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The Otago Central Railway branched from the South Island Main Trunk at Wingatui, 12 kilometres south of Dunedin, and ran through Middlemarch to Cromwell in the heart of Central Otago, 235 kilometres from the Junction. The route was chosen from seven proposed in 1877 because it opened up the greatest area of Crown Lands, presented the fewest engineering difficulties and was the most direct route to Dunedin. Construction of the railway began in June 1879, but within a year it had become a victim of the economic depression that persisted through the 1880s.

It was 1889 before the first section was opened to traffic, and that was only the 27 kilometres to Hindon in the middle of the Taieri Gorge. Middlemarch

was reached in 1891 and thereafter progress was a little better; the rails reached Ranfurly in 1898, Omakau in 1904, Alexandra in 1906 and Clyde in 1907. Here work stopped until 1914 and it was not until 1921 that the line was completed to Cromwell. Despite its late arrival, the railway played a major part in the development of Central Otago.

Scottish born John Elder Moultray settled in Dunedin with his artist father, John Douglas Moultray in 1883. As an artist and a journalist he interviewed and sketched Maori and Pakeha settlers on his travels throughout New Zealand. He had a particular interest in historical events.