

Background to the Haast

BASIL HOWARD

It is natural to find satisfaction in achieving for the first time something which others have unsuccessfully attempted before us, particularly if physical prowess and endurance have been involved—climbing the Matterhorn, Everest, reaching the Pole, crossing the Antarctic continent. In this country, however, an inordinate importance is attached to being the first to do what anyone else could have done if the occasion or the opportunity had offered, if the whim or the mood had suggested it. "My grandfather was the first to ride a horse over Woodpecker Ridge"....and so on with many geographic items whose "firstness" was of no real importance. The European traverse of the Haast Pass almost falls into this category, for reasons which I shall explain.

Another aspect of this exploration situation is that most "firsts" and discoveries claimed by Europeans were just downright fraudulent in effect, though not, I hope, in intent. These mountains, passes, rivers, routes had been known to the Maori for centuries, and most of these "firsting" expeditions followed instructions given by the Maori or were actually guided by Maori who appeared in the records under the unrevealing title of "porter". Not all the explorers followed Brunner in giving credit to their Maori guides. Incidentally, New Zealand Historic Places Trust Plaques record Maori assistance and knowledge where possible.

After these comments we turn to the story of the Haast. Maori tradition says that Te Puoho on his murderous war-march from Golden Bay to Tuturau in 1835-6 led his men from the West Coast to Otago via the Haast Pass. It is unlikely that he discovered—he operated with fore-knowledge. This then is the earliest date we can give in the way of factual evidence. But a few years later, in 1844, Edward Shortland, Sub-protector of Aborigines, travelling northward from a meeting of the Claims Court at Otakou and recording details of country and of Maori population, met chief Huruhuru at the Waitaki. From him Shortland learned a great deal about the territory and was told of the existence of lakes in the interior and of a route to the West Coast. Huruhuru drew a map showing the route up the Waitaki, over the Lindis Pass to the lakes and beyond. Stopping places on the route were named and Shortland inserted these at judicious intervals. In the circumstances, the Maori had no knowledge of topographical representation, the map is fairly accurate. It shows the Neck between Wanaka and Hawea, labelled "noti" (pass, saddle). But the Makarore River (Shortland's spelling) is shown flowing into the west shore of Wanaka and not at the head of the lake. Beside it Shortland wrote the instructions about the route to the Coast and details about Te Puoho's activities in the area. I add a marginal note that later, Rakiraki, a more southern chief, drew a similar map of the lakes for J. W. Barnicoat, a New Zealand Company surveyor. It is not as good as Huruhuru's and it does not show the Makarora, but it has a quite startling entry on the eastern shore of Hawea.... the one word, "beavers". Clearly Raki had described an animal which Barnicoat could compare only with a beaver. However, this perhaps is not as strange as it seems: Cook's men sighted a similar animal in Dusky; Edwardson in Foveaux Strait in the 1820's said much the same.... and in our own times, sane intelligent folks have made otter-beaver reports. Have Raid's beavers any connection with the "floating islands" shown on Huruhuru's map? But we were to talk about the Haast!

J. T. Thomson, Chief Surveyor of Otago, making his first reconnaissance survey of north-west Otago in 1857-8 followed Huruhuru's route up the Waitaki and ultimately over the Lindis Pass (the name is Thomson's). He heard of a pass to the West Coast, but his task was to survey the land for occupation. The sheen men followed close on his footsteps and by 1860 there were enough runholders in the Lindis-Wanaka area for a meeting to be held. By the end of 1861 the road over the Lindis was open to wheeled traffic. Development of this kind brought the need for timber, and saw-milling began on the western shore of Wanaka in 1860 and in the bush above Makarora in 1861. At that date, then, there was settlement and commercial enterprise within a dozen miles of the Pass. Who is to say that none of the timber-cruisers or mill hands found their way up to the Pass?

G. M. Hassing, one of the earliest and most mobile of the pioneers in the area was at Makarora in 1861. He stated later that he knew that there was a pass but that he hadn't been up to it. Extremely casual comment, it may seem to us! He did, however, make it easier for those who did go up by burning off a vast tangle of scrub and botanical rubbish on the flats beyond the sawmill. In the same year, J. H. Baker (later Assistant Surveyor-General of New Zealand) then a survey cadet aged 19-20, came into the area not as a surveyor, but as a prospector for pastoral land. He had investigated the high country behind mid-Canterbury with Butler of Mesopotamia. Later he worked his way southward, penetrating most of the river valleys into the mountains. On his exploring way, he heard of the pass above Wanaka. He wrote: "We had heard some time before that there was a low pass over to the West Coast at the head of Lake Wanaka and we thought that this might lead into open grass country". They (Baker and one Owen) tramped up the Wanaka River and arrived at the top of the pass "afterwards called Haast Pass after the Canterbury geologist". At the saddle Baker climbed a high tree, but as he could see no sign of open country he returned southward.... as simple as that!

In the meantime gold had become the major occupation of a large transient population in Otago and miners stampeded from site to site as discoveries were made. But while Otago was almost overwhelmed by avalanches of gold dust and nuggets Canterbury, looking hungrily over the fence, hadn't a pennyweight to bulge the public purse. The people probably thought that Julius Haast the Provincial geologist was not earning his salary. There was a poem on the subject in the "Lyttelton Times" in October, 1862 ; it opens with

Dear Mr. Editor, I pray give ear
To my sad fate, my pitiful lament ;
I've not been so annoyed this many a year
My inside's really quite in a ferment.
Those other provinces—Oh dear—Oh dear,
Are filling me with shame and discontent ;
I who was once so vigorous and bold,
Am in the dumps—and why ?—I've got no gold.

Haast suggested that it was important to examine the rocks along the boundary line of the provinces and to follow them to the West Coast by way of Lake Wanaka where rumour said gold had been found on the Canterbury side of the boundary. It seems that even then there was knowledge of a pass to the Coast and there is some suggestion that approval for the name of the pass had been obtained before Haast left Christchurch. His suggestion for an expedition was approved and he set off southwards in December, 1862; for Haast this was no casual undertaking but a properly mounted scientific venture, and one of his four men was a surveyor who had mapped Lake Wanaka in 1858-9. On his way he stopped at Waimate and visited Huruheru, who told him as he had told Shortland 20 years before that there was a pass which could take him to the coast in 2-3 days.

Meanwhile a similar expedition was being organised in Otago under Dr. Hector commissioned by the Provincial Government to carry out a scientific (and especially geological) survey of the territory including the investigation of a route to the West Coast. Hector reached the Wanaka area a few days after Haast had left by boat for Makarora. Both parties had been preceded by Charles Cameron who had gone up northward on horseback a week or so before Haast....A busy outpost ! Hector, who must have known of a pass beyond Makarora turned westward up the Matukituki in search of a pass which should be Otago's Own. You see, in those days the Canterbury territory included the upper third of Lake Wanaka and the land to the northward of it. Haast was working in his own domain. Hector crossed the divide with difficulty by what is now called the Hector Col at 4,000 feet and so down to the Waipara and Arawhata rivers in appalling conditions. His party got within 8 miles of the coast, when the threat of death by starvation compelled them to return. They managed to fight their way back to the Matukituki and a cache of food, in the last stages of exhaustion. On this trip Hector named a range and a glacier after Haast in recognition of his scientific work on glaciers. These names have not survived.

While Hector was struggling in the Jackson area, Haast was being similarly punished by incessant heavy West Coast rain and storms, flooding streams and rivers. After climbing up to the divide Haast began the descent, but stores were spoilt by rain, the small tent was inadequate. Two of the party went back to the sawmill to borrow another tent and perhaps some supplies. On their way up again they met Charles Cameron coming down. It is easy to imagine their annoyance when he announced, probably in the terms of Sir Edmund Hillary : "I knocked the....pass off a week or so ago." They called him "Blowhard" and later stated that he claimed to have reached the coast. We do not know, but it is strange that when he reached Wanaka he reported merely that he had crossed the pass and climbed a high mountain. Moreover, it was understood that he had followed the Maori route, the sensible route, not in the gorges but up on the mountain sides above the bluffs. The Haast party went on, still buffeted and hampered by the weather and eventually reached the coast a month after leaving Wanaka. The time expended is of no importance ; had the weather been kindly, Haast would still have moved slowly. His was a scientific expedition cumbered with tents, theodolites and other equipment, and spending time in explorations, observations, collecting. Cameron carried only a bag of oatmeal and a gun.

The squabbling and argument about who discovered the pass is futile in the extreme. None of these people was a "discoverer"they had all been told where to find it. In any case, it was an unimportant and unspectacular pass ; it lead to no valuable territory, though it did provide a shorter but uninhabited route to the West Coast goldfields. It must not be forgotten that the passes opened up in Canterbury were at once put to practical use....the cattle trail through the Amuri, and, despite great engineering difficulties, the coach road over Arthur's Pass almost immediately after discovery. The coach road over the Haast was made a century after the first European traverse!

I have said that the squabbling was futile, but the attempts to discredit or suppress Charles Cameron were petty and ill-natured. Fortunately we do not rely on Cameron's word only. In 1881 J. H. Baker visited the area again, and going up to the pass joined one of his surveyors, T. N. Brodrick (later Surveyor-General) working in the district. Together they crossed the pass and climbed a high mountain. On the summit in a cairn of stones frozen together they found a powder flask with the inscription deeply scratched on both side : "Chas. Cameron, Jany. 1863". Brodrick

wrote: "The place was wild enough when I was there, and Charles Cameron, whoever he was and whatever his object, must have been an adventurous man to have visited it 18 years ago. I suppose no-one had been up the hill since. I shall call it Mt. Cameron." Brodrick later wrote to W. H. S. Roberts stating that Mt. Cameron can be climbed only after crossing the pass. And we have positive confirmation of Brodrick's story.... Cameron's powder flask is here in Dunedin, in the Hocken Library ! The scratched inscription is still clearly legible.

In 1865, the Otago Provincial Government sent Vincent Pyke over the pass to report on the possibility of a road. He was appalled at the nature of the country. The road as you know was completed in 1965.

It seems that honour and recognition have been shared out fairly: Mt. Cameron, Cameron's Flat and Creek; Haast River, Haast Township, Haast Pass, the latter name being a fitting reward for the first European traverse to the coast, for courageous work in adverse circumstances, for the recording of new territory.

I cannot answer the question whether the route followed was the one Huruhuru intended. His map indicates something like the Wilkin River route to the Naihi Pass; Haast, I think, took the same idea from the Maori but abandoned it when he reached the area. On the other hand both Baker and Cameron went up to the pass without hesitation.

The subsequent careers of (Sir) James Hector and (Sir) Julius (von) Haast were brilliant in their scientific fields. And Charles Cameron? After pottering about in the gold-mining, that strange Highlander went to the North Island, raised a volunteer corps of 100 men to fight in the Maori wars and had his fill of warfare.