

The story of Central Otago is a story of three eras of exploitation — that of the early moa hunters, that of the gold miners, and that of the dam builders.

THE MAORI HUNTERS AND TRADERS

The first people to exploit the region were the Maori moa hunters. Sites of their “butchery camps” have been discovered in the region, the most important on Hawksburn Station, in the hills west of Clyde. The forests which once covered this region were probably destroyed by the fires of these hunters. To transport both the moa and the greenstone from the West Coast, Maori hunters and traders used the great Clutha River, carrying their cargo on reed and flax rafts called mokihi.

THE COMING OF THE EUROPEANS

Early European travellers came on foot or on horseback, and by wagon, drawn first by bullocks and later by teams of horses.

First came the explorers, then the run-holders, but it was the discovery of gold which was to effect the second great transformation of the region. It was the miners who brought the water, established the settlements, cut the manuka and matagouri, and were probably responsible for burning most of the rest of the native vegetation, either by accident or design. And it was mining which quarried great hunks out of the landscape and left great mounds of rock and gravel in its wake.

THE SHEEP-MEN

Following the Dunedin settlement in 1848 came the squatters, those hungry for grazing rights to large tracts of land. These early sheep-men had horses to ride and pack horses, and simply pressed on until they found their promised land. For the Shennan brothers in 1857, this was “**a long valley for as far as they could see, it was well grassed and had two rivers running through it**”. But bringing horses, drays and sheep to Moutere was more difficult. “**The horses got bogged and the drays stuck in the swamps. So they got rid of them and got sledges and bullocks. It took them four weeks to get through. There were no tracks or roads. They then had to set to work and build sod huts, using their tents for a roof. They had to take their wool out in sledges, four bales to a sledge.**”

It was a life of isolation and enormous hardship, which must have been particularly hard on the women who accompanied their husbands. So arid was the Central Otago region that by 1861 there were still only four runs in the area: Moutere, Morven Hills, Earnsclough, and Kawarau.

It was the runholders who opened much of the country and proved its viability for such land use. But their contribution to exploration was unscientific and haphazard. It was to be the job of John Turnbull Thomson and his staff to survey the province systematically.



Contemporary drawings of (left) prospectors in Central Otago and (right) a digger on the tramp.