

Where No Boat Could Live

by Roger Fyfe



<<<<<< Roaring forties >>>>>>

It's easy to miss the Chatham Islands on a map – tiny specks of land, lost in the vast Pacific Ocean. It's an unpredictable corner of the world, known for its strong winds and frequent storms. In fact, the weather can be so wild, sailors call this part of the Pacific the “roaring forties”.

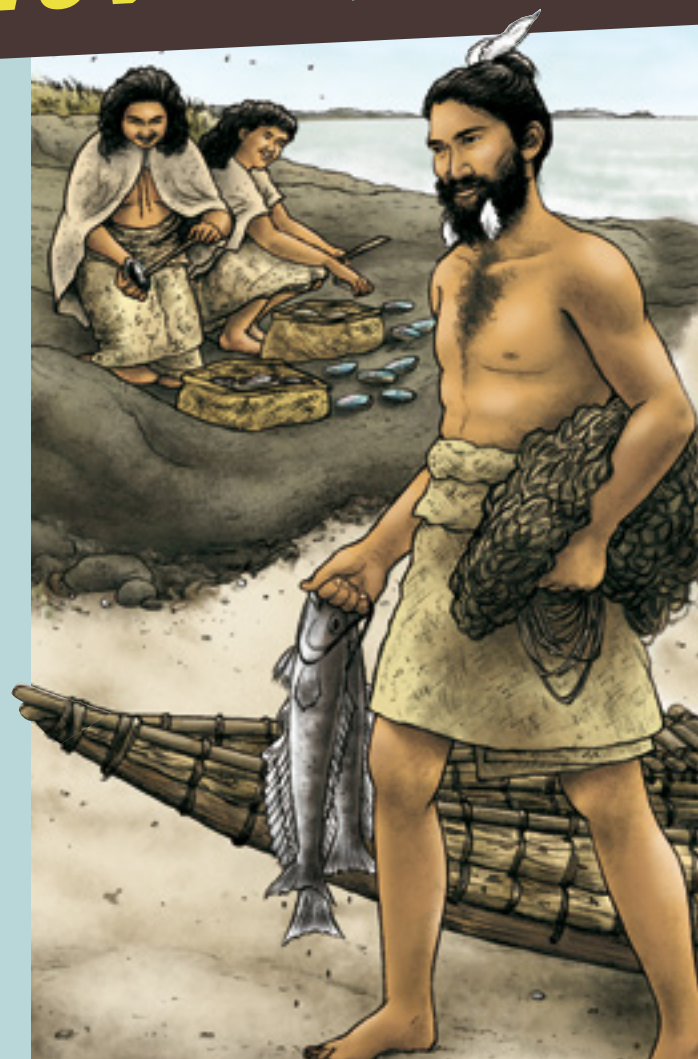


Chatham Islands

This climate didn't scare off the island's first visitors, who most archaeologists believe came from New Zealand around a thousand years ago. The visitors arrived in huge double-hulled canoes after what must have been a long and difficult voyage. No one knows for sure why these people came – or whether they even meant to come at all. And even though this new place was vastly different from their homeland, they decided to stay.

Because the cooler climate prevented the Moriori from growing their traditional Polynesian vegetables of kūmara, taro, and yams, they had to find new foods to eat. Luckily, the land – and especially the sea – provided many different options. There were berries, fern roots, and kopi (karaka) kernels. There were eels, pāua, seaweed, kōura, and crabs. The Moriori also learnt to hunt birds and seals, and they became expert fishermen.

This new hunting and gathering lifestyle involved a lot of travelling around – some of the seal and albatross colonies were on offshore islands up to 40 kilometres away. The men, who did almost all of the hunting and fishing, soon discovered that their dugout canoes capsized in the big seas around Rēkohu. What they needed was a new type of boat that could safely carry people, and their hard-won cargo of food, without the fear of sinking. The answer was wash-through waka.



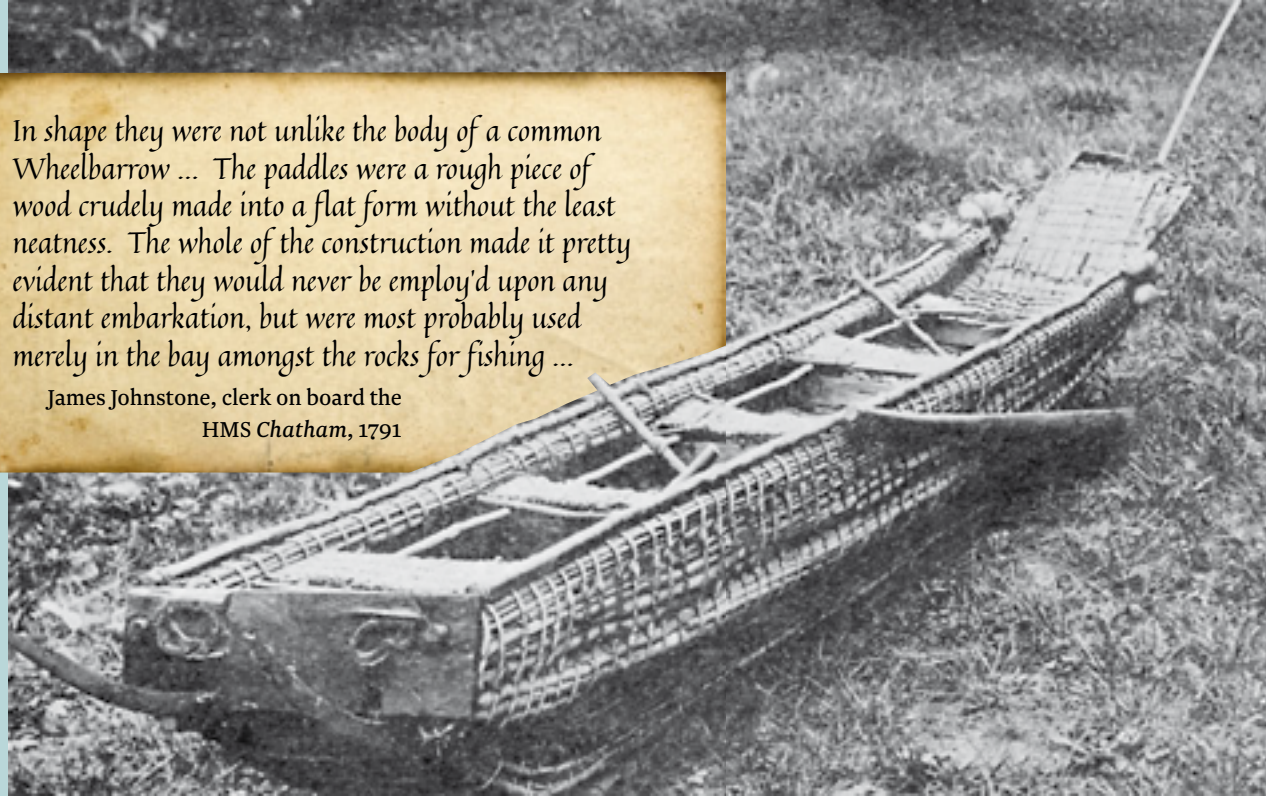
The Chathams contain many small rocky islands – and most of them provided some kind of food for the Moriori. Tarakoekoa (the Pyramid) was visited for the chicks of hopo (albatross).



Buoyant and seaworthy, the Moriori wash-through waka could carry heavy loads and a large number of people. They varied in size from the small waka kōrari (one- or two-person canoes about 3 metres long) to the waka pahī. These larger sea-going craft were up to 15 metres long and could hold a crew of twelve or more. Both the waka kōrari and the waka pahī were perfectly suited to the local conditions, even though visiting European sailors thought the smaller waka looked like wheelbarrows!

In shape they were not unlike the body of a common Wheelbarrow ... The paddles were a rough piece of wood crudely made into a flat form without the least neatness. The whole of the construction made it pretty evident that they would never be employ'd upon any distant embarkation, but were most probably used merely in the bay amongst the rocks for fishing ...

James Johnstone, clerk on board the HMS Chatham, 1791

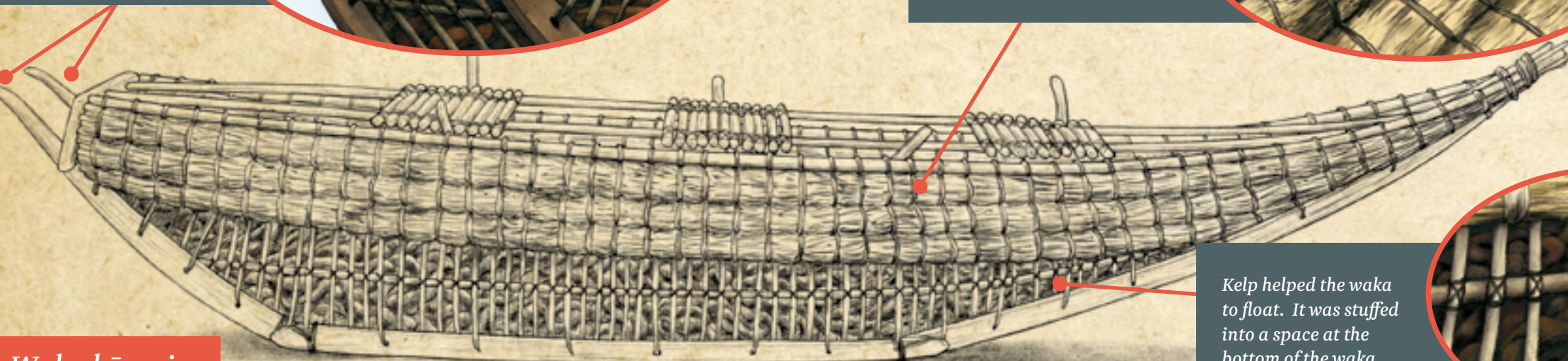


What made the waka kōrari and the waka pahī so special was their simple yet clever design. Each waka had a rectangular shape and a steeply rising **bow** (similar to modern military landing craft). Two parallel runners on the bottom of the **hull** formed the backbone of the waka and helped to support the framework. The floor and sides were made of reeds. Some waka had a base of inflated kelp, while others contained bundles of dried flower stems from the flax plant (known as kōrari). Both kelp and kōrari helped the waka to float, no matter how choppy the sea.

The two runners were made from wood. They were held in place at the stern by a wooden plank.



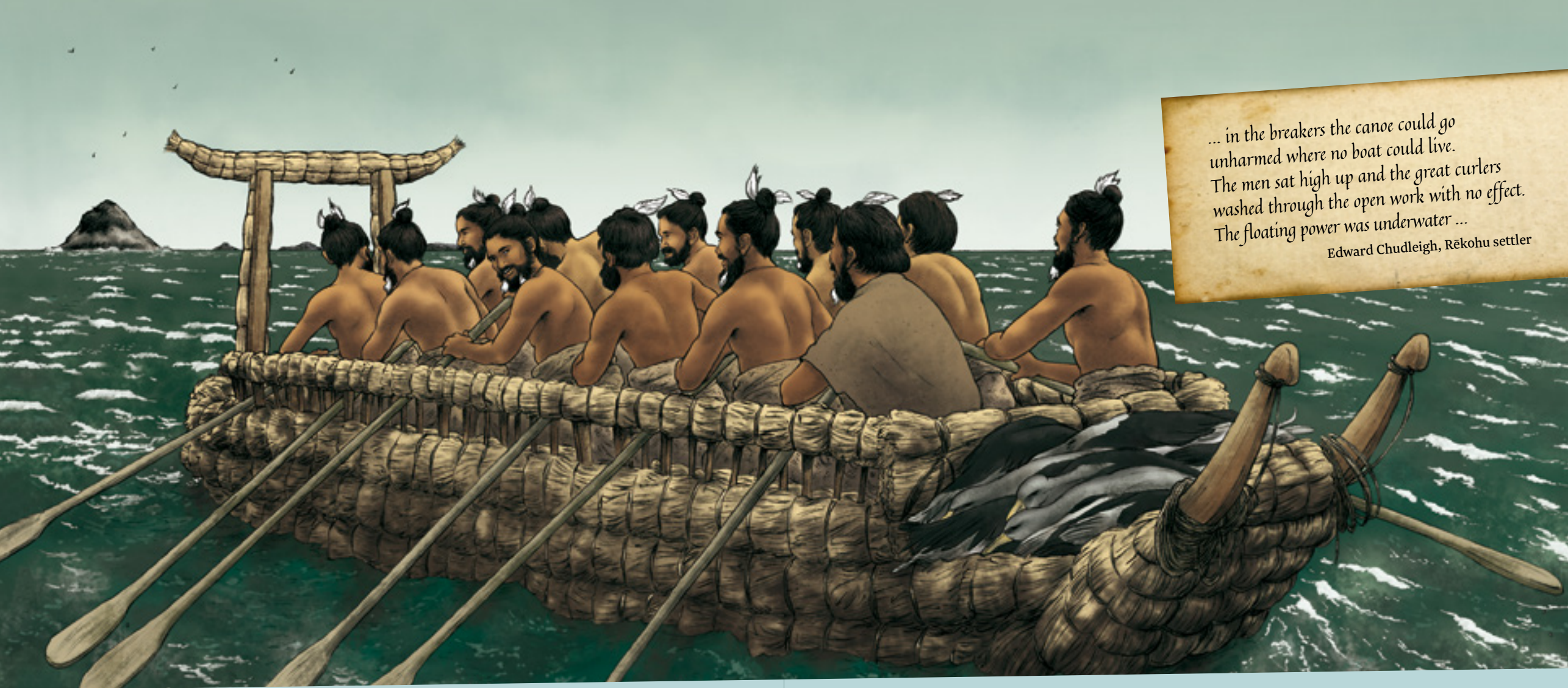
Bundles of reeds, which made the floor and sides of the waka, were tied to a framework made from young matipou trees.



Kelp helped the waka to float. It was stuffed into a space at the bottom of the waka.



Waka kōrari



... in the breakers the canoe could go unharmed where no boat could live. The men sat high up and the great curlers washed through the open work with no effect. The floating power was underwater ...
Edward Chudleigh, Rēkohu settler

It is thought that a large waka pahī could carry a load of 1000 kilograms before it became unstable. However, because of the way they were built, the waka were never in any real danger of sinking. Unlike most boats, the hull of a waka pahī or a waka kōrari was not designed to be waterproof. One of the tricks of their design was allowing waves to simply wash straight through (“the water going through the canoe as much as the canoe through the water,” wrote Edward Chudleigh, a Pākehā settler on Rēkohu). Used in this way, the sea water became a natural **ballast** and actually helped the waka to remain stable. This made them almost impossible to **capsize**. For the crew, getting their legs wet was a small price to pay for a safe journey.

Most European visitors to Rēkohu were unable to appreciate the skills of the Moriori. They considered their waka to be clumsy and primitive and thought that their simple design meant that the people were simple, too. But time after time, these canoes brought men safely back from dangerous journeys – a fact the Europeans somehow forgot.

Today, of course, we know the Moriori weren’t “backward”. In fact, they were the opposite: skilled innovators who quickly learnt to adapt to life in a new environment.

GLOSSARY

ballast: something heavy that makes a boat stable

bow: the front of a boat

buoyant: able to float

capsize: to overturn in the water

hull: the bottom of a boat

stern: the back of a boat

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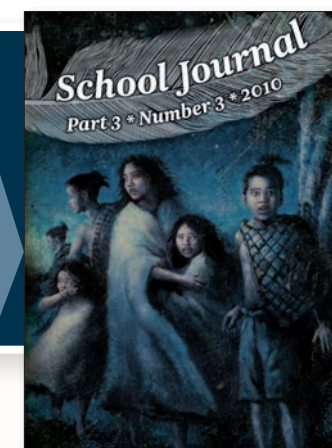
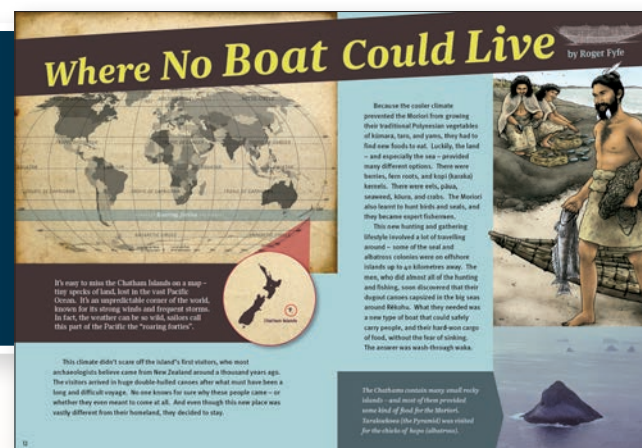
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