

Motutapu Makeover

By Ruth E. Henderson







In 1903 on the occasion of the Oddfellows Annual picnic, 14,000 people, or 14 percent of the Auckland population, arrived at Home Bay, Motutapu Island by a fleet of streamers, much faster than sail, to enjoy the hospitality of the Reid family. One hundred of these picnickers came north from Waihi by train.

One hundred and fifteen years later, in 2018 on the occasion of Auckland Anniversary weekend, thirteen sea kayakers arrived, eight paddling from Narrow Neck, three from St Heliers, and two came by fast ferry. We came for the peace and quiet, to side step the modern madness of the motorcar exodus of Auckland, to step into the past.

Those of us who'd elected to leave on Saturday morning from Narrow Neck, dodged one big container ship, crossed the Rangitoto channel, and headed north. About halfway between the causeway and Administration Bay Robert, our archeologist stopped at the Sunde site to examine the pre-European Maori and Polynesian dog footprints trapped in the ash from the 1400AD Rangitoto eruption. What a sight that must have been... watching an island erupting into being! Robert counted himself lucky to photograph a preserved dog poo!

We stopped in at Administration Bay, our first encounter with the island's World War II military history. Once full of soldiers in barracks, it's now a youth camp run by the Motutapu Outdoor Education Trust. In Yakity Yak history it's famous for the 2003 Mid-Winter Christmas party, when, as the story grows, 'everyone' bought chicken. But actually, there were a few



Photo credit – Reg Nichol



Sunde Archeological Site – dog poo – photo by Robert Brassey





The ruins of the Battery Plotting Room, once the 'think tank' of the Territorial army camp





Looking over the Rakino Channel to Woody Bay, Rakino

salads and puddings, a Christmas tree courtesy of Steve & Sue, and some crazy party games. I recall vividly the musical chairs.

Legs stretched, onward we passed Billy Goat Point where still clinging to the cliff is one of WW II's pill boxes or concrete bunkers with commanding views over the Hauraki Gulf. Some rock gardening lead us to Station Bay, its past marked by mature Norfolk Island pines. 24 kms later we pulled up at Home Bay.

Around the few young pohutukawa trees tents gathered, people were sparse, the motor boats and yachts few. Under the mature trees, at Reid House, built between 1901 – 03 bean-bags sprawled, and flags flew. Ice cream and movies were offered. It was impossible to visualize how crowded it was that day in 1903. And before then...

When the military dug into the hillsides they found under the layer of dense volcanic ash, evidence of ancient human occupation. WW II over, geologists and archeologists pieced together evidence of 12th Century occupation, perhaps the wandering Moa Hunters?

The blanket of ash left by the Rangitoto eruption made the soils more fertile and easier to cultivate, attracting intensive Maori settlement. Home Bay was a fortified Pa, terracing and kumara pits still exist on most ridges and cliffs. The Ngai Tai were the main occupants until the mid-19th century when they sold to Europeans who began pastoral farming, establishing homesteads and planting those landmark Norfolk Island trees.

The Reid brothers, John and James bought the island in 1869 and made it a famous and favourite picnic spot. Robert Graham, a pioneer of the tourist industry was the first to introduce exotic animals in 1860. James, a friend



of Governor George Grey, creator of the zoo at Mansion House, Kawau Island, shared their enthusiasm. Red deer were imported from England's Windsor Park, ostriches, emus, donkeys, and the dratted possums and wallabies. Apart from the grand social events, shooting parties kitted out in knickerbocker suits went out to bag red deer and wallabies. On other occasions such as the Boxing Day paddle steamer excursions from Thames, there were rowdy rambunctious and no doubt exciting whale boat racing and greased pig chasing.

We were decidedly less energetic. Some swam, or read and others gathered for drinkie-poops and nibbles before crouching around cookers, and either sneaking off to bed to read by head-torch or joining the kids for the movie at Reid House. The next day we set out to circumnavigate neighbouring Rakino Island. Andrea's group had the previous day paddled out and about the nearby Noises.... but were happy enough to tag along and do some more rock gardening. Andrea did point out the disclaimer sign on her back "Follow me at your own risk".

Rakino was where all the boaties were hiding! We stopped at Woody Bay...so Renee could meet and greet the dogs, and for the rest of us to grab a snack and thermos of coffee. It also had a Home Bay, a jetty and is serviced by fast ferries. We stopped there for lunch and more dog patting before passing the South Island (true), crossing the Rakino Channel to potter and rock garden down the eastern side of Motutapu. Another 24 kms done, it was time for a rest...or not.

I grabbed two water bottles and walked up the hill to see the Motutapu Battery...it was extremely hot, so I was very grateful for the Rotary Centennial plantings of native trees in the gullie heading up the hill granting me and the bird life, shade. On the hill top instead of soldiers scanning the horizon and manning the pill boxes, sheep stood guard, and on the

hillside alongside the ruins of the Battery Plotting Room, once the 'think tank' of the Territorial army camp, they sheltered from the sun. In 1942, the Motutapu Battery, one in a network of coastal defenses, had up to 700 personnel on site. I had the place to myself, so could loiter and take the time to contemplate the island's military history.

The signage on the gun emplacements and magazines described the jobs of these men (and a few woman) however the poignant thing for me was seeing the cramped, narrow quarters they slept in between duty shifts. Rusty doors opened to show the remains of brackets that would have held skinny bunks. Compensation perhaps would have been the wonderfully expansive views? Ideal for spotting enemy submarines and warships. Across to Rakino in one direction, then over to Waiheke and Motihue, and around to Rangitoto joined to Motutapu by an artificial causeway built in the Second World War.

I watched big yachts and launches, en route to a safe anchorage, a place to pull up for drinks and dinner... yes, it was that time of the day, so I wandered down to Reid House seeking an ice cream...alas they had sold out, but I was given a glass of iced lemon water and a chance to read up on the Motutapu Restoration Society. "Motutapu Island's physical connection with the iconic Rangitoto Island enhances its significance in the Hauraki Gulf. While Motutapu represents one of the oldest landforms in northern New Zealand, Rangitoto represents the youngest. Together they will create a wildlife sanctuary landmass about twenty times the size of Tiri Tiri Matangi, twice the size of Kapiti Island and significantly larger than Hauturu (Little Barrier Island), New Zealand's other major island wildlife sanctuaries". The Society in conjunction with DOC is giving the island a makeover. It got rid of the inhabitants once introduced as game, wallabies and possums in 1990 and in 2011 both Rangitoto and Motutapu were declared pest free. Admirably they have a 50-year working plan. So





far 500,000 trees have been planted and workdays are held every second Sunday of the month.

Fifty plus years ago Shirley Maddock wrote and no doubt Elizabeth Easter will echo her mother's sentiments in her 2018 TV program "Islands of the Gulf" "All inhabitants have left some trace of themselves behind. The Reid's left their belladonnas, the walnut trees and the Norfolks; the army, the remnants of their camps and batteries, and heavy concrete doors that lead mysteriously into hillsides."

That night we discussed the next day's weather forecast of 20 knot Easterly winds and rising...and decided to get up at 6 am for an on-the-water time of 8. The tail wind gave us good speed, we whizzed by Emu Point, the site of another early settlement, across Islington Bay, and 15 kms later were back in Auckland in the 21st century, in time for lunch. We may be back to plant some trees, but this time we left not so much as a tea-bag, just the temporary imprints of our tents. 🌿

References:

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