



A KORERO REPORT

THE NAME "country," as applied to a district, has in New Zealand come to be associated with the remote, the wild, and the extraordinary. The King-country and the Mackenzie country are, or were until recently, areas set apart, the one by its forest and the other by its mountain barriers. Moreover, each has a history so curious that legend and truth have become inextricably mixed.

The King-country is fast losing its wildness. Axe and fire and plough are smoothing its outlines, and in another fifty years it will have few visible associations with its past. But the Mackenzie country will always be extraordinary; here Nature has worked on so vast a scale that the marks left by a century of human habitation are trivial scratches. Even now, when Mount Cook is a comfortable day's journey from Timaru, he is an insensitive traveller who, topping Burke's Pass, does not become conscious of a dramatic transition. Behind lies the genteel, cultivated landscape of the Fairlie Basin; ahead everything is bare and vast and unfriendly.

*Nature, earth's angel, man's antagonist,
The stern antagonist from whom he
wrests his bread,
Long heretofore with vast magnificence
Did carve this scene, prepare the arena,
spread
Bronze tussocked terraces before pre-
cipitous
Great purple alps, loose glacier-shed
Fierce-laughing streams in circuitous river-
bed.*

Thus a New Zealand poet seeing the Mackenzie country for the first time.

From a distance the range beyond Fairlie blocks off the plains with such an air of finality that the squatters who began to arrive in South Canterbury in 1850 assumed that it was part of the main divide and that the passes they could see led through to the West Coast. Not for five years did they discover that beyond the range lay a great basin some 30 miles long by 20 broad where sheep could be pastured. The story of the discovery has become a sort of folk-tale in Canterbury. In 1855 the land in the Opihi Valley from the sea inland to the neighbourhood of what is now Fairlie comprised the great Levels Station, held by the Rhodes brothers. In March of that year J. H. C. Sidebottom, manager of the station, was at the Cave "paring the sheep's feet" when Seventeen, a Maori shepherd, came to tell him that a man named Mackenzie had stolen the greater part of his flock. Taking with him Seventeen and another Maori named Taiko, Sidebottom set off in pursuit and picked up tracks along a branch of the Tengawai River.