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IN THE FOOTSTEPS OF THE EARLIEST PIONEERS

We spent last weekend at Peka Peka, which is one of a string of small settlements among the dunes (primarily of holiday homes), on the vast beach arc that stretches 30-40 miles from Waikanae towards Whanganui on the South West Coast of NZ's North Island.

Notwithstanding watching occasional groups of dog walkers passing or being shunted aside temporarily by a young man keen to impress his girl by whisking her down the sands in an SUV - and a group of crazy Maori kids burning the surf edge on a quad bike - I marvelled at the sense of space and emptiness.

And as we played soccer and cricket and built a sort of tower from drift wood, I knew that I would have to write about a scene that took place 174 years ago in the very earliest days of European Settlement.

Down this same beach came a family driving a bullock cart loaded with farm implements and household necessities, herding their cattle before them. The head of the family was 55 year old William Gordon **Bell** who had been born in Scotland but who had made money as the estate manager of a sugar plantation on the small island of Carriacou off Grenada in the West Indies.

William was accompanied by his wife Alziere who was then 63 years old. She was the daughter of a French naval surgeon and a West Indian mother. She had first married the Scottish owner of the **Bellevue** Estate on Carriacou but following his death she had remarried to William. The other members of the party were their daughters Margaret (29), Mary (25), Elizabeth (22) and sons James (23) and William Gordon, the Younger (20).

The **Bells** had lived and farmed near the village of New Abbey not far from Dumfries for awhile, as economic conditions had forced them out of the West Indies, emigrating from Scotland first to Australia and then onward to New Zealand.

Having sketched in the background I'll let the contemporary newspaper Obituary for William's eldest son James tell the story of the family's pioneering days. James died in Nelson in 1902 at the age of 85.

THE STORY OF THE BELLS – PORANGI (MAD) WHITE MEN

The late Mr James **Bell**, who passed away at his residence **Belle** Vue, Richmond, at the end of last month, was one of the earliest European settlers of this Colony, and experienced adventures such as but few of those living can speak of from personal knowledge.

Deceased was the eldest son of the late William Gordon **Bell**, who was born in Dumfries, Scotland, on the 27th of April 1818. With his parents he left Scotland on the 7th of June 1839, a few days later embarking at Liverpool in the ship Lady Lilford, of Dundee, Captain James Karmeth, bound for Australia.

The mother Colony was safely reached, but owing to land speculators and officials who were in league, the family only stayed there a few months. No sooner had deceased's father selected what he considered a suitable section of land to settle on, and desired to purchase it, then he was told by officials that it was already sold.

He came to the conclusion he was being used to select land for a ring of speculators, so he determined to proceed to New Zealand, landing at Port Nicholson (now Wellington) on March 15th 1840.

A quantity of stock and implements were landed there, and deceased claimed to have taken the first bullock shore at that port. The animal did some damage to the Maoris who inspected it most minutely, and as compensation they confiscated Mr **Bell**'s coat and neck tie, and kept him prisoner all that night.

The family received considerable opposition from the Maoris. One ill-tempered chief (E. Waka) headed the mischief makers, consequently deceased's father sought the protection of another chief (Kiri Karamu), who, though conniving at the extortion of the family, would not allow violence to be done.

Deceased's father claimed to be the first to use a plough in New Zealand, and when he began to plough the Maoris used to come and watch the proceedings with intense interest and curiosity. The Chief E. Waka would come every morning and walking by the side of Mr **Bell**, senior, would tell him he should plough no more.

On one occasion, E. Waka brought a large number of Maoris and threatened violence if the old farmer did not cease ploughing. Mr **Bell** senior called his stalwart sons to his aid and taking up a spade or ploughshare, addressed the Maoris in broad Scotch as follows:

'Dinna ye think to touch a things that's here noo; for if ye do, by the God that's abune us, I'll clave ye to the grund. A bargain is a bargain; I've paid ye richt and fair; and I'll gar ye keep to it.'

His resolute looks and prepared attitude frightened the Maoris, who decided it was wiser th let the 'hard white man' (as they used to call him) alone, so peace was for a time restored.

When the ploughing was done, and the planting of potatoes began, the Maoris were highly amused to see the **Bell** family cut the potatoes into pieces. They said that trouble had turned the heads of the family and that they had gone porangi (or mad).

The Maoris were thoroughly astonished when the **Bells** secured a better crop of potatoes than they did, and they discovered the pakehas could teach them something.

Mr **Bell** senior got sick of the troublesomeness of the Maoris, so determined to remove his family to Wanganui. They undertook the journey on foot, a terrible task in those days, for they had to swim the rivers, and the women had often to be carried.

Deceased was the first to put plough in the ground in the Wanganui District as his father was the first to do so in the Wellington District. The plough then used by deceased still remains in possession of the family of Mr Thomas **Bell** of Murchison, a son, having the implement at his farm.

In 1845 the late Mr James **Bell** had a rough time with the Maoris in the Wairarapa District – once being tied up and his life threatened. Once the Europeans were given twenty minutes to clear out, and as the small body climbed a hill they could see the Natives had set fire to the homesteads they had just quitted.

At Wanganui similar troubles were experienced, and when the late Sir George Grey first arrived in this colony, he sent a body of Marines to rescue the Europeans who had taken refuge in a blockhouse they had built for their own protection. Deceased was present when nine Maoris were arrested for the Gilfilan massacre.

Finally, the work of pioneering in the Wanganui District was abandoned for the sake of the women folk on account of the Native troubles, and **Bell** family (excepting deceased) came to Nelson, and settled at **Belle** Vue, Richmond, where Mr and Mrs **Bell** senior died and were interred.

Deceased having been engaged for a time in the South of this Island, and assisting to survey the land where the City of Dunedin now stands, before the formation of the Otago settlement, returned to the Nelson Province, and settled in the Motueka Vally District.

In January 1853, he was allured by the rich goldfields in Victoria, where he remained two years and four months, experiencing the varied fortunes of a gold miner. He was present at the memorable Stockade riot at Ballarat. After his return from Australia, he tried a turn at gold mining at Collingwood.

In 1865 deceased returned to **Belle** Vue, Richmond where he settled down until the end came on July 30th 1902 and he passed away in his 85th year. Of the party who left Scotland in 1839, one daughter of Mr William Gordon **Bell** only survives, Miss E. **Bell** of Overton, Hope. Deceased leaves a widow and three sons: Mr James **Bell** of Reefton; Mr Thomas **Bell** of Murchison; and Mr George **Bell** of Napier; and an only daughter, Mrs Louis Palmer of Waimea West.

Deceased had a capital memory to the last and a strong vein of humour, and it was a treat to hear him tell some of the amusing incidents of his long colonial career. He stated that the first time the late Queen Victoria's birthday was celebrated at Port Nicholson (Wellington) a small number of loyal Europeans dragged a gun up a hill, lashed it with flax, and then commenced to fire a salute.

At the first shot the gun broke its lashings and rolled down the hill. This programme was continued until the loyalists had dragged the gun seven times up the hill, which they considered ought to satisfy Her Majesty under the circumstances.

When the **Bell** family were undertaking the overland journey to Wanganui the Maoris at one of the native settlements were excited respecting a cow the **Bells** had with them. The Natives had never seen a cow before, so the animal was thoroughly examined by them.

The chief's wife essayed to examine the hoof of the cow's hind legs, when the creature, no doubt thinking inquisitiveness had gone far enough, let out a most vigorous kick and the Maori woman was sent sprawling, and was somewhat injured. The result was the party had to travel on quickly in order to get away from the incensed Maori chief.


The Maoris eventually came to admire the courage, resolution and knowledge of the Europeans. The experiences of the **Bell** family have been noted in 'Wakefield's Adventures in New Zealand', 'Chambers Journal' and other Scotch magazines and newspapers in years gone by.

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Posted 10th September 2014 by [Keith Shorrocks Johnson](#)

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