

From The Museum

Alfred Burton Photographer.

Alfred Burton was in Wanganui as part of a nationwide trip, taking photographs for use in the production of postcards. It was late April 1885, he was staying at the Rutland Hotel and by chance he met John Rochfort the surveyor. Rochfort had been commissioned by the NZ government to survey a route through King Country for the railway line being built from Auckland to Wellington. He was leaving in a couple of day's time to go up the Whanganui River eventually to reach Taumarunui working on the survey, his offer of a seat in his hired canoe was accepted with alacrity by Burton.

Alfred Burton, now recognized as one of New Zealand's greatest early photographers, was in partnership with his brother, in the well known Dunedin firm of Burton Bros. He had made many trips around New Zealand and the South Pacific photographing scenery and people and the photographs he took on this particular trip, along with the very entertaining diary he kept give a brilliant record of those times. Rochfort had invited E.W. Payton the artist to accompany him on the trip, and his artistic work and diaries are also of great interest.

Burton tells us the canoe used for the trip was supplied by Major Kemp and had just brought the Premier Robert Stout down the river. Interestingly, Stout along with other dignitaries including the famous Maori fighting chief Rewi Maniapoto, had on the 15th April turned the first sod on the King Country section of the railway and was apparently making his way back to Wellington.

The expedition, made up of six members and a crew of eight started in a rather fragmented way as some members wanted to see a play put on by a theatrical group at Upokongaro.

Burton notes in his dairy:-

'Upokongaro is a white settlement, and boasts a church, with a three sided spire something like a bayonet, and a little theatre, where performs from time to time I understand, one of the cleverest amateur dramatic companies in the Colony. They were billed to play "The Palace of Truth", and so two of our party remained an extra night in Upokongaro to see the play, making a short cut across by land, and joining us next morning.'

This short cut was the Aramoana track, or nowadays known as the Gentle Annie, at the start of the Whanganui River Road. The church, Saint Mary's, with its unusual spire, still stands today.

Photography in the 19th Century was quite a cumbersome exercise. The equipment was heavy, intricate to set up and required great skill to operate. There was also a sort of mini laboratory required to mix up the chemicals required for the glass plate on

which the photo was taken. The result, if everything came off as planned, was a picture of high quality that is the equal of modern day technology. To the Maori population of the valley however, photography was something new, and to be treated with great suspicion.

'This copy of one's likeness could possibly take away some of one's mana'.

They called it 'taipo' (devil) and Burton 'Tangata whakahua' – the man who makes the likenesses. However Burton managed to secure many wonderful studies of people and places that have survived to the present day and his expertise shines through. Pictures of the warepuni at Parekino, and Ranana, pa sites at Tieke and Pipiriki, studies of Ngakura, Orini and Topine Te Mamaku, are a few. There is a wonderful study of the canoe and its crew, although the numbers don't seem to stack up. Although Payton and his art work attracted interest, it was the camera that was the subject of great curiosity and discussion

The trip proceeded at a fairly leisurely rate they camped at many places enduring discomforts in the form of rain, fleas, and uncomfortable beds. Burton didn't help progress by wanting to stop regularly to record the scenery. Two days were spent at the Roman Catholic mission at Jerusalem, Burton was most impressed with Sister Mary Joseph who had come from a sheltered existence in France to the wild isolated river valley. Rochfort left the river here to start surveying road lines to the proposed railway route. He would meet up with the canoeists again at Taumarunui.

On the party traveled to Pipiriki then Manganui a te Ao where Rochfort had been turned back from earlier surveys under threat of death if he returned. He had had shots fired over his head, been held prisoner and was even given an escort of river chiefs to make sure he didn't return. He did return, inspire of the threats and survived. He was a remarkable man well suited for the age when racial relationships were still strained over land confiscations following the wars of the 1860s. It was 15 years since the King Country had been closed to pakeha by King Tawhio; three years since reconciliation, and there were many communities very upset over these land confiscations.

The expedition visited Utapu where lived the Hauhau chief Taumata, reputed to have more theodolites and surveying equipment than a well stocked instrument dealer – all confiscated from surveyors he had raided.

They met Topine Te Mamaku the famous fighting chief at Tawhata. Te Mamaku was involved in the Boulcott's farm incident in the Hutt Valley and the fighting around Wanganui in 1846. Burton photographed him along with Ngatai, the man reputed to have shot Moffat the renegade pakeha of Maraekowhai fame.

Payton was very impressed with Topine and the friendly reception the party received and recorded this amusing little story:-.

'Topine, as he is generally called, is a very old man, with white hair and a very shrivelled skin. I put him down at 90 or 100 years old; but, old as he is, he carries himself well and upright, although he does not walk much. I asked the men how old he was and, after a long consultation, I was told he was 160 years old; Topine himself indignantly denied this, and said he was only 120 years old!'

May 17 they tackled Tareipoukiore, 'a veritable mill-sluice', where they had to transship all their gear, leave a man aboard to steer, and tackle a hard haul through the most dangerous rapid on the river. On May 20 they turned into the Ongarue River and reached Taumraunui, which was at that stage a village of about 20 whares. The visitors were most unimpressed with the place and as they had to wait about a couple of weeks for Rochfort to appear, they became rather bored. Burton obtained interesting views that are a great record of the development of Taumarunui and Payton wasted time trying to shoot pheasants with a crooked barreled shotgun.

So the actual expedition ended rather lamely but Burton's photography lives on today. By the 1890s it had played no small part in the Whanganui River becoming a world class scenic attraction promoted by the internationally famous tourist company Thomas Cook & Son, and of course Wanganui's own Alexander Hatrick.

Further reading

Burton's book containing the diary is hard to find these days, but some extracts are in Arthur Bate's wonderful book 'A Pictorial History of the Wanganui River', which itself is becoming pretty rare. Payton also published (also hard to find) a record of his travels around New Zealand. Both these books are in the New Zealand Room at our Public Library Janet Holm has written a book on early NZ surveyors, in it is John Rochfort and his Main Trunk Railway survey. It's in the lending library and well worth a read.