
The old Biblical tale has it that in seven days God created the Earth. After you had worked at Mangatu Forest for a period you came to the conclusion that He had not made much of a job of it and in fact probably put Mangatu together as He was about to knock off.

For any of us with experience of Mangatu Forest establishment and the associated struggles with roads, rivers and massive slips, the fact that the first twelve years or so would be recorded in an official book of fine photographs would be accepted as evidence that somebody in authority had got their priorities right. The job demanded initiative, hard work, imagination and perseverance. This latter quality was particularly called for when stabilizing engineering works, such as debris dams, were overcome time and again by a frustratingly difficult mess of sliding mud often several hundred feet in depth. This, in my view, constituted the major achievement of the N.Z. Forest Service at Mangatu. A hopeless task, which had defeated many attempts over the years, was made to yield to the tremendous efforts of staff who, unskilled in many of the aspects of erosion control, took on this job and by their energy, faith and stubbornness caused visitors to remark on the changes they had wrought in such a short time.

It was my recollection of this admiration of the men who had the capacity and vision to achieve this result, expressed by visitors to the forest, which led to my disappointment with The Story of Mangatu. It is a shame that such a tale, supported by John Johns' usual high-quality pictures, should be told in the dullest of Public Service prose. It is a technically accurate account which gives little life to a project successfully prosecuted by dedicated staff of high morale. Archie Moore's postscript in Appendix I makes welcome mention of some of the early men on the job. I would have liked to see more mention particularly of these workmen who had the thankless continuing task of struggling in the clinging mud erecting and patching debris control structures, and exercising their ingenuity and flair for improvising where it counted -- in the eroded grass roots.

The book will be popular owing to the presentation and impact of the photographs, from the dramatic front cover -- mute testimony to past destruction of forest -- to the even more dramatic, back cover showing the devastating effects of this mistaken policy. The publishers have made a good choice of format, and the presentation is worthy of any coffee-table-type publication. It is well worth buying, particularly if you have this sort of technical interest. For the lay person, for whom it is apparently intended, it would probably be worth while just for the pictures.

P.F.O.