the “visibly growing interest taken in the Arts and Crafts Movement” and in the October 1909 edition, a writer using the pseudonym “W.” speaks of Ruskin’s idealistic views on the medieval past in relation to art and nature, deeming them analogous to the magazine’s doctrine and to the philosophy of the Havelock Work more broadly

([Anon. 1909](#), 161). There are, moreover, reports of community classes on woodcarving and the running of A&C exhibitions in the village ([Sargisson and Sargent 2004](#), 29). When the Prince of Wales visited in 1921, the village’s gift to him was a medieval-style bound book, described in Christchurch’s *The Star* newspaper as “most true to the type of illuminated missal, the medieval craft which attained the most beauty” ([Anon. 1921](#), 6). Gifts for royals and other distinguished guests are of course often selected for the way they typify a country or area, so this choice to honour pre-industrial European craft production underlines how Havelock North viewed itself as ethnically and culturally connected to both Britishness and the medieval.

The Forerunner produced 21 issues and ran monthly from May 1909 until December 1914 ([Ross 2004](#), 71). The production of the magazine reflected the influence of the Arts and Crafts Movement, with the first editions hand-pressed and hand-bound by Gardiner in his home ([Von Dadelszen 1983](#), 40). Subsequent editions were

partly handwritten and partly typewritten, often with original watercolour illustrations, and published by the small Forerunner Press ([Brodie and Brodie 1993](#), 301; [Ross 2004](#), 71). It is significant that Robert Stout, a leading political and intellectual figure, who had twice been New Zealand's Prime Minister, should find that the magazine's production – “printed on good thick paper, and its size is demy quarto. Each article begins with a decorated letter” – mirrored its Rousseau-like philosophy: “Its appeal is to those who like the simple life, who want to know more of Nature, and to study the good, the beautiful, and the true” ([Stout 1913](#), 9).

The clear line that can be drawn between the production of *The Forerunner* and the A&C Movement may then be traced to medievalist trends. The British presses which inspired the *Forerunner Press* were at the very centre of the A&C Movement and attempted “to recreate the spirit of early typefaces through the study of their calligraphic form” and so demonstrate “the connection between medieval handwriting and

earliest printing typefaces” ([Livingstone and Parry 2006](#), 82). These printers venerated medieval stylistics and advocated a medieval guild-style system and handcrafted means of production, and the Havelock Work clearly tapped into this trend in founding *The Forerunner* magazine and the *Forerunner Press*. Indeed, as James and Audrey Brodie (1993) discuss, “the typeface of *The Forerunner* is similar to Morris's ‘Golden’ typeface, and the use of ornamental initial capitals reflects Morris's style” (301). Thus, over a decade after Morris's Kelmscott Press had ceased production, Morris's medieval-style press and accompanying stylistics reappeared in a small village in New Zealand. This fact testifies to the longevity of Morris, Ruskin, and the Arts and Crafts movement, as well as the tenacity of its underpinning values such as anti-industrialism and utopianism, which surfaced in this remote region of empire.

“Merrie England”: anti-industrialism in Havelock North

The medievalist identity of the Havelock Work was undoubtedly influenced by widespread anti-industrial sentiment in Britain and its colonies. In his 1913 article in *The Forerunner* Stout speaks of the ills of urbanization and industrialization, and recommends the populating of small towns and villages. He writes: “To keep our country [New Zealand] strong we must keep our country districts well peopled. And to accomplish this aim village life must be elevated” ([Stout 1913](#), 9). He champions Havelock North, as a place of natural splendour inhabited by good, honest folk who worship a natural, pre-industrial lifestyle and aesthetic. Stout tirelessly campaigned for a better society throughout his dual political and legal careers. His support for the

“return to nature” values espoused in Havelock North and the Arts and Crafts Movement can be related to his advocacy of small holdings secured by the state, and this was consonant with his determination for land reform, for the removal of monopolies and landlordism, and for a classless society ([Hamer 1993](#)).

Stout’s celebration of Havelock North no doubt also embraced the demonstrable links with medieval rituals and practices, which might be interpreted as increasingly eccentric instances of an idealized understanding of the medieval, even beyond the uptake of A&C motifs and modes of fabrication. This can be evidenced by the village’s production of several medieval/Early Modern-style fetes, beginning in November 1911 with an Old English Village Fete. This entailed a procession of locals carrying banners and dressed in medieval costume ([Stout 1913](#), 9; [Worrad 2020](#), 274), and entertainment that consisted of Morris and folk dancing, short plays, and tourneys, “all presided over by King Arthur and his court” ([Ellwood 1993](#), 169). The locals played, danced,

and dressed in a way that embodied an idyllic vision of the medieval. The following year the village held a Shakespearean Pageant ([Von Dodelszen 1983](#), 41), a photograph of which is included in Wright's book of local history ([1996](#), 111). Intriguingly, however, the women wear late-medieval-style hennins, that is, conical headdresses, and many of the men wear chaperon or cowls. Whether Wright has misidentified this photograph or whether the villagers are reusing costumes from the Old English fete of the previous year, this photographic conflation of the medieval and early modern suggests another compulsion: a desire to conceive of the English/British past as a loosely demarcated pre-industrial "Golden Age". In other words, the specifics mattered less than the fantasy of a pre-industrial utopia, a "Merrie England". M.M. McLean writing for *The Forerunner* said of the Shakespearean Festival that it was "aimed at cultivating a feeling for what was beautiful and true" because "behind the outward manifestation of things lay the ideal" ([1912](#),

n.p). The distinction between Chaucerian or Shakespearean, medieval or early modern mattered less than the ideal of a medieval English/British utopia. Indeed, the concept of periodization – of distinct epochs, of "time", of the past and present – was of marginal relevance to these villagers who played, created, worked, and lived in a space permeated simultaneously by the values and ideals of a Victorian/Edwardian British colony and an idealized view of medieval Britain/England. They constructed a community that believed it was close to nature and the "organic" way of life. This muddled sense of temporality and spatiality, I assert, also shaped the most eccentric and bizarre instances of medievalism in the village, namely the formation of mediievally infused esoteric spiritualist/occult societies.

Occultism and spiritualism in Havelock North

Beyond the imitation of the medieval through dance, play, work, craft, and costume, the people of Havelock North sought a connection that was far more intimate and magical. Specifically, several members engaged with the Middle Ages through membership in occult and/or spiritualist esoteric societies, namely The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and The Order of the Table Round. These groups drew on an array of mystical and spiritual traditions from around the world and over centuries, but they were particularly shaped by real and fabricated European medieval tropes and myths. Before discussing the medievalist undertones of these groups, and the complexities of their presence in Havelock North, it is necessary to place the 19th- to early 20th-century phenomenon of occultism and spiritualism in

broader global and national contexts.

The Spiritualist Revival and its sister movement the Occult Revival of the mid-19th to early 20th centuries in Britain and North America, have been extensively examined (see [Byrne 2010](#), 20; [Tillett 2012](#), 20; [Natale 2016](#), 1–17). The origins of both movements are commonly linked to the American Fox Sisters, who rose to prominence in the 1840s by performing séances to large crowds in America and England ([Tromp 2012](#), 160–161; [Franklin 2018](#), 30). In their wake, countless spiritual mediums and fortune tellers emerged, which in turn sparked the dissemination of pamphlets, books, lectures, and magazine/newspaper articles on occultist, spiritualist, and supernatural topics, becoming so popular that by the late 19th century occultism/spiritualism was a major part of the cultural zeitgeist of America, Britain, and its colonies. Fragments of the Occult/Spiritual Revival reached Australia and New Zealand as early as the 1850s, transported by large numbers of British migrants and Gold Rushers ([Gabay](#)

[2001](#), 15). As such, and despite common assertions that New Zealand has been a strictly secular society since colonization, there is evidence of a high degree of religiously/spiritually tinged cult and sect activity ([Sargisson and Sargent 2004](#), 204). Importantly, these assertions seem to overlook the mainstream Christian denomination and law statutes that restricted commercial activity on Sundays. Over the next 50 years, spiritualist/occultist movements and philosophies blossomed in Australia and New Zealand in small but dedicated pockets ([Brodie and Brodie 1993](#), 298). Throughout the 1870s, a steady stream of local and overseas occultist/spiritualist practitioners, lecturers, and evangelists toured New Zealand ([Hanegraaff 2006](#), 203); and from the 1880s onwards, spiritualism, the supernatural, and the occult were the subject of articles and correspondence in newspapers ([Broadley 1996](#), 118). Shaun [Broadley \(1996\)](#) states that by the turn of the 19th century the popularity of occultism and spiritualism in New Zealand was so strong as to constitute a “cultic

milieu” (119).

Globally, one of the most significant groups to emerge out of these two Revivals was The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, which was founded in London in 1888 ([Osborn 2012](#), 95) and eventually found its way to New Zealand, specifically Havelock North. The Golden Dawn, according to theosophist and theology scholar Robert S. [Ellwood \(1993\)](#), pulled together “all the bits and pieces of the century’s spiritual underground storehouses and made of them a coherent, progressive system, wherein, [...], one could attain mastery of that strange world” (158–159). The leaders and many followers of the Golden Dawn were either past or current members of other key British occult/spiritualist groups of the era, most significantly the Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia (SRIA) [Rosicrucian Society in England], which had a direct and powerful effect on its structure, beliefs, rituals, and rites ([Butler 2011](#), 5; [Osborn 2012](#), 95). The Golden Dawn was meaningfully shaped by Rosicrucianism’s medievalist elements, which focused

on the mythical figure of Christian Rosenkreuz, a German mystic allegedly of the late 14th to early 15th centuries ([Butler 2011](#), 71). Although Rosicrucianism brought together a vast array of beliefs and myths from around the world and across time, the centrality of the medievalist figure of Rosenkreuz meant that it pivotally engaged with a mythological vision of the “medieval” – medieval magic, Christianity, and culture. Thus, key to Rosicrucianism was a perception of the European Middle Ages as a time of powerful magicality, and this focus on medieval magicality in turn significantly influenced the Golden Dawn.

The Golden Dawn appeared in New Zealand in 1912 when the Smaragdum Thalasses chapter was established in Havelock North. Smaragdum Thalasses was the last significant flourishing of the Golden Dawn, and according to [Ellwood \(1993\)](#) boasted “more members, a finer temple, [and] greater ritual finesse” (156) than the British chapters. In continuing until 1978, it outlasted the British temples, none of which survived

beyond the 1920s ([Fuller 2009](#), 14; [Wood 2023](#), 105).⁴ Moreover, Smaragdum Thalasses was unique in having its own purpose-built temple, Whare Ra ([Worrad 2020](#), 277), making it one of the most significant orders despite being, “the most forgotten of all Golden Dawn Temples” ([Zalewski 2015](#), 9), hidden away in a small New Zealand village.

The Havelock North chapter was founded by British medical doctor, missionary, and high-ranking member of the London chapter of the Golden Dawn, Dr Robert William Felkin, who built the temple of Whare Ra in his basement ([Stace 2013](#); [Ross 2004](#), 73).⁵ Felkin first travelled to New Zealand with his wife Harriet and daughter Ethelwyn in 1912 on a trip facilitated by Reginald Gardiner and sponsored by members of the Havelock Work ([Zalewski 1986](#), 10), with the aim of educating members on matters mystical and spiritual. Between 1910 and 1911, under the tutelage of visiting Anglican Reverend Father J. Fitzgerald, the Havelock Workers had started exploring religious, mystical, and

figure of Rosenkreuz. Felkin himself claimed that he had forged a direct link to the medieval mystic, stating in a paper, “Lecture of the Study Group of the Societas Rosicruciana”, presented to senior members of the Smaragdu Thalasses, that Rosenkreuz used Felkin’s “Etheric Body” as a conduit for channelling his will and knowledge ([Farrell 2017](#), 270–271; [Yorke 1972](#), xxii). In a lecture given in 1916 titled “The Rosicrucian Society in Europe”, Felkin spoke of his ability to engage “on an astral plane” with Rosenkreuz, while centring the idea of Rosicrucianism as a distinctive product of the European Middle Ages (quoted in [Kuntz 2009](#), 41–52). His immediate, magical, and spiritual connection with the European Middle Ages blurred the delineation between the past and present. Moreover, Felkin’s followers became not just inheritors of medieval magical knowledge but practitioners of and participants in both magicality and the medieval.

In Havelock North there also existed the Order of the Table Round, which was intended as “a school of

Christian Chivalry” to complement the “Golden Dawn’s role as a School of Christian Wisdom” ([Ellwood 1993](#), 183).⁷ Founded by Felkin in 1912 the group comprised male, inner-order members of the Smaragdu Thalasses temple ([Brodie and Brodie 1993](#), 309), who met in an “[o]blong building that feature[d] a round table on which the 12 knights of the ancient king’s court are identified with the 12 signs of the zodiac” ([Ellwood 1993](#), 184).⁸ This description of the table, which Ellwood claims was still in use by members in 1993, speaks of a strange and interesting mélange of Arthurian legend and eastern/western astrology and mysticism.⁹ Like Smaragdu Thalasses, the group merged vague elements of mysticism and medievalism, but its air of so-called Muscular Christianity allowed it to function as a cult of masculinity and Christian chivalry. Its leader Neville (Gauntlett [sic] Tudor) Meakin, who was succeeded by Felkin at his death, claimed “that the Order of the Table Round had been alive since the days of king Arthur, having been revived from its original

founding by Joseph of Arimathea, and that he was its 37th grandmaster by virtue of a secret descent from the House of Tudor” ([Ellwood 1993](#), 183). Lacking an heir, Meakin was succeeded by Felkin, who claimed this mantle had been handed on to him ([Osborn 2012](#), 103; [Brodie and Brodie 1993](#), 309). Inherent in this legend is, again, the distorting of the line between the medieval past and the post-medieval present, with members believing themselves to be a link in an unbroken chain that extended back to the Middle Ages.

As it was a secret society, there is little information on the group’s beliefs and practices, but Wouter J. [Hanegraaff \(2006\)](#) has described it as a “cult of the Grail” (436).¹⁰ Drawing on notes by local man Jack Taylor, who was prominent in the Order until his death in the 1980s, James and Audrey Brodie argue that “[t]he teachings were based on the ideals of chivalry” and the “first members set to work to practice them and to spread them through the natural life” ([1993](#), 309). Christine [Zalewski \(2015\)](#), who also interviewed Taylor,

declares that the purpose of the Order was “service to the community, Country and our World through chivalry and Light-Work [the practice of magic]” (228). It would thus seem that the group’s values were closely aligned with the Havelock Work’s wish to form a pre-industrial, rural utopia, and with Smaragdum Thalasses’s idealized vision of an enduring magical Middle Ages. Moreover, the masculine, chivalric element of the group – by contrast to the Havelock Work and Smaragdum Thalasses, both of which admitted women – was undoubtedly influenced by another medievalist trend of the era: the chivalric gentleman’s/boy’s club. The Order of the Table Round, like several boy’s and men’s organizations and clubs borrowed from medieval, particularly Arthurian mythology: namely the image of King Arthur as an idealized militant Christian leader, the utopian kingdom of Camelot, and the egalitarian fraternity of the Round Table ([Ellwood 1993](#), 183; [Girouard 1981a](#), 178–189). Bound up with its adoption of the Arthurian myth was the group’s engagement with the popular veneration

of medieval crusades and all that they symbolized, specifically Christian ascendancy, militant colonialism, and European imperialism. These elements anticipate this chapter's final focus: an interrogation of the underpinning elements of colonialism and imperialism in the medievalisms of Havelock North.

Medievalism and imperialism in Havelock North

The medievalist activities and enterprises that underpin the Havelock Work, The Hermetic Order of Golden Dawn, and The Order of the Table Round in Havelock North of the early 20th century are surprising and eccentric and thus interesting examples of New Zealand medievalism. However, it is important to ask, “why the medieval?” Why did a group of people in the early 20th century in a small village in Aotearoa New Zealand choose to look to the Middle Ages as a source of inspiration –

culturally, socially, artistically, mystically – to create their version of a “Merrie England”? One explanation is that since the 19th century, through the promotion of antiquarianism and the subsequent positioning of the Middle Ages as the root of “modern” Britishness and Englishness – linguistically, ideologically, culturally, and ethnographically – the medieval has held significant cultural cachet. This would have been useful to a group of colonials seeking to authenticate themselves in the far-flung regions of the empire. Moreover, the immediate influence and fashion of Victorian medievalism undoubtedly explain the local attraction to the Middle Ages in the town.

Another explanation is that, as stated previously, the Middle Ages is often positioned as a magical time and place, and in many ways so too was this “newly discovered” land of New Zealand. As Dominic [Alessio \(2008\)](#) states, New Zealand's self-construction as a utopia in the 19th and 20th centuries often took on a supernatural edge (29–31). This confluence of magicality

between medieval Europe and early 20th-century New Zealand was overtly taken up by Felkin, who often spoke of Havelock North and New Zealand as attracted to the mystical and otherworldly because of a spiritual force associated with the land ([Wright 1996](#), 155). In an article in *A Wayfaring Man* are his comments about his visit to Taupo and the thermal districts, some 160 km from Havelock North, namely that the hot springs were “full of the very queerest elementals I have ever seen. [...] We seem to have gone back to the primordial slime whence life and form first emerged” (quoted by [Ellwood 1993](#), 175).

Inherent in this conflation of the European Middle Ages with Aotearoa New Zealand of the early 20th century is the ideology of primitivism, the notion that the European past and the non-western, in this case antipodean, present are culturally, intellectually, “temporally” analogous ([Richardson and Hanna 2012](#), 1108–1109). This is an innately imperialist, colonialist, and ultimately racist idea, as Felkin’s description of

Aotearoa New Zealand as covered in “primordial slime” acutely expresses. For Felkin, his mystical followers, and the Havelock Workers more broadly, Havelock North was a place outside of time, where the medieval and the modern, the magical and the material collided. Actions by this group of villagers in Havelock North thus functioned symbolically in order to degrade the history and culture of the Māori custodians of the land on which the village was built.

The British “settlement” of Aotearoa New Zealand and of Havelock North specifically is of course a product of colonialism, and colonialism is critiqued by postcolonial criticism and theory as always unjust.¹¹ Indeed, the formation of Havelock North was only made possible by a series of underhanded and unscrupulous deals, beginning with English-born trader William Barnard Rhodes’s payment of a meagre sum for the land in 1839; a bargain he struck with only some of the Māori chiefs of the area ([Wright 1996](#), 7–8). The New Zealand government then bought much of the land in 1848,

putting a significant portion of the site aside as a “native reserve”. By 1860, however, the government had reneged on this agreement so as to “make room for poorer settlers [thus Pākehā] and promote agriculture” in the region ([Wright 1996](#), 5, 10, 20). The Havelock Work sought to create a utopia in the village of Havelock North, but it was decidedly for and by white villagers only, and its very existence contributed to the systemic degradation of Māori land and culture. Moreover, reframing the landscape as a magical, medieval, European space, no doubt allowed adherents to the mystical branches of the Havelock Work to justify the displacement of Indigenous people. This bias might be attributed to the question: how could the land have belonged to and been inhabited by Ngāti Kahungunu peoples prior to the 1830s if it was believed that this was a much older, magical space of white mediocrity?

The actions and mythmaking of the magical societies and The Havelock Work, with regard to Māori people and their cultures, arguably reveal an impetus to co-

opt Ngāti Kahungunu cultures for their own ends, particularly to bolster claims to medievalized magic. Of the 21 issues of the *Forerunner*, only three include mention of Māori cultures and concerns, but none are by Māori writers, and all are inherently primitivist in ideology ([Ross 2004](#), 72). Then there is the Māori name of Smaragdum Thalasses’s temple Whare Ra, meaning “House of the Sun”, so named even though there is “no evidence that Māori beliefs influenced the practices or doctrines” of the group ([Worrad 2020](#), 271). Moreover, there are only uncorroborated claims that any Māori people were ever admitted as members, and certainly this was not the case in the early part of the 20th century. There is, however, some evidence to suggest that several Māori people worked on the building of the Smaragdum Thalasses’s temple ([Fuller 2009](#), 287).

[Worrad \(2020\)](#) has suggested that the use of a Māori name for the temple “represented a respectful acknowledgement of the Māori people” (270), but I would argue that it achieves the opposite; it can be seen

as an example of exploitative cultural appropriation. Furthermore, as evidenced by this story retold by [Worrad \(2020\)](#), the spirituality and culture of the Ngāti Kahungunu iwi was co-opted by Havelock North villagers and infused with a medievalist bent:

Havelock North itself sits beside Te Mata Peak, a Māori sacred site. According to Māori tradition, the mountain is the body of a giant, that of Waimarama chief Te Mata. [...]. The Smaragdum Thalasses Temple developed their own legend, or traditional history, that Te Mata Peak had once been a site for training Māori “magicians” in “white magic”—the magic of healing. Smaragdum Thalasses thereby linked itself to the land’s indigenous [sic] spiritual traditions (270).

([Ellwood 1993](#), 179; [Farrell 2017](#), 52–54)

The pūrākau (story) of a giant man forming a mountain, which should accurately be called Te Mata o Rongokako

(the face of Rongokako) and the fact that it is a site of spiritual and supernatural power is supported by iwi of the Hawke’s Bay region ([Prentice 1976](#), 20, 25–26, 29; [Buchanan 2004](#), 99; [Whaanga 2021](#)), but the idea that it is a space occupied by Māori “magicians” does not have any basis in local pūrākau.¹² This story thus serves as a striking example of Māori land and culture being co-opted by the settlers in Havelock North to solidify their claims to magicality and a medieval past, with the mystical fantasy relying on links to magicians, who are often tied to the medieval. Similarly, it is possible that the idea of European magic was superimposed on Māori beliefs in order to bolster the beliefs of the Havelock Workers.

Moreover, the creation of a medievalist British utopia in Havelock North is complicated by the fact that the village and indeed all of settler New Zealand was built on land previously inhabited by Māori since the 13th or 14th century, when groups first arrived from East Polynesia ([Walter et al. 2017](#), 351–375; [Anderson](#)

[2014](#), 43–67). In essence then, the land of New Zealand has been inhabited by Māori iwi since, in European terminology, the “medieval period” and one “medieval” culture have been systematically erased in order to impose another.¹³ Moreover, if through the practice of magical rituals the Pākēhā villagers of Havelock North believed that they did not simply *perform* the European Middle Ages but *became* medieval, what did that mean for the Māori iwi of the area, for their culture and heritage, which can also be dated to “the medieval”? Did their past and present cease to exist in this magical, medieval space? Read in this way, the story of the Havelock Work functions as a powerful embodiment of a broader impetus of colonial New Zealand to eradicate Māori culture, spirituality, and language. Indeed, although the medievalized rituals and practices engaged in by residents of Havelock North – the fetes, reading groups, Roycrofters and printing presses, and the esoteric societies – appear on the surface benign, quaint, and even endearing, when scrutinized more closely they

actually reveal an enterprise of cultural and historical erasure, which, far from being benign, is symbolically violent.

Conclusion: a white, Christian European Middle Ages

I came to this case study supposing that why a group of Pākēhā in the early 20th century desired to create a pre-industrial, magical, medievalized utopia in a small village in the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand would not be easily understandable. The answer, however, at first obscured by the fanciful and bizarre nature of the town’s history, is actually rather simple. Ultimately, when one moves beyond the eccentricity and the absurdity of this story, what one finds is white supremacy. The “medieval” as manifested in myriad ways in the village of Havelock North ultimately serves the same ends: to valorize the idea of an idyllic white,

Christian, European Middle Ages. Adding to this is the fact that an idealized vision of medieval Europe was revived in this colonized space not just to celebrate a glorious time *past* but through a blend of magicality and primitivism, to close the distance – both geographically and temporally – between colonial New Zealand of the 20th century and the British/European Middle Ages. This act of temporal and spatial distortion served to unmoor the people of Havelock North from the reality of rural, uncultured, colonial subjects, in order to instead position these British expatriates as inheritors of a legacy of a white, Christian, European Golden Age gone by, and furthermore as one that continued to exist. Ultimately, the Havelockians imagined themselves as guild workers, Arthurian knights, and magicians because this allowed them to embody the medieval; and this embodiment in turn enabled them to powerfully and effectively assume one significant feature of the reception of the medieval, which is foundational to the colonialist and imperialist enterprise of “New Zealand” as a whole: white

supremacy.

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Notes

1. [I do not believe that the term “Victorianism” is analogous to “medievalism” but is the interviewee’s way of describing a general air of Victorian mores and stylistics continuing into the 20th century.](#)
2. [This poem is also quoted partly in Von Dadelszen \(1983, 39\) and in Flashoff \(2000, 48\).](#)

3. [The village was called “Havelock” until 1910](#), when the name was changed to “Havelock North” ([Ellwood 1993](#), 167; [Von Dadelszen 1983](#), 39).
4. [Worrad \(2020\)](#), 291) suggests that the longevity of the group in Havelock North is mostly attributable to the town’s isolation from the factionalism and political bickering that centrally destroyed British Golden Dawn temples.
5. [Felkin was also an ex-Theosophist](#), a member of the Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia, a 32-degree Mason, and a devout Anglican.
6. [A significant number of Anglicans](#), including clergy, were engaged with movements like the Golden Dawn at this time, in Europe and its colonies. This phenomenon is examined in depth by [Von Dadelszen \(1983, 42\)](#); [Fuller \(2009, 8\)](#); and [Stace \(2013\)](#).
7. [As Hanegraaff \(2006\)](#) states, this group should “not to be confused with the Order of the Round Table, which was a juvenile branch of the Theosophical society” (436).
8. [Ellwood describes the building and the table in detail](#), but I have been unable to find any other information about the existence and/or design of either.
9. [Occultist Nick Farrell \(2017\)](#) claims to have visited members of the Order in 2011 and that the group still existed in 2017 (100); and according to Andrew Paul [Wood \(2023\)](#), the SRIA in Napier asserts that the group is still active as of 2023 (103).
10. [The Order was](#), like Smaragdum Thalasses, relatively long lasting. Reginald Gardiner served as Grand Master until 1949; [Brodie and Brodie \(1993\)](#) confirm that regular meetings were still held in the 1990s (309).
11. [For studies on the displacement of Māori people from their lands during colonization](#), see Hill ([2016](#), 391–392); Barnes ([2016](#), 439–456; 2019, 439–456); [Pool \(2015\)](#); [Morgan \(2017\)](#); [Mutu \(2019\)](#).

12. [Te Mata means “the face of”](#), while Rongokako is the name of the giant man. This infelicity in the naming of the mountain is present in Worrads’ description from 2020 and is still used informally and in official documents by Pākēhā to refer to the site.
13. [For a discussion of the concept “medieval” in the Māori context](#), see Williams’s [Chapter 4](#) in this volume.

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