

The Rhine of Maoriland

CANOEING ON THE UPPER WANGANUI

A CERTAIN Monday night in late summer found two of us (Photographer and Scribe) landed from the train at Taumarunui, where the Main Trunk line strikes the Wanganui river, 175 miles from Auckland. Taumarunui, which is situated on the delta formed by the Wanganui and a tributary called the Ongarue, is one of the newest of the new townships that are springing up in the wake of the line-builders, and looks even younger than it is. We were up bright and early Tuesday, anxious to be afloat on the river, of which we had heard so much, but we were entirely ignorant of the fact that there is no such word as punctuality in the lexicon of the Maori. He would not know what you were driving at if you began talking to him about the value of time. Taihou (Anglice "in a minute") is the keynote to all that he does. It took us some time to adapt ourselves to the ways of "Taihou" and more than once I saw the Photographer get purple in the face with suppressed emotion when the strain became particularly exasperating. Eventually at noon the canoe was loaded up with provisions and our photographing impedimenta, and the two pakehas stepped gingerly into the waist and got a firm hold of the sides. Our boatmen jumped lightly aboard, one at each end. Almost the entire Maori population came to the riverbank to see us away, and with a good deal of "Haerera!" and "Ehoho!" ("Farewell!" and "Good-bye!") we cast off, and before we pakehas could decide that a canoe was not quite so easy to sit as a pulling-boat we were in the middle of our first rapid, and all our energies were devoted to looking straight ahead and preserving a careful equilibrium. Before we reached Pipiriki (84 miles down stream) we shot nearly 200 of them (191, I think, to be correct), and after the first day out thought no more of meeting one than ordering dinner.

Shooting rapids is one of the most exhilarating sensations imaginable. "The thrilling sense" that the poet tells us "thrills the wanderer of the trackless way" is very mild indeed to the feelings one experiences in shooting like an arrow through the white waters of a swift rapid. They say there is such a thing as speed mania, and that when a motorist, for instance, opens the throttle and lets his car out, an insane desire comes over him for more speed! more speed! After doing the Wanganui one could readily believe that some nervously-constituted persons could get carried away by the ecstasy of speed. There is something very intoxicating about it. You float helmside down a still reach. Nearing a bend the sound of rushing waters strikes on the ear, and the river, swift, but placid, suddenly breaks into foam from bank to bank. The pakeha looks ahead, and sees nothing but swirling, turbulent water, and wonders what drowning is like. With a skiffle flick of the paddle the steersman turns the prow of the frail craft to the right point, and swish! you are over the crown, and go shooting down the seething river with a delightful sense of abandon and rush! A few moments, and you are floating once more in water apparently motion-

less. Some people have very weird ideas as to what a rapid is, and how it is shot. A lady who saw a photograph of the falls on the Ohura river, which flows into the Wanganui, shuddered as she murmured, "Only fancy coming over that in a canoe!" The Wanganui rapids aren't quite waterfalls. Of course there must be a drop, but it is almost imperceptible to the eye. Between the crown and where the broken water begins there is a noticeable hollow, but the canoe doesn't take a header, like the water chute at Earl's Court. The rapids vary in length and fierceness. Some are a mere break of the water in mid-stream; others run wildly from bank to bank. There is an exciting one at Paparoa, but the piece de resistance is fierce Ngaporo, five miles above Pipiriki. From crown to tail must be quite three hundred yards. In this distance the surging rapid races first towards one bank, then the other, and finishes up by rushing round a sharp bend—and all this requires very nice steering indeed.

When we went over, Ngaporo was very wild. It was just after a slight fresh, and there was a considerable sea running, which called for dexterous paddling. Although you are flying along at such a great pace the water is travelling at nearly the same speed as the canoe, and this makes steering very difficult, and therein lies the risk of rapid-shooting. If your craft slows round in a cross-current and goes sailing down broadside on the chances are exceedingly good for a capsize, and then you would know all about the taniwhas ("kelpies")!

The first day we only covered ten miles, and camped at the Whakarae Rapid, where Captain Marshall, of the River Trust, had a gang of men clearing snags and boulders. Round the fire that night we listened to some good stories of the hard life of the Trust men, who spend half their days under canvas, shifting about from spot to spot to keep the steamer channel clear. The next place of particular interest was Paparoa, where the scenery is most striking. There is a splendid rapid here, running on both sides of rocky islets, right in the centre of the river bed, which widens to about two chains. Jagged rocks are scattered about on either side, and on the right bank there is a pretty waterfall.

Sunset on Wednesday found us at Tawhata, about 28 miles from Taumarunui, one of the few pakeha still remaining on the upper Wanganui, which could once send down a fleet of war canoes that would strike terror into the hearts of the dwellers along the fertile lower reaches. By the way, I am not quite certain about the spelling of Tawhata, or any other name down this way with an "h" in it. The Wanganui Maori is the Codrington of his race in the matter of h's. Wanganui itself should if it had its due carry an "h" after the "w," but the habit of the tribe in substituting a peculiar click of the tongue for the letter, which gives so much trouble to a certain class of pakehas, probably accounts for its omission. After pitching our tent on a sheltered ledge halfway up the bank, our canoe-men went to the pa at the top of the cliff, and foregathered with their compatriots.

In front of our tent we had a glorious fire of drift wood. Sitting by it we had many pipes and much keniro. A camp fire is a most seductive spot, and some of the most pleasurable hours one has spent have been round the burning logs with the white smoke curling up among the trees. When we thought about bed it was midnight. The mists had come up from the snoring river, filling all the valleys. We could not see the opposite bank, and when we got up the fire-light threw huge reflections of our figures against the watery mist. At this village we did a deal in a large piece of uncut poumanu (green-stone), very much the size and shape of a black-moor's skull, which had been on the river for many generations—had probably been brought from Te Wai Pounamu (the Middle Island) in one of the daring raids the Northerners used to make after this coveted stone.

Next day we pressed the village into our service, and poled back a mile or so to the Ohura River, which we had passed too late the previous evening to use the camera. Armed with long tokos (poles), an equal number on each side, the crew have to pole every inch of the way, and as the river runs six or seven knots in places, this work requires some stamina. It is picturesque work—the little, dark figures of the men plunging the long poles down in perfect time, pushing the canoe forward; the slowly progressing craft creeping up a rapid like a huge centipede. In the old days, before the advent of the steamers, this was the only method of travelling, and in some of the reaches where the water is too deep for the poles to reach the bottom, you can see the poling holes along the bank just above the water level, some of them worn several inches deep where one pole after another has found the same spot during the generations of comings and goings. Just where the Ohura enters the Wanganui there is a fine fall, but two chains from the mouth there is a more striking one. The Ohura is only one of the many tributary streams which swell the flood of the Wanganui in its long meandering course from the foot of the snow-capped mountains to the sea. Some have worn their beds halfway down the paper, and make striking falls where they flow fanning into the river—such, for instance, as the Otunui, dashing over buttressed terraces, or the Otumui, which comes down like an open fan, and spills its foamy waters into the dark river. Others tumble sheer down from the top of the bank, and splash into the river like molten silver as they catch the sun. Some are so high above us that long before they reach the river their tinkling waters are dissipated in showers of spray, falling softly on the ferns and clinging plants, which always look cool and fresh even in the ardent noontide sun, when everything else shimmers in the heat, the water a glare of sparkles, and the birds hide silent in the cool recesses of the thick forest.

At Tawhata we transferred our Lurea and Penates to a larger canoe, and shipped a new crew from the Ongarue, which we met panting her troubled way up the rapids to meet the tourist train. That night we pitched our tent at an abandoned camp of the River Trust men,

who, besides leaving us a legacy in the shape of a ready-made ground—which is a big consideration when you change camp every night—bequeathed us also a troop of rats—and a Wanganui rat is thing to be remembered. Next day we had some lovely reflections in the line reaches which are to be found at this part of the river. Forty miles from Taumarunui at a sharp bend is one of those natural formations which bear a wonderful likeness to the handiwork of man. Just in the light of the dawn the cliff runs out exactly like the bow of a modern warship—some 200 feet long by 40 feet high. Not only is the profile resemblance most marked, but looked at "three-quarter face" the similarity is even more pronounced as the slight rise from waterline to deck with that slight sweep which characterises a warship with a ram bow. Man-o'-war Point is naturally one name for this spot, but the Maoris know it as Te Rerenga o Ko Inaki—"Inaki's leap."

The story goes that Inaki was hotly pursued, and in desperation jumped from this somewhat formidable height into the running river. What led up to this high diving feat the storytellers tell not, for the reason for not wanting to meet his pursuers must have been pretty urgent. The Maoris have a proverb, "Land and woman, the source of all our troubles," so the present traveller can take his choice. We are told, however, that he swam safely to the opposite bank and got away. He deserved his liberty!

Near Kirikiriroa, a little below the scene of Inaki's escapade, the river takes a remarkable bend. There is a tall birch tree standing alone at the top of a scarp cliff on the left bank. This was pointed out by our steersman, and after paddling for perhaps a mile he pointed out the same tree right ahead of us again, only back view. We had completely doubled on our own course, and had one had an arm strong enough and a stone big enough he could have dropped it over the high tree into the river a mile back! There are no birches higher up, but from just about here right down nearly to Pipiriki they are a distinct feature of the bush. They generally grow in clumps, and their dark foliage and form are like "the cedars of Lebanon."

Two miles from Te Rerenga o Ko Inaki, or forty-two miles from Taumarunui, you come suddenly to the famous Tarehokiere on turning a bend. In fact, that is how you come on all the picturesque bits. Really there is a luxurious monotony about the Wanganui, but the many windings and twistings change it into an infinite variety, and this is the true charm of river scenery. Tarehokiere ("the rats' path") is the Maelstrom of the Wanganui. A landslip on the left-hand side has confined the river till the space from bank to bank is only a matter of yards. Just below the rocks and debris brought down by the slip the river runs wider, scooping out a sort of circular back-water, and where the back widens in again there is a very symmetrical cir-