

# The Pouakani Report 1993

## 6 The North Island Main Trunk Line

### 6.1 Introduction

During the late 1860s there was talk in government and settler circles of the benefits of a railway line through the centre of the North Island to connect Auckland and Wellington. The capital had been moved south from Auckland in 1865. By 1870 the concept of a North Island main trunk line was incorporated in Julius Vogel's vision of public works. A railway from Auckland to Wanganui via Taupo was envisaged, connecting with lines to New Plymouth and Napier and Wellington. During the early 1870s several small branch lines were constructed, mainly by private companies. A line south of Auckland to Drury was begun in the 1860s but serious construction work was not underway until 1874. By 1877 a railway line was complete from Auckland to Ngaruawahia, and by May 1880 was open as far as Te Awamutu. During 1877 attempts were made to divert the line to Pirongia (Alexandra) on the grounds that King Country Maori did their trade there. {FNREF:0-86472-117-XA:6:1} Te Awamutu owed its growth in the 1880s to the location of the railway line, while Pirongia remained a small "frontier" settlement.

The main obstacles to further progress of the main trunk line were seen as lack of finance, inadequate knowledge of the country to the south to establish the best route, and government failure to come to satisfactory terms with the Maori occupants of the King Country. Financial considerations were taken care of in the policy of immigration and loans for public works which Vogel vigorously pursued through the 1870s. There were already proposals for various alternative routes. A *Waikato Times* editorial summed up the settler concept of progress and development:

The truth is, the prosperity of the colony will continue to advance *pari passu* with the opening up of the country lands to profitable settlement. Without railways and without roads we cannot have profitable settlement. The Public Works scheme, so far as it has gone, has worked wonders in this respect. Railways have rendered land available for settlement, which, till they were constructed, were hopelessly shut out from a market, and the expenditure incurred upon them has given a real value to the lands of the colony, not a merely nominal value for sale as matter for future speculation, but value for present use, far greater than the cost of the works, and already bearing fruit in the overflowing Treasury returns with which the Colonial Treasurer will shortly gladden the hearts of our legislators. {FNREF:0-86472-117-XA:6:2}

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### 6.2 Proposed Routes in the 1870s

A review of options for extending a railway south from Auckland was contained in a report by the resident engineer, James Stewart, to the engineer-in-chief, Public Works Department dated 4 June 1872. He confirmed that the route from Mercer to Ngaruawahia should follow the right bank of the Waikato river where it was subsequently built. From there several alternatives seemed possible:

From Ngaruawahia southwards, the route is necessarily determined in a great measure by the main question of the most suitable place at which to terminate. The frontier settlements are three in number, namely, Cambridge, Kihikihi, and Alexandra [Pirongia]. I understand by the term most suitable frontier, in the first place, the position most suitable for future extension into the interior, and in the second place, one that will serve well the wants of the present settlements by running the line to it.

I was very soon satisfied that if the line was taken to Alexandra, it could only be with the view of being hereafter extended over the frontier by way of Kihikihi and Orakau, as however inviting the valley of the Upper Waipa is for railway making - so far as excellence of soil, ease of construction, a certainty of carrying a great population in future, is concerned - the Rangitoto Ranges blending with those of the Upper Mokau, present a barrier against extension towards Taupo far too formidable to think of when easier routes are available. No doubt the immense district of good land lying between Alexandra and Kawhia will eventually want a railway, but it will be a branch and not the main trunk line of the Northern Island that will best serve it. If an available pass existed leading from the Upper Waipa Valley by the westward of the Rangitoto Range into the Taupo Plateau, it would be a question then between Alexandra and Kihikihi, requiring for its solution an examination of such pass, and in a general way the whole route lying through a country only recently allowed, in a passive sort of way, to be traversed by Europeans. But all whom I have consulted, and who have travelled the route, agree in declaring the country to be exceedingly mountainous and impracticable.

The route by Kihikihi means the old native track from Te Awamutu to Napier via Taupo, by which the overland mails were carried for many years, and it passes our frontier line at Orakau.

This track has not been lately used as a road to Taupo, but I am informed the country is good between the eastern side of Rangitoto and

the Waikato; that the range of the mountain blends gradually with the central plateau, and presents no special difficulties. That the valley by Orakau to this plateau of Upper Waikato is generally favourable, is evident from the fact that hills of very moderate elevation on the banks of the river far above Maungatautari are visible at Alexandra. I examined the Native track beyond Orakau for some miles, and the country looks very favourable for the purpose in view.

The route to Taupo by Cambridge runs through the Maungatautari Gorge, keeping the proper right of the river; southward of the above range, by crossing the Waikato, the line might take the same country as by Orakau. I do not think the Cambridge route is likely to prove so easy in point of construction as that by Orakau, - speaking of extension to the interior, - and I believe it only remains to consider if questions of locality are likely to prove more favourable, and influence decision in favour of the former. And towards this, I am inclined to think that had the question been between Cambridge and Alexandra alone, without reference to extension, the proximity of the latter to the large Native population, and its consequent strategical position, would, even if other things were not equal, point to it as the terminus of the railway. And it is clear that a line by Te Awamutu, Kihikihi, and Orakau, presents practically the same advantageous features, and on this head is preferable to a more easterly route.

The question of strictly local traffic is the only other point which presents itself in the comparison, and looking to the equally excellent quality of the land in all the frontier settlements, and the steady progress each is making in settled population, it is impossible to say that Cambridge in this respect possesses any advantages over a strictly central route. Considering, again, that Cambridge and Alexandra are each at the head of a navigable river, a central route between would afford more accommodation to the country than one alongside either river.

For the foregoing reasons, then, I believe some suitable position in the valley of the Mangahoi just below Kihikihi and about mid-way between Te Awamutu and Orakau, to be the most suitable place for a temporary terminus; the line to be hereafter extended across the frontier at Orakau. {FNREF:0-86472-117-XA:6:3}

In 1873 the Engineer-in-Chief of the Public Works Department, John Carruthers, was directed to provide a report on alternative routes. His report, submitted on 30 June 1874 set out several options (

[I had very little opportunity of forming an opinion as to the suitability of the country for making a railway through it; but I believe a shorter line \(as shown dotted on the map\) could be got by keeping to the west of Lake Taupo, which would have the advantage of easier gradients than the line we followed.](#) {FNREF:0-86472-117-XA:6:5}

All the alternatives to the Waikato route meant a line along the Waipa valley and into the King Country. Carruthers favoured the Mokau route to connect with an existing line to New Plymouth. He acknowledged some difficulties with the coastal route south of Mokau but:

if the country on the West Coast were open for survey, a much better line would in all probability be found either by the Mokau River or by the level country supposed to exist between the Wanganui River and the Taranaki coast. {FNREF:0-86472-117-XA:6:6}

No decision could be made on a route until more detailed surveys on the ground were made. It was rumoured that lands of better quality could be opened up in the King Country. {FNREF:0-86472-117-XA:6:7} An editorial in the *New Zealand Herald* 29 August 1879 expressed frustration:

Looking southward we are confronted by great difficulties. Beyond Te Awamutu lies a stretch of Maori territory reaching far into Wellington Province. Even if the Maoris were willing, Parliament would not consent to build a railway unless it was under some agreement by which the Crown was to acquire blocks of land. {FNREF:0-86472-117-XA:6:8}

Kerry-Nicholls described the Pakeha attitudes to the King Country in the 1870s:

The New Zealand war concluded, or rather died out, in 1865, when the confiscated line was drawn, the military settlements formed, and the King natives isolated themselves from the Europeans. For ten years it may be said that no attempt was made to negotiate with them. They were not in a humour to be dealt with. About 1874 and 1875, however, it became evident that something would have to be done. The colony had greatly advanced in population, and a system of public works had been incorporated, which made it intolerable that large centres of population should be cut off from each other by vast spaces of country which Europeans were not allowed even to traverse. From time to time during the whole period the awkward position of affairs had been forced on public attention by outrages and breaches of the law occurring on the border, the perpetrators of which took secure refuge by fleeing to the protection of Tawhiao, who then - as now - defied the queen's authority within his dominions. {FNREF:0-86472-117-XA:6:9}

Kerry-Nicholls went on to describe how Sir Donald McLean's "several important interviews with the Kingites ... had considerable effect in promoting more friendly intercourse". Sir George Grey also attended "two large native meetings in the King Country in 1878 and opened up communication with the chiefs of the Kingites". Grey's offer to return some confiscated land west of the Waipa river was rejected by Tawhiao in April 1879 as being insufficient to meet Waikato grievances over confiscated lands.

An editorial in the *Waikato Times* set out a local settler perspective of the desirable route for the proposed railway:

Speaking generally, the opinion of people in this part of the colony inclines to favour the Mokau route, the reason being that a line taken thence would bring us directly into communication with Taranaki and the West Coast country, the produce of which would find an outlet through the port of Auckland. There are not, however, wanting advocates (indeed we are not sure that they are in the minority) of a line via Rotorua to join either the Napier system or that of Wanganui. The opponents to the first named of these routes urge, as against any advantage that might be derived from securing the trade of the West Coast, that the cost would be enormous - far exceeding the amount proposed to be raised by loan - and the greater bulk of the country through which it would pass is utterly valueless for the purposes of settlement. The first of these objections will not apply to the line eastward of Taupo, but the second will, and in a much higher degree. There is not, however, much to choose between broken barren country on the one hand, and a wide area of pumice on the other... but looking at the matter from an Auckland stand-point, the traffic likely to be diverted hither is much greater via Mokau than by way of Taupo. Wanganui has set itself to untie the Gordian knot by proposing, by way of compromise ... this middle route. {FNREF:0-86472-117-XA:6:10}

Without detailed exploration and survey, settlers could only speculate on the quality of land to be "opened up" by the proposed railway. The *Waikato Times* editorial supported the route up the Waipa valley through the Taumarunui and Waimarino districts to Wanganui, quoting a report by a Captain Blake:

The proposed line ... would make the most direct and nearest way from Wellington to Auckland and the Thames, presenting no serious engineering difficulties, would be easy of construction, and open up thoroughly good country of large and extensive area, fit for holdings of moderate acreage. It would form a work of great political importance, dealing with the most powerful tribes of the inland and King country ... Respecting the quality of land through which the railway would pass Capt. Blake describes the Puniu and Waipa Valleys and Upper Mokau country as good land principally of limestone formation. Between the Tangarakau and Ongaruhe the country is rich in coal, valuable timber forests, and good agricultural lands .... The Tuhua country is as we all know, openly reported to be auriferous, though guarded as it is by the natives, it may be years before any reliable information concerning its wealth will be forthcoming. {FNREF:0-86472-117-XA:6:11}

When Lawrence Cussen surveyed the Rohe Potae in 1884 he was more realistic about the quality of the country. He classified the land according to its potential for development and settlement (map 6.2):

The first-class land lies within the open country through which the Waipa and Mokau rivers with their tributaries flow. The area is about 390,000 acres, more than one half of which is good agricultural and the remainder good pastoral land.

The second-class is chiefly in the limestone country to the west of the Mokau and Mangapu rivers, and on the plateau which lies between the valleys of the Mokau and Ongarue. Its area is about 724,000 acres; the greater part of this is capable of being made good pastoral land, and here and there are small patches suitable for agricultural purposes.

The area of the land which I have called third-class is about 986,000 acres. It includes the high wooded ranges of Hurakia. Hauhangaroa, and Rangitoto, the rugged mountainous country on the West Coast between Kawhia Harbour and the Mokau River, and the pumice-plains in the valley of the Ongarue and on the west side of the Waikato River. Here and there throughout this large area might be found arable patches, and a great deal of it is capable of being converted into pastoral land; but in the present state of the farming industry throughout the country, and while better land can be had cheap in more accessible places, this will be valued more for its timber or the minerals it may possibly contain. {FNREF:0-86472-117-XA:6:12}

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*Waitangi Tribunal, Department of Justice, Wellington.*

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### 6.3 Railway Surveys

It is important to note that the railway surveys were separate from later land surveys, the major and minor triangulation of the King Country, and the dividing up of the land into blocks for the purpose of investigation by the Native Land Court. B Pierre identified three stages in a survey for a railway line. {FNREF:0-86472-117-XA:6:13} The first is the "reconnaissance survey" for the best general route, which must be made over a considerable area. John Rochfort's survey, for example, extended 20 miles (32 km) either side of the line eventually adopted. The second stage is the "preliminary survey" which reduces the area surveyed to "a band of routes giving detail to advance planning where the actual line shall be built". The third stage is the "location survey" which uses data already gathered to determine on the ground the gradient and curvature of the rails:

Difficulties were encountered by the early railway surveyors because their reconnaissances were made before the areas to be penetrated by the railways were triangulated. Consequently prominent features of the terrain were not accurately mapped. It is to be kept in mind that there was no aerial survey possible at that time. Everything had to be done on the ground amid the forest trees. {FNREF:0-86472-117-XA:6:14}

The North Island Main Trunk Railway Loan Act 1882 had made provision for raising a loan of £1,000,000 to be spent on railway construction, including surveys and land acquisition. The preamble to the Act stated:

Whereas it is expedient that the construction of the Main Trunk Railway of the North Island should be proceeded with as soon as circumstances will permit: And whereas the obstacles in the way of carrying on the extension from Awamutu may be shortly removed, and it is expedient that money as required should be available for such construction ....

In 1883 reconnaissance surveys were commissioned for four possible routes ([map 6.3](#)):

1. [From Te Awamutu to Hastings via Taupo. \(map 6.3\)](#)
2. [Two lines between Te Awamutu and Taranaki. \(map 6.4\)](#)
3. [A central route from Te Awamutu to Marton or Fielding. \(map 6.5\)](#)

The survey parties carried a letter written in Maori on behalf of John Bryce, Native Minister, dated 15 September 1883, of which the following is the English version:

To the Chiefs of the Maori people  
Friends, greeting to you where you are living on your lands. This is my word to you. Parliament and Government have agreed to make a railway through the country so that the fruits of the earth may pass to and fro. This will be of great advantage to both races, but especially to you whose lands will be particularly benefitted. Therefore my earnest advice to you is to assist me in this great work. Men of knowledge are now searching out the country to find the most suitable line for a railway. The bearer of this letter Mr Williams is one of them. Let the chiefs of the people make his path smooth for him. If obstacles appear let them be quickly removed. {FNREF:0-86472-117-XA:6:15}

The survey parties encountered some opposition but by November 1883 the upper Whanganui tribes had all agreed to allow the survey to proceed. Ngati Maniapoto had turned Rochfort's party back at Waimiha, early in December. Negotiations to allow the railway surveys to continue were included in discussions of land survey and investigation of title by the Native Land Court, as outlined in the next chapter. By 19 December 1883, agreement was reached with Ngati Maniapoto and the railway reconnaissance surveys were completed within the next few months.

The reports of all these reconnaissance surveys were placed before a parliamentary select committee of South Island members who reported in October 1884. The eastern route via Taupo was discarded as being too difficult ([map 6.4](#)). The central route ([map 6.5](#)) was chosen and parliament passed a Railways Authorization Act the same year which appropriated government funds for construction. On 15 April 1885 the first sod was ceremonially turned at the Te Awamutu railhead. At that time contracts were let for 15 miles (24 km) of construction south from Te Awamutu and 12 miles (19 km) north from Marton. The exact location of this central route was not yet finalised and representations were made from Taranaki interests to divert the line their way. Two further select committees considered these issues. One of these, the North Island Main Trunk Line Railway Committee reported to parliament in 1892:

Your Committee find that since 1884 the railway works have been extended from Te Awamutu southwards for a distance of about forty-eight miles, at a cost of £266,398, through land of inferior quality, which is still in the possession of the Natives, and upon which little or no settlement has taken place; and they desire to express their strong disapproval of any line or lines of railway being pushed forward through Native lands whilst the negotiations for purchase thereof are still pending ....

No consideration has been given to the route by way of Waitara to the Upper Mokau, or to that from Hastings by way of Taupo on the ground that both these routes have been previously condemned, either on the score of excessive cost, or of the poverty of the country to be traversed. {FNREF:0-86472-117-XA:6:16}

The railway committee also noted "an easy route said to exist between Urenui and Taumarunui, which, if correct, would have much to commend it" as a link between

Taranaki and the main trunk line. Among the recommendations of the committee were:

That further exploration and survey are necessary before the location of the North Island Trunk Railway can be determined.

That in the meantime no railway extension ... should be undertaken either at the northern or southern extremities of the two suggested routes until the land is first of all acquired from the Natives, and so far opened up by exploration and roads that judgement upon this question may be given with such a degree of certainty and force that it will be accepted as final. {FNREF:0-86472-117-XA:6:17}

The final route of the North Island main trunk line was not resolved until 16 years later. By December 1903 the line reached south to Taumaranui and in 1908 the North Island main trunk line was officially opened.

The Taupo route had been rejected in 1884 on the grounds of the difficulty of making the connection over the eastern ranges from Hawkes Bay via the Mohaka valley to Taupo. Although the central route was chosen for the main trunk line, various alternative routes for branch lines were occasionally canvassed. During the 1880s an East Coast main trunk line was proposed to link Gisborne with Opotiki and the Bay of Plenty. Various options to connect this with the main trunk line included Rotorua, Tauranga and Taupo. In 1881 parliament passed the Thermal-Springs Districts Act 1881 which was intended to promote development of Rotorua as a tourist centre. A private company, the Thames Valley and Rotorua Railway Company, began construction of a line from Morrinsville to Lichfield, near Putaruru. In 1884, the government decided to buy the line and complete it to Rotorua, and after protracted negotiation a deed of purchase was signed on 15 May 1885. Because of the difficult terrain over the Mamaku plateau east of Putaruru, construction was not completed until 1894.

Whether it was still intended to construct a branch line to Taupo is not certain, but this may be the explanation of the Crown purchases of several Pouakani lands in 1892-93 under the North Island Main Trunk Railway Loan Application Act Amendment Act 1889. These blocks were Pouakani B7, B8, B10, B11, C3, D3 and D4 (deed nos 1809 and 1810) which were listed with a number of other blocks as coming under s5 of the 1889 Act. {FNREF:0-86472-117-XA:6:18} The purchase money was appropriated from the funds set aside under the North Island Main Trunk Railway Loan Act of 1886, which, in s4(4), allowed the funds to be raised by way of a loan for both construction costs and "the cost of acquiring Native or other Land". The Amendment Act of 1889 in s3(2) set aside the sum of £100,000 to "be applied in completing land purchases at present incomplete, and making further land purchases". This Amendment Act also retained the power of the governor to set aside at least five percent of such lands as educational endowments: "The remainder of such land so acquired or that may be acquired as aforesaid shall constitute an endowment for the purposes of the North Island Main Trunk Railway, and may from time to time be sold, leased, or otherwise alienated or disposed of" (s4(2)). The Crown had already re-established a right of pre-emption in west Taupo and the King Country in the Native Land Alienation Restriction Act 1884. The long title of this Act reads: "An Act

temporarily to prevent Dealings in Native Land by Private Persons within a defined District of the North Island". The definition included both the Aotea and Taupouiatia sections of the Rohe Potae.

There were later attempts to revive a Taupo rail connection in the early twentieth century, but no connection with the North Island main trunk line was constructed. The Taupo Totara Timber Company did construct a logging railway from Putaruru to its mill established in 1900 at Mokai on the eastern part of the Pouakani block. The company negotiated separate arrangements with Maori owners of land involved in its operations. The Crown was not directly involved. However in the 1880s, a potential rail route to Taupo lay across the Pouakani block and was an important factor in Crown transactions on this block through the 1890s.

## References

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2. *Waikato Times* 6 June 1878
3. AJHR 1872 D-5 pp 5-6
4. AJHR 1874 E-3 pp 58-60
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6. *ibid*
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9. J H Kerry-Nicholls *The King Country* (London 1884, reprint Christchurch 1974) pp 8-9
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11. *ibid*
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14. *ibid*
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16. AJHR 1892 I-9 p 2
17. *ibid*
18. *New Zealand Gazette* 1894 pp 170-171

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*Waitangi Tribunal, Department of Justice, Wellington.*