

NOTES ON A NEW ZEALAND PAINTING
BY WILLIAM STRUTT (1825-1915)

William Strutt was in New Zealand from March 1855 to July 1856, arriving in New Plymouth on 27 March 1855. He purchased a block of rural land of over 100 acres about 10 miles from New Plymouth, when he cleared a section by burning and felling the bush, and built a bush 'whorrie' where he lived with his wife and child.

Two albums of drawings and watercolours, purchased from the artist by Alexander Turnbull in 1913, are a valuable historical record of the life of a colonist in the New Zealand bush.

Also in the Alexander Turnbull Library are two oils by William Strutt. The most important of these, which depicts a group of Maoris on a beach, was formerly known as *The Beach, New Plymouth*, probably because of its affinity with a pencil and watercolour drawing of the same name in Strutt's albums (C1/2). This drawing includes some of the same elements as the oil painting: a procession of Maoris carrying produce up the beach, a laden cart drawn by two bullocks, and a Maori in a short, feather cloak driving a pig tied by its hind leg.

The oil painting has also been reproduced in *From Plymouth to New Plymouth*, by R. G. Wood (Wellington, Reed, 1959) as 'Return of the Ngatiawa Maoris of New Plymouth'. However, R. G. Wood gives no evidence to support this title, and the possibility of the oil representing the return of the Ngatiawa seems unlikely for several reasons.

The Ngatiawa Maoris returned to New Plymouth before Strutt's arrival in New Plymouth, i.e. in 1848. (See: Charles Hursthouse: *An Account of the Settlement of New Plymouth, in New Zealand*. London, Smith, Elder & Co., 1849, p. 51.)

In all cases, Strutt's major colonial history paintings were based on events to which he was an eye-witness or, at least, which occurred when he was present in the country, so that he was able to gather eye-witness accounts to aid him in his reconstructions.

It is unlikely that Strutt, had he wished to reconstruct this event, would have reduced a scene of such magnitude, as described by Hursthouse, to a mere four canoes, three dozen Maoris, two bullocks and a few pigs. Nor would he have missed the opportunity to paint Maoris on horseback.

Nowhere in his *Journals* does Strutt mention either the return of the Ngatiawa, or that he painted a scene such as this on the beach at New Plymouth. Yet his other historical pictures, even those which remained at the stage of a preparatory drawing, are described in considerable detail.

In his later years, when writing his *Autobiography*, Strutt had