

De Forest Describes His River Trip and Its Beauties For An Artist

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On arriving in Wanganui, some two weeks ago, and representing myself as an artist, I was strongly recommended to pay the Wanganui River a visit. Having met, both in Wellington and in Wanganui, gentlemen who had availed themselves of the pleasure of this trip, and with their praises of its charms still singing in my ears, my optics one day fell upon a number of pictures now on exhibition at Mr Willis and painted by Mr Blomfield, and I at once determined to venture the trip.

Several persons were recommended as suitable river pilots; but as the services of some were not available, and others were objectionable, I finally and fortunately decided to elect Mr Andrew T. J. Anderson as my canoe-man and guide, and here let me remark that I have done canoeing in America, on the Continent, and in the Colonies, but I never met a more active and expert canoe-man than Mr Anderson. People unacquainted with this river and its dangerous rapids, thinking of doing it without a pilot, must make up their minds to be in the water more of their time than they counted upon: for if they do not get out, their own awkward inexperience would put them out, smash their poles and possibly their canoe, thereby entailing a loss of time, property, and temper. Mr Anderson seems to know every foot of his ground, and would do the Wanganui River, as safely by night as by day.



Andrew Anderson (1865-1897).
From Cyclopaedia of New Zealand.

On the morning of Dec 10th, with old Sol doing his level best to make nature smile her loveliest, myself, Mr Anderson, two young Maori men and two canoes might have been seen, under sail, gliding up the river, one canoe, with two of its occupants on pleasure bent, the other containing Mr Anderson's up-river freight in charge of two natives; but both were tied together and under the propelling influence of one sail, and we continued in this united state for some miles up.

At Upokongaro (seven miles) we called a halt, and took on board a Mr Stevens and two children, two calves, a cook, and some other small freight. With this additional cargo and a lunch, for 'twas then between 12 and 1, we set off again. From this point onward for a distance of 13 miles the river assumes a very serpentine character and precipitous, but only partially wooded hills rise on either hand. About 6 p.m. we arrived at Punakiwitu, about 21 miles from town.

Here, on a beautiful grassy bank, in the shade of a grove of willows, we decided to camp. Meantime, with sketching traps in hand, I made the ascent of a lofty razor-back elevation, where I obtained a late evening sketch of the valley of the Wanganui looking toward the sea, showing a small section of the river and the merest indication of the town in the distance. [This sketch was probably from the top of the Aramoana ridge, looking over the Upokongaro stream valley and gave rise to the mystery painting described in the previous story].

Returning, I found two tents pitched and the billies boiling. Without a pressing invitation and an appreciative appetite, I set to work upon boiled eggs, bread and butter. The next important item was to prepare for a good night's rest. Our Maori boys were rolled up in their blankets, and lay at a safe distance from our camp fire, Mrs. Stevens and children occupied a tent close by, and Anderson and myself were in the other; the two calves were anchored to a tree at our heads, and the cock — no doubt a distant relation of the one that so unexpectedly reminded poor Peter of his sacred promise to his Master — was tethered to another, and worse still, the waeroa [mosquitoes] were present in abundance. I arranged some mosquito-netting for my protection, smoked the little savages out, and turned in to try my luck.

Next morning, after a night of misery and disturbed rest, I turned out, weary and well punished. The waeroa stormed us all night long, and in spite of my care in netting ourselves in, they gained the inside, and, with proboscis and music, did for me properly. At day-dawn, however, through sheer fatigue, I fell into the arms of Morpheus, and by some mysterious means the rooster found it out, and commenced to crow his beautiful harmony to the tune of about ten crows a minute. He banged away for about ten minutes, and suddenly stopped. I tried again, was soon in dreamland, and fancied myself dining on cocks' combs and mosquito pudding, when suddenly, as if set to go off with a bang at a given moment, these two lovely calves

opened their jaws, and roared most unmercifully, but one roared so much louder and more continuously than the other that the weaker one gave up in despair, and so did I. That brute never ceased for two and a half hours.

Our party all being roused, and breakfast over, we struck camp, and were once more on the war-path. There being little or no wind, we travelled separately, as we did the latter part of yesterday's journey. The hills now began to grow more wooded. Occasionally we encountered a rapid, and by leaving the canoe at different points and following the pathways along the hill-sides to pick up my guide further on, I obtained two very pleasing sketches before reaching "Atene" (Athens), at which point we overtook our Maori boys with their living freight, who had already boiled the billie [sic] for lunch. Of course, we did not eat the billie, but being noon we regaled ourselves on such delicacies as our camping hamper could most conveniently produce. I then made a sketch of "Kakata" [across the river from Atene] and its surroundings, and took canoe again.

A short distance above Athens I landed for another short walk, at the end of which I was brought up with another pleasing sketch, embracing a reach of sheeny river, reflecting a series of well wooded and picturesquely-formed hills and a bold bit of foreground (Te Mutapi, 27 miles from town.) This completed, I joined my guide for a mile or two more until we were again intercepted by a rapid and favoured with more beach. I landed, and was not long in discovering another picturesque scene; this time looking down the river, where the distant foliage clad hills, reposing in beautiful irregularity under the softening influence of an afternoon sun, whose searching rays caught with telling effect the outer edges of the nearer masses of foliage and the more exposed points along the reach, while the dark shining river gliding peacefully along to its oceanic destiny, gave a fitting completeness to this delightful scene. From this point until we reached Hoperiki [Operiki, a mile and a half beyond Korinit] I stood by the canoe.

That night, through the hospitality of Mr and Mrs Stevens, we were entertained at their whare, and enjoyed a comfortable night's rest. There, at the top of a frowning cliff, in a thatched whare, with mother earth for its floor, we enjoyed a plain but wholesome tea, and comfortable bunk, not a hair or spring mattress, of course, but we slept, ah, didn't we? Next morning (December 12th) having passed the night in undisturbed repose, and showing a due appreciation for the breakfast our kind hostess prepared for us, we took leave of herself and family, and were soon lost to all else, excepting those scenes immediately surrounding us.

Two and a half miles up, and we had crossed 3 rapids, obtained a sketch at Ruapirau Rapids, and were approaching another stiff fall, when, by request, I was landed, and making a detour up the side of the hill, I

passed down the other side, through the midst of a well arranged and prettily situated pah, which proved to be "Karatia". The majority of its residents were in Wanganui disposing of their spring's wool-clip. Descending the terrace I met my guide, and in 5 minutes we were in the midst of another strong rapid. For the next 5 miles there was nothing particularly remarkably but landing at Moutoa Island. I walked to the upper end, whence I made a sketch, embracing Tawhitinui, another old established pa, occupying a partly cultivated hill on the right bank, with lofty hills at the back, fading in colour as they retire with the distant winding of the river, their higher points beautifully wooded, while their bases show signs of more or less cultivation. I am informed that Moutoa Island is celebrated as being the point at which the friendly and hostile natives met in battle some years ago. The hostile natives were descending the river in force to annihilate the pakeha settlers at Wanganui, when they were unexpectedly checkmated at this point by the friendly natives.

Our next stage was for about 3 or 4 miles to Hiruhara-



Tawhitinui.
From a postcard.

ma, or Jerusalem, another delightfully situated pa consisting of something over 200 natives, a Catholic priest and three or four Sisters of Mercy. It also occupies a cultivated grassy slope, whose sandy banks dip suddenly to the river, which at this point, makes a sudden turn round a precipitous cliff and disappears from view. The hills in this vicinity run to a good height, and are heavily timbered. Of this pleasing scene, I obtained a sketch from an elevated point on the left bank.

It was then past 6 p.m., and we decided to camp for the night, which we did a mile and a half further up at Te Ripo, where a dry, and grassy sand point, offers fine camp accommodation. Next morning, bright and early, we struck camp, hoping that day to reach the caves. It was now seven miles to Pipiriki, with weather threatening and heavy clouds gathering on the mountain tops, on which rain must surely follow, which it did, and having secured one sketch we reached Pipiriki about 11 o'clock, where through stress of weather, I was detained for three days, but in Mr Anderson's cottage I had dry quarters, and every hospitality shown me.

At Pipiriki, the natives appear to live more independent of each other, a few on either side of the river. In the course of my stay at this place, news came one day that a canoe manned with natives, had come to grief in one of the rapids, and was broken in two. On Tuesday, December 17th, my fourth day at Pipiriki, it was still raining heavily. We decided, in case that the river should rise, to push on to Te Arawata, which we did. From this point upwards, for a distance of 10 miles, (the extent of my journey) the scenery becomes intensely interesting and with peculiarities and charms that are not to be found on any other river in the colonies. Mile by mile as we advance, the hills become higher and higher and are more densely wooded, the banks more precipitous and rocky, the rapids more frequent and strong. Within the above distance we crossed seven of the worst rapids on the river. The day being so wet, there was no opportunity for admiring anything.

Arriving at Te Arawata about 6 p.m., we found dry quarters in a native whare of which a pakeha-Maori, Mr Cribb, is proprietor. Next morning the weather cleared and we returned to Pipiriki, and not till then could I thoroughly enjoy the grandeur of these two miles of scenery. For four or five miles we seemed to be confronted at every turn we made with nature's bewitching loveliness. On either hand are lofty walls of rock, rising almost perpendicularly from the water's edge, to heights varying from 50 to 250 feet richly clad with ferns, grasses, mosses, and shrubbery, and at the tops overhanging bush and occasionally trees which, if they have one chance of retaining their hold upon that which has nourished them for so many years, seem to have fifty of coming, down with a crash and annihilating one at any moment.

Three miles below Te Arawata the Manganui-o-te-au unites with the Wanganui, and it is in this vicinity where the cliffs rise to a giddy height. Our canoe glides round a corner and to all appearance, at the end of a short reach, an impenetrable barrier forbids our further progress. Yet on we glide, are simply drifting along with the flowing



The mouth of the Manganui o te Ao River.
Photo: Michael Parnell.

tide of this deep, dark, mysterious looking stream, with its precipitous walls of rock, its wealth of foliage, its densely timbered spurs all reflected upon its mirror-like surface. At one point and in full view of Oapehu, rises a frowning cliff, to the side of which and fully 150 feet above the river, clings a huge rata tree, and, indeed, at every bend of the river, some new beauty or mysterious freak of nature reveals itself. I obtained four or five sketches in this locality, which I regret very much I shall not have time to develop in Wanganui.

Within three miles of Pipiriki we called at the cave, of the interior beauties and formation of which there seems to be little known, and without proper appliances I did not venture an exploration. In the face of a perpendicular cliff a huge recess has been formed, large enough to admit of a small two story cottage, at the back of which appears a tunnel from whose dark and dismal mouth issues a good sized stream of water, dropping for about 15 feet with a continuous roar into a large basin below. From its natural facade, having fantastic clumps of rata vine, the lower walls and slopes are beautifully draped with ferns, gaegae [keikei (Freycinetia banksii)?] and shrubbery, while the pool at the base of the cliff is as black as the hole from which it so mysteriously emerges. I also obtained a sketch of this scene.



The Puraroto Cave entrance with interior waterfall.
Photo: Jim Parnell.

By 6 p.m., we were once more at Pipiriki. Those ten miles were to me, miles of pleasure and not without more or less excitement, for as we shot through one rapid after another, apparently whizzing past frowning cliffs and overhanging foliage I was filled with sensations of delight. Two days later, including a half day I bestowed upon a painting of Koriniti, I arrived in Wanganui, fifty times repaid for my efforts and little discomforts.

H. J. DeForest.