

MOTURATA STORY

GWEN SUTHERLAND

It is a bare humped island, quite distinctive in shape. It is about a half mile long, quarter mile wide and 300 feet high. It lies a quarter mile out from the mouth of the Taieri River, that treacherous mouth where there have been so many drowning tragedies in the last hundred years, and doubtless many in pre-European days. Depending on the swing of the currents, some years one can walk out across a sand spit at low tide, either from one side of the river or the other. Today the most interesting things on the island are the starfish and shellfish in the rock pools, some muttonbird burrows, one fresh water spring, an old well, and little vegetation but veronica, scrub and tussock. Yet once the cliffs facing the Mouth village were begrimed by smoke from fires under whalers' try-pots, and one European child at least was born on Taieri

The Maoris called it Moturata, Rata Island. It may have once been covered with rata, like some of the islands in the Stewart Island inlets, for there are signs of tree stumps still, or it may be that for the Maori, it marked the limit of the Otago rata. Rata trees do not grow on the coast north of the Taieri until one reaches Banks Peninsula. Tradition has it that sometimes it was the temporary home of Maori chiefs ; the Southern Maori population was too sparse for it to be turned into a permanent fort, the Maoris preferred to establish their pas up river nearer what is now Henley, but Te Wera, a well-known Waikouaiti chief, stayed on Moturata for a time on his way south and one Te Mauiwi was pursued and killed there in a fierce battle.

Captain Cook would note it as he sailed along the South Island coast in 1770, and it was known to the sealers of 150 years ago. Edwin Palmer a well-known sealer and whaler of pre-settlement days, wrote down some of his memories for the late Dr. Hocken in 1879 and speaks of being "mud bound at Taieri Heads for a fortnight" in 1825.

After the sealers, whaling companies established shore stations on various parts of the New Zealand coast and Weller Brothers of Sydney, whose base was at Otakou, presumably as early as 1831, had a branch on Moturata Island. In those early days large whales were plentiful in the season from April to October. They were seen in Blueskin Bay, even in the Harbour itself, and' in the bay south from Cape Saunders to Quoin Point, about 32 miles away. Taieri Island—Moturata----was a strategic point from which the look-out sighted the monsters, and from which the four whale boats would fare out in hot pursuit. They would tow the dead whale back to their harbour on the shore side of the island for cutting up and boiling down. A large whale was valued at about 1500 and might yield 120 barrels of oil—a barrel holding 32 gallons. The boiling down was done in heavy iron "trypots". One of the Moturata trypots still stands at a spring near the headland at the end of the sandy beach to the south of Taieri Mouth.

We are able to piece together the story of the Taieri whaling station from the letters of the Weller Brothers, some of which are in the Mitchell Library in Sydney, and from the unpublished journal of Octavius Harwood, Wellers' manager at Otakou, which is in the Hocken Library, Dunedin. In his journal mention is often made of supplies for and news of the "Taieri" station. We can here reproduce a few of his entries :

Wed. 6th June 1838. Issued whaling gear to Mr. Cureiton for Taieri. *Nov. 5th.* Mr. Cureiton came over from Taieri, one of his Maoris dying—brought him with him.

Friday. Received note from Mr. Curieton and find he had got a cask of fish instead of beef. He wants a hand saw and nails."

Weller letters, 14th Feb. 1839. Edward at Otakou to George in Sydney : "I send a sample of pine timber which is growing at Taieri river and from

50 to 60 feet long, much superior to Otago pine, the carpenter approves of the wood for boat building and the natives say they will assist in getting timber though they cannot be depended on. I have seen a boat built of the pine and it looks well."

Harwood's Journal—Sunday Feb. 24th 1839. "Mr. Weller set out for Taieri in the dingy.

March 5th. Mr. Weller returned from Taieri. Curieton wants mincing knives.

Saturday May 11th. Mr. Curieton came over from Taieri bringing with him two men hurt by whales, one his leg broke, the other struck about the head and back. They had killed 7 whales up to this date this season."

Then in June came the first European sea drama at Moturata. One of Wellers' schooners was the Dublin Packet of 108 tons, plying between Sydney and Otago—the Otago Chief Tairoa had a trip to Australia in her. She was off Moturata on Sunday 9th, having come down from Otakou to land stores and ship whale oil. The weather was bad, and though the schooner was moored with both anchors ahead sudden heavy rollers carried her on to the reef where she struck with great force. A musket was fired to arouse the men on shore and after trying to launch a boat off the deck, in the doing of which the Captain broke his arm, the crew took to the rigging until the mainmast went over the side. Three men were drowned in the struggle to reach shore for although a boat put off from the island its crew could do nothing to help. At daybreak there was no sign of the ship on the reef but the beach was strewn with wreckage.

Harwood records—Tuesday 11th June 1839. "Mr. Dalzel and Bradburry return in dingy from Taieri bringing with them intelligence of total wreck of Dublin Packet having drove on shore on the night of Sunday 9th., three hands lost, Captain Wells arm broke. Mr. Weller wants big boat. *Wed. 12* Got big boat launched and set carpenters making masts for her. *Frid 14th.* Employed King to rig big boat carpenter not finished masts so Tyroa could not proceed *Sat. 15th* Tyroa set out for Taieri in big boat, Sunday Tyroa returns with Captain Wells loads boat with hooping for Curieton who wants beef also has five casks flour and half cask sugar left Friday 21st Engage Gailey and Fern to go to Taieri to have 15/1 each."

*March 1840—*George in Sydney writes to Edward "I got £900 insurance on the Dublin Packet, 1400 on its goods".

Jan. 15th Edward at Otakou to George in Sydney "Curieton has made a very bad season and there are many complaints so I have given the fishery to Mr. King. When I tried to settle with C he refused to give up a spy glass belonging to the Dublin Packet and behaved in a suspicious manner about it.

Harwood—Sept 13th 1840 Ten tons oil Taieri. Fishery but middling. *Nov. 4th* 161 planks pine from Taieri."

In December that year Harwood went to inspect Moturata. He speaks of everything being in "a reckless and unprotected state." No one being there Octavius "slept at Wrymouths Kaique" a Maori camp on shore. After a boat trip up river to inspect cut logs he returned to take an inventory of things on the island "mustered all the old copper, blocks etc.-7 goats 2 fowls 1 boar pig on Island Mr. Murray only man left on Island."

After this the station seems to have been abandoned for a time ; whales were getting more scarce.

In 1843 Edward Shortland, Protector of the Aborigines, visited the mouth of the river. He wrote of the river entrance as looking wild and inhospitable. "There is an island on the lee side of which a boat can find shelter in all weathers, and there await a favourable opportunity for crossing the bar" also, "Since the abandonment of the whaling station on the island the natives had received no visits from Europeans and their tobacco was nearly all consumed."

But in 1844 Frederick Tuckett, civil engineer and surveyor, came to select the site for the Otago settlement and in the course of his exploration visited the Taieri river mouth. He and his companion Dr. Monro have left us vivid pictures. The station was again operating under the management of that colourful and intrepid figure Tommy Chasland, half cast Australian aboriginal and practised whaler on the South coasts. They were busy cutting in a large whale. "Mr. Chasland received us with hospitality his wife, Puna, a sister of Tiroa is a Maori woman, they keep a very comfortable fireside, not the less so from the bleak barrenness which surrounds their dwellings. Nowhere perhaps do twenty Englishmen reside on a spot so comfortless as this naked inaccessible Isle." It is interesting to know that Puna was newly wed for the marriage between her and Chasland is registered as being celebrated by Rev. James Watkin at Waikouaiti on August 14th 1843.

Dr. Monro's account is this :—"Opposite the mouth of the Taieri River is a small but lofty island upon which is a whaling station. Close to where we landed an enormous whale's head stripped of its blubber was anchored and on a projecting ledge the process of "trying out" was going on busily, diffusing a most grateful odour of train oil. We were rushed up a species of wooden railway by a following sea, a number of men being ready to seize the boat and drag it high and dry. We then ascended a sort of staircase along the edge of a steep cliff and on a little platform at the top found a number of grass huts. We were here most hospitably entertained by a Mr. Chasland, the head man on the island, while his active Maori wife acquitted herself most respectably of the household duties of good cooking and bedmaking" One wonders what she cooked and how she provided beds!

By the late 'forties the station was deserted. Taieri Island stood lonely for nearly 20 years. Then the gold rush was booming at Gabriel's Gully, Lawrence. Roads between Dunedin and Waihola were only swampy tracks and the Taieri river woke to busy activity as coastal boats, cutters and schooners from 50 tons to 100 tons brought goods from Dunedin up river to above the present traffic bridge. From there smaller boats took them up to Clarendon and thence bullock waggons carted them to the diggings. In 1861 three successive wrecks decided the Otago harbour master, Captain Thomson, to establish a pilot station on the island. Accordingly in 1862 Pilot Fullerton, once of Her Majesty's survey ship "Acheron", and Pilot Irvine with their wives went to live on the northern end of the island. The facetious diggers called them Robinson Crusoe and Man Friday. From that point they could see approaching vessels and run up flag signals to warn the captains of the state of the bar and the tide. A well, still discernible, was made for a fresh water supply and although the place was exposed to the north-easterlies Mrs. Irvine, who resided on the island until late in 1863, made a good vegetable garden. One midnight in March 1864 a signalman put off in a rowboat for a kindly, capable Mrs. Perkins of Kuri Bush. Mrs. Fullerton's baby had given warning of its coming. Mrs. Perkins, of necessity taking her own six month baby boy with her, waded the

creeks along the beach and was rowed over to the pilot's house. Before long Joan Kennedy Fullerton appeared, the first white baby born on the island, everyone was delighted and Maoris even came down in their canoes from Henley to see "white baby". Of course it is possible that earlier children could have been born there to the whalers' Maori wives.

With the improvement of inland roads the river traffic eased off and in the early months of 1864 the pilot service was discontinued. On March 31st the pilot schooner "Caroline" arrived, but could not take off the families until 27th of April because of the state of the tides. An amusing little incident is recorded. When Mrs. Fullerton was about to step into the dingy she handed a bundle wrapped in a Paisley shawl to a seaman without telling him what it contained, when it wriggled the startled man almost dropped it—it was baby Joan. A piece of the actual shawl has recently been given to the Otago Early Settlers' Museum by Joan Fullerton's daughter. The building which had been erected at the beginning of 1862, of local pitsawn timber, at a cost of £166 7s 0d was bought by the well-known Captain Antonio Joseph who boated it to the mainland, and the cottage erected from its timber still stands at Taieri Mouth.

About 40 years ago a resident of Taieri Mouth had a vegetable garden on the island, where the soil is very good in places. Later the island was infested by rabbits, but they seem to have died out.

Since then the island has occasionally been leased by local farmers, sheep being driven across at low tide at times when there was a firm sandbank on the north side. This year is one season when it has been impossible to go out from the mainland except by boat. Up to 100 mutton birds are taken in the season by folk of Maori descent. There was once a proposed scheme of tree planting by the Taieri Mouth Domain Board, but so far it has not eventuated.

The old island has witnessed many other wrecks and drowning tragedies on the bar, but that is a tale for another time.

[The writer acknowledges considerable help from the records, now in the Otago Early Settlers' Museum, compiled by the late Mr. John Bowie, Weller letters, and the Harwood Journal.]