

Mercury hides in New Zealand Hills



THE mining of cinnabar, the peculiar red ore from which mercury is derived, is probably the least known of New Zealand's industries, yet for over eighty years it has occupied a place in the Dominion's mining history. Mercury production has never attained large-scale proportions in New Zealand. There have been years when it has had its booms and there have been some periods when the output was very small, but it has never completely ceased. Just prior to the war, production fell low, but in 1942 there was a resurgence when new interests brought the latest machinery and modern methods to a desolate, abandoned field and a new hope to the hearts of old miners and prospectors who believe that great sources of cinnabar still lie unexplored.

Men who have spent a life-time tunnelling into lonely hillsides in search of the precious ore are firm in their faith that there is a great deal of mercury in some of Auckland's hills. Cinnabar has been mined in the Kanaeranga valley just beyond Thames, at Puhipuhi, twenty-five miles from Whangarei, at Mackaytown, alongside the Karangahake goldfield, and near the Ngawa springs not far from Kaikohe. It was only at Mackaytown that the mine was closed through the exhaustion of the supply of ore. Even there, there are some who believe that had better plant been used and other levels prospected the venture might have been successful. There is a story of adventure and toil, hope and despair in the chequered history of

some of those northern cinnabar mines. When companies gave up, lone seekers remained, working with pick and pan and humble retorting furnace. Though their life was hard and their income small they were fascinated by the quest. It was the labour and zeal of such men that kept the industry alive.

The first locality which offered prospects of yielding cinnabar was at Ngawa, and it was there that the initial effort was made to place the production of mercury on a commercial basis. As early as 1860, people who gazed at the thermal springs had wondered at the globules of "silvery white and metallic lustre" that they sometimes saw in the waters. Many and varied were the theories advanced, but the one most generally accepted was that a thermometer had been broken at some time when the temperature of the water was being taken. The real explanation is that cinnabar yields mercury by heating, and at Ngawa the element had been freed by the hot mineral water of the springs.

In 1869, F. W. Hutton, F.G.S., visited the district on behalf of the Transactions of the New Zealand Institute. He found a large quantity of mercury both in cinnabar and in a pure state. An English industrial chemical firm spent large sums of money on cinnabar mining at Ngawa and worked over many acres. Having interests elsewhere in the world, where larger quantities of ore could be obtained at lesser cost, they eventually abandoned the New Zealand project. Some