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The Great Barrier Island

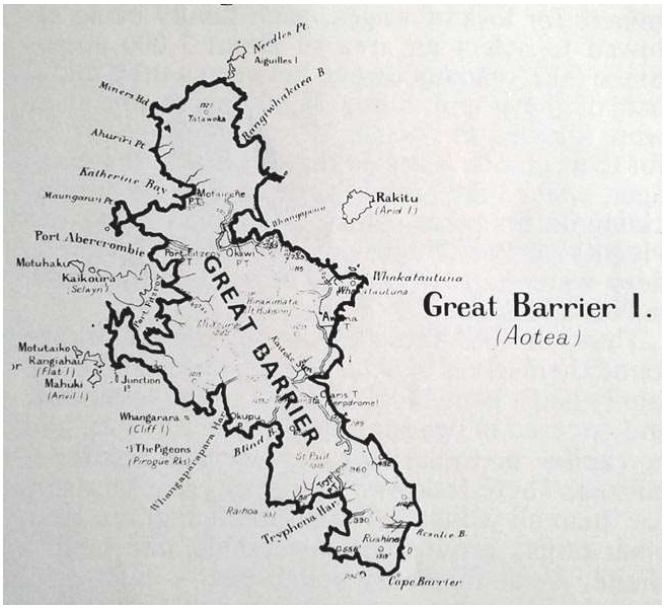
by A. E. Le Roy

This island is some fifty to sixty miles from Auckland, at the entrance to the Hauraki Gulf. It is known for its fine, rugged scenery, its steep rocky cliffs alternating with sheltered harbours and wide sandy beaches. It is still a paradise of native bush and birds and largely unspoiled because of its relative isolation and the stormy seas and dangerous currents which often make access difficult. It was discovered by Captain Cook, who liberated goats and pigs there. Since those far off days it has had a varied and interesting history. These are some of the main events.

From 1820 or even earlier there was whaling on the coasts of the island and old inhabitants remembered (about 1890) that there had been a huge capstan in Nagle Cove which was used to lift sailing ships out of the water for the careening of their hulls. Horses were used to work the old wooden capstan and some of the very early residents there were probably used to do repairs to some of the whalers. There was a renewal of the whaling industry on the western side of the island by the Hauraki Whaling Co. as recently as 1960, the harpooner being Charles Heberley, a member of an old whaling family and his wife Ruby, a great grand-daughter of John Guard, the famous whaling pioneer of 1827 in Tory Channel.

In 1838 the Maori owners of the island sold it to the American adventurer, William Webster, of Coromandel, and his partners, Jeremiah Nagle and William Abercrombie, who started the mining of copper in Catherine Bay. It was they who organized the building of the large 400-ton ship "Stirlingshire" at Nagle Cove in Port Abercrombie. This barque, which had two decks and three masts, was built by John Gillies and Robert Menzies; they used the natural bends of the pohutukawa for ribs and kauri carvel planking from the island forests. Much gear for this ship, the largest built in New Zealand at that time, was brought out from England on Captain W.F. Porter's brig in 1841 - sails, anchors, chains and ironwork - as Captain Nagle, who superintended the building of the ship was related to the mate on Captain Porter's brig. William Field Porter remembers seeing flocks of goats on the Barrier and that butter and cheese were made from the milk. The "Stirlingshire", which cost over £5,000, was finally launched in 1848; it traded across the Tasman and around the world and was probably the first kauri-built ship to arrive in London docks. Since then many other ships have been built on the Barrier and all the men on the island are excellent boatmen - they had to be, since the sea was their highway.

This first sale to Webster was disallowed, but in 1844 it was sold again o Sir Frederick Whitaker who was probably attracted by the copper as he had been to Kawau Island. It was he who named the main harbour Port FitzRoy, after the Governor at that time. There were only a few scattered settlers for some years - military pensioners and a small number taking up 40-60 acre free grants.



Copper mining was the first industry on the Barrier, after the building of the large ship. The Abercrombie brothers began mining in a small way but sold out to an English concern, the Barrier Copper Mining Co., which started work in 1855, employing a number of the Cornish miners from Kawau Island where the copper mine had flooded. The first mine manager was a Mr Allom and there were at one time some thirty men working at Catherine Bay where the copper lode was situated. The second manager, in 1861, was a Mr Stark who had had mining experience in South Africa. He declared that the copper was a rich ore but very difficult to work as the seam ran

under water and then inland where the rock was very hard. Catherine Bay is wide and exposed to all the south-west gales and Miner's Head is steep, bleak and rocky - the spot where the "Wairarapa" was wrecked in 1894 - so that it was extremely difficult to get the ore out when it was gain. A schooner, the "Rory O'Moore" was procured for this purpose and they managed to get one load of copper out to the larger ship the "Tryphena" in deeper water but the second load of 20 ton was lost when the schooner was wrecked. (Both these ships were built on the island.) There was no insurance and this tragedy led to the closing of the Barrier Mining Co. in 1865. Some ten miners and their families still lived near the mine in Catherine Bay and the Company still owed them wages at the time of its closure.

The Barrier Mining Co. in 1865 may have had no money but it had a great deal of land. The original plan had been to encourage farmer-settlers as well as miners, the settlers to grow crops and run cattle on their allotments to provide food for the miners. Unfortunately the Barrier land was too steep and rough for quick results from farming and this part of the scheme failed, but the land was used to compensate the miners for the loss of wages, each family being allowed to select an area of about 1,000 acres. Since the Company owed between a third and a half of the island, some 24,000 acres, the men were allowed to choose the area they preferred for their grants; it is said that Mr Stark, the manager, walked the island for three days before deciding on his piece. Most of the men chose the vicinity of Port FitzRoy, a beautiful, sheltered, deep-water harbour, said to be perhaps the finest in New Zealand.

Thus, in 1865 these ex-copper mine workers found themselves in an unenviable position; each family had a large block of land, steep, unfenced and covered in light or heavy bush. But they had no capital, no tools, no equipment and no proper houses. There followed a time of great hardship for them all while they tried to clear some land, plant crops, grow some vegetables and build shelter - at first only a slab hut - to live in. They had to help one another and make the best use of what fish they could catch in the sea, or what they could find to use in the bush. The first crops of wheat or barley were thrashed with a flail and made into bread and porridge. A few cattle were obtained and run wherever there was enough pasture and when a beast was killed it was shared with the nearby families. They made their own butter and tanned the hides of cattle and sheep for leather and made tweed out of their own wool. They made baskets and rough aprons out of flax and they made furniture for their houses out of local timber which was also used for tubs, buckets, baths and spouting. Nothing was wasted and for some years, as money was very short, very little could be bought. It was difficult to buy even saws, iron or nails. They sold what they could but there was, at first, a very small market as the Barrier was very isolated in the 1860-1880 period. There was no regular boat service, very few visiting ships, no telegraph and at first no school.

The Paddison family built their first proper house about 1867 of pit-sawn timber, with wooden spoutings and tanks and their own split kauri shingles on the roof. This house still stands in good repair but the additions, which were built of milled timber, have not lasted. The house had a huge fireplace, 8ft wide, in the kitchen. In this capacious open fire were suspended from a long iron bar the big pots, skillets and kettles and camp ovens sat in the embers. Very good cooking was done in these big open fireplaces. There were no stoves until about the end of the century. Bread was baked in ovens dug outside into clay banks; these were bricked inside, heated with a teatree fire which was drawn out before the loaves were put in. The Paddison family were excellent builders, even their henhouses were models and their fences well made. Joe Paddison built houses, boats, dams, roads and in 1920 even a water-powered generator for the guest-house "Glenfern" in FitzRoy Bay, which he had built about 1898. This house is still a summer holiday hotel, now called FitzRoy House.

Some relief from the isolation and money shortage came to the Barrier families in the last twenty years of the century. Cray fishing became a good line of business, fence posts and rails were cut from the puriri and a good tree in cut teatree for firewood grew up with Auckland, where immense amounts of wood were burnt in the open fires and ranges of that period. There was a great deal of heavy manuka on the Barrier hills and this was cut into lengths, tied in bundles with flax and these bundles sent down by a trolley on two wires to the beach. Scows came in regularly for this firewood. Vegetables were grown in quantity, some sold to visiting ships and the rest stored for the winter. Farming was carried on without great success but the Flinns did well in their fertile valley. The best farming land was on the east coast. There was a postmaster from 1863, the first being A.J. Allom, followed by William Flinn and in 1884 by Emilius Le Roy, who combined the post office with his store for forty years. The postmaster's salary was £6 per year.

This Emilius Le Roy, son of the original sail-maker put the Barrier teatree to good use by making all the tent pegs for the firm - thousands and thousands of them, of all sizes. He had been trained in sail-making but

preferred to live on the island, marrying Jennie Cooper, a member of one of the old copper-miner families. His brother Albert James Le Roy was a sail-maker too and a horticulturist as well and he also married into an old Barrier family, his wife being Elizabeth Paddison. This A.J. Le Roy and his son, A.E. Le Roy, the author of this story, did not live permanently on the Barrier but spent all their holidays there. The Le Roys were related to most of the old families - Stark, Moor, Cooper, Sanderson and Paddison. The second Emilius, maker of the tent pegs had only a small kerosene engine in his primitive workshop but his pegs tied down the tents of thousands of people in backblocks work, surveyors, railway workers and bush-fellers.

In 1890 gold and silver were found and mined at Okupu and Whitecliffs and a whole new village was built at Oreville. For some years this was a busy centre, with tramlines and trucks to carry the ore and a battery to crush it. A weekly boat service began in 1889; there were stores and bakery to serve a population of 500 souls, who provided a good market for Barrier produce; but the seam ran out in a few years and there is now no trace of the once-busy town.

Life at Tryphena was much the same as Port FitzRoy - lonely and hard - but all the Barrier families developed a strong spirit of self-reliance and independence, resulting from their isolation and years of struggle. A scattered community paying little in rates finds it has to do most things for itself; so it was that the Tryphena people built their own wharf and shed and road; every family in its own bay had to have a jetty, built by themselves of teatree, which was found to last well in salt water, and every young man had his own boat. It was found that a slim 14 foot boat with one sail and a long bowsprit was most suited to the Barrier as it was easily manageable by one person. The Barrier men could turn their hands to anything. The character of a country seems to impress itself on the inhabitants, so the rough and rugged island bred a race of capable, adaptable people - self-opinionated and stern, perhaps, but kindly and hospitable as well. Most of them took their religion very seriously and kept the Sabbath strictly, bring in wood and water on the Saturday and cooking meals ahead. They even developed a dialect of their own and the women had noticeably high-pitched voices - this was called the “Barrier twang”.

Karaka Bay - the Paddison’s homestead 1902. A typical piece of Great Barrier landscape.
Photo by courtesy Auckland Institute and Museum.

In 1894 the inter-colonial steamer "Wairarapa" was wrecked at Miner's Head with a loss of 135 lives. This was a great tragedy, as it is a cruel coast in that area, inhospitable in the extreme and there was no-one living in that part of the island so it was not until the next day that some Maori fishermen in a small boat discovered the wreck. There was no telegraph or telephone and only sailing boats on the island so people in Auckland, awaiting the regular ship from Sydney, did not hear of the disaster for a day or two. This highlighted the isolation of the island and led to the inauguration of the Pigeon Post a couple of years later, the first organized airmail in the world. The Barrier families, always very practical and versatile, did all that was possible for the survivors of the wreck, many of whom had spent a miserable night on an exposed rocky ledge. The Flinn and Paddison families each received a silver tea set from the Union Steamship Co. in recognition of their assistance to the stranded passengers. Maori families also extended hospitality but were hard put to it to find enough clothes for the shivering people.

The pigeon mail was pioneered by a Mr J.E. Parkin of the Auckland Homing Society, who sold out to Holden Howie in 1898. His loft was in Newton Road but soon there was a rival service run by Mr W. Fricker who had a loft in Picton Street, Ponsonby. (Note: A letter to the editor of the N.Z. Herald of 23.5.77 states that Mr Fricker was the pioneer of the Pigeon Post, opening the Great Barrier Island Pigeongram Agency in February 1897; and Mr Parkin started what became known as the Original Pigeongram Service in May 1897.) The service was a great boon to the Barrier people who could send a message to Auckland in an hour or two, ordering stores or asking for medical help. The birds carried their pigeongrams, called 'flimsies', five at a time, under a waterproof legging and had their names and addresses under one wing. Mr Howie's fastest birds could cover the sixty miles in under one hour with a good wind. The service failed to get official recognition from the Post Office and it ceased when the telephone was connected in 1908. Stamps were used from 1899 and these are now much sought after. Most messages were sent from the Barrier at 6d per message but some birds were trained by Mr Le Roy to fly the other way, a message in this direction costing 1/-. Before the inauguration of this service, with only a weekly boat, it could take sixteen days for an answer or supplies from Auckland! Very sick people had to be taken to Auckland, in all weathers, by some courageous boatman on a 'mercy trip', but with the pigeon mail a doctor and a nurse would make the journey to the Barrier in the case or a serious emergency.

Most ordinary ailments, accidents or the birth of a baby, were attended by Mrs Flinn who acted as doctor and nurse to all the families on the island.

The Paddison's first house, still standing. Mr A E Le Roy is on the horse to the left.

Since the tracks were poor and most people lived in the bays she went to her cases by boat, no matter what the weather was like; as long as she was needed the boat was manned and put out. As there were no telephones her call often came by the lighting of a fire on a distant hill.

In 1899 the Kauri Timber Co. erected a large sawmill, equipped with all the latest machinery at Whangaparapara and a whole new township grew up round it. Many logs were brought across from the mainland and kauri on the island was cut, flushed down the rivers and brought to the mill. The mill was, in its day, very fine and modern, able to put out some 60,000 feet of sawn timber per day. The mill closed down in 1941, all machinery and houses being removed. There is now nothing left of the little township but a tiny graveyard in a quiet cove, but many million feet of kauri were taken from the island during the years of the mill's activity.

Schooling for the children was very much a problem in early days. At first a teacher went from house to house, spending a week or two here and there but the Paddison family built a good schoolroom on to their woolshed in 1879. There were schools at Oreville and at Whangaparapara during the boom years of activity at these places, but now, with better roads and a bus there are only two schools, at Okiwi in the north and at Mulberry Grove, Tryphena in the south.

Mr Le Roy concludes his outline of Great Barrier history by describing the island as a paradise of native bush and birds. As a child he was especially impressed by the beauty of the central area where the Forestry Department have their headquarters now, but which was then the last large area of native bush, most of it in valleys so steep that it was too difficult to remove the trees. Though the island now has some main roads, stores, schools, a taxi, hotels, bush tracks and even a district nurse in a Landrover, it is still little exploited commercially and we can hope it will remain a safe corner for its trees and birds and beaches and its pioneer type people.