

Stepping back through time

Nelson's landmark Cawthron Steps celebrated a century late last month. To mark the occasion, a book, *Meet You At The Church Steps, A Social History of a Nelson Landmark*, was launched. Here, author **Karen Stade** canvasses the unfolding social tapestry and history that has played out on Church Hill (Piki Mai) and its historic steps, much of it recorded in the pages of the *Nelson Mail*.

From protests to royal visits, carols by candle-light to New Year's Eve rock-fests, the Cawthron Steps, or Church Steps as they are commonly known, have been a central part of Nelson city life for more than a century.

The impressive and ornamental granite steps were gifted by philanthropist Thomas Cawthron and formally opened on September 20, 1913, replacing wooden steps built in 1858. They rise from Trafalgar St to the city's Christ Church Cathedral.

The small hill has been a natural gathering point since pre-European days, when it was believed to be a Maori pa. When the New Zealand Company arrived in late 1841 to establish the colony of Nelson, the attractions of the hill as the company's administrative base were obvious.

Gradually a path was worn from Trafalgar St to the top of the hill, where an Anglican Church was built and later, when Queen Victoria's royal decree in 1858 established a bishop's see and earned Nelson city status, a cathedral.

The construction of the first flight of wooden steps that year was a joint project of the Nelson Board of Works and the church wardens. But the steps quickly became overgrown, were slippery when wet, and rotting treads gave way under foot.

By 1910, constant complaints led to plans being drawn up by Arthur Griffin for their replacement. However, the project stalled in a protracted debate over public memorials to

two prominent deceased Nelsonians and available funds didn't stretch to cover the design.

Eventually Cawthron stepped in with an offer the Nelson City Council could not refuse. Rather than compromise Griffin's design with a partial build of the steps to suit a smaller purse, Cawthron would pay for the entire project and also contribute to the cost of landscaping on either side of the steps.

Thomas Cawthron was a self-made man already well known for his philanthropic gifts to the city. From the 1880s he put his considerable fortune – built up over 30 years through his own physical labour and his trade, shipping and investment dealings – to good use in his adopted city. Among his gifts were donations and a loan towards the establishment of the Nelson School of Music and the organ still played there today.

He paid for the continuation of the posts and chains along Rocks Rd, gave 1000ha near Dun Mountain to the council as a public scenic and recreation reserve, put money into Nelson Hospital and the construction of a nurses' home. On his death in 1915 the residue of his estate funded the establishment of the world-class science research laboratory, the Cawthron Institute, which opened in 1921.

J and A Wilson Ltd began construction work on the steps in August 1912. Built of Tonga Bay granite, the three single flights and one double flight with landings featured garden plots flanked with Gothic-style pillars.

On September 20, 1913, a large crowd gathered to witness the



For posterity: Karen Stade's book *Meet You At The Church Steps* takes readers through a history of pomp, philanthropy and protest.
Photo: MARTIN DE RUYTER/FAIRFAX NZ



Slippery when wet: The wooden Church Steps.
Photo: KEN WRIGHT POSTCARD COLLECTION

opening of the Church Steps – officially known as the Cawthron Steps – by the Governor-General, Lord Liverpool. Cawthron's gift is commemorated on a slab of grey Aberdeen granite inscribed, "These steps were presented to the city by T. Cawthron, Esq. AD 1913" and set into the face of one of the landings.

As with the wooden steps before them, the Church Steps remain the natural gathering point for public gatherings. They were the backdrop for photographs by the Tyree Studio, F.N. Jones, Kingsford Studio, Geoffrey C. Wood, Barry Simpson, and the *Nelson Evening Mail*. Many of the photographs taken by these photographers and studios and included in the book are held by the Nelson Provincial Museum but contemporary photographs taken by *Nelson Mail* photographers as recently as July also feature.

Excerpts of reports about the events illustrated come from the newspapers of the day, including the *Nelson Evening Mail*, *Nelson Mail*, the *Examiner* and the *Colonist*.

Among the first large-scale events celebrated on the steps was the marriage of the future King Edward VII to Princess Alexandra of Denmark in 1863.

A thanksgiving service for the survivors of the wreck of the immigrant ship, *Queen Bee*, attracted a large crowd in 1877 and Queen Victoria's Golden Jubilee in 1887 saw thousands on the steps to enjoy a public holiday in her honour.

During World War I the steps

witnessed the farewell and welcome home of Nelson soldiers, as well as the first Anzac Day service and patriotic fundraisers, before peace in 1919. The 1920s were a decade of royal visits, including the Prince of Wales (the future King Edward VIII) in 1921.

Events involving the steps during the Depression of the 1930s were often fundraisers to help the unemployed, while World War II curtailed the province's 1942 centennial celebrations on the steps, although a huge party erupted when the surrender of Japan ended fighting in the Pacific.

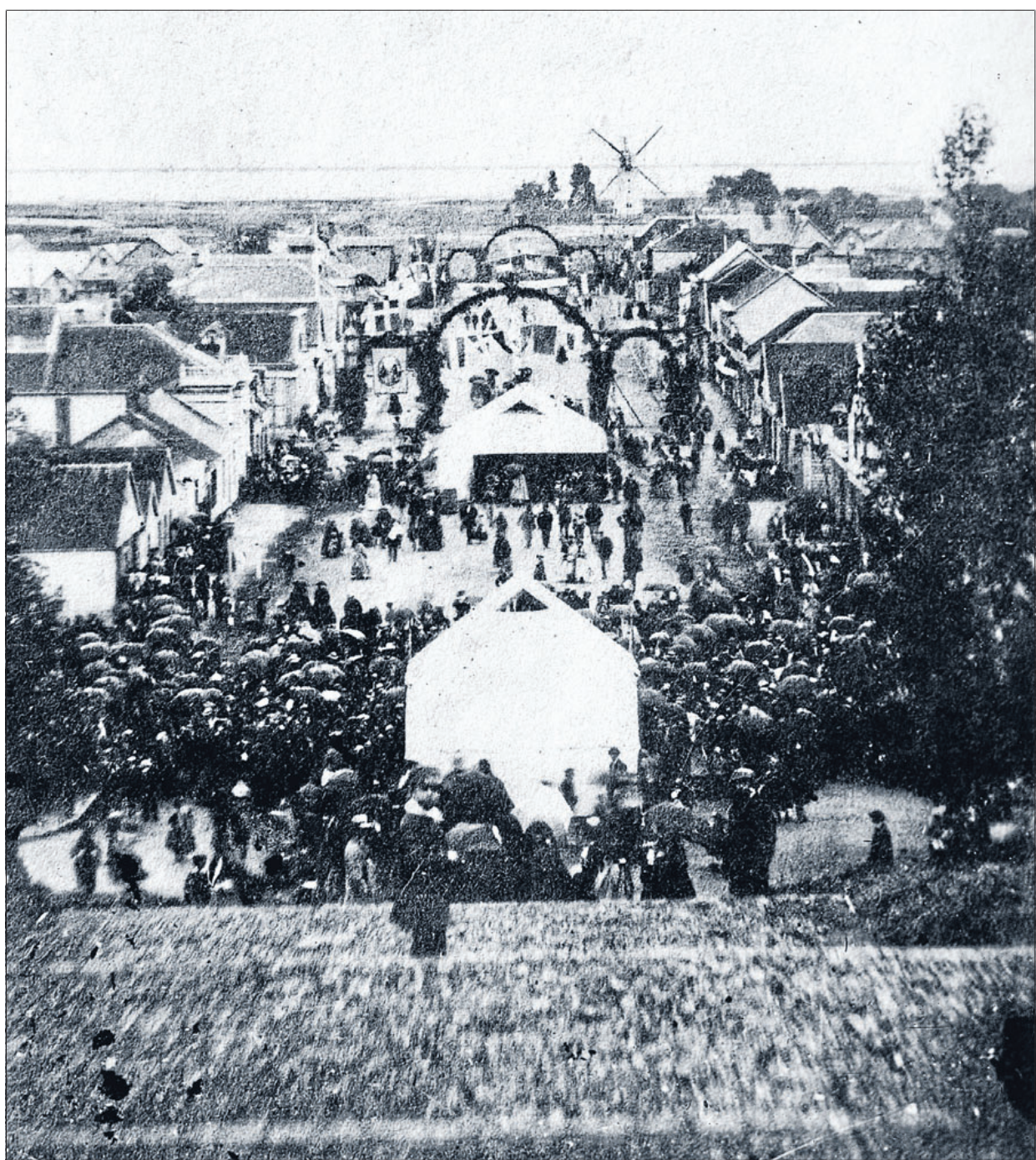
In 1954, the visit of the newly crowned Queen Elizabeth II was met with a reception on the steps of a scale not seen for decades.

During the 1960s and 1970s the steps were often used for protests ranging from the closure of Nelson's railway, the demise of the cotton mill, to New Zealand's involvement in the Vietnam War.

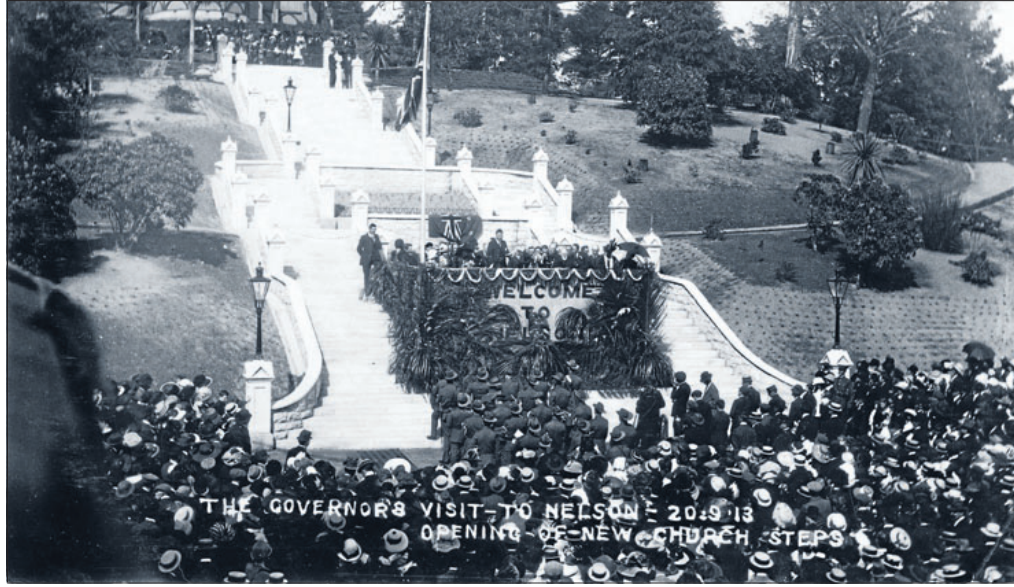
Noisy crowds demonstrated against apartheid and, later, nuclear weapons, the 1981 Springbok Tour and various Government policy shifts.

While protest marches culminating at the Church Steps continue, the location remains the chosen place for community gatherings of celebration, commemoration and fun.

Carols by Candlelight on Christmas Eve has been a feature for decades. The city celebrated its 150th anniversary on the steps in 2008 and in 2011 the steps and the Cathedral became the canvas for the Piki Mai light show. A thousand Nelson College students



Snapshot of history: One of the earliest photographs showing the Church Steps: the celebration for the marriage of the Prince of Wales, 1863.
Photo: NELSON PROVINCIAL MUSEUM, BETT LOAN COLLECTION: 31467.



State occasion: The opening of the granite Cawthron Steps by the Governor, Lord Liverpool, 1913.
Photo: KEN WRIGHT POSTCARD COLLECTION



Community gathering: Carols by Candlelight 2012.
Photo: MARTIN DE RUYTER/FAIRFAX NZ

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