

By that time William Hodgkins had been painting in New Zealand for sixteen years and, although passionately interested in the work of his contemporaries, he could have had no first-hand experience of the work of Monet, Sisley, Seurat or even Boudin. But it is possible that he had been influenced to move away from the English tradition of 'stained drawings' by his experience of French painting in Paris and by his profound study of the Turner collection at Marlborough House in London.¹⁶

The English watercolour tradition (other than Cotman and Turner) is one of clear washes of colour lightly superimposed over pencil drawing or a monochrome grey, and then the intensity and detail built up, with colour wash over dry wash and touches or thin brush lines of darker colour. It is the method used by most of the competent painters working in watercolour in New Zealand in the nineteenth century. But William Hodgkins has a stronger palette and prefers not to build up washes but to paint forms directly with a broader brush, drawing tree shapes and shadows over still-wet washes. He controls and manipulates run colour and makes use of the fortuitous effects from granulation of strong colours.

In the dash and vigour of his brush stroke he may have learned something from the watercolours of Eugène Delacroix (1798-1863) who used watercolour brilliantly for direct studies of animals and people and preliminary sketches for large works in oil. Delacroix seldom painted landscapes in this medium but two very subtle, direct watercolour landscapes by him were exhibited in Paris in 1855.¹⁷

Another French watercolourist with whose work Hodgkins has much in common is a curator at Versailles, François-Marius Granet (1775-1849) two hundred of whose watercolours were bequeathed to the Louvre.¹⁸ Like Hodgkins, Granet used wide areas of muted colour, drew directly with a brush, suggested trees in silhouette. His subjects were of Paris, and especially of Versailles, where Hodgkins had also lived and worked, according to a testimonial, 'during the years 1855-56 in assisting the late Captain Denny at Versailles, in a literary work of some magnitude . . .'¹⁹ It is not fanciful to assume that Hodgkins would have absorbed knowledge of the handling of watercolours from these two French painters, Delacroix and Granet, and that his own work introduces into New Zealand an attitude to painting more European than English. His enjoyment of the medium, his quick sensibility, his wit, above all, his accurate eye for colour, for hues of brown and green on swampy flats, for the green light of early mornings, for sunshine on snow, or the close-toned blues, browns and olive greens of bush painted in the late afternoon, these are his particular gifts, his contribution to an infant landscape tradition. His drawings make an autobiography