OTAKOU

Early Days In and About Otago Harbour

BY

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Village of Otakou, Otago Heads.

From a Sketch during D'Urville's visit in 1840.

There were two American, one French, and one English vessel in the Port during the French Explorer's visit.

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Shipping at Port Chalmers in the Seventies.

The Formation of the Harbour.

FROM earliest days the province of Otago
has been recognised as one of the out-
standing agricultural areas of New Zealand.
On the western coast of this province are
mountains covered with virgin bush yielding
large quantities of timber. East of these
mountains lies the plain of Central Otago,
bounded on the south and south-east by ranges
of high hills. In this sheltered position is to be
found most of the sheep grazing area from
which, every year, the greater part of Otago's
wool and frozen mutton is sent for export.
The lower slopes of the hills likewise provide
sheep-grazing land for the farmer.

To the east of the Central Otago district
lies the Maniototo (the Field of Blood) Plain,
to the south the Tokomairiro Plain and, a few
miles from Dunedin, the Taieri Plain.

To export her wool, frozen meat, gold, and
timber, Otago is not well supplied with seaports.
Beautiful, deep sounds abound on the west
coast, but, as the approach is barred by ranges
of high hills, as harbours these sounds are
useless.

The one good outlet of the province is the
Otago Harbour. To it roads and railways
follow the Clutha River, turning north-west to
cross the Tokomairiro Plain, bringing the

Barque Alcestis ashore on Quarantine Island, a part of the submerged divide in Otago Harbour.

products of Otago to Dunedin and Port Chalmers. From northern Otago products are carried by rail down the coast, connecting directly with the seaport.

Many years before the Maoris came to New Zealand there stretched from Taiaroa Head to Dunedin not a blue expanse of water but a green and sheltered valley, bounded on either side by gently sloping hills. Towards the middle of this valley were two small hills from the western side of which flowed a small river which joined the Leith stream in its journey to the sea at St. Clair, Dunedin. From the western sides of the valley flowed another river, which reached the sea through that part of the coast now known as Taiaroa Head.

At this time the peninsula, now joined to the mainland at its southern end, was a row of hills towards which the sea about St. Kilda beach then flowed.

Years passed, and gradually the seaward margin of the land was submerged. With each tide the water crept further up the valley, until the two hills in the centre were surrounded. These are known to-day as the submerged divide off Port Chalmers, and are called Goat Island and Quarantine Island. Thus were formed the Upper and the Lower Harbour of Otago.

Years later another change took place. The sea which had once converted the eastern hills into an island now proceeded to turn the island into a peninsula. Coarse sand and gravel

are not easily removed from shallow water. Where the land was protected from southerly swells and currents, this heavy sand was slowly moved up the coast where it was deposited by the receding tides. In this manner the island was once more joined to the mainland, this time at its southern extremity. So we have that long peninsula with its pleasant bays where many children of Otago spend their summer holidays.

To-day, Otago Harbour stretches from Taiaroa Head to Dunedin, with the Lower Harbour divided from the Upper Harbour by the submerged divide, once two green hills.

Port Chalmers in 1850.

The Maoris of Otakou.

To these shores there came the Maoris of the Kanui Tipua tribes who, according to tradition, were the first settlers of Otakou— the original name of Otago.

One Maori legend tells us that during a long struggle with a taniwha, a dragon-like monster, the Kanui Tipua rolled out the Taieri Plain. The taniwha, they said, ate out the Otago Harbour. Many years after its death the white man called its body Saddle Hill.

. Later there came the Waitaha, who arrived in New Zealand with the Toi settlement in 1150 A.D. The descendants of these Maoris were in turn conquered by the Ngaitahu, who arrived with the Hawaiki migration in the Takitimu canoe about the year 1350 A.D. Where once there had sounded only the song of the bird, Maori voices now broke the silence, as the canoes paddled up and down the harbour.

Koputai.

Port Chalmers, the seaport town of Otago, was named by the early settlers in honour of Dr. Chalmers, a staunch supporter of the Free Church in Scotland. In the early days the Maoris knew it as Koputai which, like other Maori place names, has its place in native lore.

On their frequent journeys up and down the harbour, the Maoris often used as a resting place some caves which they alleged existed in the vicinity of Boiler Point, between Koputai Bay and Carey's Bay. On one of these occasions some fighting men, during one of the frequent tribal upheavals, wearied by their long journey, beached their canoes in one of the caves, pulling them well above high water mark. Before long they fell asleep. When they awakened next morning great was their surprise to find that the tide had floated their canoes out into the bay.

"Koputai! Koputai!" they shouted as they swam out to reach their canoes. Thus the inlet was named Koputai, meaning the very high tide.

These Maoris now concluded that Tangaroa, the god of the sea, had shown his interest in their quarrel, and from henceforth the land was declared tapu. The name Koputai was used by both the white man and the Maori until it was renamed by the early settlers in the year 1848.

Although the Maoris preferred to live near the Heads, the finding of Maori adzes and other weapons at Mussel Bay seems to point to the occupation of Koputai by the Maoris. Moreover, the chief Taiaroa is said to have had a fortified pa here.

Dr. Shortland, who visited Otakou in the year 1827, tells in his *Journal* the story of the chief Kohe, who dwelt here. Three chiefs— Kohe, Te Matahara and Karetai—purchased a

sealing vessel which was to be the joint property of all. Kohe fell ill and, thinking that he was dying, began to wonder if his small son Timoko would receive his rightful share of the proceeds from the boat, which was then anchored at Koputai. Having decided that Karetai and Te Matahara would cheat Timoko, Kohe sent his slave to set fire to the vessel. He then commanded that he should be carried to the shore in order to watch the vessel burn.

The anger of Karetai and Te Matahara knew no bounds when they saw their much-prized sealing boat burnt almost to the water's edge. Te Matahara danced with rage round Kohe, while Katerai struck the ground angrily with his foot, naming various parts of the culprit's body as he did so. Their anger abated, the two chiefs walked sorrowfully away.

Kohe died soon after, and his relations declared that Karetai by his fierce blows had killed him. The quarrels which arose between the tribes were settled by Dr. Shortland on his arrival at Koputai.

Early Visitors to Otakou—Captain Cook.

In February and March of the year 1770 Captain Cook sailed down the east coast of the South Island of New Zealand. Cape Saunders, which commands the southern approach to Otago Harbour, he named after his friend and patron, Sir Charles Saunders, who, in 1776, was First Lord of the Admiralty.
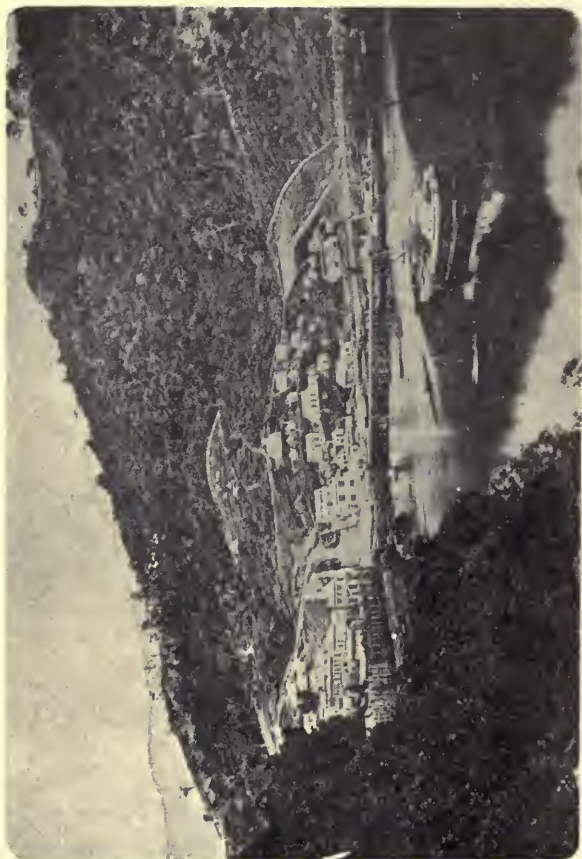
Port Chalmers, 1867.

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Although Cook did not sail into Otago Harbour, he seems to have noticed the entrance, also Wickliffe Bay, for in his journal he writes, "One to 4 leagues north of the cape the shore seemed to form 2 or 3 bays wherein there appears to be anchorage and shelter from S.W., Westerly and N.W. winds." No mention is made of a visit to Otakou, and the Maoris lived uninfluenced by white men until the beginning of the nineteenth century.

The First Traders at Otakou— The "Sophia," 1817.

The existence of New Zealand became more widely known after the publication of Captain Cook's reports, and soon after the establishment of the convict settlement at Sydney traders found their way to New Zealand.

One of these, the *Sophia* from Tasmania, under the command of Captain Kelly, anchored off Port Daniel (now the Maori Kaik in Otago Harbour) on December 11th, 1817. This vessel had come from the Chatham Islands where she had gone for a cargo of sealskins.

At Otakou Captain Kelly found the natives very friendly and eager to trade, so, considering his vessel safe, he set out, accompanied by some of the crew, in a small boat for Murdering Beach, a few miles up the coast.

For some unknown reason the natives living round this part of the coast had grown very hostile to the pakeha, and many unfriendly eyes watched the captain of the *Sophia*

and his men draw up their boat on the sand. Now, living with these Maoris was a lascar who did his best to warn the white men of the danger they were inviting by seeking to land there. These Maoris, he told them, had killed and eaten six men from the brig *Matilda* which had anchored at that same spot some time before.

Captain Kelly, unable to understand the unfriendly attitude of the natives, walked ashore with his men, merely leaving two to guard the boat. The Maoris seemed quiet enough as the white men made signs that they wished to trade, but suddenly, without any warning, they attacked Kelly and his crew on all sides. Those who guarded the boat were struck down, and only Kelly and three of his men returned to Otakou.

The news of the attack soon spread southwards, and the Otakou Maoris, hitherto so friendly, made repeated attempts to capture the *Sophia*. Determined to teach the natives a lesson, Captain Kelly and some of the crew went ashore. Here, drawn up on the beach, were forty-two canoes, and on the shore six hundred native houses, said to be the finest in the land.

Here was the Captain's opportunity. In four hours "the beautiful city of Otago," as the ship's crew called it, was a heap of ashes, and on the beach lay forty-two canoes, each one sawn into four pieces. Having taken his revenge, Captain Kelly ordered the anchor to be weighed, and on December 17th at daybreak the *Sophia* sailed away to the Chatham Islands.

Captain Herd.

Nine years after the departure of the *Sophia* the first attempt to found a settlement in New Zealand was made. In the year 1826 Captain James Herd in his ship the *Rosanna* sailed into Otakou Harbour. At this early date the idea of colonizing New Zealand was not favoured, and Herd's efforts were a failure. His observations on the harbour, which on his map he called Port Oxley, were, however, of particular value at a later date to surveyors of the port of Otago. In his journal he describes it as "an inlet or arm of the sea running up about nine miles S.S.W., making a peninsula of the land on which is Cape Saunders."

The Whalers.

After the departure of the *Rosanna* the Maoris of Otakou were again left to their own devices until the arrival of the whalers within the Heads. Many whaling stations had been set up in New Zealand, but until the year 1832 Otakou was not considered as a suitable base for vessels. In this year, however, George and Edward Weller of Sydney sent one of their whaling vessels here, and on November 7th, 1833, the first whale oil recorded as coming from Otakou was despatched to Sydney. This rich cargo of whale oil, whale bone, flax and potatoes established the harbour as an excellent base for

The *Airedale* in the Floating Dock, Port Chalmers.
The Otago Harbour is the ship-repairing Port of the Dominion since the Sixties.

whaling vessels. Whales were so plentiful that double this cargo could have been procured had the vessel possessed sufficient casks.

Now began one of the busiest periods in the early history of Otago Harbour. Many ships came and went. Maoris from further inland came to settle on the shores of Otakou, eager to share in the rich harvest to be gained by trade with the white men. Some even purchased vessels in order to hunt the whale on an equal footing with the whalers. The Wellers' station was soon a recognized base for whalers, and the *Joseph Weller*, built at Port Pegasus, Stewart Island, became a frequent visitor.

During the year 1834, while the *Lucy Ann* was at Otakou, about five hundred natives arrived from Cloudy Bay, where they had been at war with an enemy tribe. Flushed with victory, these Maoris became very insolent, and, fearing they would attack the whaling base during his absence, Captain Anglim kidnapped some chiefs whom he had enticed on board the *Lucy Ann*. These he took with him to Sydney as hostages for the good behaviour of the rest of the tribe. In this way he safeguarded the remaining traders at Otakou, which was by now a hive of industry.

Many vessels visited the harbour, some to replenish their stores, some for cargoes of timber, and some to repair their vessels.

English, French, and American captains soon came to know the harbour well. All day long pakeha and Maori worked together bringing fuel and water to waiting vessels. Sometimes a whale, making a dash for liberty, would swim into the harbour. For the moment work would cease, as all rushed to the water's edge to watch the end of the exciting chase. On the beaches, piled five or six inches high, lay multitudes of shrimps, and it was then a common sight to see a whale which had been attracted by this delicacy, harpooned at the very mouth of the harbour.

But this prosperity could not last, and the wholesale slaughter of whales saw its only outcome in a rapid decline of the amount of oil shipped to Sydney from this base. Stations were abandoned and many left Otakou.

Dumont D'Urville.

Towards the end of the whaling activities at Otakou a famous French navigator visited the harbour. Dumont D'Urville, who had left France in the year 1837, anchored off the settlement on March 30th, 1840. With his two corvettes *l' Astrolabe* and *la Zellee* D'Urville sailed up the southern coast of the South Island towards the Heads, where he found that, without a detailed chart of the bay, the entrance was difficult to find. While the French captain

was studying his map, a trading vessel, flying the American flag, was sighted sailing past Taiaroa Head. With this vessel to guide them, the two corvettes were safely anchored inside the Heads by four o'clock in the afternoon.

A strange sight confronted the Frenchmen. From their anchorage they could see two main villages in addition to huts scattered along the beach. One of these villages, situated near the Heads, contained twenty houses, while the houses of the other were grouped around the European trading station. This latter, occupied by deserters from the whaling vessels which frequented the harbour, was a strange assembly in which all the trading nations of the world were represented. These men supplied the vessels with fresh water and fuel which was kept stacked in readiness.

There were now only two or three English and American whaling stations at Otakou. The land was fertile, but deserters and runaway convicts were as little inclined to cultivate it as were the Maoris.

As New Zealand at this date was not a British colony, many missionaries feared that France wished to annex the land. In his journal, one of the Frenchmen of the *Zelee*, thinking that the harbour might be suitable as a future settlement, wrote : "Among the crowds which swarm our towns there would be no difficulty in finding many who would be willing

Modern Port Chalmers.

to become colonists." He thought, however, that it would be too costly to bring workmen and ploughmen from Europe some fifteen thousand miles away.

Monsieur Dubouzet, who explored most of the harbour, noticed at the southern end where Dunedin now stands, a sandy isthmus over which at a more or less distant time a channel had flowed, converting the peninsula on the eastern side of the harbour into an island. Captain Privat, a whaler then at Otakou, decided to drag his whaling boats over this stretch of sand in order to send them fishing in the bays to the south of Cape Saunders. Had this been possible he could have avoided a long journey down the coast which, in wintry weather, held many dangers for sailing ships. The task, however, proved too difficult, and he was forced to abandon the idea.

At the beginning of April D'Urville sailed away from Otakou, after spending four days exploring the harbour.

The presence of French vessels in New Zealand waters had already aroused much interest and some concern, not only here but also in England, where many active men were at work trying to persuade the English Government to make New Zealand a British colony. During the years 1839 and 1840 agents of the New Zealand Company made large purchases of land on the shores of Cook Strait. Captain

Hobson lost no time preparing the land for settlers, and with the aid of missionaries obtained the signatures of Maori chiefs to the Treaty of Waitangi. For this purpose Major Bunbury, acting during the illness of Hobson, arrived outside Taiaroa Head on January 13th, 1840. Unfortunately the chief Taiaroa was absent at Moeraki, and the day was too stormy to keep the ship waiting outside the Heads. The signatures of Koroko and Karetai were obtained, and H.M.S. *Herald* sailed away that same afternoon.

This also was the year that the Weller Brothers abandoned their station at Otakou. Otago's whaling days were drawing to a close. Whales forsook their usual haunts, and the quantity of oil exported from the stations decreased rapidly. Rough and wild as the whalers were, to them, the first white dwellers on these shores, belongs a place in the history of Otago. Hardy captains, by recording on their maps and charts the flow of the tide and the existence of shoals and sandbars, rendered great service to those who were to follow in the work of making Otakou the port of the province of Otago.

Pilots at Otakou.

Commanders of vessels were hardy and venturesome men, but the presence of a bar at the entrance of the harbour, and numerous sandbanks within, caused many of them to avail themselves of the services of pilots living at Otakou. Three men, John Hunter, James Fowler, and Richard Driver, knew the harbour well. There were no regulations, and the first pilot to reach the approaching vessel was given the task of guiding her in. For this five pounds were paid, with the promise of another five pounds when the vessel was safely piloted outside the Heads.

The approach of a vessel was always viewed with great excitement, not only because of the news it brought but also because it was the signal for the start of a great race. As the white sails came in sight, the three pilots set out in their small boats, all eager to obtain permission to bring the vessel up the narrow channel.

On one occasion the rule of the settlement, that the pilot who brought the vessel in should also take her out, almost cost Mr. Hunter his life. Early in the year 1840 the brig *Highlander*, manned by a reckless crew of ex-convicts, was brought to the anchorage by John Fowler.

The crew immediately went ashore, and after much drinking began to quarrel with the settlers over a lost bowline. Many of the small dwellings were set alight because their owners refused to open their doors to the shouting sailors. The store of Mr. Hunter was looted, and the crew, tired of the search, returned to the brig. Here they found the pilot Hunter talking with their captain. They demanded that the ship should be piloted outside the Heads immediately. It was useless to argue that this was the work of the pilot Fowler, and Hunter was just about to comply with the orders of the crew when the second pilot hove in sight. Soon the vessel was safely outside Taiaroa Head, much to the relief of all on shore. Thankful to have escaped with his life, Hunter returned to restore order in his little store.