

6. I now proceeded to Rangitikei. While at Patea I had received letters from Noa Te Rauhihi and other Natives, informing me that the opposition to the progress of the surveys had ceased. I was glad to hear, from personal inquiry on the spot, that this was so, though there was some uncertainty in the minds of my informants about it. Mr. Buller, by my instructions, therefore visited the district a few days after I had left it, and has reported that, in consequence of a letter from Tawhaio to the obstructors, in which he directs them to abide by the decision of the Land Court, there will be no further opposition. The surveys were then recommenced, and are so far progressing satisfactorily and without interruption. On learning this, after conference with the Hon. the Colonial Secretary, it was determined to release Meritana, who had been imprisoned in Wanganui Gaol on a conviction for destroying a Trigonometrical Station, and a pardon has since been issued.

7. Leaving Rangitikei on Monday, the 17th January, I went on to Foxton on the Manawatu. Here I was met by Mr. Stewart, C.E., of the Provincial Government service, and Mr. A. Burr, formerly in charge of the road works carried on in this district under the Provincial Government. Accompanied by them I rode through the district to a point beyond Palmerston, about twenty-five miles inland from Foxton. My object was to inspect the partially constructed road, which, when properly finished, will rank as one of the great national works of New Zealand, being the only connecting link possible between the East and West Coasts south of Taupo. Whether regarded as a means of military defence, or as an inlet for colonization and settlement into a vast tract of most valuable land, or as a route for the traffic between the two sides of the island, which will otherwise either not exist or must go round by Cook's Strait, the importance of this road cannot be over-estimated. It runs in a nearly straight line from the sea coast on the west to the summit of the Ruahine range of mountains, a distance of about forty miles, through a timbered country practically dead level, and the very richest character of agricultural soil. At least 100,000 acres are of that description, and perhaps 100,000 more of second class, either by reason of inferior quality or locality. It abuts on the north upon a block of nearly similar size, chiefly of open land, but with large tracts of excellent bush towards the hills and northern extremity lately purchased from the Natives, and which is commonly known as the Manawatu-Rangitikei block, famous in the annals of the Native Land Court. The two blocks contain not much if any less than half a million acres, and may be regarded as the two first divisions of that vast tract of magnificent country, embracing Rangitikei, Turakina, Wangaehu, Wanganui, Waitotara, Patea, Waimate, Taranaki, and Waitara, which extends in one unbroken stretch from the Manawatu River to the White Cliffs, forty miles north of New Plymouth.

The road to which I have referred runs nearly parallel to the Manawatu River, its importance commencing at Ngawakarau, about two miles beyond Orowa Bridge, where is the head of the navigation, some thirty-five miles from the mouth by the windings of the river, and about twelve from Foxton across country. From Ngawakarau ten miles of this road, perfectly straight, have been cleared a chain wide, and constructed through the bush. Ten or fifteen miles more have been cleared but not constructed; and about ten miles more connect the Rangitikei-Manawatu block with the main road at Palmerston at right angles—also cleared but not formed.

The work having been commenced from the Palmerston end downwards towards the sea, I found that owing to want of funds it had been left untouched for about a mile and a half between Orowa Bridge and Ngawakarau, and, being through a wet and heavy bush, is for a great part of the year almost impassable on horseback, and quite impracticable for drays, thus rendering access to the country above and to the partially finished road which penetrates it quite impossible. The worst consequence of this is, that this fine tract of country lies almost entirely unoccupied; while the partially finished road across to Hawke's Bay would be almost useless if wanted on an emergency.

This line having been one of those indicated when the House of Representatives was asked for the vote of £30,000 for military roads last Session, I felt no hesitation in at once taking steps for the completion of the mile and a half which I have described as being an insuperable barrier to traffic beyond; and also for the improvement of the track through the sandhills and swamps through which the inland country is approached from Foxton for about ten miles. I arranged with Mr. A. Burr to organize road parties of Natives residing near the work, and to proceed under the superintendence of Mr. Stewart to execute these portions of the work, which I hope may be done before the commencement of winter. The cost of both pieces will probably not exceed £2,000, which of course will be chargeable on the vote for £30,000.

I have said that it is impossible not to recognize this road as a great national work, and it is one the construction of which would do more perhaps towards consolidating peace and opening the way for the settlement of a large population of hardy and industrious farmers, than any which could be devised. The work, if completed as it ought to be, would be one of considerable magnitude. It was roughly estimated by Mr. Stewart, that to complete it to the top of the mountain as a metalled road, allowing for the work already done, would cost from £20,000 to £30,000. This, however, is not a very large sum—in fact no more than the outlay on each of several bridges now being constructed in the Colony. The Provincial Government of Wellington has not at this moment the resources to effect such a work; but considering that there are on the line of road some 100,000 acres of first-class land, saleable at £1 an acre, and as much more of second class, saleable at ten shillings, surely the amount might easily be raised on the security of that noble estate. The additional value which would be given to the land by the existence of the road, would be the least advantage gained. The certainty that a large population would soon flock into it, and the benefits of connecting Manawatu, Wanganui, and Wellington with Hawke's Bay, are of far greater importance; and these are results which concern not only the two Provinces directly interested, but the whole Colony, by increasing its resources, and giving stability to its prospects of peace. If the Provincial Governments of Wellington and Hawke's Bay could see their way to raising the means for this work and carrying it into effect by any such process as suggested, I think it would be the duty of the Colonial Government to lend all the assistance it may be able towards enabling them to do so.

WILLIAM FOX.

1st February, 1870.