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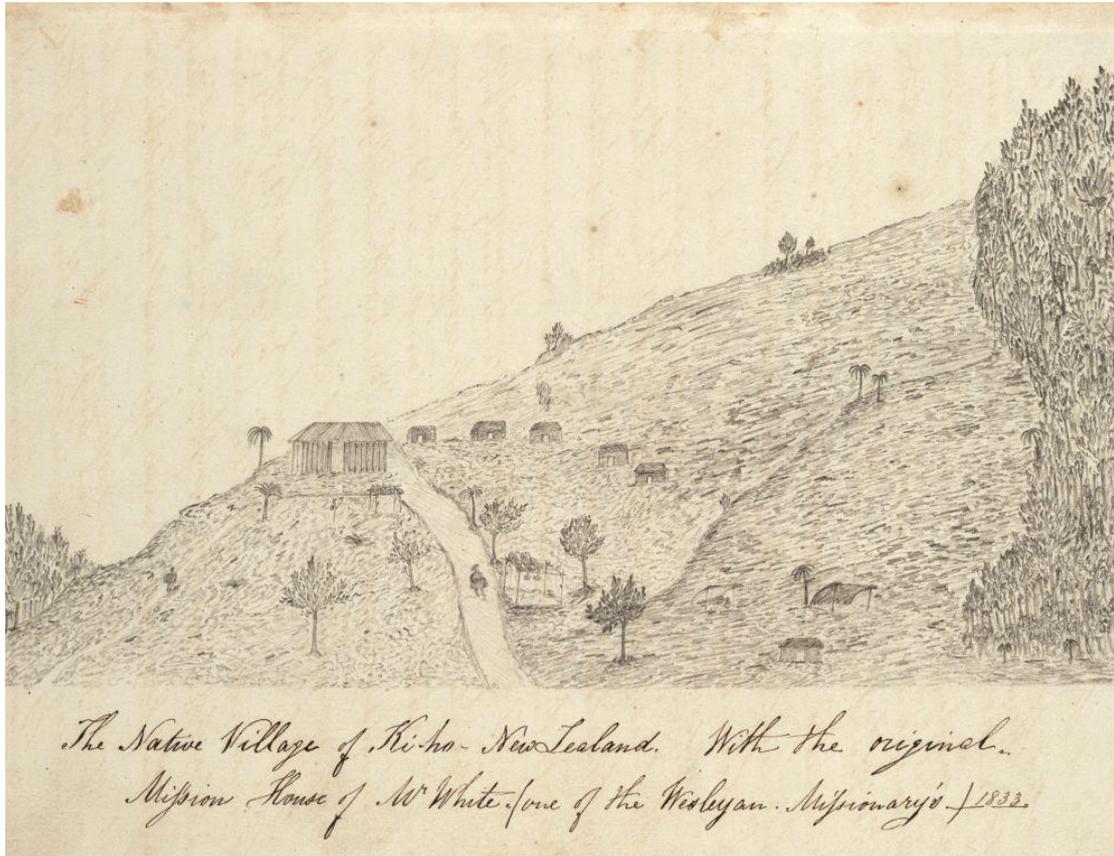
The New Zealand Journals of Thomas Laslett, 1833-1843

The Turnbull Library has recently purchased a remarkable series of manuscript journals. They document the timber trade around the northern New Zealand coast in the 1830s and 1840s, and provide new insights into early Maori and European interactions.

The journals were written by Thomas Laslett (1811-1887), the son of a Chatham dockyards shipwright, who rose from being an assistant timber surveyor to eventually become Timber Inspector for the Royal Navy. Timber surveyors and inspectors were important positions, responsible for finding sufficient timber, particularly spars for masts, at a time of when Britain's empire was expanding, and the protection of that empire still depended on a navy of sailing ships. The oak trees of England could no longer meet that need, and Baltic pine was not easily available. That meant searching the forests of the world for trees that were big, straight, strong and resistant to rot. Over a long career Laslett's work took him on timber expeditions to New Zealand, Burma, Prussia, Asia Minor, and Bosnia. In 1875 he published a book *Timber and Timber Trees – Native and Foreign*, a densely detailed and definitive compendium of the features and uses of the world's timber.

It was in New Zealand that his career began. In late 1833 he was chosen to be an assistant, perhaps an apprentice, to the timber surveyors on the voyage of the HMS Buffalo to New Zealand for a cargo of battleship topmast kauri spars. After seven months work a full load was obtained from Whangaroa and Mahurangi. In late 1837 he again joined the HMS Buffalo, this time as Second Surveyor, for another timber gathering expedition. This load was obtained from Tutukaka and Ngunguru (just northeast of Whangarei). On Laslett's third voyage he had been promoted to Timber Surveyor for New Zealand, but it was an ill-fated expedition. After spending the first half of 1840 getting a load ready on the coast just north of Tairua the HMS Buffalo was wrecked in Mercury Bay during a gale. His final voyage to New Zealand was on the HMS Tortoise. This time the crew spent nine months back on the Tairua coast, eventually leaving in January 1843 with a full load of 109 kauri spars and other timber.

Laslett's journals are not the originals, but edited copies he made over several years later in his life. In a series of prefaces he explained why he did this editing. The originals were, he wrote, "almost obliterated by age – or as is most probably from the use of bad ink"¹. But he also wanted to make them more readable, probably for the benefit of his family, and so he decided they "...might be abridged without detriment...I have therefore struck out small matters of detail, reconstructed where necessary the substance of the more important point, and in giving it new shape aimed to improve it"². They are still very detailed documents, and very readable ones. The whereabouts of the original journals is not known and it is most likely that Laslett destroyed them once his copies had been done.



A Laslett sketch from his first voyage, showing part of the Maori settlement at Kaeo, which now incorporated buildings abandoned by the Wesleyans when their mission station was sacked in 1826.

The native village of Ki-ho New Zealand. With the original mission house of Wm White (one of the Wesleyan missionary's) 1833. Pencil drawing, 180 x 230mm. MS-Papers-8349-1, Thomas Laslett journals, Alexander Turnbull Library.

Luckily, however, he did not throw out the art work he did at the same time. Laslett was an amateur artist, who, like many others with a draughting background, was good at maps, moderate at landscape and poor at figure drawing. He was keen, though, and many of his small pencil and ink drawings and maps have been carefully pasted into the copied journals. These include sketches of the timber camp the crew set up at Whangaroa, and the nearby Maori settlement at Kaeo, which now incorporated abandoned buildings of the Wesleyan Mission that had been sacked in 1826 (see illustration). There are sketches of waka and a fascinating waka sketch done by a Maori acquaintance who had been watching Laslett draw.

His detailed maps of the timber camps and surrounding kauri forests in the Tairua area give valuable information about how the timber operation was carried out. On the evidence of these illustrations it has also been possible to establish that Laslett was the artist responsible for two previously unattributed, more finished, sketches of the 1842 expedition that are now held in the Nan Kivell Collection at the National Library of Australia.

It is the journal text, however, that contains the richest sources for new research. Laslett was an inquisitive observer. There are other journals from these expeditions, including the official ships logs, but they are much less informative, partly because they are concerned with the ships' offshore operations rather than the onshore timber gathering activity, but mainly because these other chroniclers had none of Laslett's curiosity about the strange land and people he was encountering.

Laslett's passion was trees, and there is a lot about them, particularly kauri, but he also spent a lot of time collecting specimens of many other species. He also gave detailed descriptions of the complex and extremely labour-intensive process of getting the enormous kauri spars out of the New Zealand forest. His descriptions of the searching for and selecting of trees, felling and squaring them, and the exhausting work of hauling them to the shore are detailed and informative.

Just as interesting are his descriptions of the social interactions between the crew, the ship's officers, and himself. These were sometimes fraught. As a timber surveyor Laslett was responsible for selecting the trees and supervising the preparation of the spars but was not directly responsible for managing the labour. This was the role of the ship's officers and although this arrangement usually worked amicably enough he was sometimes frustrated by the lack of commitment of both officers and men. On the ill-fated third voyage relations were particularly strained. The officers resented the authority given him and Laslett was particularly hurt by the statement of one that he was just "a dockyard mechanic"³ – a deep insult to one anxious about his status in the very hierarchical social structure of the Navy.

His descriptions of the efforts to get the marines and sailors to take on timber



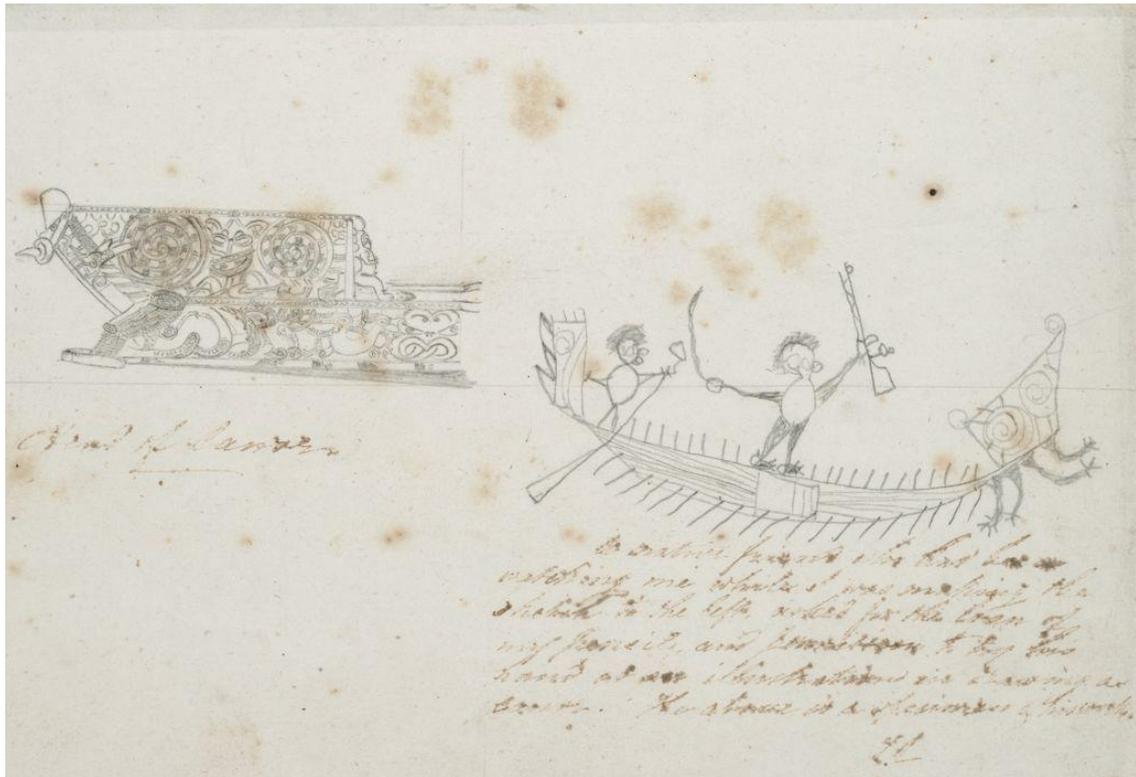
The artist who did this sketch of a timber camp near Tairua was previously unidentified. From the journals we now know it was Laslett.
Establishment of crew of H.M.S Tortoise in forest in N.Z. [1842]. Ink and wash, 221 x 274 mm. NK1112, Rex Nan Kivell Collection, National Library of Australia.

work are also fascinating. There was a lot of surly dissatisfaction. Amongst the various inducements and encouragements to get the men to work harder that he describes, is his description of bringing the ship's fiddler from ship to shore – "it being thought a little music might be desirable to enliven the men while hauling spars". He later reported on the fiddler's "stirring and lively music...but it was clear the men did not like the work"⁴.

There are other entertaining details about the voyages beyond New Zealand. For example, his account of the voyage home in 1838 hints at all the raw material, of sex, drunkenness, madness and deceit, for a novel at least as entertaining as Annamarie Jagose's *Slow water*.^{*} The drama particularly involved two passengers, a doctor Jackson and a Mrs Tudor. Soon after departure the Captain and the doctor almost had a duel over accusations that the doctor was trying to get into Mrs Tudor's room. Laslett noted "as we shall see later on one or two things happened [that suggested] there was probably something in it". Later the doctor fell overboard drunk, while a few weeks later Mrs Tudor was found drunk and confused on brandy given to her for medicinal purposes by the doctor. Laslett noted "it further brought to our minds the affair of the proposed duel...and it was suspected the doctor was paying the lady a great deal more than ordinary attention". A few weeks later the doctor was found "in a helpless state of intoxication, and needed careful watching...six men were appointed to stand guard over him by turns, to see that he did no mischief to himself or to others". There were other excitements, including drunken fighting between the quartermaster and his wife, a shipboard search for the ship's lost logbooks, and the adventures of one of the passenger's Newfoundland dog, which twice fell overboard, meaning the ship had to be turned around to rescue it. Laslett reported that the "officers were very annoyed at it especially as it was suspected the dog had been pushed"⁵.

But the main research value of the journal will be in Laslett's observations of the Maori leaders and hapu he dealt with on his various voyages. From the beginning Laslett was intrigued by this new Maori world. He was often puzzled by it but he was always interested, and he wrote down all he saw. His descriptions include accounts of Maori practices such as tapu, the growing interest in Christianity, tattooing, house construction, and of the ferocious haka and other ceremonies as different hapu arrive and depart from the timber camps. He was particularly fascinated by the size and workmanship of the many waka that carried Maori to and from the camps.

Of particular interest are his accounts of dealings with those Maori employed in the timber operation. A successful expedition depended on Maori in a number of ways. The agreement of local hapu needed to be obtained before trees could be cut, Maori labour was necessary to do most of the hauling of logs out of the forests to the water as well as for cutting and squaring work, and the ship was partly dependant on them for food supplies. The first expedition began work at Whangaroa amongst Maori who had acquired a dangerous reputation, because of the massacre of the *Boyd's* crew in 1809, and the sacking of the Wesleyan mission in 1826. Laslett describes a number



A page from the journal for the fourth, 1841-1843, voyage showing Laslett's sketch of a canoe prow, and a sketch by a Maori acquaintance. Laslett has written under the latter "A native friend who had been watching me while I was making the sketch to the left asked for the loan of my pencil, and permission to try his hand at an illustration in drawing a canoe. The above is an illustration of his work. TL."

[Canoe drawings]. [1842]. Pencil drawing, 191 x 304 mm. MS-Papers-8349-3, Thomas Laslett journals, Alexander Turnbull Library.

of confrontations, which he possibly saw as more threatening than they actually were, before reasonable working relations were finally established. With all the voyages tensions were present, however, and Laslett notes many of them, including European anger at thefts and other unruly behaviour, and Maori anger at cultural offences such as the touching of the heads of chiefs. Other details include the changes in Maori expectations for payment, the methods by which Maori carried out the work. Laslett was not always happy with progress but he did enjoy it when the Maori work parties were working at full capacity. In one instance he described how

The natives some 50 in number were working better than usual at hauling; they divided their strength into two gangs, so that one was as nearly as possible equal to the other, and then tested their powers by grappling with two spars each of 69 feet in length and of like diameters, to move them out of the forest to the beach. From beginning to end it was a real trial of strength. I watched them at intervals with considerable interest, and listened to their hideous shoutings and yells, while I encouraged first one party and then the other, with I hope good effect as they worked admirably. They divested themselves of every article of clothing in order that they might move with the greatest freedom at their work, and although the pull was a long one, and lasted for a day and a half, they did not at any time show symptoms of flagging but kept on manfully to the last, and ended their task each at about the same time at noon. A cheer was given at the result, and then they took the remainder of the day to rest themselves⁶.

The fiddler was not on shore at that particular time, but no doubt other Maori work gangs were making similar noise as the fiddler played his “stirring and lively music” to coax on the European crew. The forests of Tairua had certainly never heard such commotion before.

This last Tairua expedition took place in the midst of mounting tension, and war, between the iwi from Hauraki and from Tauranga. Tairua was a largely unpopulated area that was something of a borderland between the two tribal areas. Throughout the nine months the HMS Tortoise crew spent in the area there were constant alarms as the Maori from Hauraki and neighbouring areas in the timber camp warily kept watch for the threat from the south. In one instance, for example, Laslett described the scene when a fleet of unknown canoes appeared from the south. At that time there were less Maori in camp than usual and there was a lot of apprehension that this was a war party from the south. Laslett reported that

we had some 40 to 50 men including the marines who looked very imposing in their red coats with their muskets and bright steel bayonets fixed, and I have no doubt our display of force counted for something with the natives. Our natives now that they were backed by us, gained courage rapidly, and soon became frantic, they defied the strangers, by shouting wildly to them to come on. They were not however to be lured that way, for after firing a few muskets which did no harm, they turned their canoes and went off in a northerly direction along the coast⁷.

It is a minor confrontation, but one unrecorded in other sources.

There are other accounts from these timber voyages but none are quite such a rich research source as the Laslett journals, particularly for the study of early interactions between European and Maori.

David Colquhoun

* Jagose's lustful novel of sailors, missionaries and Maori in the 1830s won the fiction prize at the 2004 New Zealand book awards.

¹ Preface. New Zealand journal (2 and 3). Thomas Laslett journals. MS-Papers-8349-2

² Preface. New Zealand journal (4). Ibid. MS-Papers-8349-3

³ P. 69. New Zealand journal (2 and 3). Ibid. MS-Papers-8349-2

⁴ Entries for 31 October, 6 November 1842. New Zealand journal (4). Ibid. MS-Papers-8349-3.

⁵ Entries for 7 June-16 December 1838. New Zealand journal (2 and 3). Ibid. MS-Papers-8349-2

⁶ Entry for 11 July 1842. New Zealand journal (4). Ibid. MS-Papers-8349-3.

⁷ Entry for 5 August 1842. Ibid.