

B. EARLY HISTORY OF STEWART ISLAND.

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Stewart Island was first made known to the civilised world by Cook. With the other portions of New Zealand he had sailed round it, and recorded its position, and such of the more striking characteristics as could be noted from the deck of the "Endeavour." That was 139 years ago.

Outside of the ordinary commonplaces of discovery there are several interesting points associated with Cook's visit. The first is the narrow escape from destruction which the "Endeavour" had, and which will for ever be recorded to navigators in the name "Traps," given to those dangerous rocks which are met with only a few miles from the coast. The passage of the southern point of the island settled the question whether any of the islands of New Zealand formed part of a great antarctic continent—a question which had agitated geographers from the time of Tasman. The third point of interest was the strange mistake made by Cook of concluding that he was sailing round a promontory and not an island.

Following Cook's discovery in 1770 there is no record of Stewart Island having been sighted for a very long time. Its mountainous lands lying away to the south and east must, however, have been repeatedly seen by the vessels which visited Dusky Sound from the time the "Britannia" called there in 1792 until the "Mercury" relieved the crew of the "Endeavour" in 1797. Cook's chart showed a bay where now we know there is a strait, and that kept all captains away from the lee-shore they so much dreaded.

Probably the first man to land upon its rather forbidding coast-line was Captain Oliphant, in a small sealing-craft called the "Endeavour," belonging to Cable and Underwood, of Sydney. In 1803 she procured a cargo of 2,200 skins in the locality of Stewart Island, which at this time was known by the name of the South Cape.

It was not until 1809 that much was done in the way of sealing on the shores of Stewart Island. Captain Grono, in the "Governor Bligh," was in the strait early in 1809, and gave the first report of its existence to the outside world. He spoke of it as "a newly discovered strait" separating South Cape from the mainland. Several other vessels were in or about the strait at the same time, and all of them secured very good cargoes of skins. It is very doubtful indeed whether this was the date of the discovery or not. It is more probable that the strait was discovered some time before, but had not been named until the stirring events of 1808 brought the name of Foveaux to the front, when Grono gave that designation to the hitherto unnamed waterway.

The fact that the island was called Stewart Island has been the means of crediting the discovery to an old-time skipper named William Stewart. It is by no means certain that the credit of discovery is due to him, however. Though the name Stewart Island was given to the land at an early date, the first statement that Stewart discovered it was made in 1826—seventeen years after the alleged discovery—by Stewart himself. Though the evidence that Stewart discovered the island is not by any means clear, it must be pointed out that Stewart was early associated with its survey and exploration. As first officer on board the "Pegasus" he spent some time in visiting and exploring its bays in quest of seals, and his chart of Port Pegasus is dated August, 1809. The chart and his description of the island were afterwards published in the "Oriental Navigator" in 1816, and the former was used by the officers of the navy down to 1840. The name "Stewart Island" was probably given to the land because Stewart surveyed it, not because he discovered it.

Following upon the discovery of Foveaux Strait, considerable activity took place in the sealing trade upon its shores, and Stewart Island contributed more than its quota to the fur-harvest. The names Lords River, Port William, or Williams Bay, as it was at first called, immortalise the name of early Sydney merchants who traded with New Zealand about this time. The revival of trade brought the sealing gangs into conflict with the Natives on different occasions, and boats' crews from the Brothers and the Sydney Cove were killed and devoured by the cannibals.

After the discovery of the Macquarie and the Campbell Islands the Stewart Island trade fell away, and little mention is made of the island until 1813, when a revival in interest in the flax trade took place in Sydney. A vessel, the "Perseverance," was placed under the command of an old Stewart Island sealer, Murray, and sailed for Port William. The moving spirit of the party was a ropemaker of Sydney named Robert Williams. The expedition came to nothing, although several days were spent at anchor in Port William, and a visit paid to a harbour on the mainland now known as the Bluff Harbour.

Beyond the fact that it was a calling-place for sealing-vessels in their regular trips from Sydney, Stewart Island has nothing of moment to chronicle until the expedition sent out by the New South Wales Government in 1822 to investigate the prospects of the flax trade. The "Snapper" proved rather small for the work, but Captain Edwardson visited Mason and Easy Bays and Codfish Island, and reported on everything which came under his notice. His botanical survey of the south-west coast is a very different document from that of which this is a short historical introduction.

Edwardson states that on the island opposite Easy Bay, an Englishman, pursued by Natives, hid himself in a cave, where he subsisted upon shell-fish until rescued by a passing ship and taken to Port Jackson. The same year a woman was rescued from Stewart Island under somewhat similar circumstances. She was a native of Kangaroo Island, and had been taken away by the crew of the "General Gates," an American sealer. The gang which she accompanied was attacked and destroyed by the Maoris, and she, with her little child, escaped and lived under a rock until the savages left. After that she spent eight months living on raw birds and seals before she was rescued by Captain Dawson of the sealing-vessel "Samuel," and taken to Sydney.