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PAHIATUA BOROUGH : THE FORMATIVE YEARS  
(1881 - 1892)

Thesis presented in partial fulfilment of  
the requirements for the degree of Master  
of Arts in History at Massey University.

Byron John Bentley  
1973

THE  
LEGEND  
OF  
THE BIRD GOD OF PAHI-ATUA

About the year 1625, there was an irruption into the lower Wairarapa district of the ... Rakairangi tribe, when the original Rangitane tribe was dispossessed and driven south. Rai-kau-Moana, the chief of the Rangitane escaped and fled. When he reached Pori-nui-a-kuaka, he looked back and saw his Pa being consumed by fire. A difference of opinion arose between Rai and his people as to whether to hold the Pa at Okahu or to flee.

Rai's atua, Rongomai, counselled flight, but the younger chiefs decided to remain and defend the place saying they "desired to wash their throats in their own streams, rather than in strange waters".

The Pa fell and was left without support, and from Uwhi-manuka, near the place now called Gladstone, Rai-kau-Moana again called on his atua, Rongomai, who changed himself into a bird and took Rai on his shoulders and flew away with him.

After several rests, they reached the hill Pahi-atua about three and a half miles south of the present town of that name.

The atua had a permanent resting place on the south side of the hill and between it and the Mangakaki, a tributary of the Mangatainoka, in a cave about twenty-five yards deep, by about six feet wide, called To-ana-o-Rongomai. Rai was later taken on to Rai-Kapua, due south of Tahoraiti, on the Pahiatua to Napier highway, where he made his home.

## CONTENTS

	Page
Preface	i
Acknowledgements	v
Abbreviations	vi
Illustrations	vii
CHAPTER 1	1
Introduction Pahiatua 1881-1892	
CHAPTER 2	10
Bush Bound	
CHAPTER 3	14
The Breadwinners	
CHAPTER 4	23
Growth of Community Institutions 1881-1892	
CHAPTER 5	34
A New and Private Settlement	
Conclusion	55
Bibliography	56
Appendices	59

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PREFACE

To the New Zealand citizen of the 1970's, surrounded either by the tall buildings of an urban landscape, or the predominantly open fields of a rural environment, the terms Seventy and Forty mile bush may connote more of a legendary forest tract, than the actual existence, less than 100 years ago, of a vast primeval forest, extending from Norsewood to Mauriceville, on the eastern side of the Tararua and Ruahine ranges in the North Island of New Zealand.

The fact that nowadays, dairy and sheepfarms and the towns of Dannevirke, Woodville, Pahiatua and Eketahuna cover what was once bushland, is illustrative of how quickly the early inhabitants of the area adapted to their new environment, and turned their vision of viable communities surrounded by farmland into reality.

This making over of the accessible parts of the North Island inland forest was the outstanding achievement of our people .... The achievements of all these ordinary struggling people makes the really significant history of the North Island.

George Jobberns<sup>1</sup>

The story of Pahiatua is part of "this making over of the accessible parts of the North Island inland forest", though in many ways it is a unique variation on this theme.

Pahiatua's formative period, or the years between bush clearing (1881) and the conferring of borough status (1892), is characterized by all of the aspirations, crises and imaginings that are usually associated with the moving from infancy and adolescence into maturity.

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1. Quoted in S.H. Franklin "The Village and the Bush", from J. Forster (ed.) "Social Processes in New Zealand", p.102.

The movement into the bush and the establishment of Pahiatua in one of the last vestiges of unsettled country in the North Island, cannot be looked at as a "journey into the unknown". It was rather an extension of such focal points as Wellington (founded in 1840) and Masterton (founded in 1853).

The settlers who moved to Pahiatua after the land sales in Masterton (1881), were not much different from their contemporaries in these more established centre. This is illustrated by the rapidity in which familiar social institutions were transplanted into Pahiatua, and the growth of criteria necessary for community formation, such as; a sense of belonging to a distinct community, regularized patterns of interaction, a recognized system of authority, and a shared sense of mutual expectations.

Physical isolation and distance were negligible factors in the Pahiatua situation, because a road was in existence before the settlers arrived at their new home, when the road was coupled with a telegraph system, isolation was precluded from virtually any part of the country. Though physical isolation and distance were negligible factors it was a different matter when the attitude of mind of the Pahiatua settler is examined. Gradually surrounding Pahiatua in the decade of the 1880's were a number of government sponsored settlements all endowed with reserves for such government institutions as a Post Office, Bank, Resident Magistrate's Court, Police Station, School and recreation ground. Because Pahiatua was a private township, subdivided into urban sections by private individuals, it found itself, in relation to its government sponsored neighbours, neglected in respect of government institutions.

This situation, as well as engendering a feeling of distinction and "we alone" among the settlers of Pahiatua, was also instrumental in promoting a large amount of energetic self-help and volatile behaviour, over and above that usually found in a community's formative years, on the part of its early citizens, as they aspired to create a viable community out of the dense bush.

In the introduction to this thesis, the initiative behind the settlement of the Pahiatua bushland is examined, with special emphasis on a scrutiny of Pahiatua and its relationship with its government sponsored neighbours. Chapter 2 concentrates specifically on Pahiatua and the men who were instrumental in its creation, through the division of their land into urban blocks. Chapter 3 is concerned with a description of the process of turning bush into pasture, and the business enterprises that were started in Pahiatua in its first 11 years. Chapter 4 examines the growth of community institutions ranging from a Jockey Club to a town board. In Chapter 5 an attempt is made, by examining various controversies, grievances and aspirations that the private settlement of Pahiatua was concerned with in its formative years, to illustrate how a viable community was brought into existence.

As regards the research material for the history of Pahiatua, a wide variety of mainly primary information was consulted. For the initiative behind the settlement of the Pahiatua bushlands, and something of its results, the Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives, the Parliamentary Debates and the Cyclopedia of New Zealand, all provided some illustration of the pioneer New Zealand ideal, of getting "men on to the land".

The Pahiatua Town Board minutes gave some glimpse into the workings of bush-town local government, though for the broadest coverage of life in Pahiatua the newspapers, in particular the Pahiatua Star, were invaluable. Because the Pahiatua Star was not founded until June 1886, the Woodville Examiner and the Wellington based New Zealand Mail were important for the years 1881-1886. Without the Pahiatua Star this thesis could not have been written, not only because of the insights it provided through its news columns into the life of a fledgling township, but also because its advertisements depicted the "bread and butter" functions of many Pahiatua inhabitants.

A few years ago the Pahiatua Star was almost another charred mass in the Pahiatua rubbish dump. For some years it was stored

in the news office building in Pahiatua, but lack of space decreed that it be shifted permanently. Only the quick thinking of a former mayor of the town, Mr Alan Carthew, saved the situation, and the Pahiatua Star was diverted to a shed in the Borough Council yards where it remained, until a combination of cockroaches, damp, and mould, saw it removed to the Turnbull Library in Wellington.

Another invaluable information source, which complemented all other material, was the personal recollections of early Pahiatua settlers either by the printed word or a spoken interview. Two early citizens of the town, Mrs Annie Bentley, who was the first white girl born in Pahiatua (1883) and a daughter of an original owner of Pahiatua, Henry Sedcole, and Mr John Hughes, the son of John Hughes also an original owner of Pahiatua, provided much important information through the use of their remarkable memories.

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With the assistance and cooperation of Mrs A. Bentley, and Mr J. Hughes of Pahiatua, my sources of information concerning Pahiatua as it was in the 1880's was vastly increased, and to those two I owe a great deal.

For the photographs, all credit must go to Mr L. Hartley of Pahiatua for the care which he took in preserving intact these early reminders of Pahiatua's past.

To Mrs Maureen Macdonald thanks are due for her care in the typing of the draft and final copy of this thesis.

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ABBREVIATIONS

AJHR	Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives
NZM	New Zealand Mail
PD	Parliamentary Debates
PH	Pahiatua Herald
PS	Pahiatua Star

ILLUSTRATIONS

PLATE		Facing page
1	A section of the major Forty mile bush road in 1882 at the site of what was to become the three chain wide main street of Pahiatua.	i
2	A group of "bush-fellers" pose for the photographer during clearing operations of the Pahiatua and district bushland in the 1880's.	8
3	The boiler of a steam-powered sawmill stands tall amidst the bush it is helping to turn into pasture.	15
4	Bullocks serve as locomotives during sawmilling operations in the Pahiatua and district bushland. Note that the "burn" has left plentiful remnants of what was once dense primeval forest.	17
5	The Commercial Hotel stands adjacent to the main Forty mile bush road, in the middle of the infant Pahiatua, in this photograph taken in 1886.	20
6	A view of Pahiatua emerging from the bush, taken from the eastern hills in 1886. (The roadway that can be seen in this picture is Wakeman Street).	23
7	A bridge spans the Tiraumea river at Ngaturi, (eight miles east of Pahiatua) on the main road to Makuri and Pongaroa.	43
8	Two views of Pahiatua and its three chain wide main street, still waiting for the promised railway line, 1888.	49
9	Pahiatua and its squares, looking northward in 1902.	55



PLATE 1

A section of the major Forty mile bush road in 1882,  
at the site of what was to become the three chain wide  
main street of Pahiatua.