

Robert Leaf, photographer 1842-1905

Keith Giles

The name of Robert Leaf is not one that springs immediately to mind when considering early photographers in New Zealand, and yet his was a photographic career that spanned at least 44 years, 43 of them spent in this country. He was born in Beverley in the East Riding of Yorkshire, England on 6 August 1842, and came to New Zealand on the *Hanover*, the second of the Non-Conformist Albertland ships to arrive in Auckland on 18 September 1862. An interesting piece of trivia is that William Henry Scott Kinsey (of Partington & Kinsey), then aged just 2 years, and later to become well known as a photographer and artist in Wellington, was on board the same ship. (His father's cabin trunk can be seen on display in the Auckland War Memorial Museum.) But the Albertlanders produced other photographers too - George and Richard Redfern who arrived in New Zealand on the *Matilda Wattenbach* and the *William Miles* respectively, and Charles Hemus (of Hemus & Hanna), a passenger on the *Ironside* in 1864.

In 1861 the Leaf family had been living in Eastgate in Beverley. In contrast to New Zealand where all government-inspired censuses prior to 1966 have been destroyed, British census enumerator books have on the whole survived, and the 1861 census entry for Eastgate provides a snapshot of the family and their activities:

Name	Relationship	Status	Age	Occupation	Birthplace
Robert Leaf [sic]	Head	Mar	43	Engineer at Ironworks Yard (?) and animal preserver	Kingston-upon-Hull
Eliza E Leafe	Wife	Mar	41	Photographer	Yorkshire Sutton
Robert Leaf	Son	Un	18	Photographic Artist	Yorkshire Beverley
Alfred Leafe	Son		12	Scholar	Yorkshire Beverley
Julia Leafe	Daur		10	Scholar	Yorkshire Beverley
Ann E Leafe	Daur		7	Scholar	Yorkshire Beverley

Figure 1: 1861 census Eastgate, Beverley RG9/3569/fo.85v

Nineteenth century photographers were the computer whiz kids of their age, and Robert Leaf would not have been the only 18 year-old employed in the photographic industry in England, or elsewhere for that matter. Indeed many of his contemporaries in Auckland – Charles Henry Monkton, William Henry Reed, Bruno Hamel, and George Redfern - were all working as photographers by their late teens or early twenties. Perhaps one of the attractions was the potential for serious income, a potential realised by John Moffat's Edinburgh (Scotland) photographic business which recorded an annual profit of over £1000 in 1856 - a very substantial sum for the time. Indeed, material prosperity when linked to self-discipline and hard work was, according to some Protestant thinking, a sign of God's grace, and this may partly explain why Robert Leaf and other Albertlanders so readily embraced the new technology:

But Robert Leaf’s photographic education probably commenced even earlier than 1861. Harold Cazneaux, famous for his Australian photographic studies of the 1920s, joined the Adelaide studio of Hammer & Co at the age of 18, but had been introduced to photography by his parents who had together run Cazneau and Connolly on Lambton Quay in the 1870s and 1880s; and Robert seems to have had a similar induction into the profession through the enthusiasm of his own mother and father.

Most female photographers around this time either regarded photography as a stopgap employment until something better came along, or found themselves taking over studios on the deaths of their photographer husbands. Very few deliberately chose photography as a career, or viewed it as an opportunity for creativity. Robert Leaf’s mother, Eliza Elizabeth Leaf, however, seems to have been the exception. She was probably a skilled artist - at least three oil paintings of Robert Leaf, father and son, have survived that could have been painted by her – and it seems possible that it was her artist’s eye that led her to be a photographer. Another reason may have been the technical developments in the decade between 1851 and 1861 (Eliza Leaf appears to have taken up photography some time after 1851, see figure 2)

Name	Relation-ship	Status	Age	Occupation	Birthplace
Robert Leaf	Head	Mar	31	Engineer in Saw Mill	Yorkshire Hull
Eliza Leaf	Wife	Mar	33		Yorkshire Hull
William Leaf	Son		10	Scholar	Yorkshire Hull
Robert Leaf	Son		8	Scholar	Yorkshire Beverley
Alfred Leaf	Son		2		Yorkshire Beverley

Figure 2: 1851 census Eastgate, Beverley HO107/2359/fo.421v

that simplified and cheapened photographic processes, making photography much more accessible to men and women alike. And the local photographer Ann Cook, who opened a portrait studio in nearby Hull in 1843, having purchased a licence from the London entrepreneur Richard Beard, may have been another influence. But the encouragement and ingenuity of her husband, Robert Leaf senior, must not be discounted. In Beverley he worked as a factory engineer, but had a sideline in taxidermy; in Auckland he was a saw doctor, an employee of the Union Sash and Door Company in Mechanics Bay and, according to the 1882 *Return of the Freeholders of New Zealand*, a cabinetmaker. Early cameras were in a sense little more than wooden boxes, and Robert senior may well have used his engineering and carpentering skills to craft the family’s first photographic apparatus.

If Robert Leaf junior established a photographic studio immediately on arrival in New Zealand in 1862, there is no record of it. Instead anecdotal evidence relates that he and his elder brother William became involved in the New Zealand Wars, and that William was killed in fighting in January 1866. Robert

was said to have been wounded by a gunshot in the same encounter, as a result of which he received an invalidity pension of 6d per day. His injuries, combined with the financial safety-net of his pension, may have been what induced him to resume his photographic activities (if indeed they were ever suspended), and he appears in Mitchell & Seffern's 1866/7 Auckland directory, published in November 1866, as a photographer based in Waterloo Quadrant. His gallery – as his cartes-de-visite proudly announce - was "Opposite Government House", at the corner of Eden Street, conveniently situated for his parents' house in Barrack Street and close to the Auckland Museum in Princes Street where he supplemented his income as an animal preserver, a skill presumably acquired from his father. He remained at this address until the early or mid 1880s, when he moved to Alpha Road in Parnell, although the 1881 electoral roll for Auckland East points to a possible intervening presence in Lorne Street. He never married and, after 10 years of poor health, he died on 16 December 1905, succumbing to a heart attack whilst out walking. His mother outlived him by three years, dying in 1908.

Like most photographers of the period, Robert Leaf concentrated on portraiture, and examples of his work can be found in a number of family albums from the Auckland area. His work was competent, but not exceptional. But there are two things that are striking about him. The first is his longevity in the profession. At a time when many photographers could almost be classed as itinerant, moving from town to town, or even flitting between New Zealand and Australia, switching between photography and other activities as the economic situation dictated, Robert Leaf remained in Auckland and stuck with photography. The second point of interest is the influence of his mother on his career. The 1861 census is clear evidence that she was working as a photographer in England immediately prior to the family's departure for New Zealand; it also suggests that she worked in conjunction with her son Robert, probably even training him in the profession. If this partnership continued on arrival in Auckland, even though Robert's name appeared on the photographs produced by his studio, it would probably make Eliza Elizabeth Leaf New Zealand's first professional female photographer.

Bibliography

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