

Manuka:

How An Unwanted Honey Gained Worldwide Fame

By Cliff Van Eaton

Manuka honey, produced in New Zealand, was once cold-shouldered by beekeepers, but is now a valuable commodity. Read how its fortunes changed.

Over the past twenty years, the remarkable antibacterial properties of manuka honey have captured the world's attention. But much less is known about the product's historical background, and in particular how it changed the face of beekeeping in New Zealand. Putting manuka honey into that context was a prime consideration when I came to write *Manuka: The Biography of an Extraordinary Honey*. It is a true 'rags to riches' story, with a wonderful cast of characters, and writing it gave me the chance to delve more deeply into the history, while at the same time presenting a range of bee-related topics to a much wider audience than I have in the past.

Forage expansion led to more commercial honey varieties

Manuka may have been New Zealand's first honey, but it had a chequered history for more than a century. In the book I chronicle how it was sought after during the early development of Auckland, the country's largest settlement. It was a major product of the very first commercial apiaries, on Great Barrier Island, and boats from there would sell the honey directly to the public at the city's wharves. As more of the country was developed agriculturally, however, and vast acreages of pasture were carved from the native forest, honey production shifted from the north of the North Island to areas further south, and from bush varieties like manuka to the sort of white clover blends common overseas.

Bee beginnings in New Zealand

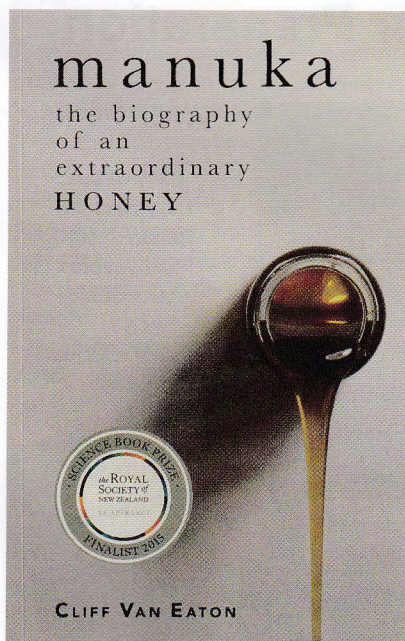
There were, of course, no honey bees present in New Zealand before the arrival of European settlers, and I have been able to shed a bit more light on the country's first beekeeper, the wonderfully named Mary Bumby. Mary arrived with her missionary brother in the autumn of 1839, aboard the good ship James, which sailed out of Gravesend. Mary obviously had a real passion for bees, since she managed to keep her two skeps alive on the six-month sea voyage from England to New Zealand.

What is perhaps not so well known, but obvious when you work the matter through, is that the first surplus honey her hives would have produced the following season was almost certainly manuka. We cannot know for sure, but there is even a suggestion that she may have served her bounty at an important event in the new country's history, the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi by Maori chiefs at Mangungu Mission on 12 February 1840. Records certainly show that by the following year, the Queen's representative on that occasion, Lieutenant Governor William Hobson, had managed to obtain his own hives.

Export regulations and newer honeys drove manuka demand

New Zealand also began to produce more honey than it could consume domestically, and so exporting became ever more important, just as with the country's dairy products, meat and wool. And like those other exports, honey also came under the control of a government marketing board. As you might imagine, that organisation found it much easier to sell commodity-type honeys, such as clover, which were already well known in Europe, rather than something far more exotic like manuka. And since what was paid for export honey also tended to affect prices on the local market, the demand for manuka began to drop away.

The result was that beekeepers stopped producing manuka honey if they could. They moved their hives away from locations where the shrub was prevalent, and when their bees somehow still managed to pack it into frames, they were occasionally forced to literally give it away, swapping full combs for empties with their fellow beekeepers, who would then use it as winter feed for their hives.



The author

Cliff Van Eaton is a well-known writer on beekeeping subjects and is co-author of two books on bee diseases used by beekeepers in New Zealand and overseas. *Manuka* is his first work of popular non-fiction.