

A DICTIONARY FOR RAROTONGA

FOR forty years Stephen Savage, a New Zealander who adopted Rarotonga as his country, made a study of the Rarotongan language, customs and legends, much of which he wrote down in a 700-page, closely-typed manuscript. This Dictionary of the Rarotongan Maori Language is now in the hands of the Government Printer, Rarotonga, for publication.

To read the Dictionary is to build up, piecemeal, a fascinating picture of Rarotongan life, each word adding another detail—that the back or nape of the neck is called *Katinga-ika*, which derives from the custom of killing a fish by biting it just behind the head, *kati* meaning "to bite"; how a *pai*, a bed for growing crops like *taro*, is built with dried coconut leaves to retain the moisture; that *papaka-toka* means "The Stone Crab," a queer looking creature which lives among the coral in lagoon waters, but at night gives off a phosphorescent glow; that in Polynesian dialect a canoe, *vaka*, is always referred to as "it" and not as "she."

Those back-to-nature exponents who think that Rarotongan life, at least before the white man came, was simply a matter of lying on sunny beaches, fishing, and catching coconuts as they fell, will be disillusioned by this dictionary. Apparently some of the evils which plague the white man were not unknown to the Rarotongan. Look at only a few words selected from the letter "k":

Kai-enua (v): Literally means eater of land; denotes a land thief; land grabber or grabber.

Kaiou (n): A word used to denote a debit or credit according to context.

Katu-pakiko (n): A bald head.

Keia-vaine (n): A term applied to a woman who takes away another woman's sweetheart or husband. A man stealer.

The Dictionary deals at some length with the custom of Kava-drinking:

"Kava (n): A dioecious shrub which grows to from four to six feet in height, cultivated for the purpose of making a narcotic drink from the roots. . . . Generally the method of making this drink (*Kava-ata*—The Exhilarating Kava) was, in the olden days, by having young girls chew the bruised roots and expectorating the results into wooden bowls. It was diluted with water to proper strength and partaken of with much ceremony. . . . The modern method of making Kava (by using a straining cloth) gives a drink of a more narcotic character, the probability being that in the process of chewing, the saliva mixed with the juice and thus neutralised the narcotic properties of the juice to some extent. This drink is said to have a good effect on people who suffer from kidney or bladder trouble, and is often used for that purpose." Which reminds one of the ancient British belief that cigarette ash is good for the carpet.

Nor, apparently, was old Rarotonga without its temperance movement:

Nuku-patoi-kava (n): A party of people who object to the consumption of intoxicating liquor.

But whether early Rarotongan life was idyllic or not, the white man came. He was called *papaa*, the word meaning "four layers," which was given to the Europeans who, when first seen, were apparently keeping the heat out with four layers of clothes. With the *papaa* came civilisation and the necessity to find new words to express new ideas and name new objects. So we find *pu-angiangi*, at first meaning the large blood vessels of the body, now picturesquely coming to mean the inner tube of a motor-car tyre.

Another word of some interest is *Kiore!* an interjection sometimes used as a mild insult, its meaning being determined by the intonation of the voice.

Rarotongan Maori and New Zealand Maori have some similarities and members of both groups can converse though



MAN BITES EEL

The word for the "nape of the neck" derives from the custom of killing a fish by biting it just behind the head

with difficulty. The link can be illustrated by the following definition:

Po'utukava (n): A shore shrub or tree that grows along the shores near the sea. It is stated in tradition that when the large fleet of canoes was about to sail from Rarotonga for Avaiki-tautau (New Zealand) the voyagers held festivals and ceremonials on the sea shore.

During the festival they danced round some Po'utukava trees and declared that when they came to land they would give the first prominent tree they saw the name "Po'utukava" in memory of their last dance.

Stephen Savage, or Tivini, as he was known among his Maori and European associates, was born at Thames in 1873. His father, Valentine Taina, was a quarter-caste New Zealand Maori of the Whanau Apanui tribe of east Bay of Plenty, while the European branch of the family sprang from an American named Benjamin Savage. As a youth in New Zealand Stephen had a varied career—blacksmith, bandmaster and musician, and gymnastic instructor at St. Stephen's College. At 20 he shifted to Rarotonga and later married over there. In 1901 he was appointed Acting-Secretary to the then Federal Government of the Cook Islands, and continued in the employ of Cook Islands Administration till his death in 1941.

The thousand copies of the Dictionary to be printed will be the property of the Department of Island Territories, and none can be promised for private sale. They will probably cost about £2.

As a dictionary the work has its limitations—for instance, cross reference is haphazard, the pronunciation signs are unorthodox, and so on. But the important factor which makes it a bad dictionary, namely, the amount of factual information it contains, is the very factor which makes it so important a contribution to the study of Cook Islands' culture.

More on the Same Subject

NO one will welcome the dictionary discussed on this page more than Julius Hogben, though as a private collector of dictionaries, he will probably regret being unable to put it on his shelves. As a collector Mr. Hogben considers himself a mere amateur. "It just happened," he says, "that I came by one or two and then the opportunity to acquire others was more than I could resist. I haven't very many, probably between 20 and 30." But those 20 or 30 give their owner endless enjoyment, some of which he shares with listeners in his talks *I Collect Dictionaries* now being heard from 1YA and later to be broadcast from other YA stations.

Dictionaries that not only define but also comment—and even air the prejudices of their compilers—are no new thing. Mr. Hogben points out, for the celebrated dictionary of Dr. Samuel Johnson did all that. Editors have bowdlerised out of that dictionary most of Johnson's brightness, so that to get the greatest enjoyment from him you must seek out one of the earlier editions. For example, Johnson originally

defined "excise" as "a hateful tax levied upon commodities and adjudged not by the common judges of property, but wretches hired by those to whom excise is paid." Later it became merely a tax levied on commodities. Boswell, Mr. Hogben recalls, said that the Commissioners of Excise were so annoyed by Johnson's original definition that they consulted the Attorney-General, who advised them that the definition was actionable—but that it would be more prudent not to prosecute!

Mr. Hogben, who has selected a mere handful from his collection for more particular attention in his talks, has already been heard from 1YA illustrating his contention that "dictionaries are never dull"—though he points out the unfortunate fact that "the least interesting of them and those most likely to create an allergy to all dictionaries are those emasculated volumes (many of them called School Dictionaries) which give very meagre information and omit all the excitement." This Sunday (May 15) at 9.30 p.m. he gets down to cases in a more detailed way with a talk on a dictionary of hard words—actually the



JULIUS HOGBEN

oldest dictionary he owns, published in 1658. On May 22, at the same time, he tells the story of the dictionary that was publicly burnt. Remarkable as it may seem, it was a legal dictionary.