

Bush travelling in Te-Ika-a-maui

by Bill Secker

In ancient times the difference in terrain encountered in the two main islands of New Zealand had a pronounced impact on the way of life when seasonal activities or other pursuits required tribal groups to move away from their villages.

Today we as a nation are indebted to those early European travellers of different occupations and callings who walked along some of the ancient North Island pathways in the company of Maori guides and companions and who have recorded in their journals of what travelling far afield involved in Aotearoa.

For both the early transient visitors to these shores and others who at a later date arrived to take up permanent residence in a new land found the prehistoric walkway system which threaded the North Island, a considerable advantage when their interests or duties took them away from their port of entry into New Zealand.

In the North Island with its more gentle terrain and less formidable mountain barriers much of the travelling with regard to food gathering, trade with neighbours or for the movement of war parties was by way of ridges. This means of travelling was in direct contrast which prevailed over great tracts of the South Island where wending the way up river valleys invariably led parties to alpine passes.

In pre european times the tracks which wended their way through fern, scrub or forest were much akin to present day trampers tracks in that they followed the crests of spurs or ridges where the general vegetation would tend to be of a lighter nature due to shallower and drier soil conditions in these places exerting an influence on plant growth. This keeping the track to ridge tops was formerly a more important consideration than it is today for in an age when only stone tools were available for hacking into growth, great difficulty would be encountered in knocking down vegetation which was in the way of progress — for absent from the tool kit was an implement like the slasher which clears the way.

There were however some differences between the ancient Maori paths and the present day tracks which provide access to the bush clad ranges. One of these differences was that the Maori track of earlier times made a bee-line approach up spurs and ridges. On the steeper grades pakeha travellers who were used to zigzagging when ascending



What travelling entailed in typical North Island hill country is well captured in this unknown artist's work of a bush scene in what is now part of one of Wellington's western suburbs. Although in ancient times this particular track was of minor importance it provided access to different parts of the coast as well as providing an alternative to journeying by canoe in the roughish waters of Cook Strait. The scene depicts a junction in the old walkway system and when the artist recorded his impression on paper it had practically ceased to be of any importance as a coach road a few chains away had made it obsolete. On an old subdivision plan of the Karori Valley the surveyor sketched in a section of this track as it led to the Makara Coast. Amongst the detail recorded were off-shoots to places where birds could be caught in the then still forested country.

hills found the going tough, and keeping up with guides, companions and even porters weighed down under heavy loads, taxed their stamina and suitability for this mode of travel. Pakeha travellers also found to what they were accustomed to, the ancient paths were exceedingly narrow and with thick growth on either side there was little room to place the feet.

Nevertheless for all the descriptive entries made by a certain section of the early pakeha travellers, one cannot escape coming to the conclusion that some of this well meant criticism was coming from people who were somewhat clumsy in their movements. For it is a well accepted maxim in walking across rough country and this involves whether it happens to be along a rocky shoreline, travelling by way of a stony river bed or in the bush where tree roots are in the way, that it calls for co-ordination between eye and feet. Furthermore this co-ordination between eyes and feet does not come about over-

night. For those who were not brought up to this form of travel from infancy, two years may need to pass before the pakeha could bound along like his Maori companions.

One of the best accounts of what travelling entailed in pre Waitangi New Zealand has been described by the artist Augustus Earle who was resident in northern New Zealand for nine months in 1827. Earle was one of the early visitors and settlers who was not particularly adapted to this primitive form of travel for he leaves no doubt that he found the going hard when he traversed the track which connected Hokianga Harbour with Keri Keri in the Bay of Islands.

Our artist describes that once on the path "it is impossible to go astray". This state of affairs which was a blessing to others in later years was due to the fact as Earle put it, "no other animal other than man ever traverses this country". Unlike today there was no risk for the unwary of being lead off course through mistaking an animal track for the way