

WILLIAM WEBSTER



DEALER IN LAND

BY R M BURDON

WHEN ADAM SMITH, founder of the science of political economy, asserted that "The engrossing of uncultivated land was the greatest obstruction to its improvement," he pointed out at the same time that although the practice had been more restrained in the English colonies than in any other, it had by no means been prevented altogether. It certainly had not. The colonizing of Australia was a case in point—a case which set reformers such as Gibbon Wakefield striving to get some formula adopted by which the new world settlements, those of New Zealand in particular, might be spared the evils of unlimited aggregation of land by individuals.

For many reasons the problem was not an easy one to solve. Viewed from one aspect alone, there was a certain fascination, quite apart from the mere making of money, in becoming the proprietor of a great estate, which appealed irresistibly to adventurers of all kinds. Among all nations from time immemorial the owning of land has been closely bound up with the aristocratic principle. Broad acres confer on their proprietors a respectability that cannot be so easily earned by wealth invested in other securities.

It is therefore scarcely to be wondered at that many of the new arrivals in the sparsely populated, freshly discovered countries of the Pacific had visions of themselves as founders of a new landed aristocracy based on the European model.

These visions, although inimical to the best principle of colonization, had nothing even faintly immoral about them in the eyes of our grandfathers, who saw more virtue than we do in the making of a fortune. Even to-day, when ideas on

the subject have changed, one is willing to extend a measure of sympathy to the adventurer wishing to become a *bona fide* landowner, but one has nothing to say in favour of a land grabber like William Webster, a man with no idea other than that of enriching himself by speculation.

Webster made his appearance on the New Zealand coast in the year 1835, soon after which he established a trading-station at Coromandel, where he claimed to have bought land from the Maoris. Later on he established a shipyard, where he built small vessels fit for entering shallow bays and sailing up rivers. In course of time he formed other trading-stations, and sometimes found it convenient to buy the land on which they were situated, but for the most part he seems only to have bought what was necessary for his purpose. In 1839, however, when rumours of British annexation were in the air, he began to speculate on the grand scale until at the time of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi he claimed to have acquired 250,000 acres from the Maoris.

Naturally he was much disturbed by Governor Hobson's Proclamation to the effect that no purchase of land would be looked upon as valid until confirmed by the Crown, especially as he was heavily in debt to certain merchants of Sydney, whose claims he hoped to settle by making over to them some of the land he had bought in New Zealand.

Now, Webster was a citizen of the British Empire, but at this crisis in his affairs he seems to have conceived the idea of extricating himself from his difficulties by becoming an American