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Through New Zealand (XXV)

By "SUNDOWNER"

ROAD INTO YESTERDAY

I WAS told by a bus-driver in Tariki that if I left Taranaki by the Taumarunui road I would pass through some of the best scenery in the North Island. I took his advice and found it good. The Whangamomona saddle is as impressive as anything of the kind I can think of on a road open all the year for motor traffic. The bush is what it must have been hundreds of years ago; what it must have been for hundreds of miles, if not from one side of the North Island to the other; what I hope it will now remain for hundreds of years. Unless civilization disappears from New Zealand no-one will ever see again what the missionaries and first surveyors saw in the North Island; but I could at least feel on the top of the Whangamomona saddle that I was looking straight into the past, seeing what the first white man saw at that particular spot, and even seeing it a little more clearly than he could because I was standing on a prepared observation point.

THE WAY OUT

But my self-satisfaction went no further than that. The longer I looked the more admiration I felt for the men who first plotted a path through the bush and the other men who made it into a road. I suppose it is safe to assume that they followed tracks known to the Maoris for many generations; but tracks that men can follow on foot in single file can be quite impossible even for pack-horses, and for wheel traffic may be no guide at all. It is, I think, generally accepted that the Maoris had well defined tracks through all those parts of New Zealand that they found it necessary to traverse, including the highest mountain ranges. They would certainly know their way from the coast of Taranaki to the upper Wanganui River, and from there by half a dozen routes to Taupo. But even if they were crossing and re-crossing all that country 500 years ago or more, as I am sure they were—before Columbus had found his way to America or Luther his to the Diet of Worms—the achievement of the men who opened it up to Pakeha settlement only 50 years ago makes me feel very civilized and soft. I was told in Whangamomona township that there is a man in Stratford who took part 54 years ago in the attempt to save the life of the surveyor whose grave stands a little off the road in the Tangarakau Gorge. It is a moving story, and I wish I had heard it before I left Stratford. But for every story of the kind that pioneers preserve there are two that no-one remembers, and I felt shame rather than gratitude to be driving an 8-cylinder truck in safety where not even a pack-horse could have got through when I was a boy at school, and where the price of my safety had been blood as well as sweat.

IN the history of Whangamomona County published by the Whangamomona Centennial Committee, Whanga-

momona itself is described as the county town; but that I think must always have been a slight exaggeration. I certainly thought it had seen better days, but that was not the opinion of its own people.

COUNTY TOWN

To them it was still what it had always been, only with a stronger hold on their heartstrings. Fifty years ago they had chosen this sheltered clearing in the bush as their trading and meeting place, and a building or two more or less makes no difference to them now. If they have not yet everything they want, they have the place they want to live and die in, and the chief difference between a town-



"I was seeing what the first white man saw at that particular spot"

ship of 200 and a town of 2000 is that friendships fade into acquaintanceships as the numbers increase, and knowledge into rumour and gossip. Everybody in Whangamomona knows everybody else, will help everybody else, and defend him against the world outside. Every schoolboy in the valley knows every eel-hole in the river, and the father and mother of every schoolboy know his teacher. They don't talk about community centres, or use the word community at all. In the sense in which so many of us now use it, as part of the jargon of sociology, they have never heard it. But they live together, meet together, work and worship together, and stand together when trouble comes. Their epic is the fight for the life of Joshua Morgan, the surveyor who blazed the trail through the Tangarakau gorge, became suddenly ill near where the road now crosses the river, and died (March 3, 1893) a few hours before one of his young assistants got back from New Plymouth with medicine for him—a journey of perhaps 80 miles each way, made partly on foot through the bush, partly by canoe down a snag-filled river, and partly by horse, with hardly any breaks for rest day or night. Every traveller who goes through the gorge to-day is told to watch for the grave, and every farmer, fencer, bushman, or shepherd who lives in the gorge knows that if he broke his leg to-morrow or slashed his foot he could depend on the same sacrifice of ease and comfort by everybody else in the gorge, and the same determined effort to get him to safety. They told me that the name Whangamomona means a fertile

valley with stretching arms. But I think it is the inhabitants who have the stretching arms, and that no valley is too long or dark or deep to prevent them from joining hands when the call comes for help.

I HAD turned in from Stratford for the scenery, but found so much human interest as I went along that I often forgot to stop and look about me. There was no-one to distract me on top of Whangamomona saddle, or for a few miles on either side of it, but when I entered the Tangarakau gorge I was surprised to find it inhabited all the way. It would hardly be correct to say that it was settled, but it was certainly occupied, and it gave me some comfort as I drove through in mud and rain to think that if my engine failed or my wheels skidded too dangerously I would never be very far from assistance if I was fit to go for it. One cheerful roadman, when I asked him at a particularly greasy spot if conditions continued like that all through the gorge answered heartily, "All the way. Where would you like best to die?" I told him I thought there were better spots than in the bush, and then realised suddenly that I meant it. The bush fascinates but in the end frightens me, and I was glad when I ran out into open country again and began to look for a hotel.

SCENERY AND SUPERSTITION

But I had forgotten that I was now in the King Country, where the hotels are all "private," and it was not till I reached Taihape the next day that I realised how far the King's word had carried.

I had of course seen hardly any Maoris all the way, and would have thought climate and topography a sufficient explanation if a surveyor had not told me in Whangamomona that Maoris will not live between Ruapehu and Egmont, and are not quite happy to be travelling between the two. However, as I was driving through one settlement I saw the faces of some Maori children flattened against a window watching me, and had a sudden but unmistakable impression of Australian Aborigines. I have often seen Pakeha faces with Aboriginal features, but had never before seen the mark on a Maori, and it still strikes me as odd that the Maoris, who thought nothing of a thousand miles of sea, show signs of so many more remote races and none at all of their nearest neighbours.

The real question, however, was whether this Maori family had outlived the ancient tapu or whether it had ever existed. I would certainly not choose to live on the Egmont-Ruapehu line myself, or for several miles north or south of it, and I can think of no reason why the Maoris would. But I would not be afraid if I found myself on the line that I was risking the wrath of the gods and that something let fly at one of them might get me instead. I don't think the Maoris would have that fear either. I think they stayed away because it was

(continued on next page)