



THE BONE PEOPLE

It may look like just an old tree stump, but it's throwing the orthodox view of human settlement in New Zealand into disarray. IAN WISHART discovers people may have been living in Auckland 30,000 years ago

On a summer's day, somewhere around the year 28,000 BC, a man with a stone axe was hard at work at the base of Auckland's Albert Park, where the Auckland Art Gallery now stands. It was warm, rather than hot - the planet was still locked in an ice age and Auckland's Waitemata harbour did not yet exist, forming instead a vast plain down to the seashore miles away.

But the man with the axe didn't pay much attention to any of this. His task was to cut down the manuka tree before him for the tribe's firewood.

History doesn't tell us whether he got to enjoy the fire or not, but the tree stump he left behind is telling a very significant story, and so is the stone axe that was found

beside it. Or they would, if city officials working in Auckland in 1874 had bothered to keep the artifacts unearthed by workmen digging drains in the area.

Unfortunately, we're now restricted to newspaper and scientific reports from 1874 because both the stump and the axe have disappeared.

What they prove, however, is that humans were in Auckland some 29,000 years prior to the first known Maori settlement of the region.

How do we know? Because the stump and axe were found *underneath* a lava flow known to have formed between 20,000 and 60,000 years ago.

The case is one of many highlighted in Gary Cook and

Thomas Brown's new book, *The People Before*, which argues that Maori and European colonists in New Zealand are merely the latest in a long string of settlers to these islands.

The story of the stump's discovery is compiled from first-hand accounts originally published in Auckland's Southern Cross newspaper in 1874, and in the official reports of the New Zealand Institute.

Albert Park is believed to be one of Auckland's oldest volcanoes, and workers were having a tough time chopping through its lava flows.

"Heavy excavations have been carried on at and about the Albert Barracks by the Auckland Improvement Commissioners," reported archaeologist John Goodall at the time, for the purpose of making new streets for the benefit of the city.

"During last March, while works were being carried on in Coburg St [now Kitchener St], near the junction of Wellesley St East, the workmen came upon the tree stump now before you, lying in the centre of a narrow channel below the road level, this channel having been cut for the purpose of laying sewer pipes.

"Through the intelligence of Mr James Williamson, the contractors' overseer, who at once recognised its value, it was saved. Shortly after, I was on the spot and my attention was drawn to it.

"It being important that the discovery should be verified by undoubted authority, I immediately went for, and returned accompanied by, Theophilus Heale, Esq, Inspector of Surveys, who satisfied himself as to the genuineness of the discovery and the undisturbed stratification of the volcanic debris of about 25 feet lying above.

"It was in its natural position, upright, with its roots penetrating the clay, of which fact I satisfied myself by digging deeply below to a depth of over two feet, and found the traces of roots going down.

"The surface of the clay has loam in it. The top of the stump was embedded in volcanic mud, and above it there were 25 feet of debris in perfect stratification.

"These stratified beds of ooze and

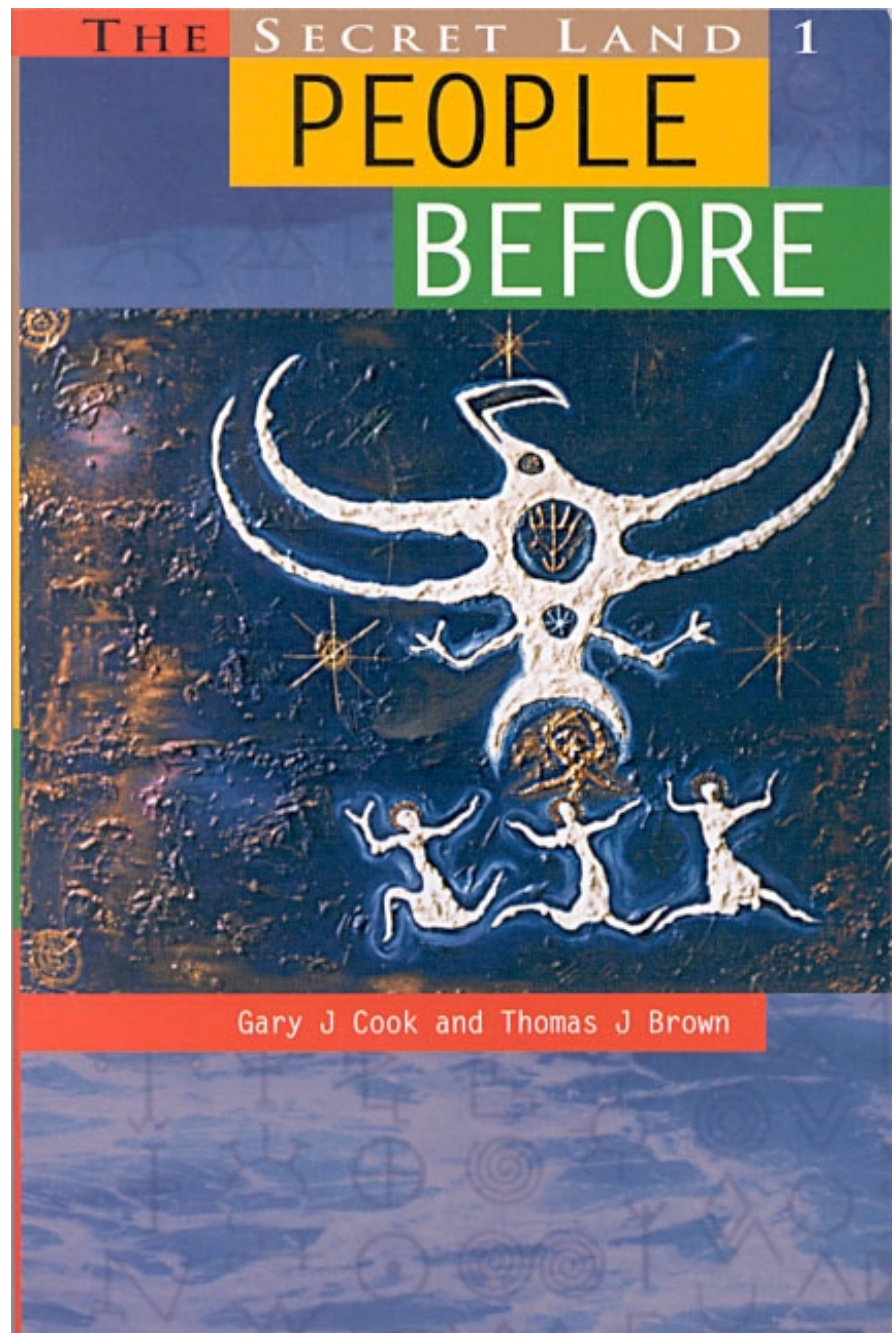
debris can be traced till they reach the beds of cinders, and thence to the conglomerated mass of scoria and basaltic lava, which occurs adjacent to the volcanic centre."

Another report, from a T. H. Cockburn-Hood in the Southern Cross, describes the stump as "an extremely interesting relic of the very remote past" before continuing:

"The root has evidently been chopped through by a stone adze which was found beside it. There

were also several small branches and roots of the same tree on which the edge of the stone adze had been tried, and the whole crown of the stump had the marks of having been laboriously and patiently cut through by the rude stone implement in the unknown past, and by one of an equally unknown race of human beings.

"The inference to be drawn is not only that the islands of New Zealand had been inhabited long anterior to



the migration of the Maoris to them, but that they had been people before the extinct volcano in the neighbourhood of the present Mechanics Institute [formerly AIT, now AUT] had begun to belch its mud torrents and streams of melted lava.

“The root must have been where it was found the other day, not only before the volcanic matter was deposited on the Barrack Hill, but for a sufficiently long period before that to permit a stratum of 8 to 10 feet in thickness to be deposited.”

The question in 2001 is: why isn't more effort being poured into pre-Maori archaeological digs in New Zealand?

Researcher Robin Collyns has done some digging of his own, and found more unexplained archaeological phenomena. His most unusual item is a rock found on a West Auckland beach back in the eighties, with a symmetrical metallic disc embedded into it.

When a TVNZ news crew had the rock analysed by experts at the Auckland Museum in 1994, the age of the rock was confirmed to be around 50,000 years, and no one could explain why it had a metallic disc inside it.

Authors Gary Cook and Thomas Brown may not have all the answers, but their book provides enough evidence to leave little doubt that New Zealand's human history goes back thousands, not hundreds, of years.

The theme they push is one of political and cultural antipathy - that news of New Zealand's ancient cultures is suppressed by peer pressure, that archaeologists fear a Maori backlash if they dare to suggest that Maori were not the original inhabitants of New Zealand.

But politically, the backlash may be more imagined than real. Even if it is officially accepted tomorrow that others were here before, it changes nothing in regard to the Waitangi Treaty issues. The previous races have long since died out or been assimilated into Maori and Pakeha bloodlines. There are no descendants left to claim land, and under the internationally accepted law of conquest they would not be successful in such a claim.

So who were the people before? According to Cook and Brown, there were several races, both Polynesian and Melanesian, and their artwork can still be seen in New Zealand's museums - wrongly labelled as “early Maori” - and in occasional rock drawings.

One of the most credible aspects of their book is the decision to let the 19th century's anthropologists and archaeologists tell their own first-hand stories of their discoveries, by reprinting their original reports or interviews with Maori kaumatua and tohunga.

As a matter of practice, when historic sites or artifacts were discovered during the 1800s, the researchers made a point of picking the brains of local tribes. Many of the sites were, of course, Maori. It is the ones that the local tribes, who could trace their genealogy back to the first canoes, could not explain or were unaware of that were then treated as worthy of further investigation.

Examples included the discovery of cooked Moa bones in long forgotten food pits unknown to the local tribe, and



whose own legends made no mention of any of their ancestors ever hunting and trapping a four metre tall giant bird. In some cases, Maori shell middens and kitchen pits were found on the coast two feet *above* the high water mark, but further excavation revealed Moa ovens *below* the high water mark.

“If we admit,” wrote researcher Julius Haast in 1874, “that the [Moa-hunters] would not have dug their ovens in wet ground, and thus would have kept the bottom of their ovens at least a foot or so above the high water mark, we cannot escape admitting the inference that the country between the occupations of both populations has been sinking about three feet.”

Haast found stone adzes buried with Moa skeletons, but when he “showed them to a number of Maoris, some of them aged men, they invariably answered that the use of this latter well-shaped implement was quite unknown to them.”

More of Haast's evidence included relatively recent Maori shellfish cooking sites, situated on top of what in fact turned out to be human burial grounds.

“Moreover, these successors of the Moa-hunters did not know that they were camping and feasting on a burial ground, which according to Maori usage is a most sacred spot and thus would not have been inhabited by the newcomers except from ignorance of its former use.”

THE PEOPLE BEFORE, Stoneprint Press