

# THE FUTURE OF THE WANGANUI

T. W. DOWNES' RIVER

(By J.C.)

THE change in the administration of the Wanganui River will be followed with much interest by the people, pakeha and Maori, who live on the banks of that long waterway, and those who have occasion to use it for travel. It was announced recently that the river will no longer be dealt with by the Trust Board, which will now cease to exist. The Public Works Department will in future undertake the expenditure of any funds voted for maintenance and improvement of the river as a navigable channel, and the Lands Department will manage the Domain lands, over 30,000 acres, which border the river. Some £500 per annum is produced in revenue from the leased lands on the sides of the Wanganui. This has heretofore been spent on improvements to the channel and the care of the banks. Now there will be no special revenue available for the river; all the money will go into the Consolidated Fund.

This change—though it is not so stated—is, I think, a consequence of the death two years ago of Mr. T. W. Downes, of Wanganui, who was the life and soul of all the work undertaken for the preservation of the scenic beauty and the maintenance of the channel of navigation. For many years he was supervisor for the River Trust and principal moving spirit. He lived on the riverside; he cruised up and down the river in his motor launch, and at an earlier period he made many long canoe journeys. He knew every elbow and every curve, cliff and cave from Wanganui town to Taumarunui, a distance of 136 miles. He gathered its history from the Maoris who lived in the many villages, and who had fought against or for the white Government. He wrote about the Wanganui—he preferred to give it its correct spelling, Whanganui, with the “h” and published several books about it. He grieved to see how settlement and bushfelling had despoiled it in the upper parts and spoiled the navigable channel by causing landslips, accumulation of shoals, and aggravating the alternate heavy floods with a rapid run-off and the silting up in the lower parts. It may rightly be said that Downes' life was bound up with

the preservation of the river and the bush that gave it its chief landscape value, and with the work of keeping it open as the most beautiful and useful waterway in New Zealand.

Now that T. W. Downes no longer cruises and watches his beloved river, it is a question whether any strong guardianship will operate in his place.

The Wanganui is a far more valuable river than most people realise. Not merely is it a tourist route; it is a natural channel into the forested heart of the North Island, the road which cost nothing for upkeep until the pakeha came to spoil it. Rivers are the most economical of roads, and they should be used to the full. The problem of maintaining the Wanganui lies first in its head to watershed stripped of bush by timber companies and the operations of struggling settlers who should never have been placed there at all. The erosion of land which is becoming more serious every year is particularly marked in the Wanganui river system.

This erosion has been assisted by a road which was made some years ago up along the steep east bank of the Wanganui as far as Pipiriki. In its making much forest was destroyed, and the bank was ruined in many places; the road continually slipped away, and it is still slipping after rain. It must have cost a lot of money for maintenance; the water-road on that lower part of the river costs nothing. Such a river would be rightly valued in any other country. It is of more value at less cost than many a road, and travel along it is infinitely more pleasant. But there is always a call for a road for motor travel, and in the road goes at whatever cost in destruction of the bush and erosion of the banks.

*The bird life of our islands is a priceless possession. We can enrich it if we will by preserving and fostering those birds that are established residents or regular visitors and by extending a hospitable welcome to all feathered wayfarers that reach our shores. This should be our pride and our boast, for the old era that worshipped stuffed skins in glass cases and cabinets full of empty egg shells is passing away, and in the new era which has already begun, we are lovers of living, free-winged birds.*—Charles S. Baque.