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Chamier the Epicurean: The Life and Works  
of George Chamier (1842-1915)

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements  
for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in English,  
The University of Auckland, 2008.

The world's a labyrinth, where misguided men  
Walk up and down to find their weariness;  
No sooner have we measured, with much toil,  
One crooked path, in hope to gain our freedom,  
But it betrays us to a new affliction.

—Beaumont, “The Night-Walker,” quoted in  
George Chamier, *The Story of a Successful Man*  
(VII)<sup>1</sup>

We shall all reach the final goal soon enough, in any case;  
why not take it easy, and enjoy ourselves by the way?

—George Chamier, *A South-Sea Siren* (113)

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<sup>1</sup> “Beaumont” (actually John Fletcher), “The Night-Walker, or, the Little Thief,” *The Works of Beaumont and Fletcher, with an Introduction by George Darley*, vol. 2 (1611, rev. 1640; London: Edward Moxon, 1840) 680 (IV.vi.21-25), quoted as the epigraph to chapter VII of *SSM*.

## *Abstract*

George Chamier (1842-1915) was an engineer and novelist, who was born and died in England, but spent most of his life on an eccentric orbit around the outskirts of the British Empire—through New Zealand, Australia and China and back to England again. After he had established himself as an engineer in Australia, he looked back on his life in a trilogy of autoethnographical novels, which work through the problem of how an “unsettled settler” such as he might get settled in the settler colonies. *Philosopher Dick* (1890) and *A South-Sea Siren* (1895) are set in the eighteen-sixties in North Canterbury, New Zealand on a back country station and in a small town respectively; *The Story of a Successful Man* (1895) is set in the eighteen-seventies in “Marvellous Melbourne.”

This thesis, “Chamier the Epicurean,” examines Chamier’s life and (fictional) works in the light of two key questions. The first is:

How can we understand the distinctive critical perspective on life in the settler colonies in the early days of European settlement that his novels articulate?

The “outside insideness” of his position as an unsettled settler can account for the critical purchase he has on his own culture. Such a perspective is unusual in the history of local settler literature, not just because it is critical of settler society or “unsettling,” but because it is critical in an unusual way: Chamier unsettles *himself* by problematising his own position as a settler, thereby generating a critical autoethnography—to borrow Deborah Reed-Danahay’s definition, a critical “self (auto) ethnography” that is also “the ethnography of [his] own group,” his own *ethnos* (people).

And the second question that informs this thesis is:

How can we understand the relation between his life and works, given the degree to which the former seems to inform the latter?

In the novels, he makes sense of his life in hindsight as a sentimental education. He has his autoethnographical “stand-ins” take on a series of sentimental personas in the attempt to get themselves settled as they move through the Australasian colonies in an ironic appropriation of the grand narrative of settlement as a progress from frontier to town to city. To see his life in hindsight as “mapped out” in this way was a gesture of aesthetic

settlement that enabled Chamier to achieve an Epicurean equanimity he was able to find only fleetingly in the scramble of life in the settler colonies.

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Lastly, I am indebted to Carol Franklin, whose paper at the 1994 Conference of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature first announced the discovery of George Chamier's lost third novel, on which the argument of this thesis relies.

*He aha te mea nui o te ao? Māku e kī atu he tangata, he tangata!*



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## Abbreviations

- 1 Texts by George Chamier (for in-text citation)

<i>AT</i>	<i>Chamier on Australian Timber.</i>
<i>Capacities</i>	<i>Capacities Required for Culverts and Flood Openings.</i>
<i>Hanyang</i>	“Hanyang Iron and Steel Works.”
<i>Kowai Road Board</i>	Letters to the Survey Department.
<i>Letter to Grainger</i>	Letter to J. H. Grainger.
<i>PD</i>	<i>Philosopher Dick: Adventures and Contemplations of a New Zealand Shepherd.</i>
<i>PW</i>	<i>Property in Water.</i>
<i>SSM</i>	<i>The Story of a Successful Man: An Australian Romance.</i>
<i>SSS</i>	<i>A South-Sea Siren.</i> 2 <sup>nd</sup> ed.
<i>SSS GR</i>	“A South-Sea Siren.” <i>Good Reading about Many Books Mostly by Their Authors.</i>
<i>UW</i>	<i>The Utilisation of Water in South Australia.</i>
<i>WP</i>	<i>War and Pessimism, and Other Studies.</i>

2 Texts by other authors (for footnote citation)

<i>AUP Correspondence</i>	Auckland University Press Correspondence: “New Zealand Fiction: Series 1 . . .”
<i>Daniel’s letter</i>	Daniel Chamier (VIII). “Account of my brother William’s children. . . .”
<i>ICE letter</i>	Institution of Civil Engineers (Great Britain). Letter to the author (15 June 2005).
<i>MPICE</i>	Institution of Civil Engineers (Great Britain). <i>Minutes and Proceedings of the Institution of Civil Engineers.</i>
<i>NSW P LA V&amp;P</i>	New South Wales Parliament Legislative Assembly. <i>Votes and Proceedings of the Legislative Assembly.</i>
<i>PICE</i>	Institution of Civil Engineers (Great Britain). <i>Proceedings.</i>
<i>PP SA</i>	South Australia Parliament. <i>Parliamentary Papers, South Australia (Bound Cumulations).</i>

## Textual Note

All references to *A South-Sea Siren* (1895) cite the more readily accessible second edition (1970). All references to *The Story of a Successful Man* (1895), which was published only in serial form, cite chapter numbers rather than page numbers for ease of reference.