

# A journey into the past

**T**HERE is an air of the mad Yorkshireman about Peter Nicholls: unruly grey hair, eyes with a far-away glint.

His features look chiselled out of the Australian hardwood he used for the sculpture which stands outside the entrance to the Auckland City Art Gallery.

There is an elemental solidity to both the man and his works. His sculp-

— like a meteor come to rest.

"Working on the edge," he described it at the time, "a 'one action gesture.'" *Full Stop* is the sculpture's title.

No such grandeur characterises his work at the Fisher Gallery, Pakuranga, which is on display until May 24. It is the result of a quieter search into his origins, Yorkshire and colonial.

Nicholls was born in Wanganui, the great-great-

London; and Atene Athens. Only Jerusalem is known by its English form rather than the Maori Hiruarama.

The willows and poplars which today line stretches of the river between Wanganui and Pipiriki were introduced by Taylor who carried bundles of twigs to plant while on his journeys. As well, he carried pocketfuls of seeds such as stocks, turnips, cranberry, bilberry and gorse.

His experiences were well documented, if not in his own writings then in the lore of those who knew him.

One such tale was recounted to Nicholls by a jetboat driver on the river who had the story from her grandfather.

**O**N one of his first missions north of Pipiriki he was not given a friendly reception. His predecessor, the Rev Mason, who had drowned, had been there before him and the Maoris decided they didn't want another god on the river.

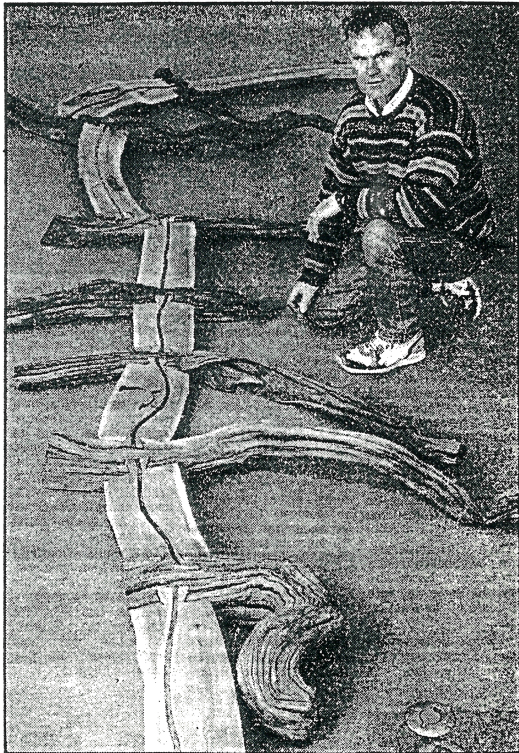
Taylor turned back and hid in the Putaroto caves which he knew his pursuers wouldn't enter since they were a burial site and therefore tapu.

In the three days the Maoris waited outside the cave for him, Taylor found an exit in the roof at the back of the caves and fled through the forest.

Because of his seemingly magical escape he was later escorted by the same tribe from Taurarunui to Wanganui by canoe and given the freedom of the river.

Taylor himself can be seen in a blown-up photo taken in 1855 with his son Basil. Nicholls' great-grandfather, and a Maori missionary, Hoani Himpango, whom Taylor took with him on one of his visits back to England.

The photo sits on the wall in the gallery's small



● Sculptor Peter Nicholls with his symbolic interpretation of the journey his forebear the Rev Richard Taylor made up the Taranaki coast to New Plymouth.

room, along with a map of the river and photos of land which Nicholls and his wife, photographer Di French, own north of Dunedin.

The photographs make explicit the theme of deforestation and reforestation which also runs through the Wanganui-based works.

The wood used in the exhibition's central work, *Whanganui*, was found on the river. It consists of pieces of totara, rimu, poplar and willow formed, with wedge-shaped joints, into a 9m length symbolising the 90km stretch of river between Wanganui and Pipiriki on which Taylor journeyed.

Nicholls has inscribed Taylor's coastal route in a ribbon of bronze embedded in narrow snake of pieces of totara, rimu, poplar and willow formed, with wedge-shaped joints. These represent the journey's resting places and contrast with the smooth surface of the elm which Nicholls has polished with beeswax.

By Pat Bassett

tures have a monolithic presence. The grounds of the School of Architecture are dominated by a six-tonne giant he made; another massive structure can be seen in a park opposite Penrose High School.

Ten years ago on a Wellington beach he created a work that might have had its origins in some streak of lunacy or artistic confidence.

He took to red heat a 5mm sheet of heavy steel, 3.6m by 2.7m, and with the assistance of Army engineers winched a three-tonne greywacke boulder above it. The ropes holding the boulder were dynamited and the rock crashed on to the steel, which curved up gracefully around it just as Nicholls had envisaged

grandson of the Rev Richard Taylor, the intrepid Yorkshire missionary who arrived in the river town in 1843 and travelled up the river and throughout Taranaki for another 30 years.

"His journeys and books, especially *Te Ika a Maui*, and the biography A. D. Meads wrote in 1966, provide the conceptual focus for this exhibition," Nicholls explains.

The title *Crossings* refers not only to the river crossings and resting places of Taylor's journeys but to the cross-cultural contacts he initiated.

Taylor was an important figure in Wanganui's history. The tiny settlements up the river owe their quaint names to him: Coroniti is Corinth with a Maori inflexion; Ranana is