

Moioio Island: One of the earliest Ngai Tahu bases

By Barry Bailsford

Sweeping along Tory Channel on the Inter-island Ferry, few passengers would notice tiny Moioio Island off Erie Bay. A dense canopy of native bush conceals the abundant evidence of Maori life that is sculptured into almost every habitable space on its surface.

Today, only the occasional bird call breaks the silence of Moioio. In times past, it rang to the laughter and cries of children and the harsh screams of war.

Moioio Island was one of the earliest Ngai Tahu bases established in the south during their migrations from Hataitai, Wellington in the late 1600's.

It was still an important pa in the 1830's and the Maori presence is engraved so deeply on its terrain in houses, terraces, linking pathways and pit structures that it is very easy to feel the drama that springs from its past.

The Moioio traditions have been recorded by Canon James Stack. He describes the Ngai Tahu migration from Hataitai to Moioio and the shattering events that were to follow.

SETTLEMENT, ABANDONMENT

What caused the step to be taken was this: Tapu, a Kahununu chief, heard those who had seen Rakai tauwheke's house at Hataitai praising the workmanship of it, and, being jealous, said: "What is his house to my Kopapa, which will carry me along the backbone of Rongo rongo."

These words coming to Rakai tauwheke's ears, were interpreted by him to mean a curse, and when Tapu afterwards came on a visit with some friends to Hataitai, Rakai tauwheke fell upon him and killed him, but spared all his companions, whom he allowed to return safely home.

But dreading the vengeance of Tapu's tribe, the Ngai Tahu abandoned Hataitai, and crossed over the straits in a body to Moioio, an island in one of the sounds close to Kai hinu, where there was a mixed settlement of Ngaitara and Ngatimamoe.

Here they lived peaceably with their neighbours for some time till



'Simeon, Queen Charlotte Sound. March 21, 1843.' by John Wallis Barnicoat. Barnicoat a talented surveyor-artist sketched Simeon when journeying through the Sounds to the Wairau, via Tory Channel.

Simeon, a Tory Channel Maori sat patiently for the sketch then took Barnicoat's pencil and wrote his own name on his chest. Print from Alexander Turnbull Library.

their anger was aroused by the discovery that they had joined in eating the corrupted body of a Ngai Tahu man which they had found in the forest, where unknown to his friends, he had died.

This was considered a very gross insult, and was avenged in the following manner: Someone was sent to fetch the leg and thigh-bones of Te ao Marere, a Ngaitara chief, whose remains had been lately discovered in a cave by some Ngai Tahu women when gathering flax on the slopes of Kaihinu.

Out of these bones hooks were made, and when Ngaitara went out to fish, a Ngai Tahu man, taking one of the hooks, went with them. When the fish greedily attacked the bait, and were drawn up to the

surface in rapid succession, he said, in a tone to be heard and remarked: "How the old man buried up there nips."

The words were noted, and it was agreed that they could only refer to the desecration of their chief's grave. To set the question at rest a person was sent to examine it, and it was found that part of the skeleton had been removed. As the Ngaitara did not regard this as a justifiable act of retaliation for their having eaten the body which they found, they determined therefore to avenge it.

An opportunity of doing so was afforded to them shortly afterwards, when a party of Ngai Tahu women came as usual to the neighbourhood of Kaihinu to gather flax.