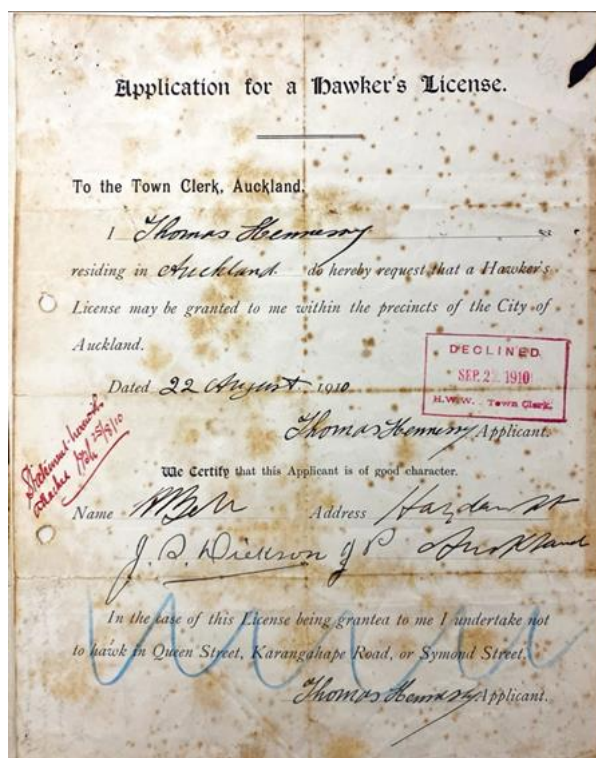


## **‘Public Boon’ or Public Bother? Tāmaki Makaurau’s Itinerant Traders and the Campaign to Keep Them Out**

Auckland commuters are all too familiar with the onslaught of peak-hour congestion and a rotational cycle of downtown disruptions. It may surprise the reader that in the 1890s, the average person shared many of the same frustrations. The difference? The ‘traffic problem’ was relegated to footpaths overflowing with stalls, wagons, and carts; the expected ‘commotion’ was street dealers auctioning wares. Street-selling, or ‘hawking’, was a diverse profession in every sense of the word, and a significant avenue for making a living without base capital. Buying fruit cheaply to resell was a popular choice. Hawking was a highly contentious trade, and several actors tried to stamp it out. The government attempted to introduce a national licencing scheme in 1894 and 1896. Although they were unsuccessful, the Municipal Corporations Act 1908 and its 1910 amendment extended council’s ability to create by-laws regarding traffic licencing.<sup>1</sup> Auckland City Council used this discretion to take a hard line against hawkers. This article will explore the reactions to and realities of Auckland hawkers amid a sea of regulations at the turn of the twentieth century. Focusing on the experience of immigrant hawkers, it will briefly discuss how the fight to defend their business, intersected with fights to defend identities, citizenship, and equality.

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<sup>1</sup> Municipal Corporations Amendment Act 1910, sec.31(q).



Declined hawker's licence application, 1910.

## An Unpopular Occupation

The number of Auckland street-sellers and hawkers numbered over a thousand in 1913, yet several organisations refuted the legitimacy of their sales. At the turn of the century, Auckland City Council, which controlled the regulation of fruit hawkers, received appeals from all angles. Submissions included: that hawkers were unsanitary, they undercut shopkeepers, that they made too much noise, and that should be removed entirely.<sup>2</sup> As well as unfavourable social attitudes, hawkers faced rigorous restrictions imposed by the Council. Hawkers had to apply for paid licences, wear a badge or sign that demarcated them a 'licenced hawker,' and they could not remain stationary, or stand on Queen Street.<sup>3</sup> The traffic

<sup>2</sup> Letter of J.S. Webster to Town Clerk, December 14, 1908, Auckland City Council Archives ACC 285 186/33 92840; Auckland Fruiterers Protective Association "Petition to his Worship the Mayor and Councillors' of the City of Auckland." August 1 1909, Auckland City Council Archives ACC 285 186/33 92840; Queen Street Shopkeepers, "The Humble Petition." December 9, 1908, Auckland City Council Archives ACC 285 186/33 92840.; W. Evans & Others "Petition for the Abolition of Street Stands." September 20, 1919, ACC 275 13-150/2 456113.

<sup>3</sup> Auckland City Council. 1915. *Auckland City Council by-laws 1-25*. Auckland: Auckland City Council, 88, 137. Auckland City Council Archives ACC 426 10/2 217352.

inspector regularly measured their distance from the street, and any non-compliance could result in fines or revocation of licence.<sup>4</sup>



An inspector handing out street-hawkers licences outside the town hall. 1909.

Hawkers did not quietly accept the unfavourable position that stereotypes and regulations placed them in. Protesting the treatment of street-sellers, one hawker wrote to the Town Clerk, “Even if we had to stand 40ft away from the main stand it would be more congenial than being harassed constantly by the police on the city thoroughfare.”<sup>5</sup> Hawkercs also engaged in material protest actions. In 1909, a group of hawkers stood on Queen Street contravening Council by-laws, and in 1910 the Street Dealers Association petitioned to Council to protest further restrictions. While all hawkers had to abide by these restrictions, immigrant hawkers navigated the streets in the face of racism and additional pressures created by intolerance.

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<sup>4</sup> J. B. Lindsay to Mayor, Councillors and Town Clerk, memorandum, "Works Committee" August 15, 1911, Auckland City Council Archives ACC 285 186/33 92840.

<sup>5</sup> Letter of Messrs Duggan, Foreman, Elias, Jones, McKendrick, Madden, Bray, and McConnell to City Council Gentlemen, August 9, 1911, Auckland City Council Archives ACC 285 186/33 92840.

UNDESIRABLE HAWKERS PREVENTION.

Amendments to the title of The Hawkers Bill 1896 say a great deal about its purpose.

## Chinese Hawkers

During the 1890s, Chinese New Zealanders were among the first to establish a hawking trade in Aotearoa. In 1911, there were at least 70 Chinese fruit hawkers in Auckland that operated as a pillar for the sale and distribution of goods.<sup>6</sup> Responses to Chinese hawkers mirrored critiques of Chinese labourers more generally – that their labour was cheap, resulting in inferior produce, and that they were ousting white people from the trade. As early as 1878, Pākehā produce merchants held a conference in Newmarket to discuss the ‘economic threat’ posed by the presence of Chinese hawkers at weekly markets.<sup>7</sup> In 1891, a Scottish vegetable seller, blaming Chinese hawkers for the decline in his vegetable sales, sought to copy their methods by hawking his goods door to door.<sup>8</sup> Pākehā represented the majority of hawkers and street sellers, but this did not prevent moral panic that the profession was being ‘taken over’ by Chinese. Consequently, in 1907, the *New Zealand Truth* suggested that Pākehā should hawk their goods to ‘reclaim’ the trade from Chinese people.<sup>9</sup> Further, they suggested that where Chinese people could easily hawk their goods and that Pākehā hawkers were harried by police.<sup>10</sup> This version of events was selective, contradictive, and drastically incomplete. Chinese people were among the first groups of hawkers to be licenced in Aotearoa even though Chinese shopkeepers were accused of profiting from these restrictions. It is worth noting that an explicit purpose of the Hawkers and Pedlars Act 1894 was to “...prevent the

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<sup>6</sup> M. Fraser Government Statistician, “Table XV. Showing the Occupations of the Chinese in New Zealand, as returned at the Census taken for 2nd April, 1911.” in *Results of a Census of the Dominion of New Zealand* (Wellington: Registrar-General, 1912) [https://www3.stats.govt.nz/historic\\_publications/1911-census/1911-results-census.html](https://www3.stats.govt.nz/historic_publications/1911-census/1911-results-census.html).

<sup>7</sup> “Market Gardener’s Meeting” *Auckland Star*, February 14, 1878, 2.

<sup>8</sup> “Scotchman v. Chinaman”, *Evening Star*, November 12, 1891, 2.

<sup>9</sup> “The Critic”, *NZ Truth*, March 2, 1907, 1

<sup>10</sup> “The Critic”, *NZ Truth*, March 2, 1907, 1

influx of Asiatics to carry on this business”.<sup>11</sup> MP William Pember Reeves also referred to ‘Assyrian Hawkers’ who were “...as undesirable...as...John Chinaman himself.”<sup>12</sup>



The fruit hawkers have been ordered away from the main streets by the City Council, owing to complaints having been made by city fruiterers.—*News item.*

*THE YELLOW EVIL.*

### ‘Assyrians’ and ‘Hindoos’: Indian Hawkers

The earliest recorded arrivals of Indians to New Zealand were two Sikh brothers, Bir and Phuman Singh Gill, who arrived about 1890 working as hawkers.<sup>13</sup> While there are few details around the ‘why’, ‘Suliman’ an Indian contributor to the *Auckland Star* in 1888 offers some insights, writing: “We come here to make a little money by trading and are careful not to break the law or get into trouble in any way.”<sup>14</sup> By 1895, small Indian peddling trades had

<sup>11</sup> New Zealand, *Parliamentary Debates* v.83, Legislative Council and House of Representatives, 1894, 155 (William Pember Reeves, Member of Parliament). <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106019787925>

<sup>12</sup> New Zealand, *Parliamentary Debates* v.89, Legislative Council and House of Representatives, 1895, 349 (William Pember Reeves, Member of Parliament). <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106019787982?urlappend=%3Bseq=369%3Bownerid=9007199272262614-375>.

<sup>13</sup> Jacob Edmond, Henry Johnson, and Jacqueline Leckie, *Recentring Asia: Histories, Encounters, Identities*. (Leiden, Netherlands: Global Oriental, 2011), 62.

<sup>14</sup> “Random Shots”, *Auckland Star*, June 2, 1888, 2.

garnered national attention.<sup>15</sup> Many Indian Hawkers worked as fruit-sellers, buying produce from local auctioneers.<sup>16</sup>



However, Indians, unlike the Chinese and other groups, had the status of ‘British Subjects’ since Queen Victoria’s Proclamation of 1 November 1858.<sup>17</sup> In theory, this afforded Indians “...all the rights of British subjects and ‘the equal and impartial protection of the law’ in all parts of the empire...”.<sup>18</sup> Exclusionary policies towards Indians therefore could not be so overt as to cause instability or upset. Reeves’ own bill, for example, was denied Royal Assent for as it was felt to be against the ‘tradition of the Empire, which makes no distinction in favour of, or against, race or colour’.<sup>19</sup> ‘Equality’ under empire was effective in name only.

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<sup>15</sup> New Zealand, *Parliamentary Debates* v.89, 1895, 349

<https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106019787982?urlappend=%3Bseq=369%3Bownerid=9007199272262614-375>.

<sup>16</sup> “One of the Hindus”, *Auckland Star*, March 27, 1914, 7.

<sup>17</sup> Sekhar Bandyopadhyay, "A History of Small Numbers: Indians in New Zealand, c. 1890s–1930s." *New Zealand Journal of History* 43, no. 2 (2009), 153.

<sup>18</sup> Bandyopadhyay, 153.

<sup>19</sup> *Conference Between The Secretary Of State And The Premiers Of The Self-Governing Colonies (A-04, Proceedings Of, At The Colonial Office, London: Appendix To The Journals Of The House Of Representatives June And July, 1897)*, 7.



MP Alfred Newman argued that Indian hawkers were wrongly called British subjects.<sup>20</sup> Regardless, for Indian hawkers on the ground, the Commonwealth connection was useful leverage and a mechanism for protesting discrimination in employment. Solicitor J. R. Landon, who represented an Indian hawker Chhiba Dear, wrote to the Town Clerk:

“...licences have been continuously issue to [Chhiba] throughout the last two years and throughout that whole period no complaints...have been made against him...until Mr Tester verbally intimated that no further licence would be granted to [Chhiba]...In view of his good record...he...is at least due...the ordinary fair opportunity (theoretically available to all British subjects) of disproving the accusation.”<sup>21</sup>

Mr J. Lindsay, the City Traffic Inspector for Auckland, was not shy about his dislike of non-Europeans. In a memo to the Auckland Town Clerk, he wrote that people of colour were “...gradually taking the place of white men on streets...starving them out”.<sup>22</sup> A year before, Auckland Mayor Christopher James Parr refused to issue any hawking licences to Indians, for reasons in a similar vein – communicating to all Council officers by confidential circular to refuse any new applications by Indians.<sup>23</sup> However, the perceived ‘influx’ of Asiatics and Assyrian hawkers by MP William Pember Reeves was a complete overstatement. In 1913, only 170 licences had been issued to Indians, in comparison, 1528 licences were issued to white men.<sup>24</sup> This anti-Indian sentiment was strongly felt. In 1922, Indian Delegate V.S. Srinivasa Sastri reported on the conditions of Indians living in Aotearoa, noting that ‘colour prejudice’ was a barrier to employment for Indians in New Zealand.<sup>25</sup> The letters of hawkers confirm the findings of Shastri’s report. In 1915, Dahya Dullabh wrote to the mayor, claiming that he had been refused licences by Mr Lindsay on fifteen or sixteen occasions, that he had “...given [licences] to Europeans but not to Indians. I believe [he] rather hate[s] Indian. I beg

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<sup>20</sup> New Zealand, *Parliamentary Debates* v.92, Legislative Council and House of Representatives, 1896, 254 (Alfred Newman, Member of Parliament). <https://hdl.handle.net/2027/uc1.32106019788014>.

<sup>21</sup> Letter of J. R. Landon to the Town Clerk, Auckland, 29 February, 1916. Auckland City Council Archives. ACC 275 13-150/2 456113.

<sup>22</sup> Letter of J. Lindsay to Town Clerk, November 20, 1914, Auckland City Council Archives. ACC 275 13-150/2 456113.

<sup>23</sup> Letter of Town Clerk’s Office to Traffic Inspector, February 6, 1914, Auckland City Council Archives, ACC 275 13-150/2 456113; Jacqueline Leckie, *Invisible: New Zealand’s History of Excluding Kiwi-Indians* (Chicago: Massey University Press, 2021), 87.

<sup>24</sup> Letter of J. B. Lindsay to Town Clerk, October 29, 1913, ACC 275 13-150/2 456113.

<sup>25</sup> Srinivasa Sastri *Report made to the Government of India by the Right Honourable V.S. Srinivasa Sastri, regarding his deputation to Canada, Australia, and New Zealand* (Simla: Governmental Central Press, 1923), Archives New Zealand 1923/12 65 R24550822, 8-9.

to inform you that I don't think quite they [sic.] right thing that you should favour Europeans...we have to make a living as well...".<sup>26</sup>



When he was charged with ‘insolence’ and refused a licence when he remained stationary against Lindsay’s orders, Dullabh protested that Indians had “as much right as the white men...to stand on the street and sell”.<sup>27</sup> The self-advocacy of Indian hawkers was crucial in preventing further restrictions. When a group of hawkers threatened to sue Council in 1914 for their inaction, the Council authorised officers to grant licences to Indian hawkers once more.<sup>28</sup>

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<sup>26</sup> Letter of Dahya Dullabh to C. J. Parr, February 19, 1915, Auckland City Council Archives ACC 275 13-150/2 456113.

<sup>27</sup> Letter of J. B. Lindsay to Town Clerk, February 9, 1915, Auckland City Council Archives ACC 275 13-150/2 456113.

<sup>28</sup> Letter of Devon Martin Prendergast to Town Clerk, October 19, 1914 Auckland City Council Archives ACC 275 13-150/2 456113; Letter of Devon Martin Prendergast to Town Clerk, November 12, 1914, Auckland City Council Archives ACC 275 13-150/2 456113.





AN ASSYRIAN HAWKER'S VAN

### Eastern European Hawkers

Eastern Europeans who were involved in hawking were not necessarily admonished for involvement in hawking but were more likely harassed for other aspects of their identities. For example, because of prejudice against them, Dalmatians often had to hawk their wine door-to-door.<sup>29</sup> Greek and Italian hawkers were likely an exception to this rule. In 1926, James Tattersfield wrote to the Council, complaining of the

“...large number of licenses being granted to Greeks and Italians to such an extent that they are becoming a nuisance to everybody concerned and when people do not buy they are anything but civil...[they are] not only a nuisance but a menace to the people of this City. Thanking you for your esteemed assistance in helping to eradicate this...”<sup>30</sup>

The complaint was passed on to the Council, and just a week later, it created a by-law requiring all people applying for hawker's licences to have had six months residence in New Zealand – a provision taken from the proposed 1894 Hawkers and Pedlars Act.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> “North Auckland Wine Industry.” *Otago Witness*, August 30 1911, 10.

<sup>31</sup> Letter of Acting Town Clerk to Superintendent of Police, December 22, 1926, Auckland City Council Archives ACC 285 186/33 92840; Richard Seddon, *Hawkers and Pedlars*, (New Zealand: Joint Statutes Revision Committee, July 26, 1894).

From the 1890s to 1920s, hawkers were a cornerstone of Auckland's horticultural economy. They were uniquely suited to deliver produce to isolated areas, and paying no rent or rates, were able to provide fresh goods at affordable prices. However, opinions of them were by no means favourable and accounts of their experiences have largely lapsed as the trade has declined. Immigrant hawkers experienced the compounding pressures of racial discrimination, and additional restrictions. Discussing this forgotten 'point-of-sale' represents a logical conclusion to many of these stories. Immigrants to Aotearoa often found themselves tied to the production and distribution of foodstuffs, whether it be as market-gardeners, winegrowers, grocers, or itinerant traders. Land and trade-based occupations were important stepping stones for newcomers to establish themselves in Aotearoa – and for some, it marked the beginning of booming business empires. These material contributions were deeply interwoven with social histories, tales of perseverance and triumph through adversity and prejudice. If we are truly committed to engaging with Tāmaki Makaurau's past, we must be prepared to encounter aspects that we find unsettling and celebrate the legacies of those who have been traditionally excluded.

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