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Henry Suter – New Zealand's most prominent Swiss naturalist



In 1886, Johannes Heinrich Suter-Naef stood on the platform in Rolle Switzerland waiting to begin a journey that would end in Wellington, New Zealand. He was beginning the most audacious and uncertain period of his life. And, he was not alone— with him were his wife Ida and their seven children aged from 6 to 15 years.

Leaving behind their large home and a bankrupted business in Zurich, Heinrich (as he was known in Switzerland) had to do something to support his family. As the creditors gathered, he made plans to sail to New Zealand in the sail-assisted steamer the Rimutaka and to make a new beginning in a far distant land. He had qualifications in science from the Federal Polytechnikum in Zurich and an abiding interest in the natural world. Reluctantly he made a living selling bedding in Zurich and when that business failed he was determined to follow his passion as a naturalist. Suter spent most of his spare time in Switzerland as an amateur naturalist – searching for and describing molluscs in his local area. His hope was to find employment in science, perhaps at a museum in New Zealand, a young country full of possibilities. –instead, he found poverty and despair.

Heinrich and his family bid farewell to their family forever. They boarded the Rimutaka and coped with six weeks in their cramped and sometimes damp steerage cabin. They also coped with their sometimes disagreeable ship companions.

Heinrich Suter became 'Henry' Suter as soon as he stepped ashore in Wellington on New Year's Eve 1887. The question now presented itself. How was

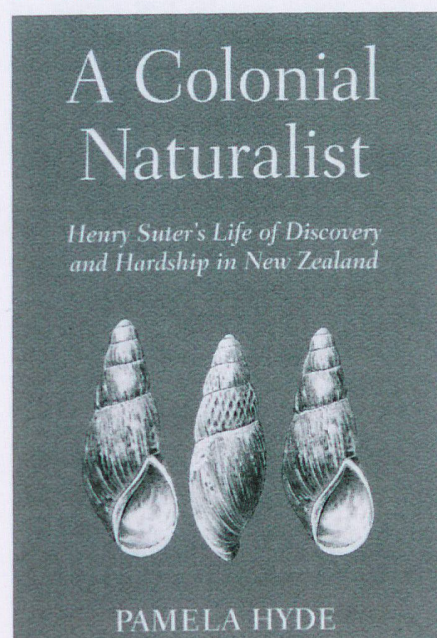
a German-speaking Swiss national who knew nobody in New Zealand going to support his family and how was he going to do this by following his passion to study the natural environment?

Pamela Hyde's book *A Colonial Naturalist - Henry Suter's life of discovery and hardship in New Zealand* describes the struggles of this determined Swiss family to survive and thrive in New Zealand. Their attempts to carve out an existence in New Zealand took them to some of the remotest parts of New Zealand including the Wairarapa Bush and Mt Cook. Henry was a hardworking, intelligent and capable scientist. His wife and children somehow managed to cope with long periods of poverty and uncertainty about their future as Henry held to his dream of finding work as a scientist.

The book describes the undulating road which eventually lead to Henry Suter becoming New Zealand's foremost expert on New Zealand molluscs and writing the definitive work on the subject. It is a compelling story of one of the forgotten men of New Zealand science as well as a compelling story of a Swiss family from Zurich making an important contribution to New Zealand's understanding of itself and its natural environment.

The author, Pamela Hyde has a PhD in medical sociology from Victoria University of Wellington. Henry Suter is her great grandfather and as her mother used to tell her she is one quarter Swiss!

This book is available from the author at drpamelahyde@gmail.com \$35.00 plus postage.



Book Corner

Swiss Settlers in New Zealand

Swiss Settlers in New Zealand is the first comprehensive history of the Swiss in New Zealand. It describes Swiss settlement in New Zealand from the time of the gold rushes in the 1860s to the present day. The stories of Swiss who have settled in New Zealand at different periods are woven into the narrative which describes the social and political situation in Switzerland and New Zealand at the time of their migration and provides the historical and social background. Among the earlier settler stories are those of Leonardo Pozzi, the Swiss Italian who tried to introduce silk-worm farming into New Zealand and the Meuli family who were among the first Swiss to settle in Taranaki. The focus is on the Swiss-born migrants, who they were, why they came, how they have adapted to life in New Zealand, their on-going links with their homeland and the Swiss community in New Zealand, and the contribution they have made to New Zealand. Extracts from letters, diaries and newspapers, as well as photos, maps and diagrams all contribute to making *Swiss Settlers in New Zealand* a very readable book and one that will appeal to those Swiss settlers and their descendants with an interest in their New Zealand history.

Joan Waldvogel grew up in the Swiss community in Taranaki and is a first generation New Zealander. She has a PhD in Applied Linguistics from Victoria University of Wellington and lives in Wellington.

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