

"The Opening up of the
Canterbury West Coast".

by

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An address delivered before the
Rotary Club on Tuesday
25th July, 1922.

After the luncheon, the President said - "I have already introduced to you our old friend, Mr. A. Dudley Dobson, and in a few minutes, will ask him to address us on a subject which, I am sure, will be of the greatest interest to every member present."

"The Opening up of the Canterbury West Coast" was one of the most important and interesting events associated with the connection of the East and West Coasts of the South Island of New Zealand. Only scant records are available and Mr. Dobson's contribution will become very valuable, more especially as he was the pioneer, and owing to his strenuous and daring work the mountain pass was found which will probably to the end of time bear his name.

Mr. A. Dudley Dobson -

You know of course that this Island is called by the Maoris "Te Wahi Pounamu" - the place or locus, of the Pounamu, or greenstone, and the actual loei were the rivers Teremakau and Arahura, a region that, in Maori times, was always debatable ground.

Some of the Maoris from the North Island came all the way by sea in their sea-going canoes for the much-prized greenstone; others crossed Cook's Strait in canoes, came down the east

coast of the South Island, thence over the Hurunui Saddle to the valley of the Teremakau, where they built mokihis (flax-stick rafts) in which they floated down the Teremakau Gorge.

Sometimes the North Islanders bargained with the Coast natives for the greenstone, and sometimes they fought for it.

The greenstone was found principally in the Hohonu Creek (now called Greenstone Creek) and lay in the riverbed in large boulders. It was found in the same form in the Arahura. So far greenstone has not been found in situ, but always in large boulders in drift formation.

Up to 1862 none of the Canterbury people knew anything about the part of the West Coast at that time included in the Province of Canterbury. To them it was a terra incognita.

The late Mr. Leonard Harper was one of the first from Canterbury to go over the Hurunui Saddle to the Coast, but he returned with very little information except that the country was covered with dense bush.

Samuel Butler, the author of "Erewhon", went over some years afterwards. A few stragglers managed to get through when prospecting for gold. They were not able to take much food with them, and on reaching the Grey they got into difficulties through supplies running

short, but were rescued by the Maoris who provided them with enough food to take them to the Buller.

It would be a long story to tell you of the journeys from Nelson made by Mr. (later Sir) William Fox; by Mr. Heaphy; and by Mr. James Mackay, who went to negotiate for the purchase of lands from the Maoris.

He was followed almost immediately by Dr. (later Sir Julius) von Haast, who was accompanied by Mr. Burnett, a mining surveyor. They went as far as the Grey and reported on the country from a geological and mining point of view. These gentlemen, however, never got much below the Grey and really never entered the West Coast part of Canterbury.

In 1862 or 1863 the Provincial Government of Canterbury decided to establish a relief store at the Grey. Gold had been found all through the Buller and Upper Grey and the diggers were beginning to work down the Grey Valley.

A little before this time, Whitcombe, an engineer, had crossed the ranges and reached Hokitika. He and a man named Louper were drowned in attempting to cross the Taremakau - an attempt they should not have made.

The Government sent a vessel, named, I think, the "Ocean Wave" to establish a relief store, and a party in charge of Mr. Charlton Hewitt, a son of the celebrated authors - William and

Mary Howitt - was sent to blaze a line along the old Maori route. The Maoris did not make a track because that would have allowed their enemies to follow them - they always hid the evidences of their movements as much as possible and made their journeys through the bush, along the bed of the Teremakau to the coast, that being the easiest route, they could find.

At the beginning of 1863, the Government decided that they must know something about the West Coast and advertised for surveyors to survey it from the Grey to the southern boundary. This area was divided into two - one 75 miles long from the Grey to Abut Head; and the second from Abut Head to the southern boundary.

I was then just over twenty-one years of age and thought that it was time I did something, and I tendered for the first section and got it. The man who got the other section laughed at a boy taking on such a job. He was a middle-aged man of considerable experience. The Government evidently did not think that I was too young to undertake the job.

My first concern was to get an outfit together, a matter that took about six weeks to accomplish. I went to Nelson and chartered a little schooner as none of the owners of boats would undertake to convey me and my party down the coast for a fixed sum.

If I had known then as much as I do now, I would have bought the vessel and put her ashore about the middle of my

contract. As a matter of fact I paid for the charter about twice as much as the vessel was worth.

I packed all my stores in drapery cases, putting in each case flour, bacon, tea, sugar, and other necessaries in the required proportions. The zinc linings of the cases were carefully soldered and well secured with iron hoops. The stores were thus thoroughly secured from water and rats.

We sailed from Nelson on 5th August, the party consisting of twelve men. As indicating how small the vessel was, I may say that the cabin was 8 ft. by 6 ft.; there were six bunks in it which were more like bee cells than berths. If I wanted to turn on my pillow I had to pull my pillow out first. The first day out we struck heavy weather off Separation Point, and we lay the first night in Tonga.

On the 10th we were out in the Straits and, meeting with heavy weather, were compelled to run back and shelter at the Croizelles, where we spent two days.

On the 13th we sailed again and got off Cape Farewell, but again met with very heavy weather and we ran back to D'Urville Island and sheltered in Greville Harbour on the western side of the Island. This harbour has a little boulder bank similar to the one at Nelson, and is an excellent place to take shelter.

After lying there for a week, which we spent fishing and pig-hunting, we

resumed our voyage on the 25th and got as far as Rocks Point when we encountered another blow and the heavy weather continued. If it was not blowing from the South-west, it was blowing from the North-west and the ship was generally hove-to under balanced reefed main sail and a storm jib.

On 11th September the weather cleared and we found that we were lying off Mount Cook. We then sailed up to the Grey and recognised it from the sketches on the Admiralty Chart. The sea appeared to be fairly calm and we took the bar at noon on the 13th.

We stripped to our flannels, ready for a swim and stood by the running rigging. We soon got into the heavy rollers and by and by what the sailors call "the Bishop" came along - a big tall fellow of a wave, with the sun shining through the top where it broke.

It came down upon us like a wall and struck off both weather and lee bulwarks between the mast, breaking the lashings of the boat which was lying, bottom up, on the main hatch. When such waves broke over us we were washed off our feet, our hold on the running rigging saving us from being swept overboard. When the water left us we were bumped on the deck.

This went on for some time - it seemed hours to us - and the vessel drifted northwards up the coast until, finally, a big wave landed her amongst the drift timber which strewed the beach.

We scrambled ashore and on the beach we found a number of Maoris and Mr. Townshend and two of his men waiting to assist us. Mr. Townshend was in charge of the Government relief store at the Grey.

We got all the cargo out of the boat and took it to the camp I established in the bush on the southern bank of the Grey. We examined the boat but found it all stove-in. My bargain with the owner was that he was to land me, so when she went ashore, that ended the whole business as far as any obligations on my part were concerned.

The crew made their way back to the Buller where there was a considerable township at Westport, and where much gold-digging was going on.

When my camp had been fully established my men were set to work. The first job was to start a survey of the Grey. I had good bush hands with me and they cut bush lines. I got a half-caste - Fred. Reid, who knew enough English to make himself understood in very simple things, and a Maori, who rejoiced in the name of John Wesley, and his wife, and we went down the beach to see what the country was like and to ascertain the best method of starting the work in that region.

When I got back to the Grey, the first thing I heard was that Townshend and one of his men had been drowned while attempting to bring a whale boat, in which they had come from Hokitika, over the Grey Bar. Two of my men were old whalers and

signalled to Mr. Townshend to come ashore on the beach; but they decided to try the bar on which they capsized.

Of the five in the boat, three were drowned - a white man named Sherwin and a Maori named Simeon managed to get ashore. When Simeon reached the beach, his wife, who was sitting cooking and looking on, said to him: "Simeon, where's your swag?" He replied - "In the boat". She said "Go and get it", and Simeon immediately made for the boat, and, when the waves turned it right side up, he got in, undid the swag and swam ashore with it.

Shortly afterwards a man came down from Lake Brunner and reported that he was the only one left of Howitt's party. They had gone eeling near the outlet of the lake into the river - Kotuku-kakao (the Arnold) in a green canoe. When they got to the mouth of the river (i.e. the outlet of the Brunner) the canoe capsized.

The only man saved was the cook and he would have been with the party, but for the fact that he had cut his foot with an axe.

This news so disheartened my men that they decided to leave, and they advised me to go too, saying that we would all be drowned. I paid off the men and they made their way to the Buller.

I went to the Maori Pah at the Grey where Terapuhi was chief. He was a dignified rangitira of the old school - quite a gentleman in his way, very dignified

and hospitable. He said to me - "You great fool to come here with white men; you should get Maoris; white men all getting drowned".

By this time I had come to realise that the work could be done satisfactorily only by Maoris, but before I could employ them it was necessary that I should know the language.

I found a Testament in Maori at the Pah, and as I had been, in my younger days, three years with my Uncle the Rev. Charles Dobson, of Buckland, Tasmania, and as I had to learn the collog and gospel every Sunday during that period, I knew a great deal of the New Testament by heart, consequently when I got a copy of the Testament in the Maori language, I was able, in a fortnight, with very little assistance from Fred. Reid as to how to use the verbs, to carry on an ordinary conversation in Maori with ease.

At once I got together a party of Maoris who knew where mussels were to be found on the beach and where woodhens and seals could be got inland. I told them that they had to look after me and my field books, or otherwise there would be no pay for them.

The result was that I lived like a fighting cock and never had a wet blanket, nor ever was in any serious danger when crossing rivers.

I found the natives

very amusing fellows - they sang songs and danced, and generally proved first class hands for the kind of work I was engaged upon.

In about six months I had surveyed the whole of the beach and had established camps at the mouths of the rivers, I had to survey. In time the Maoris got tired of the work, though I gave them tobacco, and on no day did they have to work very hard. On account of the wet weather they spent much of their time lying in their tents, but they had earned a little money and wanted to go to Kaiapoi to spend it.

I therefore arranged to use them to carry the survey up the Teremakau as far as Lake Sumner, thus joining up the East and West Coasts surveys.

When this was completed I went to Christchurch to report progress and also to get horses which I intended taking over the Hurumui Saddle to the Coast. Terapuhi had told me that there was a low pass into the Waimakariri, but that it was a difficult route.

I followed the Waimakariri upstream with the object of finding a better pass than the Hurumui. I went up the tributary of the Waimakariri that I named the Bealey, and discovered the pass now known as Arthur's Pass. I did not, however name it.

I named Mount Rolleston. I found that the pass was quite impracticable for horses in the absence of a road.

Immediately I reported to the Government, my late brother, Mr. George Dobson, was sent by the Government to report on all the passes at the head of the Waimakeriri, and he reported that the best one was "Arthur's Pass" and from that reference the Pass got its name.

When I found that I could not get horses to the coast by this route, I took them over via the Hurunui Saddle, swimming them down the Teremakau Gorge to the beach.

By this time I knew the requirements of the coast work, and I took white men with me - sailors who were used to rough work.

I finished the job within a few weeks of the contract time and I received an official letter from Mr. Cass, the Chief Surveyor, thanking me for the manner in which I had carried it out and commending me for having accomplished the work in such difficult circumstances.

That was what the boy did. What about the man who undertook the other part of the coast? He attempted to do it in boats and drowned half his men. In four months he was back and was asking for a compassionate allowance for his losses, as he had done no work for which he could claim payment.

By the time I had finished, the big rush to the Grey diggings had begun. In trying a prospect of the black sand on the beach, one of my men said

that if he could only get bottom he would make a fortune. I said - "What is the necessity for finding bottom if you have found the gold?" "If you had read your Bible you would have seen that the ancient peoples saved similar gold on sheepskins".

Afterwards all this ground was worked and the gold was saved, at first on blankets and afterwards on quick-silvered plates.

An instance of Maori superstition which came under my own observation, will probably interest you.

There is a place near the junction of the Arnold and the Grey - about 60 claims up the river, which had a very bad name amongst the Maoris. I wanted to camp there, but Terapuhi said to me - "Do not camp there. It is a very bad place".

I said - "I do not see why I should not". "Well", he said "if you do, I will come too". We camped on the spot and it came on to rain. I told my men that we were going to have a flood, and two or three days rain, and as it was no use them eating up the tucker, I told them they had better go to the Grey. This they did.

Terapuhi said there would be weeks of bad weather. I said - "I'll stay here". Terapuhi said - "Don't stop here by yourself. If you do, something terrible will happen to you. If you stop, I'll stop too".

The first and second nights nothing happened; the third night Terapuhi said: "There's something very bad". I said "What is it?" He replied - "Taupo". This word is from the verb "taa", to arrive, and, connected with "po", means any fearsome thing that arrives at night.

I said - "Ask Taupo to come in". Terapuhi a big, powerful, athletic man began to shake; he was very frightened. "May I come to your side and sleep with you?" he asked. There were two logs on each side of the Maori whare with a fire in the middle. Terapuhi came over to my side; he was shaking with fear. He said "He is coming in".

I asked; "What is he like?" He replied - "He's like a pig. He is putting his head through bundles of raupo; now his shoulders are in; now all of him is in. Now his head is turning into a man's head; now his fore-legs are like a man's arms; now he is quite like a little man; now he is sitting down on the log by the fire".

I asked - "Can you see his face?" He replied "No, if we see his face, we shall die, but he has his back to us".

By this time Terapuhi was in a state of most terrific funk. By and by he said; "He is going" and described how it gradually shrunk from a man to a pig and disappeared.

I thank you for listening to my little narrative; it is not always that I get such an attentive audience.

The President :

I am sure we are much indebted to Mr. Dobson for the very interesting account he has given of his early experiences.

Mr. Dobson has expressed his willingness to answer any questions that he possibly can if any Rotarian desires any further information.

Rotarian O.T.J. Alpers :

Said he wanted to ask Mr. Dobson why he did not finish his story by telling what he (the speaker) considered the most dramatic part of it - that fifty years after Mr. Dobson discovered Arthur's Pass, Joe. Grimmond of Ross, crawled through the six miles and a half tunnel under Arthur's pass.

Rotarian Geo. T. Booth :

asked what was the area, or approximate area, that Mr. Dobson surveyed.

Mr. Dobson said that it was about 2,000 square miles from the Grey to Abut Head and inland to the watershed.

Rotarian H. Allan :

Said he was much interested in Mr. Dobson's narrative. Mr. Dobson was a gold-mine of information if they only handled him right.

There were many matters connected with early Canterbury and Mr. Dobson's own particular work that ought to be placed on record, and he knew of no other institution, beside the Rotary Club, that could get that information.

He looked upon Mr. Dobson as probably their most distinguished citizen and a man whose life was an object lesson to the whole community. Mr. Dobson had just started business again though he was the oldest man in the room. That he should take up this engineering work as a matter of course, after retiring from his great work in connection with the State, was a credit to him and to those he lived amongst.

Mr. Dobson :

Replying to a question on the subject said that the road to the West Coast, via Arthur's Pass, was made shortly after the Pass was discovered - it must have been in 1865.

On the President's motion, and by acclamation, a hearty vote of thanks was accorded to Mr. Dobson.

In acknowledging the vote of thanks, Mr. Dobson said that he would be only too pleased, if the Club so desired, to give another address dealing with incidents that occurred in those old times.

Upon the call of Rotarian Alpers, cheers were given for the three typical early settlers present -

Messrs. Robert Allan
Andrew Anderson
A. Duiley Dobson.

