

Lost But Not Forgotten

Nga maunga Ruahine

Na Bill Secker

Although with regards to altitude, the Ruahine Range of the lower North Island falls well short of the grandeur of the loftier Southern Alps, this mountain barrier nevertheless presented a formidable physical barrier to parties who in olden times had reason to travel between Hawkes Bay in the east and the western districts of Te Ika-a-Maui. The range also presented a challenge to those parties journeying to the northern parts of the island as many a Pakeha experienced in the era before modern roading changed the landscape.

Today it is by no means uncommon to hear doubting Thomases within the ranks of New Zealand historians express their reservations about the depth of geographical knowledge possessed by the old time Maori. This questioning by a new generation of historians of how well the Maori of yester-year knew the hinterland of his tribal domain and what lay behind the distant ranges has been fueled to a certain extent from entries in the journals of early European explorers like the Rev. William Colenso of the Church Missionary Society. For in Colenso's case he has left on permanent record, the problems he encountered in finding guides who knew the Ruahine Range like the proverbial back of their hands.

There is no doubt that due to a combination of circumstances which resulted from ever increasing contact by the coastal tribes with Europeans, that some aspects of the old communal life style under went change.

First-hand knowledge lost

These changes in old Aotearoa took place from the time of Cook's first visit to these shores. For in order to obtain articles of trade which were in demand by ship's masters and traders so that European manufacturing of varying usefulness could be obtained in exchange, something in the old traditional life style had to be neglected. One of these changes brought about to the old communal life style by the changed economic conditions was that first hand knowledge of extensive areas of the

tribal hinterlands in many areas was lost.

This lack of geographical knowledge of the far away forested ranges where life was hard, is shown with the ancient trails that worked their way through the Ruahines.

Some aspects of travelling in New Zealand have not altered with the years as any present day trumper who has cause to bivouac or camp out near the bush line can verify.

This mountain forest has appropriately been given the name of elfin forest by plan geographers and is typical of highland regions of both the earth's tropical and warm temperature zones where broadleaf plants flourish.

Colenso in his mountain travels found that the gloomy elfin forest caused his

Maori companions to become depressed once sundown approached. Swirling mist, the sound of dripping water from trees festooned with moss, all combine to produce an eerie feeling which seems to be out of this world. A further characteristic of traversing the high peaks of the Ruahines above the bush line is the experience of a party almost without warning being enshrouded in thick mist. On occasions this gives rise to the spectre of the brocken. This is the phenomenon where the greatly magnified shadow of an observor is thrown onto a bank of cloud.

All this eeriness made the Ruahines a haunt of the Patupaiarehe. These being spirit people who possessed bodies like humans, had fairer complexions than the norm and who engaged themselves in human pursuits.



Mountain River and bush scene.