

The Cook Island's lost century of independent sail

Rod Dixon, US Cook Islands



The trading schooner "Takitumu" under construction at Ngatangia in the early 1890s.

In the Cook Islands there was a period of active indigenous entrepreneurship, centred on sailing ships and financed by community shareholding, which reached a high point during the British Protectorate, commencing 1888.

During this period, "more heads of their respective lineages, took it upon themselves to organize production, control marketing, and operate schooners that traded throughout the [Cook] group, as well as with Tahiti and even New Zealand" (Crocombe 1962:20).

Most districts of Rarotonga, and many of the outer islands built or bought and collectively owned their own trading schooners, and "It became fashionable to undertake extensive voyages to Tahiti and other islands" (Gilson, 1980; 51). In June 1892, the New Zealand Herald reported "The people of Aitutaki have purchased the schooner Papeete, from Tahiti. A consuming desire has apparently taken hold of the natives for purchasing vessels just now. I have known several of late years so purchased ... Their career generally is at first a prolonged succession of visiting from island to island, which however pleasant is hardly payable." An immediate pay-off was increased communication and exchange among neighbouring island communities. Almost a decade later, in September 1889, the Herald correspondent was still reporting "a furore for excursion trips" from Rarotonga, "and this happy desire on the part of the natives to get away on short voyages to drop in and take a cup of tea with their friends just across the way." One such excursion was to Rurutu and Rimatara, with a party of Arorangi people, including Tinomana ariki. In turn, the islanders of Rimatara and Rurutu had their own fleet of schooners, including the "Ronui" built of tamanu, the "Manureva" and the "Toerau" which make frequent calls at all of the Cook Islands.



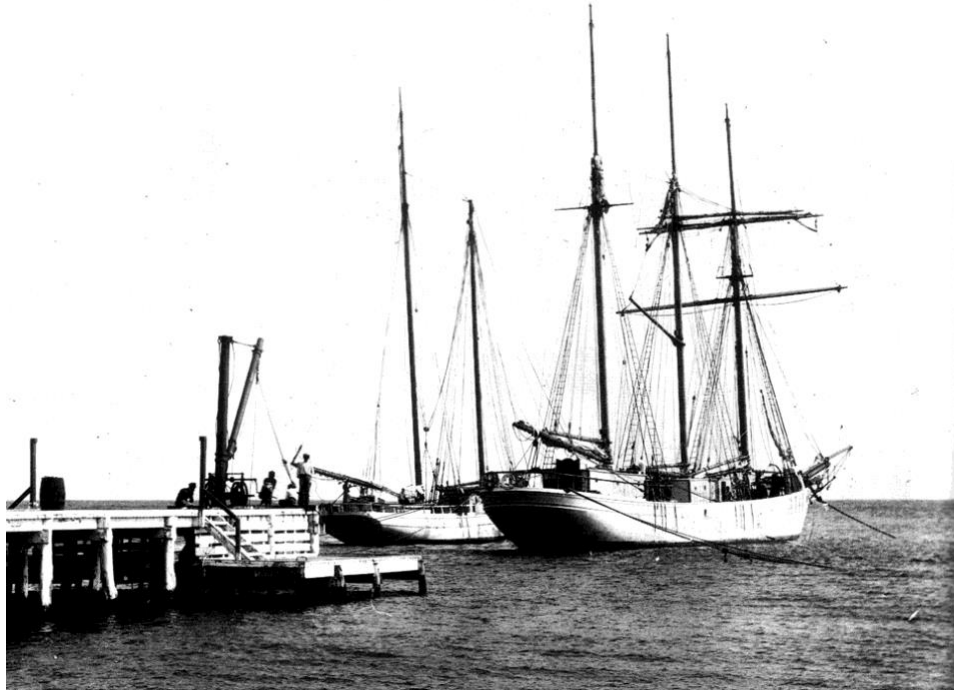
Paora Tuhaere, of Orakei, who with Kainuku Tamako, is credited with reorienting Rarotongan trade from Tahiti to Auckland.

New Zealand was another popular destination. In 1863, Paora Tuhaere, of Orakei, in the Waitemata and the Ngati-Whatua purchased a schooner, the Wikitoria in order to trade with the Cook Islands. The vessel, one of over 45 Maori owner schooners with tonnages from 10 – 25 tons, trading along the Auckland coast at that time, visited Rarotonga, bringing visiting New Zealand Maoris. Some married locally, others took marriage partners back to Orakei. In 1863, a group of Rarotongans led by the ariki Kainuku Tamako, returned with the schooner to Orakei. The subsequent alliance between Kainuke and Tuhaere is credited with turning the focus of Rarotongan trade from Tahiti to New Zealand.

Orakei became a popular destination for Rarotongans visiting New Zealand, and in the 1930s a small community of Rarotongans were still living there, centred around the marae Apihai Te Kawau. Similarly some of the Maori remained in Rarotonga, notably Henry Nicholas of Hikutaia and Auckland who arrived in 1863 with Tuhaere on the Wikitoria. Nicholas married into the Ngati Manavaraoa, setting up a trading company with Captain J.B. Young. Young and Nicholas (later Henry Nicholas and Co) owned and sailed the trading schooners “Prince Alfred”, “Neva”, “Bianche”, “Petrel” and “Pearl” as well as chartering the “Coronet”, “Mazeppa” and others.

The Cook Islands rush to build or purchase trading schooners was, in part, a response to the introduction of larger steam and motor driven ships on the Pacific run. These vessels, for reasons of economy, took the most direct route to a limited number of main ports. The islands bypassed by commercial shipping had to find new ways to get trade goods direct to market or to the steamer’s main ports of call.

- Tongareva had its own schooner “The Dolly” built in 1879, purchased by the hau of Omoka in 1892 and renamed “Te Uira” and subsequently “Omoka.” This schooner traded between Tongareva, Papeete and beyond. A second schooner attributed to Penrhyn was the “Norval” seized by the hau from Captain Harries in 1893 in settlement of a debt, and later released following intervention by the British warship HMS “Hyacinth”.



The Atiuan owned schooner “Ngamaru Ariki” and the Government owned “Countess of Ranfurly” at Avarua wharf, around 1902.

- In 1896 the people of Atiu purchased a schooner in Tahiti. Originally named “Atiu” and later “Ngamaru Ariki”, it was captained in 1901 by the Swedish Captain Johansen and, in 1903, by the German Captain Engelke. The ship was driven onto the reef and set alight following the death of Ngamaru Ariki in 1903.
- The people of Aitutaki owned at least four schooners – the “Papeete”, 15 tons, purchased in Tahiti in early 1892; the “Te upoko enua”, built in San Francisco and lost on the reef at Arutanga in February 1900; the “Araura”, a topsail schooner of 42 tons, built in Auckland and known formerly as the “Julia Pryce”, it ran on the reef at Aitutaki in 1888, was rebuilt by Aitutaki boatbuilders (“Every man in the island had a finger in the ship, and so she was run on the co-operative principle, with all hands owners.”) The Araura traded fruit to New Zealand before capsizing in a hurricane off Aitutaki in October 1890; and the “Titia-i-Tonga” purchased in 1898 and wrecked on the reef at Aitutaki June 1899. In 1896 the Atituakians were also reported to be negotiating to purchase the “Tahitienne”.



Launching the “Takitumu” in 1894.

Other trading schooners at that time included the “Goldfinch” , 60 tons, “a fine little vessel” according to the Auckland Star, (August 1891) and captained by Captain George Short, it was lost off Mangaia in April 1893 - and the “Takitumu” reputedly 97 tons and launched in 1894. Both the “Goldfinch” and the “Takitumu” were built at Rarotonga. The “Takitumu” belonged to the people of Ngatangia on the co-operative principle. Described as “a capially-built craft ... and by Rarotongan natives entirely” she was coppered in Auckland and was in the charge of Captain James Rennie. The Hobart Mercury (24 May, 1894) described her as “constructed on an Amercian model, with plenty of beam and a wide square stern, she is rigged as a fore and aft schooner with lofty spars and carries a leg of mutton mainsail.” She was built of local timbers with kauri spars, and equalled in speed the best known clipper schooners on the run to Auckland.

- The “Poe”, later called “City of Arorangi”, then “Arorangi” was owned by the people of Arorangi, built in San Francisco, purchased at Tahiti around 1891 and “refitted and rebuilt [over a period of 3 years] by natives at Rarotonga—new timbers throughout of tamanu, and planked with kauri from New Zealand, 50 tons register, and a 3 real smart looking schooner “ (NZ Herald, 9 February, 1899). Renamed “The Maungaroa” after a refit in 1899, she was captained by Captain Theodore B. Nagle, son of Captain W. J. Nagle, the first wharfinger for the Union Steamship Company at Rarotonga, and lost with all hands in 1901 on a return journey from New Zealand.
- In 1893 Karika ariki was reported to be negotiating purchase of the “Torea” from Donald and Edenborough but the purchase was never completed. The Torea was lost on the reef at Mauke, 19 May 1899.

By 1899, Cook Islands owned and operated sailing ships were responsible for carrying 10% of all imports and exports to and from the Cook Islands and 66% of all trade carried by sail.

According to Te’o Fairbairn and Janice Pearson, all “these entrepreneurial endeavours came to an abrupt end soon after [New Zealand] annexation and the imposition of colonial rule. The New Zealand administration very quickly introduced a highly centralized system of local rule that eroded the powers of the traditional chiefs (the ariki and lesser chiefs). Among other things, the chiefs were stripped of their powers to organize production, and their marketing functions were annulled or subjected to the control of local New Zealand administrators. As a consequence, production along family lines ceased, as did the operation of indigenously owned trading schooners.” (1987; 7)

Polynesian collectivism was to be replaced by private enterprise. In the first decade of colonial administration, a number of foreign-owned enterprises set up their operations in Rarotonga. These included the Union Steamship Company (USSC), already on its way to becoming one of the world’s largest steamship companies.

Prior to the arrival of the USSC, local boatmen had provided lighterage services for steamers calling at Avarua. The introduction of the larger USSC owned and operated ‘whale boat’ lighters resulted in the decline of independent lighterage, with Cook Islanders now employed as casual USSC wharf labourers. As the USSC began to dominate and monopolise trade on long voyages, local schooners stayed on mainly for inter island shipping.



In the late 19th century, local boatmen in canoes and clinker boats provided lighterage for ships calling at Avarua.



Under the USSC monopoly, Cook Islanders became casual wharf labourers. This photo shows the large black USSC lighters that replaced local canoes on the waterfront.

On these inter island service runs, Cook Islands owned schooners competed with the New Zealand government vessel, ‘Countess of Ranfurly’, a three masted schooner, sold in 1907 following financial losses, and with the schooners of the New Zealand trading companies – C.I.T.C. (‘Tagua’), A.B.Donald (‘Tiare Taporo’, ‘Vaite’), etc. No indigenous schooners appear to have survived the first decade of New Zealand’s colonial administration.

In a few short years, islander owned and operated trading schooners disappeared into history; local boat-building skills put to use in constructing the “Goldfinch”, the “Takitumu” on Rarotonga and in rebuilding wrecked schooners such as the “Julia Pryce” on Aitutaki, became redundant. Independent boatmen who had provided lighterage for steamers became casual labourers for the Union Steamship shipping monopoly. Casual excursions to nearby Rurutu and Rimatara became a thing of the past and remain so to this day.

A brief renaissance of indigenous owned sailing vessels occurred in the mid 20th century under the Manganian businessman Dick Brown's whose vessels included the Tahitiienne, (pictured below, bought 1946 and lost November, 1949).



The Tahitiienne, bought by Dick Browne in 1946.



A monopoly in place – the independent boatmen's canoe and canoe sheds have disappeared – the USSC dominates the waterfront. The black 'whale boat' lighters are pictured in the left middleground. Independent boatmen have become casual wharf labour. (Image courtesy CILMS)

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