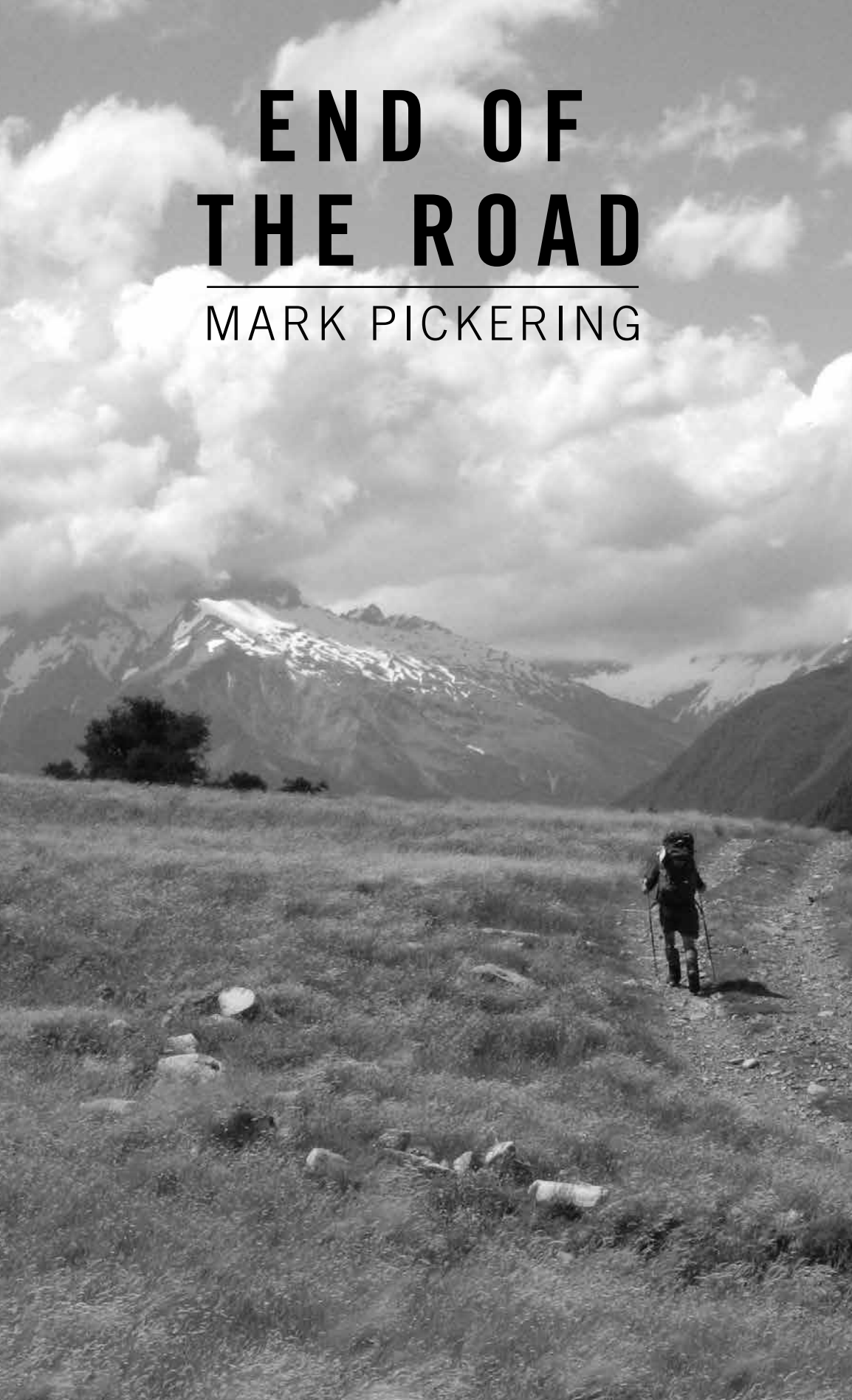
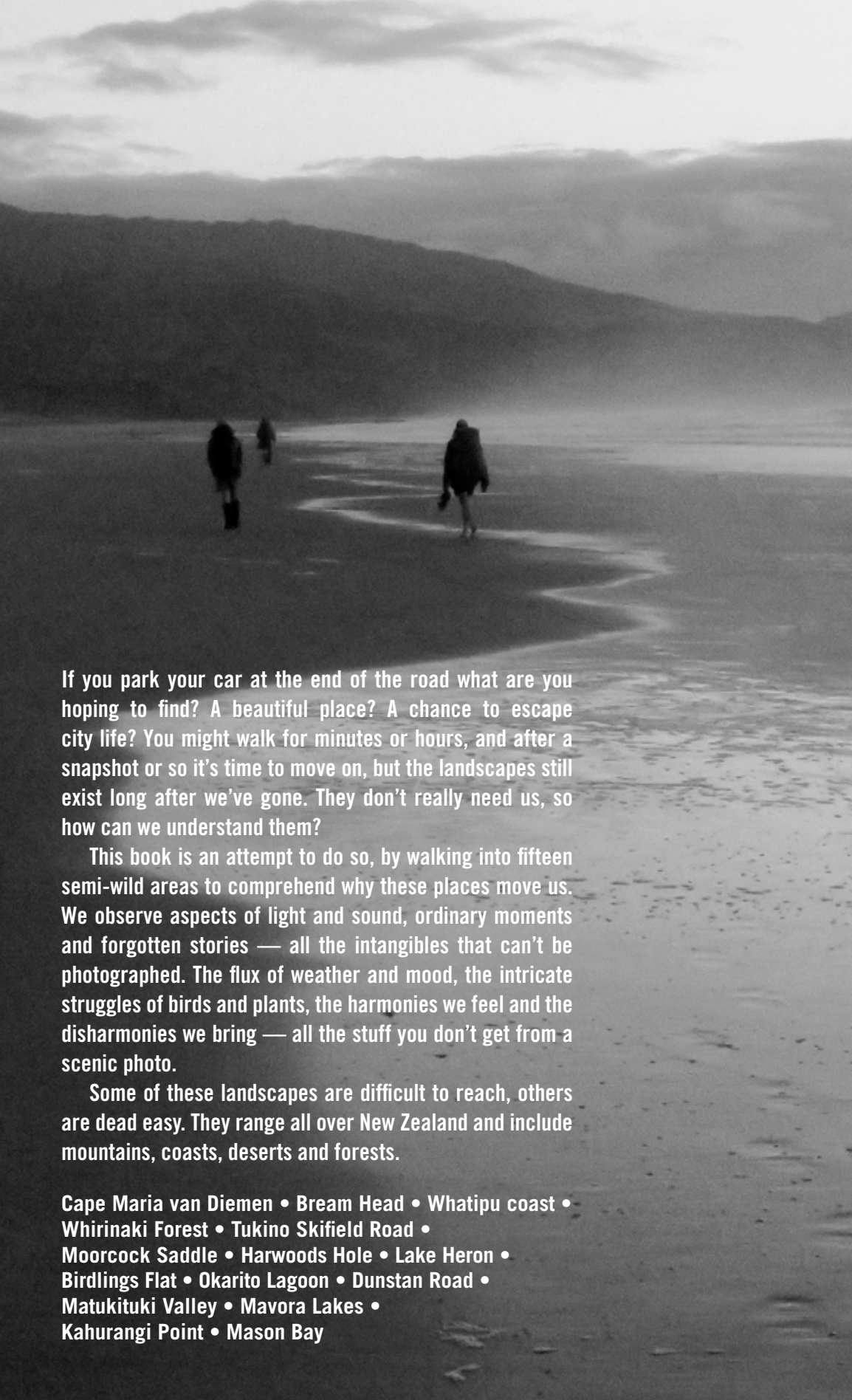
END OF THE ROAD

MARK PICKERING





If you park your car at the end of the road what are you hoping to find? A beautiful place? A chance to escape city life? You might walk for minutes or hours, and after a snapshot or so it's time to move on, but the landscapes still exist long after we've gone. They don't really need us, so how can we understand them?

This book is an attempt to do so, by walking into fifteen semi-wild areas to comprehend why these places move us. We observe aspects of light and sound, ordinary moments and forgotten stories — all the intangibles that can't be photographed. The flux of weather and mood, the intricate struggles of birds and plants, the harmonies we feel and the disharmonies we bring — all the stuff you don't get from a scenic photo.

Some of these landscapes are difficult to reach, others are dead easy. They range all over New Zealand and include mountains, coasts, deserts and forests.

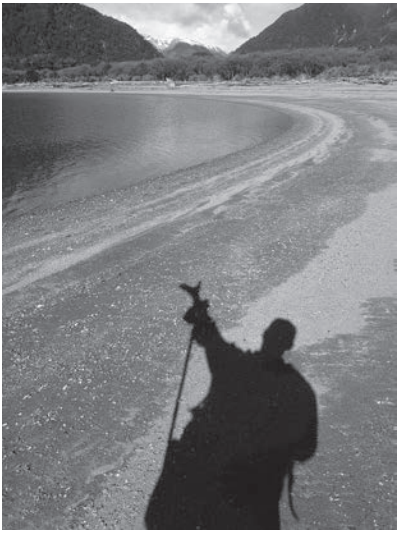
Cape Maria van Diemen • Bream Head • Whatipu coast • Whirinaki Forest • Tukino Skifield Road • Moorcock Saddle • Harwoods Hole • Lake Heron • Birdlings Flat • Okarito Lagoon • Dunstan Road • Matukituki Valley • Mavora Lakes • Kahurangi Point • Mason Bay

END OF THE ROAD

MARK PICKERING has published over thirty books on walking and tramping, most recently *Huts: untold stories from back-country New Zealand*.

Even after a tramping lifetime of forty years, he is still discovering new places and unknown corners of New Zealand.

End of the Road is his personal reflection on the lands we live amongst. He wanted to show their beauty and also to give them a chance to speak.



END OF THE ROAD

MARK PICKERING

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Firstly, a big thanks to the people I interviewed for this book — Milan Jurlina, Paul Kilgour, Dave Harwood, Peter Mitchell, Geoff Spearpoint, Anne and Philip Todhunter, and Jessica and John Pybus. It would be impossible to thank all the people I've met in a lifetime of tramping, but wherever possible I've mentioned them in the relevant chapters. In particular, I'd like to thank Sven Brabyn and Nic Bishop for their companionship, stories and philosophical outlooks.

My friend John Madgwick read through the text, correcting my apostrophes and various crimes against grammar. My daughter Alexandra also read through the chapters and highlighted the good, and not so good, bits, and my partner Rachel Barker has always encouraged me to go wandering (not that I seem to need much encouragement) and has shared my life and many adventures.

IGNITION

About five years ago I walked up from the end of Clifton Hill Road to the Mt Pleasant gun emplacements.

The farm road rises past twisted kowhai trees to the skyline ridge, where the old Second World War gun sites are arranged in crisp hexagonal shapes, rather like a puzzle that no one has quite worked out how to put back together again. Grey rocks curled up in the sun like sleepy lizards, their flanks mottled with red and white lichens. I tucked myself in their shelter, hidden from the remnants of a biting sou'wester that brought two inches of rain to Christchurch the day before.

Puffs of cumulus formed shuffling lines as if a steam engine had just passed by, and higher still were the speckled wisps of cirrus. On the warm rocks red mites dashed about with great courage, though I still can't figure out what they eat. In England when I was a boy we used to call them 'money spiders' — I don't know why — and we considered them good luck. When I tried to coax one mite onto my finger it wouldn't have a bar of it.

In the warm, lazy sunshine my feet sprawl inelegantly out towards Lyttleton Harbour, and the ridge drops away with a long view of Gebbies Pass and a snippet of the Kaitorete Spit. Mostly I hear the wind, but there are other background summer noises. A jogger gasps by, two mountain bikers yell along a track, and over my head a solitary paraglider takes off from Mt Pleasant with a whoop, making slow hopeful spirals upwards, using the updraughts from the bluffs. He wants to be a cloud too.

Behind me several pipits pop out of the silver grass like fleas jumping out of fur, then two skylarks burst upward and start to pour a liquid torrent of joie de vivre into the sky. How they can sing full throttle and fly vigorously at the same time, well, I can't guess — and that's my problem. I'm hopelessly unobservant of what's right under my nose: the frantic money spiders, an ascending skylark, a swish of cloud. I see them,

photograph them a lot, but the sheer connectedness of the natural world has somehow passed me by. I've been missing something.

After all, these landscapes still exist long after I've gone home, and this fascinates me. They don't really need us, so how can we understand them? I should dig a little deeper, but how was I going to do that? These somewhat incoherent thoughts became the start of an idea, a thread of thinking; maybe I could tell a detailed story about each place, to try to understand why they move us?

I chose fifteen landscapes, places that aren't pristine or wilderness areas by any means. In fact, most of these sites have been exploited and industrialised by humans in one way or another, and a few came close to being nullified. Can you murder a landscape? I think you can, but they seem to forgive us.

Each chapter blends a mixture of observation, sympathy, history, sometimes art and crucially the passage of humans and their memories. I chatted to people who still live and work in these landscapes and I always tried to record some of the intangibles that can't be photographed. Noise, senses, smells, the flux of weather and light, the intricate struggles of birds and plants, the harmonies we feel and the disharmonies we bring — stuff you can't get from a scenic photo.

Some of these places are difficult to reach, others are dead easy. They range all over New Zealand and include mountains, coasts, deserts and forests. I wanted to show their beauty of course, but my main intention in *End of the Road* has been to give the land a sense of itself, to give it a chance to speak.

If this book is about anything it's about the art of looking. I read a story about an eighty-year-old woman in Seattle who, when asked how she spent her day, replied that the first thing she did in the morning was to go outside and 'just look'. 'I notice things, sky, plants, people, world. I appreciate the power of a quiet mind when I look.'

So, collecting my tea things, and glancing around at stuff I've long taken for granted, I set off on a journey for some hard looking. This book is the result.

> *'An abiding sense that inside any ordinary moment something extraordinary is waiting to be revealed.'*

NOTE TO READERS

This book does not need to be read sequentially; it wasn't written that way. Also, I've noticed that I tend to indiscriminately mix my miles and kilometres, my feet and my metres. This reflects an English background, and I still have a foot in both places — the local and the global.

Much of what I've written in this book is based on memories and past journeys. Things have changed. Some people wanting to follow my routes into these landscapes might get some surprises, some good, some not so good. Every place has got busier, and the solitude I found so easily then may not be so easy to experience nowadays. Usually, anyone with a tent can get away from the madding crowds, although I have noticed lately that the madding crowds are buying tents as well…

EXPRESSIVE

WHATIPU COAST

Whatipu has long been an unreliable witness to its past. This wild beach plain has morphed, moved and shape-shifted over centuries, as fluid as the light around it. You won't find many bikinis on Whatipu beach because the sand often runs in rivers of shrapnel, quite literally tearing the surface up and lambasting the fishermen and walkers who are giving the landscape a try-out. Benign days are rare: Whatipu is clean, intense and unfixed, and gets judged accordingly.

In 1809 the German artist Caspar David Friedrich completed a painting which he called *The Monk by the Sea*, which shows a vast sky and darkling horizon with an ocean of white horses and a lonely figure on the dune grass. It isn't, but it could be Whatipu. There's a sunset (though it might be a sunrise), and whitish blobs of stars, but the minimalist amount of information caused quite a fuss when it was first exhibited. Some critics interpreted the painting as a man facing the melancholic majesty of God. The sea shows fuming white caps, but the monk's garment is curiously unmoved, and the painting has an unresolved tension between watching and waiting, ceaselessness and solitude.

It's this luminous space between the land and the waves — a space that really shouldn't exist but exists everywhere — that makes Whatipu so compelling. Town planners have tried to delineate a boundary, but the sea keeps moving the pegs, for it turns out that Whatipu is a sort of non-land, which, if you're a poet, is the best kind.

In this chapter there are stories from sailors, artists, writers and landlubbers, and they all contribute their experiences to the strange pulse and disorder of this coastline. Whatipu would be nothing without the waves.

Whatipu sits at the southern end of the Waitakere Ranges and the northern side of the entrance to Manukau Harbour. At least until the mid 1920s, there was no road. People would walk or ride over a bush pack-track, but many day visitors took a convivial boat trip from Blockhouse Bay or Onehunga along the shimmering Manukau Harbour, and probably wouldn't have noticed that the language of the *Orpheus* shipwreck has washed up along the coast: Burnett Head, Wonga Wonga Bay, Orpheus Point, Orpheus Bay, Wing Head.

The day-trippers' boat would moor at the sheltered wharf underneath Paratutai Island, and the visitors would take lunch at Whatipu Lodge. Inside the lodge today there are nostalgic photographs of those days, with boats overladen with happy young men in jackets, and women in roaring twenties-style hats and fashionable dresses, all smiles and sunburn, a summer journey to the black sands.

Nowadays, getting to Whatipu is much less romantic. It's a crawl through the endless suburbs of a pop song — 'Mrs Gray she's proud today, because her roses are in bloom, Mr Green he's so serene, he has a TV in every room' — Hillsborough, Mt Roskill, Blockhouse Bay, and after the fashionable and confused Titirangi, the road tightens to Huia. The café here serves as a gathering centre, and on weekday mornings the children jostle in excitedly as they wait for the school bus. Everyone knows each other, perhaps ad nauseum, judging by the exchange of guarded looks as I peep over my deep cup of strong coffee.

Around the next bend the Huia Settlers Museum has a display on the wreck of the *Orpheus*, along with two stuffed huia in a glass box. I felt sorry for them; their blue wattles aged to a brittle white and their eyes lifeless dots. The one-lane road from Huia then crosses the ford at Little Huia and turns inland, past an old bus and a set of rainbow gates. Pale wood-smoke simmers from a rusted flue. It felt hippie, so I plugged in Dylan as the road squashed up Destruction Gully to the bush saddle, then Bob and I blasted down the gothic corridor of the dust-covered 'haunted, frightened trees, out to the windy beach, far from the twisted reach of crazy sorrow'.

Whatipu is a carpark, a lodge and a campsite. There are no baches here, nothing at all homely, and with a million people on their backdoor step a middle-aged couple run a lodge that in 2012 barely got enough visitors to break even. I chatted to the woman about this absence of customers.

'It's the wind, I suppose, people don't like it.'

It's this wind that drives and chews at the shore, pushing waves that deposit millions of tons of black ironsand and then spirit them away again, toying with a land that doesn't seem to be one thing or the other. When the *Orpheus* struck the middle sandbar in 1863 the signalman's station on Paratutai Island really was on an island, and the high tide

was crumping against the sea caves at Sargent Point. Cutter Rock was also an island, yet by 1940 it was part of the beach, and now it sits as a stranded wreck itself, its clipped rock sails trying to heave itself out of the engulfing sand. The beach plain has crept so far seawards that the surf line is now almost two kilometres from the Whatipu cliffs.

'And there are stranger stories told,
from long, long, ago…'

Early Maori told Europeans of a semi-mythological place they called 'Paorae', a vast sandy land, that existed south of the Manukau Harbour all the way to the Waikato River, almost thirty-five kilometres away. This land was covered in dense scrub and wetlands, which had abundant eel and wild duck, with plentiful pipi, mussels and fish. Kumara were cultivated and the kainga (or temporary villages) on the sands adopted a reciprocal and curious coastal marriage of convenience, shifting in and out as the sand dunes were stripped away, then put back.

James Cowan in his book *Tales of the Maori Coast* was informed by the rangatira Patara Te Tuhi that 'his father, the warrior chief Maioha, remembered seeing in his boyhood (around 1780–1800) the fast vanishing land of Paorae'. Where did Paorae go? Will it come back?

Maori said that centuries ago there was no channel to the south from the Manukau Heads, that the strong tidal currents cut around the Whatipu cliffs and scoured out what we walk on today. Now it is the other way around, with the southern channels eating away the sandbanks, a new 'Paorae' being created to the north. Most wild landscapes do not change much in a single human lifetime but Whatipu oscillates, it has rhythms of existence.

On the afternoon of 7 February 1863, the signalman Edward Wing saw from his post on Paratutai Island at Whatipu a strange vessel approaching the Manukau Heads, and was momentarily puzzled. He had not been informed that such a large ship was in the offing, and the chief signalman and pilot, Commander Wing, who also happened to be his father, was not present on the station. Edward Wing checked his

tide tables and saw that there was enough depth of water to enter the heads, and with a fair westerly wind and smoke indicating a steamer, he could see no reason why the vessel should not be able to cross the bar. He consulted his signal book, though he knew the signals almost off by heart now, and hoisted up the flags that contained the terse instruction — 'Take the Bar'.

On the poop deck of HMS *Orpheus* an unusual conversation took place. An ordinary seaman was waving his hands about and trying to say something to the officer of the watch. Commodore Burnett and Commander Burton were studying the chart of the entrance to the Manukau Harbour, and at this critical moment of entry to this difficult port the last thing they needed was the distraction of some idiot from the lower decks.

The commander would have glanced across and recognised the troublemaker as Frederick Butler, a former quartermaster and deserter from the naval ship *Harrier*, who had been arrested in Sydney and was being taken back to New Zealand. Perhaps Burton was just about to tell the officers to get the prisoner below (and what the hell was a deserter wandering around unchained for anyway?) when the insistent words coming across the deck 'ship going the wrong way', 'the entrance is to the north' may have reached Commodore Burnett's ears. He was already concerned. The signal station said 'Take the Bar', yet they could see disturbed water ahead. The charts plainly stated 'follow the instructions of the signal station', but their direction seemed to be taking them close into shoaling water.

Perhaps the Commodore was regretting his haste. He had chosen the Manukau Heads harbour — known to have a dangerous and shifting entrance — because the *Orpheus* had made slow progress leaving Sydney, and he wanted to make up time rather than take the long-winded voyage through the Hauraki Gulf. For the same reason the Commodore had decided not to heave to and call for a pilot, but instead approached the heads at a brisk nine knots with the steam engines engaged. Yet something was not right, and now this madman was yelling.

The Commodore nodded to the officers and in an extraordinary breach of naval discipline and hierarchy Frederick Butler was pushed or

rushed forward. He saw the chart, perhaps grabbed it, and said fatally, 'That's the wrong chart! We are too far south!'

Commodore Burnett immediately ordered the engines into reverse, but at that precise moment the *Orpheus* sliced deeply into the middle sandbar of the Manukau Heads and became stuck fast. The propellers became fouled by sand and a westerly swell pushed the ship sideways so that now she took the full force of the Tasman waves broadside. New Zealand's worst shipwreck was about to begin.

We don't know precisely what happened on board the *Orpheus* that morning. We have only newspaper accounts of Frederick Butler's assertion that he tried to warn the captain, and only one book states emphatically that he said the words 'That's the wrong chart', but something of this sort must have occurred. Butler was a quartermaster of HMS *Harrier* before he deserted, and quartermasters were important seamen, in charge of the navigational instruments and charts amongst other duties. Quartermasters could read, and Butler would know the chart of the Manukau Heads because he had already studied them on board the *Harrier*, and it subsequently turned out at the inquiry that he was the only man on board the *Orpheus* who had crossed the bar before and knew from first-hand experience the safest route.

The weather was fine, visibility good. *Orpheus* was a modern corvette, only three years old, and something of a hybrid because she carried masts and sails as well as steam engines. The funnel had a telescopic mechanism so it could be retracted below deck when sails were put up. It had a crew of 259, of which 189 were going to drown.

It was a slow-motion tragedy. Ship's boats were launched from the *Orpheus*, but some were smashed. The *Wonga Wonga* steamship — with the pilot Commander Wing on board — hove into view, but it took the wrong channel and had to patiently manoeuvre back around to the wreck, using up valuable time. Four local Maori men launched the pilot boat and tried to reach the wreck. One of the *Orpheus* boats landed at Whatipu and headed up the harbour to alert the naval vessel *Harrier*, but this proved a waste of energy as the *Harrier* was stranded by low tides, and anyway by now the mighty *Orpheus* was already breaking up.

What must it have felt like for those seamen clinging to the rigging of the doomed ship? The nauseous wrench of twisting wood underneath them, a westerly wind screaming through strips of sails, spray filling their nostrils as they waited for the final lurch and inevitable collapse of the masts.

Shipwreck is as much death by noise as drowning, with men yelling for help: 'Heh lads!' 'Look! That steamer is coming to our rescue', but it can't get close enough. 'Jump for it, lads.' 'Swim for it, mates!' But if you can't swim? Jump anyway — and hope those Maori boys in the pilot boat will see you and pick you up. They did rescue a few, and got medals for their courage, but for those that remained on the disintegrating wreck of the *Orpheus* the delay must have been sickening as they waited to be absorbed, slowly dragged towards the drowning shore.

It reminded me of that cruel but evocative line in Gerard Manley Hopkins poem, 'The Wreck of the Deutschland':

> *'And the inboard seas run swirling and hawling;*
> *The rash smart sloggering brine...'*

Drowning is not an exact science: we don't know whether it is unpleasant or euphoric. Perhaps it starts as flailing desperation, and then becomes cosmic as the oxygen-starved brain floats away into oblivion — both types of experiences have been reported by people who nearly drowned. Writers and poets often feel that waves express a deeper significance (even if they don't agree on what it is) and they have long been attracted to drowning as a metaphor for being submerged in a complex and overwhelming life. The English poet Stevie Smith had a famous vision of a man swimming out at sea, desperately signalling for help — 'not waving, but drowning' — but arguably it was Virginia Woolf who was the most obsessed with the suffocation of water.

In 1931 she published a novel called *The Waves*, a series of poetic character monologues in a compelling and strangely unreadable cascade of words — 'phrases laid like Roman roads across the tumult of our lives' — and the text flows from one consciousness to the other, although intuitively you feel that they all seem to be aspects of Virginia Woolf herself. In several places Woolf's sentences echo the weariness and

smokiness of a T. S. Eliot poem, and one reviewer said truthfully: 'the writing is beautiful, the ideas are beautiful, but nothing really happens'.

For a writer like Virginia Woolf, waves had impetus and strength, energy and even majesty: 'catching a wave', 'riding the crest of the wave', 'making waves', 'rogue wave', 'a wave of feeling'. Things that heal us when we play with them, hurt us when we get in the way, and appearing to generate energy from nothing and expunging power into something else. They are death, and yet defy death, being in some ways immortal.

It's not clear whether Virginia Woolf could swim; there was no mention of it in her diaries, although she holidayed as a child in St Ives for many years and once went 'skinny dipping' with Rupert Brooke in 1911. Presumably like many English of that era she at least paddled. I remember my grandmother would tuck her skirts in her stockings and my grandfather would roll up his trouser legs ('I grow old, I grow old, I will wear the bottoms of my trousers rolled'), but you can't tackle real waves like that.

Woolf seemed seduced into the ocean and water, but she had an uneasy relationship with it, and when she plunged into depression (as she often did) the metaphor of the sea grew louder and louder in her head. When she wrote these words, it's not hard to feel that she was drowning:

> 'But why am I feeling this? Let me watch the wave rise. I watch. Vanessa. Children. Failure. Yes, I detect that. Failure failure. (The wave rises). Oh they laughed at my taste in green paint! Wave crashes. I wish I were dead! I've only a few years to live I hope. I can't face this horror any more — (this is the wave spreading out over me).'

In the 1860s a sailing ship would usually wait two or three miles offshore at Whatipu as the crew tried to read a flag signal through the spray, squalls or fog. Signalling was an inexact business. Even on a clear day, deciphering flags across blinding and glittering waters could be confusing. Yet signalmen were as vital to New Zealand in the nineteenth century as air traffic controllers are today, for coastal shipping was the only practical means to supply farms, export produce, move troops, and travel around the country.

Early photographs show that signal stations were perched precariously on exposed headlands — such as Paratutai Island — in a messy arrangement of poles, ropes and flags that replicated a ship's mast structure. Erecting the signalling masts and equipment was a major engineering challenge, and it was an uncomfortable place to work. A good gale could wreck the mechanism. Colonial governments would usually penny-pinch and bundle the jobs of signaller, wharfinger, pilot and harbourmaster all into one. They might provide a dinghy so the pilot could get out to the waiting ship, or they might not. Captain Wing wrote letters to the Provincial Government in Auckland complaining that he barely had the equipment or the men to maintain a safe harbour passage.

I walked around Paratutai Island trying to work out how I was going to get on top of it. It's a stolid pudding of a rock, about a hundred metres high and sheer on most sides but with a flat grassy crust. On the Manukau Harbour side, a chewed-up wharf and tramway are being pulled backwards into the sea and the conglomerate rock is beautifully stuccoed with grey pebbles. The iron ring bolts have oxidised into orange doughnuts. The old concrete lumps of wharf are now covered in millions of tiny shells as the waves swamp in, and the original wooden piles emerge zombie-like from the sea at low tide.

There was nothing that resembled a track; but perhaps if I tried here? I managed to scramble up from the old wharf along a rocky ledge, and then pushed through the steel-belted flax to a rocky spur. There were bits of grass to hang onto and a gull watched leeringly, but this wasn't comfortable, and after a long hesitation I edged back down, making a promise (which I don't suppose I'll ever keep) that one day I'll have another go.

However, there's a good track up to Wing Head where the signaller's house once stood, and when I settled into the warm grass the view quickly made sense of how the *Orpheus* tragedy happened. All the elements can be seen. The middle bar, the narrow channel of opportunity, the confusion and helplessness, the beautiful hubris of it all.

The signal 'Take the Bar' by the signalman Edward Wing was ambiguous. He thought the signal indicated that the bar was open, whereas the British naval inquiry interpreted it as indicating a direct

line. Interestingly, hundreds of ships had crossed the bar using these same signals, including naval ships such as the *Harrier*, to no ill effect, and the same signals continued to be used after the tragedy. So everyone seemed to understand what 'Take the Bar' meant except those particular officers, on that particular ship.

Commodore Burnett was in a rush, and the naval navigators were unobservant and overly confident. The admiralty had either not passed on the latest sailing instructions of 1861 to the ship's commander or, worse, Burnett had ignored them. If there were doubts on board the *Orpheus* they should have paused, perhaps called for a pilot, but the *Orpheus* never did so, and there was an inherent sense within the Royal Navy that they did not need colonial advice. There was a watchman at the bow and on the masthead who intuited shoaling waters from the 'colour of the water' (that pesky Frederick Butler reported such), but no avoiding action was taken. In truth the *Orpheus* charged at the bar, omnipotent, confident, Britannia ruling the waves.

After clinging to the mast for a while, Commodore Burnett was eventually washed up dead in his full dress uniform north of Whatipu, and his funeral was a grandiose affair that resembled a state occasion. The Victorians loved a good funeral, and even the Auckland shops closed as a mark of respect. The body of the Commodore was laid to rest along with any of his possible guilt in the tragedy. The British naval inquiry blamed Edward Wing. The colonists needed the British navy badly, both to transport troops and to maintain morale, so they said nothing. But the Wings kept their jobs.

It doesn't seem to be the sea that makes long-distance sailors reach for the whiskey bottle, it's that final lurch to the land. Look at the language they use. Sandbars, mudbanks, reefs and shoaling water, black headlands, skerries, whirlpools, maelstroms, sea-cliffs and sea-caves, tidal currents, cross-currents, back-eddies and breaking surf. One maritime author estimated that for every single ship lost at sea there were at least a hundred hitting the shore.

Roger Taylor talks with real feeling of the dangers of coming into a 'safe' harbour in his book *Mingming and the Tonic of Wildness*. He first

describes his voyage across the Atlantic Ocean where he set out to reach a destination which was simply a latitude line on a map, quite literally a boundary that doesn't exist. After cracking a rib he turned back, and recrossed the Atlantic to England without seeing any land at all, but it was here, on the last day of his voyage, that his problems really began.

He was off the coast of Scotland aiming for the small fishing harbour at Whitehills, but there was a northerly storm predicted, a big one, and he was undecided between riding the storm out or making a dash for it. His choices were complicated because amidst all the shipping lanes, fishing fleets and offshore oil rigs, there was very little sea-room, and he marked on his chart a fifteen-kilometre-square area of sea where he could wait out the storm. He was poised thirty miles offshore in a sort of no man's land, a limbo where he was not sure whether to wait for the storm to pass or rush in before it arrived.

Mingming had no engine and needed the harbourmaster to tow the yacht the last few hundred metres into the haven of the marina. Finally, agonisingly, Taylor decided to run for shore in an act that teetered 'on the very edge of good seamanship', and the harbourmaster came out to tow him through the harbour entrance, which three hours later would become impassable. It was a misjudgement, probably, but the boundary had to be crossed somehow and he got away with it. You could feel the relief in his voice, and the last words in his book are 'wall and rock'.

At the Whatipu campsite I cooked tea as the Subaru wobbled in the wind shunts. Starlings were poking into the red and black flax flowers with their thin sharp beaks, jabbing down to the nectar and picking up an orange hairdo for their efforts. Although one or two lights appeared in Whatipu Lodge, no other guests showed up; I was the only camper that evening.

At dusk the pukeko came stepping onto the grass in that deliberate manner of theirs, lifting one foot up high as if momentarily unsure where they should put it down. With a 'kwee' call, they swagger about with an arrogant sense of proudly owning this marginal and freshly minted land, a last bit of grass before Australia. Pukeko make scrappy companions. Two were peaceably grazing, when one suddenly — it reminded me of

me and my brother — turned nasty and in a flurry of wretched wings and clapping horny beaks, viciously chased the other one away. A few minutes later they were equably sharing the same space again. As my mother so often asked in exasperation: what was all that about?

Maori reckon they brought pukeko over in their waka, and they also occasionally ate them, although they were considered sinewy. Red was an important colour for Polynesian people, a noble colour, and only the high born in Samoa were allowed to keep 'manuali'i' or the 'chiefly bird', and pukeko were often paraded as pets. Curiously the Romans shared this sentiment. Swamp hens were kept as lawn decorations for their villas, and apparently were too valued ever to be eaten; the Romans ate just about everything else. Red along with purple were the emperor's colours, and the pukeko not only has a red face and legs, but its feathers have a metallic blue and purplish sheen.

But despite its Roman nose the pukeko is ignoble. It will steal eggs from its cousins, and Maori called a stubborn, annoying person taringa pakura or 'pukeko's ears' (pakura being a synonym for pukeko). Pukeko seem to thrive on the bits of land we don't occupy: wasteland, leftover lots, damp paddocks, strips along motorways. Somehow the several species of this clunky, bolshie, quick-mannered and opportunistic bird have managed to get around at least four continents from Portugal to Pakistan. Few bird species do well amongst humans, but the pukeko does all right: we should like them more than we do.

The pukeko kept me awake by screeching into the night, as did the lighthouse on Ninepin Rock with its circulating beam glaring through the car windows every fifteen seconds. Lying there I started to count the beams and ponder why (with all these GPS gizmos) they need lighthouses these days anyway.

Every hour or so a jet plane climbs over the Whatipu headland heading to Australia, and if any of the passengers peered out they would look down and see nothing much at all: a blackness interrupted by a line of fuming, boiling white where the big waves hit the shore. There's a huge electric city over the hill, yet the night at Whatipu is as black as a cave, and the Southern Cross appears in gaps of scudding cloud, resembling a kite born on the galactic wind with a zigzagging tail of sparks.

For a while in 1969 Colin McCahon had a studio at Muriwai beach on the Waitakere coast, about twenty-five kilometres north of Whatipu. He painted at night under a large incandescent light bulb and hated being watched. A whole tirade of paintings was based on this blunt, gnawing landscape: islands in the shape of Moby Dicks, crisp black oblongs squeezing the blue water, and strange fuzzy aeroplanes launching into a black sky. He may never have painted at Whatipu, which seems strange, because it feels like he was here.

As McCahon used darker pigments he got better and as his scale increased he grew more confident. Squashed humans don't even appear in his paintings; they have been reduced to letters and words. These are not landscape paintings as people traditionally knew them, but descriptions of a soul searching for what was underneath the land and what was bubbling up through the sand. I don't think people liked them much then, and probably don't now. Some sold for as little as five guineas each.

McCahon loved Northland and on one of his paintings he scrawled 'a landscape with too few lovers', and in a later diary entry he wrote soulfully 'it's a painful love, the love of the land, it takes a long time'. Many people feel that McCahon's waterfall paintings showed this love at its best and simplest: a white sensuous line slicing through the black. Light fascinated him. It was a sort of faith, uncertain, pervading, illuminating everything, and he would have agreed with what the Australian painter Sidney Nolan wrote in 1952:

> 'Remember also that we are not the light: although it is always with us, it comes from afar. From Heaven, from Nirvana, from Einstein's version of things. Each takes his pick, it does not matter, but the fundamental thing to keep clear, is that the light comes from a source that is not ourselves.'

On the way to Whatipu it's well worth deviating down to the small McCahon cottage in Titirangi, which has been restored as a museum. There's a maze of backstreets to negotiate, twisting down steep bush spurs which are crammed with parked cars. It's hard to believe that when the McCahons shifted here in 1953, Titirangi was awkwardly distant from the city, a rural settlement with one shop and the forest

still being hacked at. The trees have grown vastly since McCahon built the deck, and he ended up painting the *Northland Panels* on it, splashing the paint around while his friends supped 'Dally plonk' (Dalmatian wine) and made smart conversation. This was in the late 1950s and one visitor observed wryly: 'because we drank wine we thought we were intellectuals'.

The house is tiny, an overgrown Wendy house, full of squares and miniature spaces. The family struggled to fit in, and in typical Kiwi bloke fashion McCahon dug out underneath the house and created a bathroom and a bunk-room for the boys with one wall missing. They hopped out of bed onto a mud floor and disappeared into the forest like sprites.

The panelled windows in the lounge — and some of them ingeniously slide on marbles — the numerous small square cupboards, the tiny cardboard box rooms, and the painted panels downstairs, all seem vaguely and deliberately Mondrian in resonance. As if McCahon the painter and self-taught DIY guy was echoing another painter he admired yet did not follow. He was quite clear about this: 'geometric perfection seems to lack tension, it lacks being human, so it lacks God's share'.

McCahon was often photographed in a cryptic diamond black and white jumper which was somehow exact for his character. He drank, quite a lot, and eventually it became his overwhelming problem, but this cottage above the bushy languid bays of the Manukau Harbour marks the start of his most productive period. There's a list of his paintings on the wall — and probably not even a complete list — and as I counted them up I realised he was averaging one painting a week. Not bad for a man with kids and a job in town, as well as being busy enlarging the cottage. His wife, Anne, who herself was a painter, must have been a saint.

This little Titirangi cottage reveals far more of McCahon than any art gallery could, as well as the struggle that creative people often have with cramped spaces, poverty and difficult living arrangements. The English poet Charlie Connelly visited the converted garage that was Dylan Thomas's messy, paper-strewn 'wordsplashed shed', and was disappointed by the 'mundanity of genius'. He also poked into Robbie Burns' cottage and dittoed his observations. Artists are messy and disorganised, dropping ideas like confetti or litter.

Even under all these handicaps (or maybe because of them), McCahon emerged from his bush-hemmed cottage as a butterfly from a chrysalis with the ground-breaking *Elias* series. He knew he'd painted something special: 'The 1959 Elias series were all painted at Titirangi and all come out of the story of the Crucifixion, and I became interested in men's doubts… I could never call myself a Christian, therefore these same doubts constantly assail me too.'

Black slabs of rectangles covered in white biblical language on a vast scale, prophetic words in massive loops and harsh either/or light. McCahon's brand of religious expressionism was out there beyond the niceness of things, like an Old Testament prophet painting the wilderness itself. While some popular modern New Zealand artists get regularly reproduced in postcards and prints — think of William Sutton or Rita Angus — McCahon does not easily fit these tasteful landscape categories, and I'm not sure that he is greatly popular even today or very well understood.

As an artist he was an odd man out, and his artistic presence was uncomfortable for a modern world that rarely enters a church. He seemed to come from nowhere and left no obvious disciples. McCahon's critics sensed his isolation and became vociferous as they closed in for the kill:

'Forget those quotes from the Holy Scripture,
it doesn't even look like a bloody picture.'

At dawn I jammed on my boots and left the Whatipu campsite to walk out into the vanishing land.

The flailing wind had blown itself out from the night before, and the beach plain was quite disconcerting in its whitened intensity, wrapping light and spume around my eyes. Amidst the constant rumble of the sea, it seemed that the sullen shore was taking hits like a punch-drunk boxer. Further out the black ironsand was soft and muddy. The footsteps of yesterday's walkers stopped in the middle of nowhere, washed away by the night tides. In this linear luminosity, solitary objects resolved into something more significant than they really were. I stopped to photograph an assemblage of driftwood sticks that had

been stuck upright in the sand. Together the sticks formed a sort of shamanistic ritual circle that had been abandoned or at least had long served its purpose.

The tangible land is now almost a kilometre away and on the Whatipu margins the sand is ironed clean. For some 200 metres' width there's no driftwood, seaweed or sea junk. Spotless. A few cracked shells, some stranded purple jellyfish that resemble bloated blood blisters, and a myriad of silvery sand hoppers scuttling in fear into tiny holes. Over the intricate weave of sand patterns there are joyful bubble trails, and the old lines of surf foam have dried into ochre-white patterns. Occasionally, the bubbles are still perfect, poised and glassy, holding their baleful form as staring castaway eyes, or beautifully glazed with exotic colours as if opals had spilt on the black sand.

Each day the tide pushes in and mucks around with the contours of the beach, seesawing like a dogged married couple in a never-resolved, never-ending relationship which leaves fingerprints all over each other. I can see that another sandbar has appeared about fifty metres further out, with a flat salty lagoon in between, and it made me speculate whether I was witnessing new land being formed. Was this another 'Paorae' being created out of nothing?

The southern horizon is full of the fretful serration that is the famous middle bar that destroyed the *Orpheus*. In fact, I'm closer to the wreck of the *Orpheus* now than I am to the headlands of Whatipu, and what is now beach plain was then wreck and maelstrom as the naval vessel got subsumed into the surf. After some six kilometres of walking north along the outer curve of the beach, Whatipu comes to an end at Karekare Point, where blocks of black basalt and sea flinch in an acute meeting point between slabs of wind.

In 1958 McCahon and his wife went on an extended overseas trip to America and he was excited by the large scale of the works he found there. Drip paintings by Jackson Pollock, Picasso's *Guernica* (3.5 x 7.5 metres) and the massive art of the Mexican painter Diego Rivera. McCahon immediately realised that that was what he wanted to do, paintings on a huge scale that filled a room, 'paintings,' he remarked 'for people to walk past'. A friend once observed of McCahon that he would

start his brushstrokes well outside the canvas, so the crucial gesture began before he applied the image. He broke the frame, something nature does every day.

> 'There is nothing more beautiful than this pure and unregulated action of inanimate nature, and nothing more frightening. It is beautiful because it is untainted by self-awareness or self-interest or even love. It does not know itself and has no need to know itself, it simply is.'

At Whatipu the waves are forged in a gesture a thousand kilometres away, with surf smeared in washes of blue and milky foam, sucking and withdrawing, sometimes almost playful, though it depends on your mood. Walking back along the beach, I found it puzzling that the sea on the horizon looked a mite higher than where I was standing. Someone else was walking that morning, his head down, trudging along, and as we passed each other I asked him what he thought — was this just an illusion? He looked up surprised, glanced at the sea and shrugged: 'Yeah, it's always like that.'

Every beach has some sort of 'Paorae' in it. Sands that shift, waves cutting new scallops out of the sea edge, and everything at Whatipu is fluid and opportunistic beyond belief because nature isn't bothered with boundaries but with being vital and existing. It's a continuous painting that you walk through, static and unstatic at the same time, keeping its permanence even as it transforms itself every day. If Whatipu had a memory it would observe us as the transients, the things that come and go.

So the shore is a flexing line — part haven, part fence, part warning — and for me there's a tinge of paranoia as a wave surges in and the grey day gets darker, but there's nothing out there. Only God's share.

BOOKS & SOURCES

■ *Whatipu: our history*, Auckland Regional Council. See also Bruce Harvey, *Whatipu: the story of Whatipu and early Huia* (2001).

■ *The Monk by the Sea* (1809–10), Caspar David Friedrich. Friedrich's work went through extremes of fashionableness. At the height of the Romantic movement he was highly considered, then fell out of favour by the time he died in 1840, reclusive, poor and forgotten. The rise of German nationalism in the early twentieth century saw interest in his work revived and the Nazis borrowed his paintings to push their own agenda. This had the effect of sinking Friedrich's reputation again until the 1970s, when interest again revived and, now, some of his works are considered masterful icons of German painting.

■ '*Pleasant Valley Sunday*' (1967), released by *The Monkees*, written by Carole King and Gerry Goffin.

■ '*Mr Tambourine Man*' (1965), Bob Dylan.

■ *Tales of the Maori Coast* (1930), James Cowan.

■ *Orpheus*. As you can imagine the *Orpheus* disaster was exhaustively reported in the colonial newspapers. For the inquest see *Daily Southern Cross*, 17 February 1863 and the *Colonist*, 13 March 1863. There's a simple cemetery on Cornwallis Road of three 'unknown sailors' from the *Orpheus* who drowned.

■ *The Wreck of H.M.S. Orpheus* (1975), Roy M. Hetherington. First published as 'New Zealand's Worst sea disaster, the wreck of H.M.S. Orpheus'. An eccentric history, but he does interview Edward Wing, the signaller who guided the *Orpheus*, and who died in 1930.

■ *Wing of the Manukau: Capt Thomas Wing: his life and harbour 1810–1888* (1991), T. B. Byrne. This detailed and engrossing book is essential reading for anyone interested in the *Orpheus* wreck. The author's conclusions are straightforward and hard to argue with. Built in Glasgow, the *Wonga Wonga* was Australian-owned, as its name is derived from an Aboriginal word for a woody vine or a pigeon.

■ *Frederick Butler*. There was a Frederick Butler born at Gosport in 1835, of a waterman. He married an 'Elizabeth Carveth' of Gosport on 7 January 1856. If this is the same Butler, he would have been aged twenty-eight when on the *Orpheus*. His death is recorded as 'before 1870' aged thirty-five.

■ *Orpheus*. It's a strange name for a Royal Navy warship, but it has been used seven times since 1773, the last time on an Oberon-class submarine in 1959. This Greek God was a charmer, a musician, and it was said that even the stones themselves would dance to his music. In mythology he was apparently destroyed by enraged females because he only took male lovers, and the maddened enraptured women left his bloodied head floating in the water. It was also said that Orpheus was able to visit the underworld and return safely, something no other god, mortal or sailor could do.

■ '*The Wreck of the Deutschland*' (1876), Gerard Manley Hopkins. 'Inscape' is a word coined by Hopkins and represents 'the charged essence, the absolute singularity that gives each created thing its being'. The poet frequently invented, and compounded, unusual words in his poems and encouraged his readers to read his poems aloud.

■ *Not Waving but Drowning*, collection of poems by Stevie Smith, 1972.

■ *Virginia Woolf*. Diary, September 1926, see the introduction to *The Waves* (Penguin, 1992). Woolf drowned herself in the River Ouse in 1941 when she feared she was going mad again. Leonard and Virginia Woolf founded the Hogarth Press in 1917, an influential hobby publisher that printed the first English book edition of T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* in 1923. The text was typeset by Virginia Woolf herself, and coincidentally one of the sections in the poem is called 'Death by Water'.

■ T. S Eliot (1915), 'The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock'. The last lines in this poem on the theme of waves are beautiful.

> *'I have seen them riding seaward on the waves*
> *Combing the white hair of the waves blown back*
> *When the wind blows the water white and black...'*

■ *Mingming and the Tonic of Wildness* (2012), Roger D. Taylor. He enjoyed the solo sailor's right to introspection.

> 'The more time one spends at sea, particularly in the kind of unmediated proximity that only a slow-moving cruising yacht can engender, the more one realises that it is the land which is the oddity, the geological aberration; perhaps it should not be there at all. This is a startling thought, and one that invites a total reassessment of our own place in the world.'

■ *Pukeko*. See Wikipedia.

■ *Towards a Promised Land: on the life and art of Colin McCahon* (2010), Gordon H. Brown. When once asked if inactive periods worried him, McCahon replied: 'You're damn right, of course they worry me. I start to think there won't be any more painting, that I've got nothing left… But then it will start again, for no apparent reason.'

■ *Colin McCahon: the Titirangi years, 1953–1959* (2007), Peter Simpson. The quoted lines come from a bluesy backing song in the 2004 documentary film *Colin McCahon I Am*. In the *Christchurch Press* of 15 November 2016 there was an article on McCahon at Titirangi and an illustration of one of his paintings, 'Kauri Landscape 1955'. The picture looked strangely familiar. Then I read that it had been bought by the Canterbury Public Library as one of their 'lending' paintings; people could borrow paintings for a month for $2 or something ridiculous, and I sometimes did so. It occurred to me that I had once borrowed this exact McCahon painting and hung it on my student flat wall, but I never dreamed it was an original. I'm pleasantly amazed it survived through some grungy student parties, with beer and cask wine being swigged about, though perhaps McCahon might have applauded. He enjoyed his booze.

■ *And Did Those Feet: walking through 2000 years of British and Irish history* (2009), Charlie Connelly.

■ *Encounters: the creation of New Zealand* (2013), Paul Moon. He provides an interesting interpretation of McCahon's *Otago Peninsula*.

■ *Zone of the Marvellous: in search of the Antipodes* (2009), Martin Edmond. In the 'Erewhon' chapter Edmond discusses Sidney Nolan and Colin McCahon.

OKARITO LAGOON

We canoed up this lagoon a long time ago, so long in fact that I struggle even to remember the actual year so I've just assigned a decade to it. The eighties, maybe. I do remember the calmness of the water, and the syrupy sound as the paddles went into the brown liquid, slurped out, and no matter how careful you were, trickles of water would run down the blade and into your sleeves. It was warm and sunny, so it didn't matter. I certainly recall the priestly dignity of our slow travel, the gentle motion of paddles as we went forward, eased along by the high tide as it kept filling the upper lagoon one or two hours after the actual high tide at the coastal entrance. We could dimly hear the hymnal sea, but for all intents and purposes we were land-locked. The placid waters stretched out everywhere and rimu forest lapped every edge that we could see. There were no other vessels, just us, and the mirror of us, as we paddled along, twin colourful yellow canoes joined seamlessly at the water's edge, reflected, and slicing through three dimensions into a fourth.

On the west there was a wide sandy and scrubby spit; on the east, huge icy mountains were propped up as cut-outs from a film set. As I glanced over my shoulder there was Aoraki/Mt Cook, and Mt Tasman, called by Maori Horokoau because it refers to the swelling of the neck of a shag (koau) as it is swallowing a fish. At this angle the white edge of Mt Tasman seems to resemble the outstretched wings of a gull, or a white heron, the kotuku.

Every kilometre or so they stood solitary and evenly spaced, probing their territory with deliberate strides. All herons are wary. This canoe beast was an annoying intrusion, and if we got too close — about fifty metres judging by their calculating black eyes — they would take flight with a great laboured whack of their wings, struggling to gain enough height, and then awkwardly side-shearing away to a less occupied spot, their plumage as dazzling as fresh white paint.

We watched the herons carefully, for they were standing on the mudbanks, which we were trying to avoid as we followed the erratic river channels. The first time we hit land it was amusing. One of us would get out, grab the bow rope and tug the canoe into deeper water, then have a wet wobbly struggle to get back in. Another stuck, another tow.

Our large Canadian canoe was laden with packs and water containers, and odd bits of gear that we threw in as an afterthought, because the thing seemed to have so much room, and we were on a sort of venture into the heart of a dark forested hinterland. We might just need that axe.

It was late afternoon when we reached Commissioner Point, where there was an old whitebaiters' bach sunk on its rotting piles. It had been nearly nine kilometres from where we had started from the Okarito wharf, and factoring in all the changes of mind and deviations — we'd gone four kilometres right across to the far eastern side — we had probably paddled fourteen kilometres that day and our shoulders ached. The hut was locked, so we put up the tent on spongy turf and walked across the couple of hundred metres of shingle to the beach, where driftwood was jumbled in a revolutionary barricade. Embedded into the contorted, whitened trunks were thousands of small stones fired by the wave carronades.

That evening the languid, humid air massed quietly under the black mountains and the clouds wrapped the bush hills like drapery on a body. High spurs were revealed then obscured teasingly, and as so often on the West Coast you never see one part of the mountain entirely. Our little beach fire quickly became a lone light as the winter chill deepened. We weren't expecting a frost at sea level, but that's what we got. The lagoon started to drain away, the mudbanks turned black, and a lone morepork called across kilometres of subtle water with its haunting hunting call. The night crystallised around us.

At the far north end of Okarito Lagoon there is a natural canal that joins the main lagoon to the secretive Lake Windemere, so the next morning we packed up and eased into the swampy, consenting stream. There was no defined flow of water one way or the other, and we slid under crouching kowhai trees, their bright yellow flowers dangling like golden earrings onto the brown bog. A couple of kahikatea trees grew straight out of the water. Large flax stalks hung down with succulent black pods, and a tui flustered about trying to extract sugary nectar. Bellbirds started a brouhaha as we glided along, and long cobwebs, dripping with sunshine and dew, had been spun over the narrow channel.

For 200 metres I fancied we could be in the Amazon, or pushing up the Orinoco delta — but the axe stayed in the canoe.

We emerged into an open twisting channel of low shrubs and raupo, and a few strokes later we had drifted out into Lake Windemere.

It's a large pond, a kilometre long and half a kilometre wide. There is a fringe of shrubs on the seaward dunes, which effectively seals in the lake, and the circumference is reeds and rimu forest. The white herons love this spot — their colony is close by in the Waitangitaona River — and there were at least a dozen on the lake as we paddled around counting them. Kereru swooped across the water in a rather desperate flight surge, struggling to get their fat bellies up to the tree roosts on the other side of the lake. A lone kaka cackled its way across. We stopped paddling and just floated, slopping into a mirage of lapis-lazuli greens and blues, opulent and dreamy and … suddenly we were late.

Turning about and hurriedly thrusting back through the canal to the main lagoon, we discovered we'd missed the high tide and we had a battle to catch up with it again. Everywhere was water but only a few inches of it, and it was rapidly running away from us as our paddles jarred into the mudbanks. We poked and scraped until it was easier to get out and hand-pull the boat to the first decent stream channel. It was hard work, and black mud oozed up to our thighs; still, we couldn't complain.

When we started out we weren't looking for anything in particular —some sort of treasure or taonga — but whatever it was we weren't looking for, we found. Snowy mountains in a line, emblazoned blue skies, jade forest, watchful white herons, a coffee-coloured estuary. We were caught in the middle of this palette, drifting down the waterways on the outflow of the tide hardly having to stroke at all as we exchanged a few monosyllables, which were swallowed by the afternoon's quietude.

There's a lot to appreciate about estuaries. The way they get thrown into reverse every few hours, the way they breathe in and out with the tides, cleansing, restless, revealing, smearing, shifting. The slow and sinewy patterns on the sandbanks, the sheen of glassy waters, singular herons probing studiously and animated oystercatchers pipping and patterning on the mudflat, leaving their temporal imprint.

Yet people dislike estuaries. They talk about them as if they are a wasteland of neither one thing nor the other, somewhere to dump our tyres, our offal and building rubbish. The smell of exposed mud and rotting sea lettuce is disagreeable. There are midges, mosquitoes and screaming gulls, and algal blooms that colour the translucent water green as if it had caught a disease. Everything is sticky and smelly.

Okarito gives the appearance that it's one of those rare lagoons in New Zealand which has largely been left to itself, but the historic photos at the information shelter tell a different story. Gold dredges worked the lagoon in the 1880s and there was sand mining on the spit, as well as sheep and cattle grazing there. The forest on the eastern bank has had logging roads cut through it, and on Google Earth you can still see the pretty star-burst patterns dotted through the Okarito bush where the logging haulers once stood. Fortunately this activity has ceased.

In Maori, the word mauri might be translated as life force or life principle, although there's no useful English equivalent. Joan Maloof spoke of this absence of language, where by not articulating how much we value something, we devalue it. In this sense, words are as much of a weapon as the saw and the bulldozer.

> 'We know, instinctively, that our own health, both physical and spiritual, is a reflection of the health of the earth — for better or worse. But we barely have words to discuss this connection, perhaps because we don't yet have all the tools needed to measure it. The strands connecting us are largely invisible…'

That day on Okarito estuary I felt part of something. I was in the front of the canoe, and as my partner guided us down with sweeps of her paddle, I leaned back luxuriously on the packs piled up in the middle. Sun bright on the water, green algae and white herons sliding by, even a plastic L&P bottle bobbing along didn't diminish my mood.

We are inside a web of connections to the natural world, but we flail against them, constantly snapping the threads. We tease out a string of knowledge in one area, but unravel the garment somewhere else. The links, the strange synchronicities, and weird juxtapositions of the natural world are but a myriad of stories embedded in our story, but because we can't put a value on those connections we discard them — accidentally

and deliberately — and say 'there's no pattern here'. Freed from these emotional obligations we exploit everything to our advantage. We don't see nature giving us 'gifts' but 'freebies'. The desire for a short-term profit, the rushing around, the hopelessness of our mortality, the constant pursuit of status and material things, blinds us to the riches we already have. We want so much to be noticed, and the earth does notice us. Most of the time our lives are meaningful and fulfilled; it's our appetites that confuse us.

Floating down the shimmering sea channels, I felt connected. The Greeks have a word for this sense of being, the *kairos*, the perfect delicate moment which is a fleeting rightness of time and place. That mood doesn't happen to me often, but it felt genuine, and reflecting on that feeling almost thirty years later I began to wonder if I had stumbled onto something. What Maori call mauri is, I believe, really the strength of our connection to the natural world, and the knowledge and awareness of this is what gives us a sense of being meaningful.

Geoff Park in his book *Nga Uruora: the groves of life* touched on this insight when he wrote: 'Just because the land has revealed something to you, however, doesn't mean it can be easily explained.'

There was a grunt from behind, also meaningful. We were in a single deep channel and the current had veered west and we were being rapidly accelerated out to the surf and ocean, so it was time to stop day-dreaming, pull finger and paddle. A few more deeper strokes and the canoe graunched onto the pebbly shore. I hopped out and we hauled the boat in. We were more tired than we realised, I think, for lifting the heavy plastic Canadian canoe onto the car roof-rack wasn't easy. The centre of gravity is high in these boats and as we hoisted it up to shoulder level we lost our grip and it twisted violently and thumped us back down to the ground. Twice.

In the Okarito information shelter there's a black and white photograph taken around the 1860s of two bearded swaggers patiently pausing (no doubt on the photographer's instructions) just before Kohuamarua Bluff. They had just left Okarito township and were heading south for the Three Mile River, and then onwards down the coast. They are wearing

moleskin trousers, holding walking sticks, and rolled-up blankets are strapped to their backs. One man has a perky boater hat, the other a soft felt hat that in nineteenth-century colonial New Zealand they used to call 'wideawakes', because they had no nap.

This was the 'road' south, the only road in fact. Surveyors, road-workers, government officials, laden packhorses, drovers with half-wild cattle, hopeful goldminers, all slogged along this beach highway. They faced river crossings, low-tide dashes around bluffs, and wretched nights in ponga huts with thousands of mosquitoes. They found it dreary. The constant droning roar of the sea, the crumping of surf, soft pluggy dark beaches, followed by another never-ending series of black headlands. One correspondent summed up the nineteenth-century traveller's view: 'The southern journey can now be accomplished from Hokitika to Jacksons Bay on horseback. It is somewhat tedious, and difficult in places and few travellers have undertaken the journey for pleasure.'

In 2015 my journey south was pure pleasure. I set out on the same beach as the swaggers with walking poles, cap and a sophisticated sleeping bag stowed in my pack. The low tide was at 7.30 pm so I left Okarito about 4 pm. Kohuamarua Bluff hasn't changed much in 150 years, and if we could bring forward those gentlemen swaggers to the present day they would know exactly where they were.

This beach is always in flux. Sand gets piled in by currents and then flushed away in an unsynchronised and chaotic pattern. Headlands can be surrounded in a massive beach plain, and two years later the beach has vanished and it's a struggle to clamber over the rocks. In recent years the Three Mile beach has seen much of its sand replaced by rocks, so the quad bikes can't get south any more. In effect, the road has been closed.

Every generation builds roads to where the important things are; to something they desire, something tempting they want to eat, or a sheltered cave to spend the night in. Our motorways will not make much sense to a future generation, but this motorway on the beach, with the sea curling into rocks and scraping the shingle back and forth, made sense a few hundred years ago. It was a greenstone pathway.

The greenstone or pounamu roads were the first trade routes to and from the West Coast, and sketched on a sheet of paper they would in

some ways resemble a modern road map. The trails crossed the passes we know, followed the river valleys where we go now. Typically, Maori would travel in family groups, with tattooed warriors carrying taiaha, with their wahine carrying dried eel (tuna) or muttonbird (titi) wrapped in kelp bags. An older wahine might carry a fire plough. Food was relatively plentiful on the coast, though some Maori parties used captive slaves to carry the greenstone and killed them when they were of no further use.

The greenstone trails existed for hundreds of years and only ceased when Europeans and metals arrived. Pounamu became not less precious, but less of a tool. Its status was never eclipsed by steel or iron because for the Maori it told a story. Handling a piece of deeply coloured greenstone such as tangiwai, which means 'tears from great sorrow', or kahurangi, 'clearness of the sky', is a realisation that the story is inside the stone itself, and these stories became a taonga and their lustre gave the landscapes texture and meaning.

This green road then became a gold road. Thousands of fresh-faced and bushy diggers landed from Australia in 1865 and struck out down the beaches, rushing past headlands, looking everywhere for 'the colours'. Such was the importance of these 'beach roads' that wherever possible the government hired unemployed miners to make pack-tracks around the headlands, and there's still one between Okarito and the Three Mile Lagoon.

Trudging along the Three Mile Beach towards Blanchards Bluff I saw a man approaching, and I intuited from his long rapid stride that he was on some private business of his own and he wasn't interested in a chat. We passed with a laconic Kiwi exchange: 'How's it going?', 'Good'. At the flooded Five Mile Creek his footsteps shuffled irritably up and down on the bank, as if he had tried to cross but had been thwarted.

The tide still had a long way to go out so I fidgeted, watching the gulls who were watching me. In the nineteenth century, swaggers on the beach would have followed a pack-track over Blanchards Bluff, and there was a ferryman to help them across Five Mile Lagoon. These West Coast ferrymen supplied not only a service but a vital crumb of human contact in this enormous wild. I could imagine the long fire-lit conversations, strained through cheap whiskey, as the traveller and

ferryman communed about what they had deduced from the world. Their patience would have been steadier than mine, and standing by the Five Mile Creek I would have quickly paid my shilling to the ferryman to get across if I'd had the chance.

On the banks of a wide river you stare across to the other side; travellers have been faced with these terrible crossings for thousands of years. We can't walk across, we have no skills to build a boat, we can't swim, but we wait. We have heard that there's a ferryman, and for a small charge he will take us to the far shore, but, and then the doubt creeps in, what is on the other side? Is it better or worse?

It's easy to see how this potent imagery could be transmuted into the journey from life to death. The Greeks believed that upon death the newly deceased souls would descend to Hades and the River Styx, which separated the living world from the dead, and there in that final awful darkness underground, the hooded figure of Charon would pole the dead person across on his boat.

Funeral attendants would place a coin, usually a low-value *obol* or *danake*, in the mouth of the dead person in order to pay the ferryman. The poor value of the coin was a pointed allusion to show that death is a great leveller, and the rich could no more escape it than the poor. Strange to pay for a journey to where you don't want to go, but if you could not pay Charon, you would be forced to wander the shores of the Styx for a hundred years, some said for ever. Restlessness, it seems, is worse than death itself, so you paid the ferryman.

Ancient depictions of Charon often show a sinister figure, face-hidden, shrouded, dark-cloaked, and if the face was revealed it was a skull, a version of the Grim Reaper himself. One medieval book illustration pointedly has the Devil sitting in the boat. But other paintings show a rather helpful man who might have been a bus driver collecting a ticket: 'This way please, sir', 'Careful on that thwart, ma'am', 'Are you sitting comfortably?'

The ferrymen who plied their trade on the West Coast in the mid-nineteenth century were much more of the cheerful busman sort, with monikers to match — Californian Bill (he operated the Waiho ferry)

German Harry, Arawata Bill, Bill the Maori — but the journey across a wide strong river such as the Arawhata, or the Waiho, in an ancient rowing boat was undoubtedly dangerous. Travellers in the nineteenth century were versed in Latin and Greek and in one newspaper clipping there was a gold-digger's lugubrious comment: 'At every river there was another bearded Charon, with his dinghy and stories, fortunately not the mythological one.' The ferrymen lived in huts alongside the river with a boat and some sort of contact system for people who wanted to cross. It could be a flag, or loud yells. Later on wires were strung over for a simple telephone. The boats were dilapidated dinghies, maybe a whaler's wherry, and any pack animal or horse had to swim behind. Charges were usually sixpence or a shilling a crossing, although there were subsidies on every river. With the job came a patch of land to graze a cow, or sheep, and on an average day the ferryman would spend more time in his vegetable garden than on the ferry.

Ferrymen had patience built into their job description and it was a life that suited the semi-retired man. They were philosophical types, always ready for a yarn. Of ferryman William Hindley — who worked and philosophised on the Waiatoto River — Charlie Douglas wrote:

> 'But long may he and others rule the Ferries South, but for their eccentricities we would have nothing to talk about. Can anyone explain why Ferrymen are in general Characters, do ferries make them so? Or are they a special case born to create Ferries & how is it that they are in general sociable & talkative, while the Tollman, whose occupation is about the same is a gloomy Misanthrope?'

Douglas understood the ferrymen — he was one himself, after all — but he also got caught up in the river's movement. He tried out jobs here and there, settling in one place, then shifting on, half inclined to stay for a while, and then sensing the wavering water, he shoved off to another landfall.

Sadly, the stories of the ferrymen and the swaggers have mostly vanished, and very little of their history has been written down. I regret that, for this is how we get whittled away. Skin flakes, hair retreats, lines deepen, and we become our own self-selected memories, then the

unreliable recollections of other people. Eventually, all that is left is a tiny recorded residue that might be called history. The connection is broken. We've crossed to the other side.

It took ten minutes to boil the billy on a driftwood fire, then I spent an hour slapping at the blood-sucking sandflies until, finally, I could wade across the Five Mile Creek and the full cascading run of the Franz Josef Glacier walloped me in the eye. I said out loud, 'That's beautiful.' The glacier begins in a neve over two kilometres higher than the shoreline, and behind it are higher mountains in a huddled and clenched group, squeezing out the ice as if from a gigantic tube of frozen toothpaste.

The untrodden beach sands on the Five Mile had a salt crust with white patches that resembled frost and crackled underfoot. There were 'bear' prints, some below the high-tide line. Rabbits, probably, I thought, perhaps some possums, though why either animal came down to the beach puzzled me, unless they were licking salt off the rocks. In one place two deer had run rapidly onto the beach and had a melee. Maybe it was play, or a fight, but I could follow their deep prints mushed in a tight aggressive circle until the hoof marks dashed back into the scrub to finish the business.

Nothing moves on the sand without being recorded. Scrawling lines of worms, laborious beetle trails, and hundreds of small trap doors leading to a crab's lair. Bird prints formed a mosaic of industrious criss-crossing, with banded dotterels, oystercatchers, black-backed gulls, spur-wing plovers overlapping and intertwining, yet also going about their own preoccupied lives. My own foot-trail made little sense, looping around logs, scuffing around an interesting driftwood sculpture and then edging tentatively along the gorse until I finally spotted the road.

It led through the gorse-covered dunes to a large black-sanders shed with a satellite dish on top. Lengths of black piping resembled coiled fat eels and the front step collapsed when I stepped on it. No one had been here for months. There was a rippleboard contraption built on a trailer which in turn was probably hooked up to a quad bike, and then driven down to the beach. Black sand was shovelled into one end and water

pumped through so the heavier gold grains are trapped in the riffles. Most amateur claims use a small generator these days, but even so it's hard work.

A gold rush dumped a town here. Historic black and white photos from the 1860s show the File Mile Town had impressive wooden frontages, usually with the moustachioed proprietor leaning grandly against it, masking the canvas tent tucked surreptitiously behind. The town lasted for three years and boasted a post office, several stores, a bank, a school, many grog shanties (most of them illegal) and a population of 2000 people jostling, swearing, scratching at sandflies, and digging through the rich black sands that were quickly run through the ripple boards and sucked dry of gold.

By the 1890s only a few solitary miners were still working on the Five Mile, and they were known as 'hatters'. Old worn-out men, working the beach for a few grains of gold a week, and just the occasional comfort of a little 'something' bought at Donovans Store at Okarito. Under the broken steps of the shed I found an old medicinal bottle with emphatic raised lettering that stated: 'This bottle remains at all times the property of Clements Tonic'.

Many of the small black-sanding gold claims haven't actually been extinguished, and are quietly passed on, or sold for a few quid or a crate of beer and usually into the ownership of West Coast families. There's no money in it; well, no one admits to any money in it.

I still had one more gold relic to find. The bush track was marked with pink tape and squirmed around a dead possum half melded into the earth with its skeleton tail curved in a koru shape. Strips of grey rimu bark had toppled to the ground like roofing slate. Everything smelt rotten. The trail stopped at a deep black lagoon and the submerged branches were as rosy-coloured as Ophelia's arms, the flax forming an immaculate double-mirrored wall along the virginal channelway. As I peered in, I saw an exact copy of me peering back. There might be fat black long-finned eels down there, looking up and wondering: what sort of food is that?

The last scrap of pink tape was attached to a line of old gold dredge buckets with the word 'Sheffield' stamped over them. Since working gold dredges float, I suppose that this is really a type of inland shipwreck.

The giant engine has been slumped in this melancholy posture for a hundred years or so, and nearly all of the steam-powered boilers and huge elevators, pontoons, clanking cranes, winches, cast-iron machinery and miscellaneous iron trash has been absorbed almost tenderly into the black-water lagoon.

On someone's database there would be the notation 'derelict gold dredge', although they could have written (and as accurately) 'taniwha waiting'. A few gold-tinged leaves hesitate on the ebony surface of the water, waiting for something to rise up and suck them down.

The evening lowered, cloud crushing the horizon. Some black titi or muttonbirds were dipping in and out of the waves and the air was as warm and velveteen as a Spanish night. My evening *paseo* was down to Waiho Bluff, where I got a fright as a seal (more of a half-pup really) snorted its way hastily over the rocks and into the foam. It looked at me once, vigorously blew through its moustache, then dived underwater. At the river mouth the Waiho River was the colour of brownish milk: turbid, swollen, pregnant with threat. Massive boulders have been pushed here, and I ran my fingers along a quartz vein which writhed and quivered as if the river currents and foam had slowly forced its way into the fabric of the rock.

West Coast rivers are intimidating, they don't let you think. Only two weeks ago I was in the headwaters of the Arahura River — the prime source of pounamu for Maori — as it bludgeoned its way down through the mountains, dragging great nephrite boulders in a sulky milky cascade. Mist seeped into the crannies of spurs and ridges, obscuring, revealing, softening, wetting. Everything was lush and exploding, earthy and humid, and I remembered how in that all-green matrix there were surprising amounts of red — in the rata flowers, and the pepper tree leaves with their multi-measled red design, and the bright pink stems of fuchsia. Lichen covered the rocks in unnatural fur, and the lower river terraces of the Arahura River had rows of ponga ferns lined up as if green parasols had bagged a space on the gravel beaches.

Back on the Five Mile shoreline I cleared away the driftwood, pumped up the air mattress and by 8 pm the only sunlight left was on

Mt Elie de Beaumont, Mt Tasman and Mt Cook, each peak daubed with a juicy tip of pink. About three years ago I was up on that neve, standing by the doorway of Centennial Hut as the air crunched with cold and the ice-fields flushed with an organdie sunset. I still clearly remember looking down on the Five Mile lagoon as it was being enveloped into the black hole of night.

It wasn't a great sleep. Stars swung in a waltzing gyre, the surf got noisy, and it never really got dark, as if some sort of light oozed off the snow-fields because a midnight snacker had left the fridge door open. Mosquitoes vanished in the cold and my sleeping bag became soggy with dew, and then gained flecks of white frost. So I was happy to see the freezing dawn and lit a big fire of driftwood — fierce, bright and warming — and when the billy boiled rapidly I flung in the tea leaves and gulped down the hot amber.

My eyes kept turning up to the neves, and I wondered if anyone was at the hut this morning. Perhaps they'd struggled outside with a full bladder, yawning, fumbling with their clothes, and then sleepily squinting across the glaciers and the ice-glazed gloaming of dawn, they would have spotted this little bonfire on the beach for sure, and been momentarily puzzled. Brighter than Venus it was, fire as a taonga.

BOOKS & SOURCES

■ *Commissioner Point*. The old hut is now called Top Okarito, privately owned but currently open to the public. Canoes can be hired at Okarito. My canoe partner on that trip was Kate McClaren.

■ *Nga Uruora: the groves of life* (1995), Geoff Park. A seminal work, which I understood much better when I re-read it twenty years later. 'I believe there are places where the land has expectations we must meet, where people can live only briefly.'

■ *Teaching the Trees: Lessons from the Forest* (2005), Joan Maloof. Based in Maryland, USA, Maloof experienced great anguish as she watched the old-growth forests being developed into housing estates. She realised that only two per cent of old-growth forest was left in the state and that it was all in private ownership. She established an action group called Old Growth Forest Network to try to galvanise public opinion to save these rare forests. *National Geographic* magazine estimated that in the nearby coastal state of Maine, only a small percentage of the shore is in public ownership, so New Zealanders should count themselves lucky.

■ *Mauri*. These concepts of the value of the natural world are not just the preserve of indigenous cultures. In Sweden in 2017, seventy per cent of the population expressed the belief that being in nature, or close to nature, made their lives more meaningful. In quantum mechanics there is the notion of 'entanglement', the idea that particles are 'entangled' with each other in all sorts of complex and barely understood ways, and I think this is a useful metaphor for our own relationship with nature. On the Okarito beach (or any other beach for that matter) we feel and know instinctively that all the parts contribute to the completion of the scene — but we are entangled as well. We might insist that we are just observers, but at the moment of observation we are as necessary to the beach's presence as each grain of sand, neither more nor less.

■ *The Greenstone Trails: the Maori search for pounamu* (1984), Barry Brailsford.

■ *Pounamu: the jade of New Zealand* (2010), Russell Beck with Maika Mason. The photographs of the cut and uncut greenstone by Andris Apse are very fine.

■ *Franz Josef Glacier*. Captain Cook sailed past Franz Josef Glacier twice and never saw it.

■ *Mr Explorer Douglas* (1957), John Pascoe. Douglas worked as a ferryman on the Paringa River and he already knew the answer to his rhetorical question: the ferryman eases your passage, the tollman is a tax collector.

■ *West Coast Times* can be accessed through the Papers Past online catalogue. It reports extensively on ferries and ferrymen in the nineteenth century. This news item is from 1896.

> 'We have had some fearfully bad weather here for the last few weeks. All the rivers have been continually flooded and travelling has been difficult and dangerous. Some days the various rivers are so high in flood that the ferrymen have been, time after time, unable to cross with passengers. Last Sunday the Waiho ferryman while coming across to take some passengers over in his boat was carried out to sea, but fortunately got landed on the beach without accident, but had to remain several days before he could attempt to cross back to his home.'

■ *Hatter*. Usually an old ex-gold miner working on his own. The term probably derives from the self-imposed isolation and therefore 'mad as a hatter'.

■ *Taniwha*. This is a guardian and a predator, often lurking under a lake or river. It could take the shape of a giant lizard. It has to be appeased, and sometimes it gets nasty. A taniwha is not necessarily real, but also not something you would wish to meet, real or otherwise.

■ *Centennial Hut*. This hut is between the Agassiz Glacier and the Chamberlin Snowfield at the head of Franz Josef Glacier. Located at 2360 metres altitude, it is one of the highest huts in New Zealand.

DUNSTAN ROAD

It was a large, wide, dark surf overhanging the Otago peneplains. A sky wave, with lenticular clouds stacked up as odd-sized white saucers in grandmother's cupboard. Some rolled-up clouds resembled fat dags, but the sky is not static, and was being constantly recharged by the nor'west wind, and then reassembling itself. I especially noticed the small dark scruffy cumulus that escaped before the massed cloud, as if black sheep were trying to run away from the looming frontal jaws. Occasionally, a wishy-washy blue poked through gaps in the clouds as if the sky had been strained through a wringer for too long.

The rock outcrops are heads on plinths, unmoved by the drama above them, cold and deliberately turned away. Their faces chewed by wind and frost into elaborate overhangs and cusps. Mica flakes gleam in sunlight and the strata ripples through like an old man's vein at the point of bursting. Thickets of aciphylla make a blazoned show, with their gorgeous creamy flower heads shot through with finger-long thorns and leaves that cut in razor slashes. Sky and rock, wind and gold, harsh shadows and pinpricks of colour, this is the landscape that the Dunstan Road crosses.

Basically, my idea in this chapter was to follow the road from start to finish, catching the dust of history and some of the voices of men who made the journey before me. I wrote about the aspects of Otago that caught my fancy, like boundaries, the Queen's Chain and paper roads, and frankly the text rumbles along and is as disconnected at the road itself, and almost as long-winded, and I'm sorry about that — but the land wanted me to talk about freedom.

A single yellow fingerpost at Clarke's Junction marks the start of the Dunstan Road. Initially, it is sealed, as it drops down to Deep Stream at Rocklands Station, and then the gravel erupts and a warning sign states: 'Dry weather road not maintained'. That's not strictly true, as a grader does trundle up here from time to time, and scrapes at the surface and fills in the road ruts with mud that becomes greasy after rain and snow. It's a steady climb, with the spidery transmission lines keeping company with the road, and at the Te Papanui junction the good black gravel ends and the ochre dust begins.

This is still a well-used landscape, with repeater towers on hills, the wired webs of fencelines, muted grazing stock, and most days someone drives up here for work: the farmer, an electricity line worker, or a roadman on his grader. On this particular day it was a fleet of pest control men and women charging about on quad bikes. Somewhere — and I'm not sure exactly where — the farmland changes to tussock and then the Dunstan Road dashes over the pretty Sutton Stream, and starts to climb abruptly to the top plateau. And climb and climb, until you reach a landscape at an altitude of 800 metres that is uncomfortable and bluntly unaccommodating. It happens quickly, and if you have driven from Dunedin that morning as I did, it seems peculiar to be up on an alpine plateau with tussocks and skerricks of snow glued on the hills, and yet still be inside the Dunedin city boundary.

It is hard to imagine why anyone would think this high-altitude peneplain was a great place for a road, but in 1858 the Shennan brothers had little choice.

The previous year Alexander and Watson Shennan had tramped up the Clutha Gorge and over the Knobby Range to the Manuherikia River, near present-day Alexandra. They were satisfied with what they saw, took out a lease, and came back in 1858, driving their sheep over the 'Lammermoors' because the valley routes were too scrubby and swampy for sheep. After a week they returned their wheeled dray after it got repeatedly stuck in the mud and used bullocks to pull their goods on a sledge instead.

Even by the grim standards of the nineteenth century it was a nightmare trip. The route they took went via Styx and Puketoi stations, then over and down the Rough Ridge, which is still known as Shennans Track. They had to make a road as they went, herd their sheep closely and they struggled to find any fuel to burn. They were caught in a snow blizzard, and for four weeks they fought their way over to the Manuherikia River to the 50,000-acre station which they named Galloway. It's still there, though the Shennans sold it in 1860, and Watson Shennan subsequently bought Puketoi Station.

In this modest way the Dunstan Road began its existence, but the cash-strapped Otago Provincial Government could not afford to spend

much on road maintenance. Roadmen made some shallow cuttings, dug a few drainage ditches, and flat stones were bedded into fords and a miserly layer of metal was scattered on the surface. By 1860 there was a passable dray track of sorts going from Outram all the way to Blacks Station on the Manuherikia River. It was okay in dry weather, a mudway by autumn, and in winter it was useless. In the normal course of settlement, the Dunstan Road would have been superseded by a valley route and completely forgotten within ten years, but it was destined for a rare fame.

In 1861 gold was discovered at the junction of the Kawarau and Clutha rivers at a place called Dunstan, nowadays known as Cromwell. The Dunstan Road wasn't the easiest way to the new gold diggings, but at only 130 kilometres from Dunedin it was the shortest and fastest route, and it seized the public's imagination. A remote alpine road crossing four mountain ranges (some over 1000 metres high), a five-day trek on foot through a wilderness, with harsh weather, baffling topography and no shelter for a man caught in a snow blizzard. The Dunstan Road had an epic and romantic quality about it which it has never lost, every kilometre infused with a historic intensity, and it is the only road listed as a Category 1 historic place by the Historic Places Trust. It is still probably one of the few roads in New Zealand that is famous in its own right.

On the plateau the power pylons sheer away at Sentinel Rock, striding into the misty Lammermoors. From the road I catch a glimpse of the Loganburn Reservoir which was once called the Dismal Swamp, and then later more poetically but far less accurately, the Great Moss Swamp. Howell Hut is actually two locked cribs, one painted a noisy pink in defiance of the landscape's quietude.

Then the road rises away from the lake and gets distinctly more rutted as it crosses a ford at McPhees Stream to a subtle crest at 1030 metres. Mr McPhee and his wife ran the Halfway House Hotel and stables at the crook of road here, and for three years it was the necessary overnight halt for the coaches and dray wagons. The peat fire burned all day, without much heat, and crowds of gold-diggers would jostle in the bar for a nobbler and the company of fresh rumours.

This saddle is a natural place to pause, and this is where I think the Lammermoors and the Rock and Pillar Ranges separate, or meet, a hinge on the Dunstan Road where the landscape doors open as you top the rise and gaze towards the upper Taieri River valley. Outside the car, the silence and golden light came flooding over. This land is what the locals call simply — Central.

Just the shape and sensual fold of the Otago peneplains remind people of the arms and legs of people lying down, or otherwise engaged, as in Denis Glover's poem of a 'country rumpled like an unmade bed'. Sometimes the spurs are interlocked fingers of hands at rest, knotted, tense, thoughtful, and hillsides droop like quilts on the fleshy spurs, often hemmed with zigzaggy lines that mark where the roads and four-wheel-drive tracks have stitched the land together.

Nowadays people forge their experience of Central Otago by driving through it. Trundling on back-country roads with the music blasting and getting whiffs of freedom through a cinerama windscreen. Occasional 'oohs' and 'aahs' break the silence as unending and satisfying vistas open up. Because we follow the dictatorship of the road, it gives us a sense we have explored all the important spaces here, as if a land without roads is the oddity. Well, actually, that's becoming sadly true.

When I searched through the map database of Central Otago, the largest roadless space I found was a block of land about fifteen kilometres wide and long, covering the Garvie Mountains and the adjoining Old Man Range. About 225 square kilometres with no public metalled roads (like the Dunstan), or bulldozed service trails for electric pylons, and not a single sheep-farmer's track. Even the paper roads were absent. At first glance a map without any roads seems oddly meaningless; the only building here is a solitary musterer's hut called Jack Macks owned by Glenaray Station, and when we tramped there in 2015 the logbook proudly recorded that the hut could only be accessed by horse, pack-animals and foot-sloggers.

But what this map is really telling us is that a few steps off any road there are other 'elsewheres' with completely different rules. In the 1860s a horse-rider, or a gold-digger on foot, could wander freely in

all directions across Otago, and they did so, and there's nothing really to stop us doing that now, but we don't. Roads might be corridors of power, but they also form habitual pathways which give us the comfort of accessing a landscape without participating in it. I like roads, but every now and then you have to break free.

Slamming the car door shut, I decided it was time for a stroll.

In the late winter of 1861 two swaggers with overladen packhorses arrived at Valpys Station at Patearoa. The station was near the Upper Taieri ford, a vital link on what is now known as the Dunstan Road. The men looked tired and worn out, and the packhorses were hungry. The back mountains were still covered with snow and the travellers seemed to have appeared from nowhere.

Swaggers were rare at that time, and as Mr Langlands, the manager, reminisced later, 'when an occasional one did turn up, he was invited to stay for the novelty of seeing a strange face'. Langlands never met the two men, but his cadet said they were Australians who'd been prospecting in the back-country, but 'could not stand the rigour of the climate and were making back to Victoria as fast as they could'. Next morning Langlands asked the cook about the two men, but they had already gone. The cook replied with a shrug.

> 'They have gone, they left word that they were much obliged to you for permission to stay, but they were so sick of the country they would never rest until they were out of it, and left early.'
> 'Were they fit to travel?' Langlands asked, somewhat amazed.
> 'They made a poor show sir, and went away limping. They were offered better clothes and boots by some of the hands, but would accept nothing, except some tucker to do them for the day.'

Langlands was puzzled by the men's behaviour. Most swaggers welcomed the hospitality of a station. Here would be a warm fire, a yarn, some mutton roast, and sometimes they had trouble getting rid of them for they enjoyed the station comforts far too much — but not these two. Later, not much later, Langlands realised who his mystery swaggers were, and why the two Victorians were anxious and desperate to keep moving.

Strapped to their packhorses was a hefty eighty-seven pounds of gold.

Horatio Hartley and Christopher Reilly caused a sensation when they reached Dunedin and deposited 1000 ounces of gold at the Gold Receivers office. The men received about £2400 each, and it's hard these days to grasp what this money meant. A snug Dunedin freehold cottage was advertised in the *Otago Daily Times* in 1862 for about £300, so Hartley and Reilly could have bought themselves several Dunedin houses each. By 2013's massively inflated price of gold of around £900 an ounce, this meant they each had made about £450,000, or close to $NZ1 million. Not bad for a four-month winter sojourn.

Dunedin went mad, and that wasn't all. The two prospectors also claimed the gold reward of £2000 for discovering a new goldfield. Hartley travelled back with the soon-to-be Commissioner Jackson Keddell and four troopers two weeks later, to show him the exact spot on the junction of the Clutha and Kawarau rivers where the two men had made their fortune. Hundreds of hopeful gold-diggers followed. Hartley and Keddell stopped at Valpys Station on their way through, and Langlands recalled the interview.

> 'After lunch, while smoking outside, this man said he wished to speak to me, at the same time walking round the front of the house until he reached the men's quarters, where he opened the door. I looked at him, but did not recollect ever seeing him before.
>
> 'Pointing to a bunk he said, "I slept there one night." I told him I had no recollection of that. "No," he said, "you didn't see me, but do you remember sending word to two footsore prospectors that they could stay until they got all right?" "Yes," I said, "were you one of them?" "I was." "Well, what made you go away if, as I was told, you were footsore, had bad boots, and were in rags?"'

Hartley winked the other eye at the fast one that he and his digger pal had pulled.

> '"Look here mate, if you had seen us after we got round that point and changed our boots and clothes you would not have seen anything footsore about us!"'

Walking up to McPhees Rock is not legal. The paper road, the invisible road on the ground that doesn't exist, but everyone knows is there, does not follow the formed farm road but veers around the back of the rock. Strictly speaking I'm trespassing, which doesn't bother me, but it does concern me that despite the splendid open vistas along the Dunstan Road, which give the comfortable impression that this is public land, very little is.

The cadastral maps published on the Walking Access Commission website tell us to the metre exactly what is public land, what is private land, where I can go, and where I can't go. Much of the landscape along the Dunstan road is private, or in leasehold pastoral runs, which means that the Otago uplands are not a well-protected landscape.

A cadaster is an ancient word dating back at least to the Romans, who wanted to organise their lands to collect more taxes. The English word derives from the Latin *capitastrum*, a register of poll tax. Measuring land is also tied up with the English expression of 'metes and bounds', a 'mete' meaning to measure. In medieval practice a 'mete' was in effect a long descriptive prose sentence that, for example, began with a prominent rock, then verbally takes the occupier along a fence, twisting back to a stream, waymarking a prominent tree, or a barn, and returning to the rock again. The land inside the language was yours.

Early run-holders in Otago did much the same when they staked out a grazing right, running their boundaries through natural markers such as rivers, or along the crests of the mountains. This is awkward in Central Otago since the mountains sprawl in such shapeless lumps that the crest is hard to define, and the serpentine silvery swamp of the Taieri River defied any boundary logic at all.

Knowing your boundary was important for settlers, but not of great interest to nomads, or gold-diggers for that matter. In the 1860s miners could dig pretty much where they wanted, and the landowner would get compensated later, if at all. Nobody likes being told what to do, which is what a boundary does. On the other hand, everyone wants to define what they own, which is also what a boundary does.

The Kinder Scout 'Mass Trespass' near Manchester in 1932 was a defining issue in England then, and it still is. It has its own website.

Kinder Scout is thirty kilometres from Manchester, the highest point in the Peak District at 636 metres. In April four hundred or so young working-class men and women deliberately tramped onto private land to argue for greater recreational access for industrial workers. Barely two per cent of open wild areas around Manchester were available for walking, yet up to 15,000 ramblers might head out on any Sunday. It was manifestly unfair, and the ramblers were irritated that the land was barred most of the time just so grouse could be shot on twelve days of the year. The protest was by no means welcomed: the local villagers opposed it, the landed gentry didn't want it, and the official rambling clubs called it 'organised hooliganism'.

As the protesters walked they sang the socialist anthems 'International' and the 'Red Flag'. It was young versus old, working class versus aristocracy, rights for many as against rights of a few. The walkers were met by the Duke of Devonshire's gamekeepers and a lively stoush resulted with words and fists flying, and the walkers triumphantly continued upwards. The authorities were enraged, and arrested six men, of whom five were given harsh sentences of two to six months' imprisonment, not for trespass, but for riotous assembly. This extreme verdict galvanised public opinion and two weeks later 10,000 ramblers, the largest group of walkers ever assembled, protested near Winnats Pass.

When young people protest they are usually right, and the old fogies are steaming wrong. It would be nice to think the Kinder Scout Mass Trespass changed matters quickly, but it didn't. The 1949 National Parks Act cautiously approved mechanisms for negotiation for better access, and the Peak District was one of the first areas to receive attention. But it was not until the Countryside Rights of Way Act (CROW) of 2000, sixty-eight years after the Mass Trespass, that saw walkers granted a limited 'right to roam' on moorlands and mountain lands. In a nice touch the 11th Duke of Devonshire apologised in 2002 — so the young were right after all.

Although this fracas happened a long time ago, in another country and another century, it still seems pertinent to the way we look at land

and enjoy land. We are constrained by permits and permissions, laws of the landowner and the state, and it's odd we talk about freedom so much, because it doesn't really exist. Society grants us privileges as long as we obey the rules.

The 1861 gold-diggers had no qualms about roaming anywhere, the land was empty, and in any case they were 'bettering' the Province by finding wealth. Modern walkers do not have that excuse, we are only bettering ourselves, but there's a sense that the gold-digger was also briefly trying to escape nineteenth-century social strait-jackets — although, the policeman, judge and tax collector were never far behind.

What's all this got to do with Otago? On the far side of the Great Moss Lake the slopes are a strange verdant green. They've been top dressed. Not so slowly, industrial farming is creeping up onto the higher slopes, so introducing a friction between the person who wants to stroll about the landscape and the owner who is trying to make a living. At one level the owner is being perfectly reasonable. No one want strangers wandering about the factory floor willy-nilly, but what happens when the factory is mountain tops and big skies?

Bruce Ansley described this landscape 'as deserted but somehow not abandoned', and lolling sleepily against McPhees Rock in the late sunshine, I find myself agreeing with the Kinder Scout walkers. The private ownership of mountain lands is absurd, and perhaps one day soon, we might have to trespass more deliberately. A 'right to roam' above 800 metres would be splendid in the Otago uplands.

Schist is derived from the Greek 'to split'. Schizophrenia also comes from the same root word, reflecting the original notion that the disorder involves a 'split personality'. It's a metamorphic rock where the original shale or mudstone has been squeezed at high pressure in the earth and over time pushed up onto the surface. Large crystals of quartz and mica often made the rocks shine, probably enticing the early gold-diggers who made a grab for anything that glittered. Schist can be hard in one plane and crumbly in another. It can be compressed, laminated and pancaked into an impossible density, yet on its weak underbelly the rocks are etched into colonies of small pits as exact as a

line of swallows' nests. The weathered quartz nodules can turn red, and orange lichen finds succour in the holes of rock. At a distance the black schist rock gives a darkling edge to the skyline, as if a scenic photo has been over-pixelated.

In Otago, schist comes in handy workable slabs. Horizontal slabs can build a cow byre quickly, or a house wall. Everywhere along the Dunstan Road you see upright slabs of stone schist that have been used as impromptu fence posts and lassoed with No. 8 wire. The steep road that descends 500 metres from McPhees to the Styx gorge at Paerau was a severe test for the bullockies, and it was a common practice to drag large lumps of schist rock behind the bullock wagon to brake the dizzying descent in dirt, dust and dung.

At the bottom of the hill at Paerau there's a sheep yard made of upright schist slabs where the original wires have been stripped away, leaving avenues of stones. A quick glance to check the farmer wasn't about, then I hopped over the fence and walked over to what now resembled a megalithic temple. Were some of these the bullockies' drag stones? Dumped in a pile by the waggoners, then assembled by a thrifty farmer into a sheep yard?

The Styx 'gaol' is across the river and a visitor has to ignore the strident handwritten sign that tells you that this is private property and absolutely everything is forbidden. Ancient willows stroke the surface of the ponds and old-fashioned hollyhocks add bright notes of colour. There's no wood in this landscape, not in 1862, and not much now. To build the walls the clay was puddled with water and straw and layered on top of the next layer as the bottom one dried; these 'cob' buildings were much faster to build than stone huts. Tussock grass provided the thatch. However, in heavy rain, or if the Styx River flooded, the cob huts could simply melt away, so later schist rock replaced cob. Every early hut at Styx (or even Central Otago for that matter) carries the soul of the landscape within it.

There's the hotel built in 1861, a large building made of cob and roofed with iron. The stables are a splendid stone structure, still smelling of horses. The Styx gaol is a neat stone building and rather unlike a jail, I think. Would they really have kept prisoners and gold bullion in a

cottage with windows? The gold escort from the Dunstan diggings did just that, according to the story.

Up behind the buildings there are rows of schist fenceposts resembling headstones, and even on this warm summer's day the Styx felt a tad melancholy. Since I enjoy cemeteries I don't mind, and run my hand over the surfaces of the stones, feeling the sprawl of leathery lichen — crunchy, apparently lifeless. The silence felt strong, and time paused. An evening harrier hesitated in the lengthening shadows, and yellowhammers repeated the same musical idea in the willows. The last bit of sun syrup dripped onto an old plough, and the air itself felt sleepy. So in complete defiance of the sign — which has probably forbidden camping as well — I park the car and go to bed.

The next section of the Dunstan Road can't be driven. It's in limbo between the Linnburn Runs Road and the Styx gaol, and it's not even clear where the road is, but there are one or two clues. A gate says 'Please Close'. If it had been private property it would have said so. Nineteenth-century surveyors marked unformed legal roads or 'paper roads' at a chain's width, which is twenty-two yards. Since a yard and a metre are roughly the same measurement, everywhere in New Zealand where there are two parallel fence lines about twenty-two metres apart it's a dead giveaway that it's a legal road.

The few sheep look hot and bothered and the farm track I'm walking on swivels up through the scent of wild flowers and dust, and into big skies and pencil-thin altostratus. Slowly the summer soils of the upper Maniototo are becoming heat-tempered and bitter with a hint of salt, and each rock outcrop is set in sphinx-like aloofness. The tussock grass is almost white. Because there are no obvious modern landmarks to keep me in the twentieth century, it's easy to slip back a hundred and fifty years or so. At the point where the farm track crosses bedrock there are the two discernible grooves in the schist, and I study them thoughtfully. It seems improbable, but they have the defined cut and narrow width of dray carts. Could they be the stigmata of a bullock cart a hundred years before?

The wagons groaned downhill. The harsh cracking of the bullockie's huge whips, the moans of the beasts. Creaking wood and harness from

the overloaded drays, with sudden alarming lurches over the edge of the narrow track and outbursts of bad language as the bullockie struggles to keep the steers on the track. Every animal would have a name, but what they understood is anyone's guess. The chains would graunch and drag against the wheels to slow the wagon down, and everywhere dust would fill this narrow gully and choke the bullockie's throat. It was colourful, noisy, frustrating progress.

'Oh the days when the track was a road, boys,
The rollicking days of old,
When the bullockies came with their load, boys,
The days of the first of the gold!'

A team of ten bullocks could pull a wagon of three tons on a flat road at about two miles an hour. They were the truck, semi-trailer, tractor, bulldozer and bus of the empire, all rolled into one. William Vance in his book *Bush, Bullocks and Boulders* speculated that many rural settlements in New Zealand were twelve to fifteen miles apart (20–30 km), because these lumbering, and not unlovely, animals physically dictated the rural landscape. Where they stopped, everything stopped.

On the Dunstan Road a bullock team might normally expect to take eight to twelve days along the high tortuous mountain track from Dunedin to Dunstan. It was slow and dangerous, and because the bullock drivers slept under the wagons at night, with dust in their hair and their tongues turned to earth, every day they badly needed a drink. I must have been dull not to realise this, but when I marked on the map where the shanties and hotels were on the Dunstan Road, it became self-evident that they were usually a bullock's day journey apart. Thirsty work, eh boys?

Now we climb again. A heavy old-fashioned iron gate blocks the way and has to be manhandled back in place. The Old Dunstan Road sign is clearly tipsy, pointing up at a sky flecked with dribbling white cirrus. The white road climbs up the hillside from the Linnburn Runs Road and onto the sticky flanks of the Rough Ridge. Fences have

been constructed using schist slabs, and the leftover No. 8 wire curls in crazy corkscrew twists. Here and there the road has been worn down to the bedrock, sending the car rocking and rolling along the carbuncled surfaces, and even when driving slowly you sense that this land is reluctant to let you in, but perversely, as the road gets dodgier, it gets more interesting. The car breaches the 1000-metre contour and then the road lumbers through a plateau of dark tors that have massed in menacing panzer divisions.

Pink briar insinuates itself between the rocks and roadside Scotch thistles have a pop-up purple flower like a punk rocker's hairdo. On every tall flower of the viper's bugloss is a corpulent bumblebee, toppling the stem and desperately clinging onto their small skyscrapers like miniature King Kongs. Opening gates, closing gates, crossing creeks, keeping the wheels out of any side-bogs. The skies are raw, the clouds are close. Amidst this rough-skinned land — which a local poet called 'dry as a buzzard's crutch' — the Poolburn Reservoir suddenly gleams as an open polynya in a desert of rock and earth. The light is luminous and chilly, and when I open the car door, it made me shiver.

In the 1860s the gold-diggers and bullockies never saw the Poolburn 'lake'. The Drunken Women's shanty that they headed for is now drowned under the waters, but I would rather have the lake — strangely coloured as it is — than a pub. For me anyway, the Poolburn Reservoir is where the poetry starts. Other people must think so too, for all around the lake are cribs, some stuck out on outcrops, others snuck into little coves. Some huts are only metres from the roadline and any passer-by can practically lean in through the open window and help themselves to the sausages frying for lunch. There is a bus painted battleship grey-green, and another has the full condiments of a suburban house — garage, pot plants and satellite TV dish. A home-made sign beside the lake states forthrightly: 'Further Hut Resurrection Prohibited In This Area'.

I like that. This is a biblical, Old Testament landscape, thank you very much, so none of your new-fangled resurrections here. On this grey hazy day, the rocks melt into grazing sheep and the sheep are calcified into humped tors. It confuses everyone. 'All around rise rocks that

look like houses and huts, and villages, and people, and dinosaurs. My, you think, that looks like a festival up ahead, people and wagons and buildings. But, of course, they're rocks.'

Pareidolia is 'the imagined perception of a pattern or meaning where it does not actually exist'. You know the sort of thing: the man in the moon, or newspaper photos of the Madonna on the burnt toast. Just near the Poolburn there is a large rock outcrop that uncannily resembles a gigantic rabbit, and pictures of it have been posted on the internet.

Everywhere in Otago you can find sharp schist outcrops that resemble a face sticking out in profile, and they could easily be the faces of the gold-diggers, frozen, hungry, penetrating, still scouring the land for the glitter that eluded them. My pareidolia is worse than that. New faces remind me of other faces, or an incident resembles something that happened long ago. As I get older the tail of memories is far longer than what lies in front of me, so it's tempting to join them together as a pattern, perhaps to make sense of this life and apply some wisdom in the shorter bit that lies ahead.

That evening the cloud smeared thickly over the lake and spotted the car window with droplets. It wasn't really rain, but a sort of grey wet blanket pulled around me, and by darkness my Subaru has become just another motionless rock outcrop.

There are over 56,000 kilometres of unformed roads in New Zealand, often called 'paper roads'. They were used as droving alleyways, bullock routes for exporting produce, dragging pianolas in, walking access for school pupils, and social corridors for women.

Formed and unformed roads became vital bloodlines for the new country, but they were also something more. They were a statement of New Zealand's egalitarianism, an idea that still has great emotive power.

Provincial governments in the 1860s fondly imagined a New Zealand dominated by prosperous yeoman farmers on small-holdings with towns full of happy tradespeople to maintain the rural communities. They wanted to avoid gentry on large English-style estates 'grid-ironing' the small farmer out of existence by buying all the land and denying access.

With this political ideal in mind, the government surveyors diligently followed the roving gold-diggers to their numerous claims and counter

claims, dragging massive theodolites and chains after a duffer rush, or onto a poor man's diggings, or on crazed short cuts across the mountains. The surveyors laid out a plethora of roads as well as police camps, townships, hotel enclosures, stock-holding areas, just about everything and everywhere. Long after the gold-diggers were a dusty memory, the maps and land titles still contain the inked lines and legal scratch marks that have accidentally recorded Otago's history.

This partly explains why the Dunstan Road didn't disappear. It has always existed on the map, as a ghost road, and — as is often the case when people abandon something — after a while the paper road turned out to be useful. The councils rediscovered that they needed to extract gravel, or establish their water supply at Rocklands Gorge, or build irrigation dams at the Great Moss Lake and the Poolburn.

The Queen's Chain isn't the same thing as an unformed road, but it tends to do similar things. The legal Queen's Chain is an incomplete and piecemeal assemblage of strips of land alongside coast, lakes and rivers. Although the British Government directed the local provinces to set aside the Queen's Chain, many failed to do so. The chain width was not ambulatory, so it did not shift if the river shifted, or the cliffs crumbled, and little more than sixty per cent of the coastline is actually protected by this ad hoc Queen's Chain.

But there is another Queen's Chain, a psychological one. This is a deeply held belief by many people that full legal entitlement exists to the coastline and rivers, and New Zealanders have an absolute right to it. Trampers, walkers, fishermen, hunters, horse-trekkers, 4WD drivers, whitebaiters, quad bikers — all access the coast and rivers as if they have a perfect right to do so. Curiously, this entrenched attitude is so persuasive that it even affects the landowners, who often believe that coastal or river access is guaranteed even when it is not.

The powerful notion that New Zealanders should have access to their own landscapes is as much of a cultural taonga as a legal one, but it often convinces local councils and politicians to maintain public access as if it were holy writ. It is frankly a muddle, a rather English-style muddle, that only works because everyone pretends it does.

More New Zealanders have seen the Poolburn landscape in the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy than they have in real life. The fishing cribs were disguised as farm houses in a small Rohirrim village, where orcs plundered and rampaged and the wide open plains and rock outcrops — looking a mite demented and orc-ish themselves — served as the background for Rohan. On my last visit I watched a party of wealthy visitors fly in to the small airstrip by the Poolburn, possibly a tad disappointed that the orcs have gone but the beastly wind remains. Poolburn is Panavision for the soul, no movie camera needed.

From the Poolburn Reservoir the Dunstan Road descends thirteen kilometres to Moa Flat. The white road is smooth and well-made, peppered with pipits luring cars away from their young, then flying off with a flash of two white wing bars. Skylarks burst over the top of my car as if they had been waiting for an excuse to do just that, and for a kilometre or so I track a harrier, only fifty metres higher than me, as it flies without flapping once as it surfs easily on a wave of warm air.

I know this is a peneplain, and I know the rocks have been eroded downwards, yet such is the power of this land that I often feel that the tors have knuckled themselves up out of the protective skin of tussock. In the distance there are the tableland tops of the Old Man Range, and beyond them the pretty serviette tips of The Remarkables.

At Moa Creek the Dunstan Road crosses the Crawford Hills, although the original road follows a long spur down to Galloway Station. Here the old and new meet up on Galloway Road as it continues onto Highway 85 and present-day Alexandra. But instead, keep going on Galloway Road as it turns onto the Lower Manorburn Dam Road, and at the first right-angle kink, drive onto Tucker Hill Road to the ford. Take off your shoes and socks and wade across the stream, and about a hundred metres up the road slope, embedded in the grey gritty bedrock are two deep thin wheel ruts. Otago author John McCraw states in his book *Gold on the Dunstan* (and I'm happy enough to agree with him) that these are bullock cart tracks from the 1860s.

After the gold-diggers had crossed the Knobby Range via Cairnhill, they descended the Tucker Hill Road towards Dunstan. Not everyone came this way. But enough dray carts did, with storekeepers and sly

grog men, groaning bullock wagons, and many weary foot-sloggers, plus horse and gigs and Cobb & Co. coaches, old forty-niners from America, brown-tanned Aussie diggers from Bendigo, creamy-coloured Irish dancing girls and cheeky London prostitutes, New Zealand clerks and runaway black sailors, the whole fantastic paraphernalia of a circus that is a gold rush, descended off the ridge and wore two grooves that have never been erased.

In 1861 in Dunedin a 'Mr G' recalled 'quietly wending my way to my usual hum-drum office life' at 'D. R. & Co', and on seeing an excited knot of people on the street asked, 'What's up?' Hartley and Reilly had arrived the day before. He asked himself: 'Who wouldn't go?' and in a few days 'Mr G' with two mates set off to the Dunstan with a wayward packhorse and not an ounce of gold-digging experience between them. On their first day they got lost sludging through the estuary mud of Blueskin Bay, and then their packhorse did a runner. It took them eight days via the Pigroot to reach the fabled goldfields and on the way they saw the ranges 'in their white robes of snow towering high above the rest in the sheen of the glorious sunshine, formed a panorama of truly surpassing beauty'.

Were they disappointed with the goldfield? Despite arriving by 9 September, all the best positions were gone, the rivers high, and the trio nearly drowned crossing the Kawarau River. When they erected their 'rather showy green painted tent-poles' they were mistaken for storekeepers and were besieged by hungry miners. On the spot they decided to try this lark, and ferried flour and goods on their packhorse from nearby food depots to the diggings.

> 'This kind of life went on for some little time, and although we were making money, perhaps more surely than if we had been digging, I began to tire of it; moreover, civilisation was following us up in the shape of an opposition store, a butchers, a bakers and a shoemakers shop — forming the nucleus of the future town of Cromwell.'

In early November 'Mr G' decided to join in with the furious pursuit of William Fox, who was known to be onto a good thing somewhere.

'Hunting the Fox' led them to Cardrona, where they dug fruitlessly (on good ground it later turned out), and then travelled over to the Arrow River. They found gold, but not much. A shepherd helped 'Mr G' to butcher a sheep, 'leaving me to skin and clean the carcass, which I accomplished in a manner that surprised myself'.

Ceaseless movement seems to be the gold-diggers' lot. 'Mr G' had to return to The Junction to pay off his former mate, and he fell in with a mysterious digger who put him onto a good tip towards The Remarkables. To get there they had to cross the famous natural bridge of the Kawarau River.

> 'To reach our camp the same day we had to cross this chasm, and although the distance to jump on solid land would have been nothing, it made one's blood run cold to think that the slip of a foot or miscalculation of the leap would end in certain death in the boiling river below.'

They reached The Remarkables and 'the colour of gold we could get everywhere, but nothing more', so Mr G resolved to give up the gold-digger's life. On 15 January 1863 he was on the Cobb & Co. coach for Dunedin, and that was that.

The average time a gold-digger spent on any goldfield was a few weeks at most, and the total working enthusiasm of a gold-digger rarely exceeded four to six months. Gold created excitement and gnawing anxiety. Within two weeks of the rush to Dunstan there was a steady stream of diggers trudging back, hungry and disconsolate, telling the new chums not to waste their time as the goldfield was a 'complete sell'. Back and forth the diggers went, swirled by rumours as exhausting as the nor'west wind, and once they had had their adventure and spent their money, it was time to go home.

I liked 'Mr G'. It could have been me (or even you) stuck in a dreary office in Dunedin in 1861, and we might too have said, 'Sod it, why not?' It was a lark and he was participating in a moment of real history. 'Mr G' wrote his account twenty years later for the newspaper, relishing the action, the geography, larger-than-life personalities and the sheer delightful folly of it, and I hope that he didn't write it from the sloping desk of a clerks' office. That something changed in him.

'The road winding above among the mountains,
which are mountains of rock without water.'

It's been a long road, and a long chapter. About a hundred kilometres from Clarks Junction to the town of Alexandra, with several excursions and detours and lots of potholes, way too many gates and fords, with grit and dust coating the car seats, so no, it's not really a road for the faint-hearted, or a car that spends its life in a garage. Still, there are compensations. You will be mostly alone, rocks will appear as actors under livid Shakespearean skies and there will be evening twilight that grips the tussocks in shards of magenta.

Gold digging is an occupation at cross-purposes with itself. Driven by rampart capitalism, seizing the main chance and grabbing whatever they could, most of the men were young, brash, foolhardy, with no idea of how to dig up gold, but they knew it was theirs if they could find it. On the other hand, this free-market entrepreneurism was tempered by mateship and shared difficulties, a sort of communistic camaraderie with their fellows in hard times and the exercise of manliness.

The mere association of thousands of young men from all walks of life gave the gold-diggers a sort of tribal identity. Hundreds persisted with a nomadic and economically unrewarding life, going from goldfield to goldfield, from Otago to the West Coast, up to Coromandel, back down to Otago, working, dreaming, hoping, desiring, living.

The gold rushes have left their stamp on New Zealand, especially in Otago, which has preserved the scars in the frosted air. At Quartz Reef Point there are tailings stacked into herring-bone piles, and deep aquamarine dredge ponds at St Bathans. Everywhere there are Lombardy poplars that flare like torches in autumn, illuminating the old diggings in a theophany. Straight draughtsman-like lines of water-races are high on tussock hillsides, and along the banks of the Clutha River there are at least a thousand gold-dredging hillocks. The diggers swarmed everywhere and left slang names of places that are now desolate: Garibaldi Diggings, Drybread, Serpentine, Quartzville, Tucker Hill, Muttontown, Rise and Shine Road, Styx, Tinkers, Buster Diggings. They left behind songs, poems, stone huts, many cemetery headstones, newspaper accounts and, yes, even some gold, I'm told.

The gold-diggers asserted the right to roam in Otago, perhaps the last people to do so. Since then the land has slowly been rounded up, allocated to so-and-so, divvied up by the farmers and settlers to make of as best as they could. The fences make boundaries, but I don't feel that when I drive up onto the Dunstan Road. I don't feel that these man-made lines and scratches count for very much, in fact I hardly notice them at all. This land feels boundless. Free.

BOOKS & SOURCES

■ *Dunstan Road*. Dunstan 'road' or Dunstan 'track'? Both are used, the latter in a more colloquial sense. A 'gravel' road, which the Dunstan is, can also be called 'shingled', 'unsealed' and rather oddly perhaps, 'metalled'. The full history of the Dunstan Road is complicated and confusing, and it was constructed in bits and pieces and assembled almost as the gold-diggers tramped over it. I have compressed history and taken liberties.

■ *Promised Land: from Dunedin to the Dunstan goldfields* (2009), Grahame Sydney. Arguably the best history on the Dunstan Road, with superb illustrations.

■ *Hartley and Reilly*. The price they got for their gold in 1861 was curiously set by Sir Isaac Newton in 1717 when he was master of the English mint. It was £3.17 shillings per troy ounce, which stayed at that price until 1914.

■ *Sutton Stream*. At Sutton Stream the paying passengers on the Cobb & Co. coaches, or their rivals Quick Co. coaches, would have to get out and walk up this steep road section. The dray wagons stopped so the bullocks could be watered and fed and prepared for a 300-metre climb (1000 feet) up onto the top tableland.

■ *Historic Places Trust*. Report and history of the Dunstan Road. Humans are always eager to differentiate themselves from the animals, so perhaps I can suggest another point of separation: road-makers.

■ *Kinder Scout Mass Trespass*. The website is a great source of information, and the *Guardian* newspaper online archive section has the original article on the Trespass, which makes fascinating reading because the reporter was literally right in the thick of it. I especially enjoyed the moment when after the fisticuffs and the ascent, the walkers stopped 'for tea'.

■ *Our Place: can we save Britain's wildlife before it is too late?* (2018), Mark Cocker. He has two chapters on the Kinder Scot mass trespass, looking at the political aspects and how they affected future environmental policies.

■ *Right to Roam*. Although New Zealand has a huge reservoir of public land (up to forty per cent of the South Island is public) we do not have a 'right to roam' as you find in Sweden. My suggestion of 800 metres is the approximate bushline in Central Otago, but anywhere above the bushline in New Zealand should, I believe, be considered free public access.

■ *Wild Roads: a New Zealand journey* (2015), Bruce Ansley. There's a

chapter on the Dunstan Road which he places under the 'Feral' section'.

■ *Tenure Review*. This is the process by which leasehold land is divided into private and public parts, freehold to the farmer, conservation land to the public. Land ownership of the high country has had a long and complex history, and because the early Provincial Governments wanted to encourage farmers to settle they offered up land parcels at virtually giveaway rates. These agreements later solidified into 'perpetual renewal' or 'thirty-three year right of renewal' arrangements etc., which in reality became a sort of poor man's freehold. Tenure review tries to sort out this mess, pleasing no one.

■ *The Dunstan: a history of the Alexandra-Clyde Districts* (1953), C. W. S. Moore.

■ *Sheep May Safely Graze: the story of Morven Hills Station and the Tarras district, Central Otago* (1978), Geoffrey P. Duff.

■ *1980 Trespass Act*. My interpretation of the Act is that in mountain country it heavily favours the trespasser — which is unexpected. Most of the Act deals with domestic violence and entry to bars, so when it comes to high-country land it does not have a great deal to say. 'Trespassers Will Be Prosecuted' signs have no legal force, and walkers have to be warned in person by the landowner, and if they turn around and walk out that is the end of the matter. If, however, they give their name and address (which they must legally do) and proceed up the mountain, then the landowner can take the trespasser to court. The maximum fine is currently $1000, the minimum $200. Which might explain why in nearly forty years of tramping I cannot recall a single successful prosecution for walking trespass on high-country lands. In a conversation with David Round, lecturer in law at the University of Canterbury, he generally agreed with my observations on the apparent lack of prosecutions.

■ *The Lord of the Rings: Location Guidebook* (2011), Ian Brodie. Fantasy can always turn a profit, but the magic of reality is unbelievable. A search on the Christchurch library computer database for the fundamental process of photosynthesis, exchanging carbon dioxide for oxygen, revealed nineteen items, but a search for *Lord of the Rings* threw up 166 entries. 'Vampires' gave me 1011 entries.

■ *Gold on the Dunstan* (2003), John McCraw. He has included a photo of the cart tracks.

■ *Dray Roads*. In England in the 1750s the roads and highways were so bad that a dray wagon loaded with a ton of goods might take all day to traverse seven or eight miles. So when the canals were built, some of which predate Captain Cook's arrival in New Zealand, they revolutionised transport. A narrow canal boat could move twenty tons of goods in a day.

■ *Bullock Wagons*. Bullocks were cheaper to run than a tractor, and worth trading at about £12–15 each. Once their working life was finished at about fourteen years, they were fattened up and sold off as meat. In his book *Bush, Bullocks and Boulders* (1976), William Vance considered a normal bullock team would pull a wool wagon of twelve or thirteen bales, but when I glance through the photos in the Alexander Turnbull Library his estimate looks optimistic.

■ *Station Ballads*, David McKee Wright. This version was found in the *Otago Witness*, 24 September 1896. Wright inadvertently borrows language from a later era than the Dunstan rush since the word 'bullocky' or 'bullockie' is first recorded in the OED from Australia from 1885: 'one of the sunburnt bullocky men'. On the Dunstan trail in the 1860s they were still called bullock drivers or dray men.

■ *Crib*. This is an Otago word for a holiday 'bach', which itself is a contraction of the word 'bachelor'. Most of the North Island and top of the South Island call their holiday homes 'baches', but somewhere south of the Mackenzie country the word changes to 'crib'.

■ *Pareidolia*. See also *Wild Roads*, Bruce Ansley. The word 'apophenia' is for the condition of seeking a pattern where there is none.

■ *Otago Witness*, 19 September 1885, the story of 'Mr G'. The famous leaping rock bridge over the Kawarau River collapsed a few years later.

■ *Lyttelton Times*, 6 September 1862. 'Nor has the mania been confined to the diggers; people of all ranks and classes have been affected by it, farmers have left their farms, storekeepers their stores, servants their employments, to rush away in the eager desire to be among the first to reap the golden harvest. Dunedin at one time promised to be drained of its male population. The most unlikely people have been seized with the fever. Clerks, tradesmen, hotel waiters, cooks, billiard markers, all have been more or less seriously affected.'

LOSS

TUKINO SKIFIELD ROAD

I kicked it. It didn't move. Another big boot and it still wouldn't shift, which annoyed me, so I prised it out of the ground as my hand grazed against a larger boulder with a sandpaper surface. My rock was a small apple-sized red ball, which looked out of place on the charcoal terrain, and I surmised that it had been blasted here. When I looked around carefully, I saw the whole slope was made up of fresh unweathered rocks with odd colours and textures that resembled dog biscuits, and soon my hands were overloaded with samples. After a while I abandoned the whole lot, dropping them onto the ground except for the first red specimen, not because it was prettier than the others, but because it was the first. I have a certain loyalty to my souvenirs.

As a mountain Ruapehu doesn't pack much street cred. It lacks the serene symmetry of Mt Taranaki, or the ice-pick skyward stab of Aoraki/Mt Cook. From a distance the mountain looks like its top was once blown to Kingdom come, leaving it partially collapsed like an elderly relative in a rest home that nobody really bothers about any more. But beneath the passive flanks of last winter's snow there is hot, bloody magma in a chamber that is topped up from time to time from the bowels of the earth. This fearsome power doesn't bother us because we inhabit a cool and predictable crust, which gives us little inkling that we live on top of a gigantic rotating explosion.

Fifteen kilometres turned out to be a handy number to remember. First, it's the depth of the magma well under this part of the earth's crust and, second, by coincidence, it is also the distance that I intend to drive and walk from Highway 1 to the summit of Mt Ruapehu, which shouldn't take more than three days there and back. I shoved the red rock in the glove compartment of my car and when the graze itched, I scratched it. I'm always surprised when the magenta stuff pulses out. Like magma, I tend to ignore it until it starts flowing.

Shiva. Creator. Destroyer. This would be a great name for a volcano. They make new land in red ruby rivers, yet chill the planet with ash clouds, and occasionally let rip with the odd cataclysm or two. The giant caldera that Lake Taupo occupies was created 26,500 years ago by the Oruanui eruption, a super-volcanic explosion that buried much

of the North Island under 200 metres of ignimbrite and deposited eighteen centimetres of ash on Chatham Island, 1000 kilometres away. This eruption shoved the Waikato River from the Hauraki Plains to the Waikato region and forced it to exit into the Tasman Sea. It might even have triggered the last Ice Age.

In 1968 photographs of a pretty eruption at Mt Ruapehu went around the world's newspapers because they showed brightly clothed skiers paused incongruously in the foreground, chatting, laughing, taking snaps of huge black cinder clouds towering up into a blue sky. These days if there is a hint of volcanic rumbling the mountain is placed in 'lockdown' — as the television news loves to call it — roads are closed and radio bulletins issued every hour. Police patrols are sent out to make sure that overstimulated backpackers don't trespass into the forbidden zone, but in the 1960s things were a little different.

I first interviewed John and Jessica Pybus specifically about their early caving exploits, but another story they told me was even more remarkable. They are both in their eighties now, living in Auckland, but enjoying some pretty sharp memories infused with a dry wit. In 1954 they were part of an Auckland tramping group that was on a winter climb on Ngauruhoe in August when the mountain started erupting. Great belches of steam, ash and gas poured out of the volcano and the mountain shook thunderously, with several big bangs and rock bombs flying out. 'Then,' John remarked with a most sanguine expression, 'it all went quiet.'

As the times between bangs got longer, they thought with complacent naivety 'maybe it's over', and recommenced the ascent. Just near the top of the mountain another huge rumbling explosion took place, the roar of an irritated beast. As the mountain shook, the agitated trampers rushed around and sheltered under a big rock as superheated fireballs landed with a swooshing and hissing sound in the snow. If they had been halfway up, without any rocks to shelter under, they would have been bombed to death. As soon as the eruption paused, they took off: 'The moment it stopped, boy, we went down that hill fast.'

I always smile grimly to myself now when I hear the expression 'solid earth'. In the Christchurch earthquake of February 2011, I saw rock slushing about as if it were blancmange. Our house was seized by a giant God-like hand that rhythmically and ferociously pumped it up and down, and I stood paralysed as I heard the brick chimney disintegrate and the kitchen blasted with piles of broken glass, flung cups and bits of crockery and drenched in the stewed fruit that been put in jars on the top shelf a week before.

Rushing down to Heathcote Primary School to check on my daughter, I saw the ground in the park ripped apart, curbing split, one half of the road higher than the other — and divided neatly on the white dotted line, as if the earthquake was under instructions to cut here — and the constant aftershocks delivered a series of quick punches through the ground by a force that wasn't playing fair. The kids had been shepherded out in the open school sports ground, but they screamed as each aftershock rippled through the grass like an incoming tide through seaweed. There were several hundred aftershocks that day, and that week, in solid earth.

Tents popped up in the park. Some people fled the city, then came back, but some stayed away permanently. Road cones sprouted up like geraniums, and I grew to hate them. Bureaucratic machinery trundled into place and we learned about 'red zones', 'red stickered houses' and 'loss adjusters'. After a few days we were back living in the house, although water took another two weeks to arrive and we dug holes in the garden for a toilet. Parts of the house were on a slight lean. Insurance inspectors came and went.

But something strange happened for a few weeks after the initial earthquake. I never mentioned it to anyone because I was worried people might think I was making it up. Most nights as I lay in bed, I felt a strange lifting and settling sensation, as if the earth was breathing underneath me. They weren't aftershocks, but something more subtle, like an unearthly seiche flexing across my mind. I tried sleeping on the floor, but I could still sense them, and no one else mentioned them.

One day I walked down to Café Rhombus, which had temporarily resurrected itself from the rubble, and I mentioned this in passing to

the café owner. She shrugged, she hadn't felt it, but a woman standing nearby said emphatically and with great conviction: 'Everything is moving, the land is constantly in movement, as if we are at sea.'

Patriotic folk claim that New Zealand is the Goldilocks country: not too hot, not too cold, not too big, not too small. I'd agree with them except that under our feet is an exponential power biding its time, and New Zealanders — and probably everyone who lives next to volcanoes and in earthquake zones (the two pretty much go together) — indulge in a playful gamble and pretend that the mathematics of geology are on our side.

Surely, we argue, geological time is so stretched that the odds of a volcanic eruption or another great rupture of the Alpine Fault within our lifetime is unlikely? Several people insisted to me that Christchurch had 'had' its earthquake, and we were good for another hundred years. It was someone else's turn.

Professional gamblers I suspect would shake their heads at this nonsense. We don't know the odds. A roulette wheel in a casino has only a finite number of options, and if all the numbers are taken then one player must be a winner, but the planet has an infinite number of options as it spins its wheels. It does not know about timing, or gambler's luck, or 'my turns', or fairness; this is the dynamic design of the planet and the envy of any casino boss — the house eventually takes all.

The grumpy guy with the pumped-up muscles and tats in the Waiouru garage said that the gate on the Tukino Skifield Road would be locked, or there would be no gate, or the road would be so rough I'd need a four-wheel-drive vehicle just to get the first 100 metres. As an afterthought, he said it would be deep sand, a boggy lake, or both. His mate chipped in and insisted that the army actively discouraged people by putting large boulders on the road. Everyone agreed that there was no road sign to the Tukino Road; the skiers removed it, they said, to keep the bogans out.

The yellow signpost off the Desert Road said 'Tukino Skifield'. It pointed optimistically to some wheel ruts that meandered through sand

scrapes that became ponds in autumn and ice lakes in winter. A few marker poles give proximate location of the road which leads wildly around potholes and tufts of tussock islands that stick up on small pillars of red earth eroded by ferocious winds. The road then wormed under the transmission towers, which grasp the obedient and silvery reins of electricity with a know-it-all matronly air.

After a kilometre the road fords the ankle-deep Waikato River and starts to climb inland as fingers of spurs interlock. Each gully is an eroded wadi full of gorgeous cupcake colours of earthy red and creams. Occasional rock mounds jut up that could be leftover miners' slag-heaps, or emperors' tumuli. Many spurs had surface striations of yellow and grey, and when I walked on them I saw they were actually alternate layers of feather-light pumice, blown sideways to reveal the dark rock underneath.

Decades of acidic ash have blown across this desert erg, but still the plants come back. A gentian flower stalk has forced its way through the pumice in a boyish imitation of volcanic upthrust, and a prostrate totara has been shoved over by the wind, half buried in ash and grit with its roots trailing out behind it like guts. Beside the road someone has gone to a great deal of trouble to protect an olearia tree with a fence. It's a real Methuselah, gnarled, crotchety, the leaves brittle and sharp as glass.

After six kilometres on the skifield road a DOC sign warns that it is '4WD only'. I slowed down to read the sign, muttered some male remark like 'bugger that', and revving the Subaru's engine hard, bashed my way up the final steep section with a few crumps and lurches, breasted the hill by a translator tower and then rolled down to a saddle and a locked gate. I'd saved myself a kilometre of walking and gained a fair bit of height. The signpost stated: 'Round the Mountain Track, 1400 metres altitude'.

It was nice up here. The trucks on Highway 1 were mute and the size of Tonka toys, doggedly followed by ant-like streams of vexed traffic. On the left was Mt Ngauruhoe — a grubby and gigantic cinder cone — and one lone gull circled high, not doing anything in particular, as they often seem to do, until it indulgently curled a wing and headed towards Mt Ruapehu. I assembled my pack and followed suit. With the sun on my back and the dusty road departing behind me, it was a good feeling,

uplifted like the gull, as if I'd borrowed some of the mountain's mana in order to climb it. At least I thought that's what I was doing, but it turned out that the mountain had other plans.

Maps aid the colonisation of territory, and one of the earliest maps of Mt Ruapehu is dated 1891. When I unrolled it at the museum, the linen paper was blotchy brown, heavy and creased from use and with occasional splotches of ink. It was easy to imagine the smell of leather satchels and field notebooks full of measurements, and then visualise the nineteenth-century surveyor with a weighty three-pronged theodolite (carried on the assistant's shoulders, of course), and with a determined clink of hobnails as he climbed the scoria fields and tasted the vile water from the Whangaehu River. He spat it out and wrote: 'Strong medicinal waters'.

Cursive hand-lettering was still employed on the 1907 map, with the Rangipo Desert marked as 'steppes' or 'grass steppes', and they noted a 'haunted whare' to the west of the mountain. It would be intriguing to know if the surveyors slept there to test out the ghost. The Tukino Road follows a 'good riding spur', and by 1917 the map shows 'good riding spurs' on all the flanks of the mountain.

You can plot year by year, map by map, how the roads around Mt Ruapehu encroached, and the date where the railway line nibbled the western edge. There's a military training ground just north of the present-day village of National Park, and Girdlestone Peak on Ruapehu is called Little Matterhorn. On a 1920 map there is a mountain hut at 'Ketetahi Blowhole' and already a 'formed bridle track' was going up to Blue Lake and beyond. Railway stations at Ohakune and Erua were bringing tourists to admire and pet the mountain, and as the National Park was enlarged the encirclement became intense.

My 1971 inch-to-the-mile topographical map shows the vehicle track to Tukino Skifield, but the Round the Mountain Track and the trampers' huts are not in existence. However, useful bits of information are implanted on the map. 'Sand, tussock and small stones', 'pumice and sand', and curiously 'shell holes'. Beside Highway 1 in the middle of nowhere was noted a 'Telephone Box', possibly the loneliest in the

North Island. In the mid 1970s stranded car travellers on the Desert Road might have found it useful, but times change. From the Tukino carpark I text home.

After three kilometres and 300 metres of climbing, the Tukino road flattens at the skifield where there was a working party ensconced. A couple of Subarus parked there suggested to me that if I'd had a gate key, I might also have been able to drive up this far. The lodges and other sheds are bunched on a flat plateau at about 1700 metres altitude, and like most skifields in summer they look incongruous and slightly embarrassed to be caught without snow skirts.

The work party were a cheerful bunch, mostly retired chaps sitting in the cool lunchtime sun with sandwiches and reddish faces. 'Going to Whangaehu Hut?' they asked when I said I was going to Whangaehu Hut. 'There's the track there', and one man dropped his half-eaten sandwich and led me over to where I could see the marker pole. That was a bit of a surprise. A poled route stops a lot of thinking, although as it turned out the route wasn't that well poled and I still had to get out the map. The track clambered up a spur and wandered around a complicated arena of bluffs and gullies with cairns and faint diverging foot trails everywhere as walkers made up their own short cuts across the talus slopes.

Every step brought me closer to the volcano's throat. Strange copper boils of iridescence popped out of the boulders, and handsome groups of blood-red granules had rolled and congealed on the spot. One lovely magenta specimen went into my pocket as a keepsake from the underneath. When I checked out a patch of 'lichen' it turned out to be a weird sort of verdigris soil, smelling of sulphur, that crumbled to a powder between my fingers. There was nothing living up here. No bird, or green plant. I turned over a rock or so to try to find a spider or beetle. Zilch. Except, after a fart (I blame the altitude) a blowfly appeared, and plopped down on a rock with a look that said 'Is that it?', and then followed me up to Whangaehu Hut like a friendly dog.

The hut is hidden until the last few hundred metres and then it looks perfectly in sync with this moonscape. Its glaring aluminium sides are wired down to the ground like an extraordinary space capsule, and

beyond that are the wrought, writhing bluffs of Whangaehu River — fleshy vermilion and white — that reminded me of the meat carcases I'd seen in butcher shops as a boy in England. A few puffs of steam escaped from some cracks and there was a smell of iron.

Whangaehu Hut is one of the highest in New Zealand at 2060 metres and is owned by the New Zealand Alpine Club. It has a lobby, four double bunks, and a logbook that reveals a lot of people wander around in cloud and wind. The summit is close now, only 500 metres to go, but my sleep was bullied and interrupted by the bang and clatter of live firing from the military zone. The next morning it was all over.

A bouffant of cumulus appeared on the top of Te Heuheu Peak in the predawn and a small cloud shaped like a golf ball immediately suggested to me that a change was coming. The wind rose, and within an hour storm cloud combed the summit tops so by the time I got back to the ski huts the rich colours of the volcano had been washed out to grey. The rain spat on the windscreen as I drove down the road, but I didn't take it personally.

Mt Ruapehu is New Zealand's most trespassed mountain. Surrounded by busy highways, it is edged by a railway line, hydro-electric canals, and with huge electricity transmission lines strung across the desert. Pine plantations are self-seeding on one side, sending endless armies of *Pinus contorta* trees up the southern flank. For more than fifty years tramping clubs have been pulling them out, but the battle is still a stalemate. The army has a major militarised zone on the southern corner, with live ammunition exercises, and the danger of unexploded ordinance means that the land here is permanently alienated from the public.

The mountain has three major ski areas, with ski tows that come within 500 metres of Crater Lake, and there's a mass of club lodges at the Top o' the Bruce. A walking track goes right around Mt Ruapehu and the Tongariro Crossing is one of New Zealand's busiest day walks, with up to 100,000 trekkers a year. When I passed through the Tukino ski huts on my first attempt at the peak, the ski-club working party were having lunch and talked enthusiastically of the idea — still in concept stage in 2014 — of having a snowcat concession drive up from Tukino Skifield, dragging ski bunnies to the top so they could have a blissful ride down.

Te Heuheu in his grave must wonder why he bothered.
Is this what he meant when he drew
three sacred circles around three summits?

In the Alexander Turnbull Library there is a photo of the young Horonuku Te Heuheu Tukino IV. His is an intelligent face, firm, almost fixed in a grimace perhaps, already burdened with too many responsibilities. The patu he grips and the korowai cloak (which look to be covered in wool tassels) emphasise his status, but he was never regarded as a warrior. Horonuku means 'landslide' and is the name he took after the huge avalanche of mud that killed his father and mother and many others. It was his fate to have to deal with the Europeans who greedily wanted Tuwharetoa lands: how was he to keep them out?

His quickness of tongue served the tribe well. In 1885 at the Native Land Court rival tribes — some of whom had fought on the side of the Europeans and were looking for payback — demanded that Tongariro be theirs, claiming they had lit fires of occupation. 'Where are they?' demanded Horonuku, 'there is my fire' and he pointed through the window to the smoking peak of Ngauruhoe. It's a famous story, and perhaps it's true in intent, but the story of the 'gift' is much less certain.

I know the gift story, everyone does. Te Heuheu, as the paramount chief of Tuwharetoa, wanted to stop Pakeha trespassing on his beloved mountains:

> 'They will become of no account, for the tapu will be gone. Tongariro is my ancestor, my tupuna; it is my head; my mana centres around Tongariro. My father's bones lie there today.'

So on the advice of Lawrence Grace, then Member of Parliament for Tauranga, and Horonuku's son-in-law, Heuheu gifted the top peaks of 6518 acres (2638 hectares) to the New Zealand people in 1887. Richard Boast in *Buying the Land, Selling the Land* describes this story as a fable.

First, Tongariro was not 'Te Heuheu's to give away'. There were multiple Maori owners and some of them objected strongly when the Native Department first suggested that Tongariro should be turned into a 'public reserve'. The concept of a national park was still strange in the 1880s. After the surveying of Mt Ruapehu, it became in essence 'Maori

freehold title', and the government had to negotiate with the owners to sell, which Tuwharetoa did slowly and reluctantly. It took sixteen years in fact, and not until 1903 did the last owner sell up, which was long after the National Parks Act had been passed in 1894.

Te Heuheu's role was equivocal. He only owned a seventh of the surveyed Tongariro title, but after hesitation, and some 'arm twisting' as Boast describes it, he 'gifted' the tops of the three mountains to the Crown. 'The 'A' blocks, the very tips of the peaks, were vested solely in Horonuku Te Heuheu, although he remained an owner in the 'B' blocks as well. It was these 'A' blocks, comparatively small areas, but of course enormously significant ones, which formed the 'gift'.

It was not easy trying to overlay the 'sacred circles' on a modern map as I did not have access to the original survey measurements. The two circles around Ngauruhoe and the central crater of Mt Tongariro are about a mile and a half across with a diameter of around 2500 to 3000 yards (2.2 to 2.7 kilometres). There's a gap of half a kilometre between them at the South Crater.

Mt Ruapehu's 'circle' is actually a half-moon shape of about 2.5 kilometres in radius and five kilometres in diameter. It looks as if the survey team took the high point of Tahurangi as the base line, and drew a 2.5-kilometre radius from that, which luckily includes (but only just) Te Heuheu Peak. By 1887 the summit of Mt Ruapehu was the apex of several freehold titles, and perhaps there were difficulties with the Maori owners who claimed that side of the mountain. Drawing a half-moon was a tactful way to divide the peak.

For all the flaws and hasty draughtsmanship, these three summit enclaves are the famous gifts, the sacred circles. The 1887 map shows how tiny they are, and to European minds they appear far too small to be deemed 'useful'. This comment comes from the *Evening Post* of 24 September 1887.

> 'The Native Lands Court which has been sitting for a long time at Taupo in reference to the gift of a national park of 65,000 acres, confirms the fizzle that was predicted. Instead of the block of country as delineated in the beautifully coloured map got out by the Native Lands Department being presented

> to Government as a token of love to Mr. Ballance and his administration, the Maoris have given 9000 acres in all, in three detached blocks, namely, a radius of a mile and a half from the centre of Ngaruhoe [sic] crater, and a radius of a mile from the centre of Tongariro and Ruapehu respectively. The gift is absolutely valueless or it would not have been presented; but how many thousands of pounds it has cost the country to obtain kudos for the Native Minister will probably be never ascertained.'

Putting aside the complex land negotiations and the argy-bargy of the wheeling and dealing, it is fair to ask what Te Heuheu meant by his 'gift'. The *Te Kahui Maunga: The National Park District Inquiry Report Pre-publication* is a massive document, but there was one sentence that drew my attention:

> 'It has always been the view of the tribes that their Kahui-Maunga, Tongariro, Ngauruhoe and Ruapehu, were tuuaahu sacred altars. They were tino tapu forbidden places, because they were domain of atuawairua spiritual beings.'

According to Tuwharetoa, the high places had been set aside for all time, ring-fenced to put it crudely, to be 'a holy place not intended to be trodden by mortals'. Europeans ignored this view completely, for they saw Tongariro as a playground, and they interpreted the gift not as a partnership but as access permission.

The three summit circles were accepted and quickly linked to create a dumbbell shape that is boldly drawn on the 1887 map, and these boundaries became a public reserve that gradually extended to the present-day National Park. On every side — roads, railways, army land, hydro-canals, skifields — the parklands provided a resource to be utilised for recreational and commercial pursuits, and Tuwharetoa felt alienated from what they thought was theirs and their spiritual ancestors, and still feel alienated — as the Waitangi documents make clear.

In New Zealand both European and Maori have had tremendous problems keeping their sticky fingers off the land, especially when a profit can be sensed, but perhaps we could make a concession. Around the summits of Mt Ruapehu we could redraw the sacred circles of

Te Heuheu and mark them on our maps. Then people could make their own decision, whether to cross or not to cross that line. Would we trespass or not?

A year later. We left Whangaehu Hut at half-past six in the morning as the sun splashed the colour of Beaujolais on the high peaks. The air had no taste, no bouquet at this altitude. The pumice and ash slopes were still frozen as we trudged up the ridge with crampons and ice axe attached as if we meant business, but that was really a bluff. We hadn't used them for thirty years.

The morning light shifted rapidly from crispy red to silky and mellow. No wind, not a zephyr. We climbed up towards the rock stump called Marker Pole and negotiated steepish slopes underneath it, trying to avoid the patches of glacial ice that were as hard as white steel. In the saddle between Marker Pole and Cathedral Rocks we had a rest, and I suppose we were at about 2500 metres now. After an awkward scramble around a rock hump (mainly a bother because of our heavy packs) we zigzagged up the final rock to the crest of the Cathedral Rocks and the crater rim.

It had taken us two hours' tramp from the hut, and we had a self-congratulatory boil-up on top of the North Island. By now we were well inside Te Heuheu's sacred circle, inside the tino tapu, the place where people shouldn't go. No footprints, no sound (human or otherwise), and we were alone up here — well, not entirely. Sven had got out his iPhone and started to send rapid texts and photos to his nephew Matai. Feeling this rather spoilt the mood, I plunged on ahead, working my way over the grey ashy humps and hollows that hid the glacial ice, and craning over my shoulder as the splintered peaks and buttes of rock jostled about. Most are over 2700 metres.

Under the Dome shelter (technically the highest hut in New Zealand but a drab horrible little bolt-hole), there was a good view of the milky blue-grey crater lake. According to the DOC website a blue colour implies that the temperature is at the cooler end, maybe 15 degrees Celsius. There are photos from the 1960s of girls in bikinis sunning themselves and people dipping in the high volcanic spa, but not any more. When the lake turns this grey it means a temperature of 60

degrees, and the heat and acidity would peel the skin from your body. Two weeks after our tramp the lake began puffing out sulphuric gases.

In the end we did have to strap the crampons on. Between us and Paretetaitonga Saddle there was a broad sheet of hard crunchy ice; fortunately, it was not very steep. I was using a wooden ice axe which I'd bought in the 1970s, with a blunted point, and my crampons perched on top of the blue icing with an uncomfortable feeling of not being really attached to the land at all, my fate resting on twenty metal nipples. There were a couple of crevasses to walk around, which made us feel we were real mountaineers just like the old days. Sven said he enjoyed it.

At the saddle we peered over the edge onto the Mangaturuturu Glacier. It was covered in rock debris, so we tied our ice axes to the packs and stashed the crampons away and started boulder-bashing all the way down, a knee-crunching descent through the Turoa Skifield and following the narrow rocky track past the river cascades and silica rapids to Mangaturuturu Hut. We borrowed mattresses from the hut and lit a campfire in the beech forest that evening, feeling that we had deserved it after twelve hours of tramping.

We didn't need to talk much. Our little fire chattered away happily for us, in sparks and shadows, its belly of red embers making sweet crackling noises.

There's a sense that climbing a peak is putting a mountain in its place, and when I was younger I didn't care what the mountain thought. I wanted that feeling of heroicness from being above everyone else and gazing triumphally down. I wanted ownership. But Ruapehu and I have aged together and now it isn't so clear who owns what, and where the victory actually lies. After reading the story of the 'gift', I can understand why Tuwharetoa get anguished by all these manfleas traipsing all over Mt Ruapehu, and why Horonuku Te Heuheu must have flinched as he and his descendants watched the roads being built, the huts constructed, the ski tows creeping higher and higher up to the tuahu.

I had to get up twice that night, and glancing up at the summit arena of Mt Ruapehu I wondered: why is it so difficult to nail your presence to a landscape? What it comes down to is that we don't like being ignored. We might take photos, write stories, build structures, but these are

ephemeral gestures. Mountaineers try to steal the mountain's mana for their own egos, holding on by nerve and scratches that are as feeble as crampon points. When we get to the summit we find it is harsh, beautiful and encompassing, but we can't linger there, and nowadays I don't want to. We are trespassing, it's as simple as that.

BOOKS & SOURCES

■ *Volcano*. The Taupo eruption was almost six times larger than the famous Krakatoa eruption of 1883.

■ *Christchurch earthquake*. The February 2011 earthquake had a magnitude of 6.3, not unusually large. But the Ground Acceleration recorded on instruments kept at Heathcote Primary School revealed a force of 2.2g, the second most powerful acceleration recorded in the world in the last ten years.

■ *Pumice*. In 2012 a Royal New Zealand Air Force plane was about 1000 kilometres off the coast of Auckland when it spotted a vast pumice raft, 'nearly the size of Belgium' or '10,000 square miles'. A naval officer said it was the strangest thing he'd ever seen in eighteen years at sea. These floating pumice rafts are brought up by undersea volcanoes and some rafts are packed so closely they extend several feet down into the ocean. Passing yachties even try to walk on them; see *Off the Map*, Alastair Bonnett (2014).

■ *Tongariro maps*. Can be found online for 1887, 1891, 1907, 1917 at the Alexander Turnbull Library. I'm grateful to Mark Bagnall, cartographic curator, for an email conversation on the maps. He commented: 'I believe there was also a document drafted by Hon Mr Grace with Te Heuheu after the [Land] court hearing which I believe was sent to Wellington to form the basis of setting aside the cones for a park.' The Turnbull Library does not seem to have this document and is unable to say where it might be located.

■ *Summit Circles 1887*. This map sows the three 'circles' merged into a distinctive dumbbell shape. I'm grateful to Rhys Lewis of DOC at Tongariro National Park Visitor Centre for taking photos of their version of the early 1886 survey and emailing it to me. I guessed that the many converging lines south of Tahurangi focused on the peak of Girdlestone, named after Hubert Girdlestone, a well-known land surveyor.

■ *Tongariro, a Sacred Gift* (1987, revised 1995) Craig Potton.

■ *Civilisation: Twenty Places on the Edge of the World* (2012), Steve Braunias.

> 'There it was, magnificent and brazen, creamy. With its sides of luscious white snow, the mountain looked as if it were glowing. It was like a power source, energising the town, giving some of its power to the army. It burned in the sky and blossomed out of the ground: Mount Ruapehu, the desert rose.'

■ *Te Kahui Maunga: The National Park District Inquiry Report Pre-publication*. This document can be viewed online through the Waitangi Tribunal website.

■ *Buying the Land, Selling the Land: Governments and Maori Land in the North Island 1865–1921* (2008) Richard Boast. Impressive scholarship on the land dealings between Maori and European in the nineteenth century. The Tongariro 'gift' is a special case study in Chapter 7.

■ *Evening Post*, 24 September 1887, full text. I have not been able to track down 'the beautifully coloured map'.

■ *Mt Ruapehu*. Te Heuheu is 2720 metres high, Paretetaitonga in the centre stands at 2751 metres and Tahurangi is at 2797 metres, the actual high point.

■ *Arctic Dreams* (1981) Barry Lopez. Lopez expressed a similar idea to Te Heuheu, that we need to give plants, animals and landscapes respect, and try to return to the land some of its 'sacred' quality. In the North American context, ripping apart a mountain for its nickel, herding cattle into massive feedlots, or seeding whole continents with one wheat crop is just overpowering the landscape, not meeting it on equal terms.

■ *Maori*. They have a sense that a landscape should be listened to, and a letter writer to the *Christchurch Press* in 2015 put this notion explicitly: 'The land knows this was its purpose and it would be grateful if its purpose could be reinstated. When the land is happy the people will be happy too.'

MOORCOCK SADDLE

At first the air seemed weighty, then the horizon blurred. Grey sky crept in over the hills, becoming seamless with the land. Some southerlies bludgeon their way upvalley, but this one insinuated itself with thickening cloud that hooked onto the top of mountains, like seaweed fastened to rocks on an incoming tide. The air became cold and unwelcome, as with a conversation that chills suddenly when the wrong word is spoken.

Unusually, this front brought little wind, just sketchy tones of charcoal curling around the edges of the landscape, as if a misty Chinese water-painting were slowly unscrolling and we were being absorbed into it. I've often wondered what it would be to experience the inner world of a painting, and on this smudgy afternoon it seemed to happen. Hill by hill was brushed into silence, mist and moodiness, and the views gently evaporated into a sort of white greyness, until only the merest hint of a peak, or the blurred line of a ridge, marked where the land lay. It started to rain. Dripping off the corrugated hut roof, twanging on the metal water-tank. A homely counterpoint against the crackle of the leatherwood fire. Our day was done, and there was nothing more to do, and rain, at least in this gentle form, is the most sleep-inducing stuff I know.

This chapter is about gains and losses.

My grandad Jack would sometimes remark to me: 'Mark, that's right up the Khyber.' He meant a 'basket case' or a total mess. The Khyber Pass between Afghanistan and Pakistan was famous in its day for its remoteness and great British military bungles, which were taken the mickey out of by the comedy movie *Up the Khyber*. But 'Khyber Pass' is Cockney rhyming slang for 'arse', just as 'mickey' seems to have been derived from a forgotten character called 'Mickey Bliss', hence 'taking the piss'.

Jack was a Londoner, so no doubt he knew the double meaning of these expressions, but how Khyber Pass came to be labelled on a narrow, gorgy part of the Tukituki River, as it winds back up to Moorcock Saddle — well, that's a mystery. Initially the Mill–Kashmir road runs through a lush green hinterland, as remote from dry Afghanistan as it is possible to imagine, but I guess the settlers saw the name in New

Zealand newspapers in the 1870s and placed it (in a sort of linguistic time capsule) under the Ruahine mountains.

Just past Kashmir Station the road splits, and Mill Road turns right and Kashmir Road heads south and coruscates into the foothills. As the width and life gets squeezed out of it, the white dotted line dwindles into gravel and abrupt signposts deliver discouraging information: 'Seal Ends', 'Road Narrows', 'Gate, Leave As You Find', 'No Exit'. As each piece of road disappears the driver is left with a question: to go on, or to turn back. It's a matter of instinct and faith in your vehicle, and I guess that's why carparks were invented; so there's no need to think about that moment.

It doesn't help that 'the end of the road' has funereal connotations. It can also mean cantankerous farmers — I've met a few — wild hairy hunting men, and off-the-planet hippy hermits in house trucks. It's about six kilometres along Kashmir Road to Moorcock Saddle and on both sides of the road are stencilled the old industrial shadows of what happened to this land. It was a battleground of conquest and exhaustion, thrust and impotence. The poet Denis Glover knew from first-hand experience that the heroism of the settler life was a load of old romantic tosh:

> *'Here is no peace, only struggle.*
> *Not happy farmer digging;*
> *Only the desperation of his spade'*

In truth, most of the landscapes around us are not original; a good deal has been subtracted. The 'wildness' we see is really what's been abandoned after people have retreated from the landscape, usually beaten by loneliness, lousy weather, or exhaustion of the 'thing' they were extracting. Places like Moorcock Saddle have been repeatedly knocked up and remanufactured to suit us, and even today it is possible to see the exact boundary where the settlers finally became tired of the whole bloody shambles.

That blunt black line on the ridge is original forest, still standing because the settlers fires didn't quite reach that far. The zonky farm fence

up the spur once had a job to do, funnelling sheep and cattle onto the tussocks, but it now looks as if it was built in the wrong place. There's a chimney with a hut missing. Several gullies have been overcome with brown bracken where male California quail make a piping call that sounds to some bird-watchers like 'chi-cag-o, chi-cag-o'. A deep stream gully has a leftover pubic pocket of beech forest.

Probably only twenty years ago sheep were grazing on Moorcock Saddle, but the resilience of the original native seed stock is astonishing, and grass slopes are being creepily reoccupied with manuka and flax. The shrub forest at the head of Moorcock Stream is shaven, with burnt-black tree stumps poking through the manuka, but the hillsides are peppered with hebes, cabbage trees, pittosporums, coprosmas and young totara, the shock troops of the native soldiery. Lupin are moving up the stream bed, but so are the flag-waving toetoe.

The slopes are still being farmed after a fashion. In November 2013 the Moorcock road was closed by a logging gang felling a large radiata pine block that was almost on the top of Moorcock Saddle itself. Heavy machinery had been brought into this remote part of the Ruahines, and the logs were cut and bundled onto the logging trucks and the wood waste was piled beside the road. It reminded me of a scab being peeled off, with the red earth running over the tracks and road.

The last climb on the road to Moorcock Saddle is steep, and stream channels have gouged out trenches in the roadside mud. The huge carpark has a rather unfinished quality about it, as if the bulldozer driver had flattened as much as he could, turned around twice and got the hell out of there. I switched off the engine and stood outside as mist drooped over everything, giving the hills a sort of drowsiness. A grey warbler ululated from the scrub, and two California quail ran past, the male's front bobble jiggling frantically. There was no other vehicle up here, and the air had a clean alpine tinge.

I lace up my boots and fiddle with the pack straps. What I like about the end of the road is that it's the moment where the landscape gets its turn to speak; of course, it's our loss if we don't listen.

The track climbs a spur from Moorcock Saddle, following an old sheep trail as it zigzags patiently through the bush and slurry mist to the tops. Toetoe and thistles have bunched together, manuka is in flower, and astelias have round berries that dangle dangerously as huge glassy raindrops. There are shield ferns, cabbage trees and a flush of white snowberries as the mist drips onto the leaves. Pepper trees are feverish with red and purple blotches, and there's green tutu beside the track, a sure sign of stock in the past.

One fallen tree has exposed its red innards in neat segmented lengths, and threads of white fungi play over the rotting bits. Beside the track there's a massive old beech stump, perhaps burnt thirty years ago. It's ruined and proud, like an old dowager stuck in a corner of the ballroom, knowing its time was up, regretful, perhaps despairing, as the fresh green things bustle up amongst its roots.

On the ground I spotted a new feather, pale brown with tiger stripes of white, and when I stroked it, it was beautifully soft at the tips. It didn't remind me of any bush bird except perhaps a morepork, sifting through the forest with the accuracy of a stealth bomber on its noiseless flight. I put it in my parka pocket. Feathers are perfection. We can manufacture supersonic jet fighters, but if we tried to engineer a feather out of metal it would look beautiful, and would gleam, but it wouldn't fly. Whatever had been killed here had put up a fight, leaving two detached feathers.

About halfway up the hill I escaped the mist and walked into dry tussock and a cool hard blue sky that would linger for days. To the east a lone harrier was drawling about the spur, using the air currents for buoyancy and sight lines. Suddenly, a pair of black and white Stukas came into the attack. Their wings beat and yaw with a powerful urgency, white patches flashing, and the harrier, sensing danger, tries unaccustomed and erratic spirals to evade the onslaught, but the magpies close in. This violent swirl of wings went on for several minutes until the magpies broke off the attack, and squawk away with the noisy satisfaction of a job well done.

The spur track meets the ridge track and the signpost gave three choices. I dropped my pack and wandered up to a hillock at 1232 metres, a rounded flat mountain that nobody has bothered to name, and looked

down on Pohangina Saddle. A pipit came and sat on a rock near me and flicked its tail, making a quiet 'tweee' call. Sun dried the sweat on my shirt. One out of the box. It was like this thirty years ago too.

Five of us tramped along the Ruahine Range on a home-made week-long epic, and the journey still comes back to me in little memory fragments of heat and sweat, along with the camaraderie of effort and long days. Gesticulating at Mt Ruapehu in the haze. Feeling the sun shear on one side of our face and seeing streetlights forty kilometres away. Following flat ridges that bind and disconnect, spotted with eye-watering tarns, and splintering into spurs that we have to decide which one to take, which one to avoid. Grateful for mouthfuls of water from tarns that tasted brown and sweet, and almost blown to bits on an overnight camp — one tent did collapse — and in fog early one morning we got muffled and confused.

For eight days we were travelling the tussock tops firmly believing we were in control because that's how it seemed. We marked our line on the map and joined huts together as stations of the cross, forded rivers into creeks, crossed passes, switching catchments three times and making sense of a place that in eight days we were sure we had conquered. The Ruahine Range, top to bottom, north to south. Ours.

Or was it the other way round? Not one of us would have accepted it was a type of pilgrimage, but now I wonder if the land wasn't teaching us something. It was fun, of course, but bloody hard work, and every kilometre was sweatily and incrementally well earnt as hour after hour we walked to experience the other side of mundane, whatever the opposite of that was. The long-distance stroller Nick Hunt reminisced about this phenomenon:

> 'Walking, as so often before, became less a means to an end than an end in itself. Like an act of meditation, it answered its own question.'

Of course, we were lucky. A week of fine weather, who'd believe it? The Ruahine mountains are a scrawny range and the weather buries its teeth into the neck of them on every side; there is no safe weather aspect. It rains three hundred days of the year, with fog and blizzard wind that

pushes people away. Huey (the trampers' god of weather) came back on the final day and flushed us down the Makaretu River in a downpour, and I have a final photo of five soggy trampers making good use of that farmer's hayshed. We had quiet smiles on our faces.

Longview Hut sits off the ridge facing Hawke's Bay and was empty. A gas cooker and heater has replaced the log burner. The last entry in the logbook was four days ago, when a hunter was passing through in bad weather: 'Pissing down, freezing, and where's the bloody log burner?' he wrote bitterly. I pulled more clothes on as the afternoon cooled and scribbled in my notebook as words and sentences got darker on the page. After a struggle the gas heater started to work, and I lit a candle, more for its poetic soul-like flickering than for any practicality as a light source. Two tiny brown moths started to circle the candle, and they slowly gyrated inwards on their hypnotic final spiral.

That night was a catacomb. Frozen quietude. I'm drawn to silence, and where else could you go to find such a stillness? Longview Hut is 1200 metres above sea level, a good deal higher than many countries and far too high to hear any river noise. No wind tonight. The little local rivulet had paused as its drips and drops of sound solidified into ice, and there was an occasional ping as the iron roof shrank back to its old shape. I strained to detect any sound but all I could hear was the noise of nothing, which was a kind of ringing pulse that might have been the blood in the veins next to my ear. All our busy little planetary yelps and squeaks were getting sucked into space — and extinguished.

The New Zealand astronomer Beatrice Tinsley said in her diary that she found 'the stars are comforting', which is an odd thing to say. Perhaps she meant that they are always switched on. Permanent points of tranquillity that move in a calming quadrille across a black dome, tinted with weak colours that are faintly nostalgic of Christmas tree lights. About an hour after dusk the Southern Cross stands out sharply and most Kiwis can pick it, or at least muddle it up with the false cross, but the night is only beginning the show, and few people stay up to see what happens next as there's usually something good on the telly.

'We are stardust
Billion year old carbon'

For star-watchers the perfect night would have no moon and be well away from streetlights. Ideally, it's best to be at altitude, and it should be cold — autumn is good — and keen stargazers need to get up at 2 am and linger outside for half an hour so that their eyesight starts to see the sort of stuff that Neolithic hunters once saw. These were exactly the conditions at Longview Hut that night; Beatrice I think, would have been impressed.

The stars came down; they poured out of the sky. I tried not to think of sperm but that's what the Milky Way was, a confused ejaculation of stars and globular clusters, of blurry dwarf galaxies that seemed cloudy, and black holes that are dark interstellar nebulae. The stars were embedded in a miasma of light pricks that dimmed the famously bright constellations of Orion and Scorpio, so that they seem to disappear into a glorious galactic soup so thick you could drown in it.

We're told all this starry mush was assembled by chance. Some of the atoms in us were there at the beginning of the universe, and some will be there at the end, but — ahem, a question to God, please — if we are mortal, how is it that the atoms that make us up are immortal? A friend remarked to me once there are two really weird places in the universe: 'the first is inside the atom, the second is inside our minds'.

When I first came to Longview Hut in the 1980s, we were completely disconnected from the world. Now, the umbilical frequencies spit through the air. There's good cellphone coverage from the hut verandah, the internet is a few clicks away and the GPS on the iPhone tells me where I am, and, if I choose, I can be tracked by anyone. If I really get into a pother, then the emergency locator beacon will fetch a rescue helicopter to me in about an hour. So I wasn't alone, even if I wanted to be.

Progress, civilisation, whatever we might call it, gives us gains but there are losses as well, and we often forget to put these in the life account ledger. Once, the real prize for the hard yakka of climbing up

to Longview Hut was silence and solitude, and if you wanted to tell your story you had to climb back down the hill and find someone to talk to. Now we have the instant vanity of Facebook, Twitter, blah, blah, blah, all right I'm old-fashioned, and my plaints are slightly futile, but I remember how it used to be. That the disconnect meant something, alone under the stars meant something.

It's getting cold. Breath forms a cloud and steam comes from the other end. The verandah had a smear of frost on it already and just as I was burrowing into my sleeping bag I suddenly remembered the feather. The parka pocket was still damp from the mist, but I laid the morepork feather on the table and hoped it would dry out overnight. In the morning, it was gone.

It came up for auction in Auckland in June 2010. A single feather, black at the base with a broad white band of two centimetres at the tip. It was twenty centimetres long and about three centimetres wide. The auction was brisk and the audience was 'spellbound' as the expected price of $500 was rapidly passed, and within ten minutes the price was settled when the auctioneer's hammer banged down. At $8400, it was then a world-record price for a single feather, the tail feather of a huia.

There are twelve tail feathers. The two centre feathers were called the crown feathers or chief's feathers, because the white tip was dead straight, whereas the feathers on either side sloped off at a small angle. These feathers were so precious to Maori that they were kept in an elaborately carved box called a waka huia that was hung from the ceiling of a chief's house and passed from chief to the chief's son. A Maori chief could not hold his mana without adornment, and what he needed was a huia feather. There are hundreds of photographic portraits of Maori, male and female, in the Turnbull collection, and many have well-groomed hair topped with one or two huia feathers.

The huia had the bad luck to be abundant at the precise time that feathers for adornment were at the height of their faddishness. No Victorian or Edwardian lady could not be seen without a feather in her cap, a dainty ephemeral thing that sketched the air in a twirl, and implied that the large resplendent lady underneath was also dainty. Photographs

of the era show that ladies wore huge hats, elaborate crustaceans of fabric and artifice which they needed to be topped by feathers. Birds that sang in the sunlight were slaughtered and farmed in large numbers and the fashion market was huge. It has been suggested that dinosaurs originally used feathers as a type of sexual display, and Edwardian ladies were no different.

In his book *Feathers: the Evolution of a Natural Miracle*, Thor Hanson points out that when the *Titanic* sank in 1912 the most valuable commodity on board (by weight) wasn't the aristocratic passengers, but the feathers. Feathers that had been shipped from South Africa, Asia Minor, the Levant, the Spice Islands, feathers from everywhere. The Edwardian woman could no more venture out without her feathers than we could go outside without our mobile phones. The forty cases of feathers on board the liner would today be worth $2.3 million.

It was the First World War that destroyed the feather market. Collectively, universally, within months, women leaders in fashion had decided feathers were frivolous and unseemly. The austere look came into vogue, and according to Hanson hundreds of ostrich farmers in South Africa went bust. Bales of feathers ready for export simply did not fly. The ladies stripped them off, discarded them, threw them away.

Except some. The white ones were kept for a special purpose, and ladies, it was usually young ladies, would hand them to young men in Britain if they thought they should be in uniform, or should have volunteered for the army by now. It signified cowardice. The ladies felt they were doing a social service to require every young fit man to sacrifice themselves and saw no irony that the feathers that they so right-mindedly handed out were only a few months before balanced impeccably and improbably on their heads. Sometimes the girls played a meaner trick, and several male civilians tell stories of how they were approached by attractive girls with a big smile, which suddenly changed to a frown as her eyes inspected a man who wasn't in uniform, and therefore not worthy of a pretty girl's smile.

The young men were devastated, and died, and feathers have almost never come back into fashion until June 2014 when I saw in the Ballantynes department store of Christchurch a woman arranging

a display of minuscule caps and hats, tiny as a Jew's skullcap. Each cap was adorned with feathers, some much longer than the hats themselves. I told her my *Titanic* story. She was unimpressed.

Well before the First World War, some learned people of the time were conscious of the huia's sharp decline. The so-called 'reluctant conservationist' Sir Walter Buller advocated island sanctuaries, and settling huia on Little Barrier Island, but he didn't really mean it. When he gained two living huia, he promptly despatched them with a great triumphant note 'after three years of persistent effort' to Lord Rothschild in England.

Buller thought, as most educated Victorian New Zealanders did, that the native species were 'inferior' to English birds and would shortly die out, and there was some scientific gravitas behind this thinking. Many people misinterpreted Charles Darwin's *On the Origin of Species*, and the philosopher Herbert Spencer later popularised this educated misconception as the 'survival of the fittest'. To the colonial gentleman of the nineteenth century it was obvious that the weak would be eliminated. The English birds would be tougher than the local rabble, and the same bit of wishful thinking was thinly applied to Maori.

In 1890 the wife of the then governor-general of New Zealand, Lord Onslow, gave birth to a son, who they named Huia in the hope that this would secure the bird's protection. Indeed, the little boy's 'mark' was placed on the proclamation declaring the huia a protected species in 1892. A nice bit of public relations but it had a dire effect, for it drew attention to the bird's extreme rarity, and, by association with Maori and English royalty, its value.

It is hard to realise how abundant huia once were. In a little book called *Links in the Chain: field surveying in early New Zealand*, Archie Bogle fondly recalled his surveying days along the Whanganui River and in the Rangitikei district in 1903 and 1904. He saw 'dozens of huia' and the surveyors got pretty good at imitating the huia's call.

> 'On a calm day, a whistling huia could be heard right across a deep bush gully. Usually, they would respond to a friendly return whistle and fly across to see what was happening. Quite often, a pair of birds could be located from the sound of bark and rotten limbs being torn off a tree and falling to the ground.

> 'I can only say that every man of our survey party, and in Girdlestone's party to the north of us, seems to have been a natural artist, because he could, and did, whistle up a bird almost any time.'

In the 1950s Bogle's observations of the huia were noted down by the ethnologist W. J. Phillips from the Dominion Museum. He also recorded Bogle's imitation of the huia's calls. Archie Bogle thought that his whistle was 'a good result', but when *The Book of the Huia* was published there was no mention of his earlier recording and later enquiries failed to discover any trace of it. So Bogle recorded the huia's whistle a second time for H. R. McKenzie of the Auckland War Memorial Museum. This recording has also been lost.

What makes Bogle's story poignant for me — since it's a story about extinction, and the inability to save things even when we could — is that the same perverse logic was applied to his own siblings.

The youngest brother, Jack, had died in childhood, but every one of his older brothers enlisted to fight in the First World War; in the typical patriotic reflex of the time they were 'whistled up to fight', they did not want to be seen as cowards. Stafford George Bogle was killed at Suvla Bay in Gallipoli, aged twenty-six. Gordon Bogle was killed at Ypres. Gilbert Bogle was killed, aged thirty-two, on the Somme, trying to rescue an injured soldier. Archie was in the thick of it at Messines, but survived. What did their mother feel as the telegrams arrived?

Huia disappeared for many reasons. The loss of mature forest habitat was crucial, as the huia needed old-growth trees to supply its food sources such as beetle larvae, weta, and huhu grub. The complacent curiosity of the huia accelerated their extinction. Maori hunting parties regularly caught them in large numbers; one Maori hunter said he caught sixty in a season. Chronic overtrapping by Maori for feathers and Europeans for good specimens was another blow to the huia, and as a poor flyer the introduction of stoats, weasels and rats made it vulnerable. It was a perfect storm, and too much for the poor huia, and despite being abundant in the 1850s, by the 1900s they were becoming localised, and by 1907 they had disappeared.

Although huia were in theory protected there was little enforcement. Several half-hearted official and unofficial expeditions were made to find them, in 1899 (Wellington), 1902 (Mangaweka), 1905 (Tararua, where a Mr Murphy claimed bizarrely to have seen '100–150 huias hopping towards Kapakapanui Hill…'), 1909 (Ruahine), 1910 (Ruahine) 1912 (Ruahine), 1914 (Ure River or Waima in eastern Marlborough), and 1924 (Akatarawa, near Wellington). This last expedition saw evidence of huia scratchings in trees but saw no birds. By 1916 'Wanganui Maoris would readily pay £5 for a single huia feather if in good order', and if they could find one.

It's possible to hear the huia today, or an approximation of it, made by Henare Haumana, who was on the 1909 Ruahine expedition. It was recorded in 1952. Most people noted that the huia had a wide variety of calls from 'soft, quick twittering', 'soft whistle', 'loud clear whistle', or 'flute-like'. The alarm call 'who-are-you' or in Maori 'uia, uia' gave the bird its onomatopoeic name. Huia calls were said to carry a long way in the forest, and to be the first sound of the dawn chorus.

Occasional reports of huia drifted in after 1920. The government ranger William Cobeldick reported seeing huia in 1924 on Taharua Station, 'nineteen miles south of the Napier-Taupo road near Rangitaiki'. In *The Book of the Huia* by W. J. Phillips, the same ranger reported a sighting of huia at Lake Waikareiti in Te Urewera a few months earlier. Phillips knew the ranger personally and vouched for the accuracy of these sightings.

There was a possible sighting at Lake Waikareiti track as late as October 1961. A Miss Margaret M. Hutchinson, an 'experienced English bird-watcher', saw a 'black bird with a fan-like tail tipped with white flying from her up a valley'. Miss Hutchinson spent a week waiting for another sighting, but nothing was seen. Dr Falla and W. J. Phillips both interviewed Miss Hutchinson afterwards and agreed that it might have been a huia, and if it was, it was the last definite sighting — ever.

The loss of the huia to me is worse than that of the moa. It could have been saved; we just did not try hard enough. The huia had a fragility in its home in the forest, a companionship between male and female, it wanted to be friends with humans, greeted us, never learned to avoid us, and we

destroyed them. In Japanese they have an expression *mono-no-aware*, a bittersweet sense of the transience of things. Sometimes *mono-no-aware* is translated as the 'pathos of things', or 'an empathy towards things', and rather exquisitely, as the 'ahh-ness of things'.

There it was. Gone. Ahhh, a space in the forest waits for the huia to come back.

BOOKS & SOURCES

■ *Star Names: their lore and meaning* Richard Hinckley Allen, based on *Star-Names and Their Meanings* G. E. Stechert (1899). The Southern Cross perambulates and 3000 years ago it could be seen in the Baltic and 'it was last seen on the horizon of Jerusalem about the time Christ was crucified'. Northern hemisphere star-watchers are terrible snobs and think the southern hemisphere has rather a poor showing of stars.

■ '*Root, and Crop, and Stone*', Denis Glover. His other poems such as 'The Magpies' and 'The Road Builders' also seem appropriate.

■ *Ruahines' traverse*. The quote is from Nick Hunt (2014), *Walking the Woods and the Water*.

■ *Beatrice Tinsley*. NZBC ran a series of radio programmes on Tinsley and this phrase was used repeatedly. See also the biography *Bright Star* (2006), Christine Cole Catley.

■ *Stargazing*. As a teenager in England in the 1960s I watched Patrick Moore on the BBC programme *The Sky at Night*, and my neighbour invited me to look through his ten-inch reflector telescope in his garden. I saw a moon with carbuncles and zits and watched a tiny black dot of a satellite (actually it was the satellite's shadow) as it dashed across the gigantic orange disc of Jupiter — never forgotten that.

■ *Longview Hut*. I was sufficiently intrigued to count up how many countries are *lower* than Longview Hut: Lithuania, Latvia, Ghana, Hungary, Burkina Faso, Belarus, Estonia, Finland, Ireland, Maldives, Malta, Egypt and many low-lying Pacific and Caribbean nations etc., so perhaps forty in all?

■ *Gains and losses*. In John Fowles' introduction to the book *Thomas Hardy's England* (1984), he talks about the role of nostalgia. Thoreau in *Walden* made a comment about progress and the railways and the impact on the country way of life, and he remarked that 'I do not see clearly that these successive losses are ever quite made up to us'. When Fowles looked over the comments of English countryfolk from the 1890s, and from the Appalachian people at the turn of the century, he found the same disconnect. 'Childhood after childhood of appalling deprivations and poverty; yet hardly a person who does not recall it with a warmth, love and affection very seldom shown for all the outward improvements in life since. One may subtract as much as one likes for the notorious golden distortion of memory; yet there is still

something, a secret, that none of our politicians and sociologists seems to have quite penetrated. Perhaps it is made up of those losses that Thoreau spoke of, that are never quite made up to us.'

■ '*Woodstock*' (1969), Joni Mitchell. She did not attend the Woodstock festival because of confusion about getting to the event, and because her manager said she would get more exposure appearing on the *Dick Cavett Show*. That television show can be found on YouTube, and also appearing with Joni Mitchell were Crosby, Stills and Nash, and Jefferson Airplane. The full chorus of 'Woodstock' is:

We are stardust
Billion year old carbon
We are golden
Caught in the devil's bargain
And we've got to get ourselves
Back to the garden.

■ *Huia feather*. The previous world record price for a single feather was $US2800 for a bald eagle feather.

■ *Feathers*. The Royal Society for the Protection of Birds in Britain (RSPB) had its beginnings in 1889 as a women's movement protesting against the excessive use of feathers in women's hats. Members would sign a 'pledge' to not use feathers (except farmed ostrich feathers) in their millinery and encouraged other women to do the same. By 1889 they had 26,000 members. See *Our Place* (2018), Mark Cocker, pp33–36.

■ *Huia*. Bird diseases have also been suggested as a cause of extinction, as parasitic ticks were found on the wattles of huia birds in museums. These turned out to be Indian of origin, and possibly arrived with myna birds in 1875.

■ *Huia calls*. Henare Haumana's imitation of the male and female calls of the huia can be found through the Radio New Zealand Sound Archives or through the New Zealand Birds Online website. Since we know Maori hunting parties regularly 'whistled up' huia to catch them, it's reasonable to assume that this call is quite accurate.

■ *The Reluctant Conservationist* (1989), Ross Galbreath.

■ *Links in the Chain: field surveying in early New Zealand* (1975), A. H. Bogle. Bogle was born in 1883 and qualified as a surveyor in 1906. Tall,

lean, a good all-round sportsman, with a fine tenor voice, he won a poetry prize in 1917. He was awarded a CBE in 1970. The sacrifice of al the male siblings in a family to the war effort was not unusual. The Dannevirke family of the Knights lost all three sons in the First World War, George, Herbert and Douglas (see *New Zealand Herald*, 12 October 2017) and the Cockerell brothers, Allan, Dave and Jim, all fought at the Battle of Passchendaele on the same day, 12 October 1917, when Jim was killed (see *Christchurch Press*, 12 October 2017).

- *The Dominion Post*, 7 November 2015. This article covers the Bogle brothers' history with a photo of the four brothers. A street in Waipukurau has been renamed Bogle Brothers Esplanade in their honour.
- *First World War*. The 'white feather' movement was supported by many prominent English women, including the suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst.
- *The Book of the Huia* (1963), W. J. Phillips.

BIRDLINGS FLAT & KAITORETE SPIT

The great beach of Kaitorete Spit runs from the warm red cliffs of Banks Peninsula down to Taumutu, some thirty kilometres of lonely and desolate gravels that every day are sucked and sawed at by the waves of the Pacific Ocean. Humans visit this place fleetingly, sometimes to fish on the margin or glean driftwood that glows in the moonlight like ancestral bones. Sometimes fires are lit, and figures huddle around them, and get drunk, shouting defiantly into the sea. Orca occasionally slice offshore, and infrequently a leopard seal will haul up on the beach. Terns roost on the gravel and sand in numbers, and banded dotterels patter about day and night, seeming never to sleep, trying to raise chicks that seldom survive the gamut of wild cats and the patient sweeping V-wing of the harrier.

The wind is part of the spit, flattening the big Pacific waves in a nor'wester, and then pushing them into hooked crests in a fierce southerly front. Under these conditions the waves hit the beach with such force that the vibrations can be felt in the small baches that have sequestered themselves into a prime niche of coastal property. The fine sand gets scoured and lifted high, adding to the sting of the air as the spit is washed with an unceasing smog of salt spray.

Kaitorete Spit is a barrier that traps in Te Waihora or Lake Ellesmere. The lake is void and mirror, not really dead, but not quite living. Once its waters reached Lincoln township, and this wetland in turn connected to the great swamp around Christchurch. There was so much water that in the 1850s a boiler was shifted from Ferrymead to Little River through the inland waterways, up the Heathcote River, down the Halswell River, across Lake Ellesmere and up Lake Forsyth. Te Waihora waters were once full of fish, flounder and eels and thousands of nesting birds, a bountiful food basket. Now it is eutrophic, starved of oxygen and stuffed full of fertilisers, which has rendered it into a cow effluent pond. Ngai Tahu dream of returning the mana to Te Waihora.

Birdlings Flat is the bach village at the far eastern end of Kaitorete Spit. Harsh words are usually thrown at it — gritty, bleak, grotty, mournful, unsettling — but also some kindlier language such as calm, off-beat, reflective, meditative, painterly. Plants struggle to grow, and human skin gets dry and cracked. Here are enormous skies, the pulse

of the waves, the descent of a hot bloody summer sun into the sea and nearby a long line of tau crucifix telephone poles down Bayleys Road.

The Bayleys have been here for a hundred years and the main road on the spit is named after them. Or maybe they named the road. Or maybe the dirt track was simply known as the road to Bayleys' farm and it became the easiest thing to call it. In 2015 when I interviewed him, Michael Bayley had lived for seventy years on Kaitorete Spit; he's seventy-two.

> 'My grandfather took it on, planted most of the macrocarpas, and then my father took over. We had a partnership for a while in the seventies and then I was on my own. I'm a reluctant farmer really, so was my father'.
>
> 'Will any son take over the farm?'
>
> 'Probably not, the oldest is in his forties, and he's doing software at Trimbles. Wool was a pound a pound in the 1950s, so an eight to ten-pound fleece was over a week's wages in one fleece. Old man bought a Land Rover in the good wool years. Sixties and seventies had guaranteed meat prices.
>
> 'I gave up sheep in 2000 and that part is leased out. I started potatoes in 1972, gave it a go and we must be getting better at it because the yields have gone up. Ten acres gives us 130 to 150 tons.'
>
> 'Is that a living?'
>
> 'We can charge big prices for early spuds, and we're frost free. Share the work with Bruce in the cottage,' Mike said with a grin, 'he takes half and does all the work.'

The old DSIR (Department of Scientific and Industrial Research) had a trial of potatoes at Kaitorete and one plot was nicknamed 'Bayleys Beauties', which was rejected as low yielding, but they are the best-flavoured potatoes in New Zealand. We order a sack or two every year and they are delivered by Annabel Allison, Michael's wife. She's a friend of a friend so I grabbed the chance to ask her how she would describe living on the spit.

She revels in it: space, vastness, clouds that you notice, sharp southerlies, silence, darkness. No artificial light, except the Christchurch

light dome and what filters across Lake Ellesmere. Once she went down to the beach and was a bit miffed when she found someone else there: 'I'm quite selfish with my landscapes, I don't like to share them.'

> 'We never suffer in a drought because it's always a drought. About 500 millimetres a year. Michael doesn't own gumboots because we never get puddles.'
>
> 'Anything you don't like here?' I asked. Annabel paused.
>
> 'Not really, the driving. Oh, and I had ten flat tyres in ten weeks.'

Michael showed me the cap of an army shell. He recalled they used to pick up shells from an air force bombing range, and each had three and a half pounds of lead, with a brass nose cone and a brass end plate. From all the shells they scavenged they managed to pay for their ski gear at Mt Olympus skifield.

> 'The army had the last exercise in about 1980, I think. We went up there and they were having practice assault charges, with M1s they called them, machine rifles with live ammunition. We joined in the line to see what it was like being on an assault charge. We all kept in a line, but the army boys gripped their machine guns across their stomachs as they ran which meant their barrels were all pointing at us! We thought bugger this!'

Michael and I walked down to the beach, but he hadn't switched off the electric fences, so his method was to perch on top of a fence post and leap acrobatically over. For a man who claimed his 'knees are gone' and walks with a noticeable limp, it was a creditable effort. I hate electric fences, enough said, not enough jump practice and my groin injury got no sympathy. He showed me lines in the paddocks that he thought were old plough lines created by traction engines driven by his grandfather.

That day the beach had been washed clean of most marks, the sea flat and patient. In behind the dunes was a small copse of stunted ngaio, maybe planted by Maori. Michael showed me rubble of the old Maori oven. They used the greywacke rocks so often they had been tempered and etched red. After he showed me, he repositioned the stones back into the gravel and dust.

Any moa bones? Quite a few, and argillite adzes and a couple of greenstone adzes have been found. He also found a burial site, someone important, maybe a chief, with knees tucked up under the chin and a few ornaments. Ngai Tahu came and took the body away. Were there any native trees on the spit? He remembered one kowhai tree was left, gnarled, geriatric, deformed, and the sheep used to rub up against it.

'Just one?' I asked, 'What happened to it?'

'It fell over.'

'Old age?'

'Yeah.'

In his quiet farm kitchen Michael Bayley most liked to reminisce about his sailing days. He built his own ocean-going boat in a huge shed on the spit, creating practically every part, including melting the lead for the keel. That was finished in 2001 and he and Annabel took off to the ocean and had many an adventure.

These exploits included being off the Wairarapa coast with Michael, his wife and the baby battling a north-west gale of fifty knots. Tonga was a bad crossing, twenty-five to thirty knots with a three-metre swell and the wind 'right on the nose'. When they heaved to, they lost twelve miles backwards, which took a whole day to make up, but it was a respite from getting rolled around. The crewman got sick two hours out of Opua and stayed in his bunk for six days. Annabel held onto the baby.

'It doesn't sound like much fun.'

> 'It isn't, it's a bloody challenge, but there's something about passage making that gets you, an achievement in doing it. Three hours on and off. You can lose three kilograms on a passage. You don't eat as much, sleep as much, the muscles are always tense, always at stress, working all the time. But in a trip of several months, a passage is only seven days, and in compensation you get so much time in the islands.'

He's had to give up the sailing and now the boat lives in the inner harbour at Lyttelton. He looked regretful, and Annabel made the same point as I was thinking it. There is a psychological link between sailing and Kaitorete Spit. A sailor sees an endless horizon, a landscape of single lines, and that's the same on the spit. From the hills of Banks Peninsula,

the Kaitorete Spit resembles a sort of finger pointing at something out there, or with a fancier imagination, the spit is boat-shaped like a long waka, forcing its way between the lake and the ocean.

A foggy day on the spit. Sunday. Early June, almost the winter solstice. Close to a frost, with the sea mist pushing onto the spit as far as the main highway. Car noises muffled. Fence wires drip. Above the fog is a low stratus cloud, so it was a sandwich of grey, pressing down on the horizon and weighted at the edges like a drooping tablecloth. The sea moved sluggishly, with none of its usual vigour, and a sort of drizzle wet the top of the stones but got no further. Shift them away and the pebbles slide easily and with a bum wiggle there's a dry pit underneath. Sea fog isn't typical at Birdlings, usually it is dry and sunny, but when the fog happens it's as if a slow Bach fugue is playing.

My mate was less kind. It was his first visit to Birdlings Flat, and when we drove into the fog he said it was about as appealing as a 'three-day-old meat pie, stiff and unappetising'. We drove down amongst the baches; 'Soweto,' he pronounced. Huts with broken cars, rusting iron fences, an old bath tub, curtains closed, piles of rubble, two telephone poles on crazy angles, smoke oozing out of one chimney — who would guess I'd end up living here?

In the 1970s Robin Morrison took a photo at Birdlings Flat outside a tacked-together shed, with a man on the shoreline burning a pile of plastic rubbish as the black smoke smudged a perfect blue. Paul Moon called it 'a lament for the struggle to retain a faltering presence on the landscape'. It was what people saw when they drove into Birdlings, and it's what I saw. A crude contrast between the perfect curves of nature and the disgusting pile of man-made crap on top.

The spit is built on greywacke gravels, and how far down the stones go is anyone's guess, but someone has reckoned about 300 metres. That's around 1000 feet of grey stones that roll and slide over each other so comfortably that even a 7.2 earthquake in September 2011 made little difference to the baches perched above. The correct name for this unlovely sedimentary rock is Torlesse greywacke, from the German 'grauwacke' which means 'grey, earthy rock'. It is the backbone of the

Southern Alps and rolls immense torrents of gravel down the rivers to the coastal plains, trillions of tons that have been dragged down the Canterbury Plains to Banks Island, a mere 20,000 years ago.

If a committee created a rock, I think it would resemble greywacke, and Canterbury trampers find it boring. Slogging up a riverbed of monotonous boulders, scrabbling up unstable river terraces, zigzagging across scree slopes to crappy rock summits that mountaineers irreverently call 'Weet-Bix'. This dross rock is speckled with minerals such as feldspars, quartz, iron oxides, calcite, and has bits of practically everything else, including gneiss, chert, slate, schists, garnets, hornblende and pyrites. None of them have any value, but at Birdlings Flat the greywacke hides a secret.

On that fog-bound day a car arrives at the carpark. A young couple get out and stand on the edge of the huge mounds of shingle, pondering their options, looking helpless. The ocean is hidden in the fog, but they can hear it mumbling. Then something unexpected happens. They allow themselves to get lured to the sea and without thought their feet sink into the gravels. They glance about and start to fossick. There are storm-shaved sticks of white driftwood, a gull's feather, sundried taco shards of seaweed, empty Coke cans, and yellow fisherman's gloves torn at the fingers.

Backs stoop and bend and hands pick up tiny coloured rocks amongst the grey stones. Rummaging, scratching, scrabbling. The absence of colour makes their eyes spot anything different, and hands sweep through the rounded pebbles as if brushing a dog's fur, searching for the tiny agates, garnets and tourmalines that impregnate the gravels. I don't think people can resist. Gleaning is something for nothing, and hardly anyone does not end up with a pocketful of pebbles which they take home and put in a saucer of water to gleam.

There used to be a faded council sign at the carpark which stated that the 'Taking of Gravel is Illegal' — until someone nicked it. Actually, the taking and supplying of stones has always been the sea's responsibility and it supplies more than it takes, for the spit is creeping seawards. In the 1820s Lake Forsyth was open to the sea and called Mowrie Harbour. The sea currents push gravels (and those small gemstones) from the

Rakaia and Rangitata rivers along the coast and close the lake's entrance, so every now and again the Selwyn District Council unleashes its bulldozers to open it again. In 2001 an expensive sea-mole was instigated and constructed by Ngai Tahu to keep the lake outlet open permanently, but the sea shuts it down.

People often find stuff on the spit. An eleven-year-old girl found a natural twelve-millimetre oyster pearl, and she got her picture in the paper. She had sharper eyes than mine, for I usually only found fishermen's gloves, red and green, sometimes navy, with the plastic turning gooey and scaly. Soon I had such a large collection that I stuck them on long driftwood sticks behind my bach and the rubber hands shook and trembled helplessly in the wind.

In 1986 I bought a small five by five metre hut known locally as 'the late Dolly Palmers cottage'.

I didn't know much about Dolly (or Dorothy) except what her neighbours Archie and Mary van Dorp told me after I bought her place. They kept an eye on Dolly in her old age, until she became too feeble to look after herself. She lived in the cottage until the last two weeks of her life, and when I first walked in it was still crammed full of her furniture: three tables, five easy chairs and four huge wardrobes. It was the first 'home' I'd ever owned, and I was dumbfounded by my audacity. It cost $8500, which even in 1986 was absurdly cheap, but still it was all my savings, wasted on a beach shack with rusty nails and rotting fence-posts. The roof was corrugated iron with a huge water tank attached, and the outside cladding was a cheap white fibre cement board called Pole-ite. The toilet was outside and linked to a septic tank.

I was forced to become a DIY guy. I scavenged a bath from somewhere, put it in the shed and then installed my own hot water cylinder by copying the wiring from Geoff's cylinder next door. I broke the wardrobes up for firewood, then put in a larger wood stove, painted windows, replaced washers on taps, and installed a Zip water heater, but for all the home improvements it was still a bach. I lived there for a year.

The piece of land I owned was a one 57th undivided share, a communal title similar to Maori land, so there were fifty-seven co-owners.

This strange land title had caused a lot of aggro. No one had any right to their particular piece of land, it was simply where the four walls of your bach were put down. The duckshooters who arrived first didn't mind, they only wanted to kill ducks, but later people moved in and built proper houses, and put up fences and barriers marking their supposed territory.

Inevitably there were feuds. Vince started arguing with his neighbour Ken, and the row got so bad that it ended up on the telly, and they are still squabbling thirty years later. Anyway, the Selwyn MP at the time, Ruth Richardson, presented a Bill to Parliament to subdivide the land so everyone knew where their plot was. It turned out that my shivering hands sculpture amounted to a kind of land claim, and that gave me the stretch to the road. After a while the gloves fell off.

It took me some time to get to know the neighbours. Stan managed the golf course and used to surfcast from the shore. When I went down to play my guitar on the beach, he said I was scaring the fish away. Old Bert next door was a bit shaky and leaned against the pillar of his verandah as he shot rabbits with his .22. Miriam and Bill lived a few doors away from me. Bill was a big Maori guy who sometimes played Frank Ifield and Dean Martin super loud on his gramophone. They had a spell of running the Little River store until it got too much for them.

Vince has the only gem museum in New Zealand. The glass shelves shimmer with polished agates, jaspers and chalcedony, and there are huge chunks of fossilised wood on the floor. 'Ask the farmers,' Vince said knowingly, 'they'll tell you where the good stuff is.' Another local man was Horton Wilson (that's what he called himself) and he rushed around in a frenzy of wheeling and dealing, and then nailed up two authentic but unofficial road signs: Whispering Wind Lane and Sound of Sea Lane. I liked him a lot more after that.

People are attracted to Birdlings in a drifty, dreamy sort of way. Every evening the surf fishermen turn their monkish hoods up and patiently cast into the foam. If you chat to them, they all chant from the same hymn book, 'The fishing is crap now', and point to the pile of dogfish they've hooked up, and the offshore trawlers. I nod in sympathy, but on reflection, I've never heard a fisherman admit anywhere, anytime, that the fishing was better than ever.

Visitors to my bach came out and just fall asleep, lulled into a doze by the low pulsing sound of the sea. We had evening fires on the beach, and watched the spotted shags wobbling on the serrated horizon like semi-quavers on a musical bar. We saw huge southerly surf dumpsters carving scallop shapes out of the gravels. One day, hammering nails into some loose roofing iron, I looked up and saw three crisp triangular fins of orca cutting through the flat seas. Then there was the morning I found a leopard seal on the beach looking sleek and sleepy, covered with dark spots.

I've taken hundreds of photos at Birdlings Flat but one that means a lot to me is that of a black jersey hanging out to dry on my washing line, taut, stretched and almost alive. It looks occupied, and I can see the person who did occupy it. Stephanie Mues had washed it that morning. She and Peter had come out to stay for the weekend, and they'd got caught up in the striking sunlight and uncluttered horizons. In the evening we had a fire of driftwood on the beach and they talked of how far away Germany seemed, and how unlikely it was that you could do this there.

She found her niche. I took Peter tramping up the Tasman Glacier at Mt Cook and Stephanie moved in with Blair and started to train to be a midwife in Dunedin. On a flight back from Germany to New Zealand an old woman she had never seen before, or spoken to, leant over to her and said, 'You are the most beautiful girl I've ever seen.' She was in love with New Zealand, and in the end never left it, which was her choice, I guess, but I wish she could have chosen another way. There is a small plaque to her in the Dunedin Polytechnic grounds, which I couldn't find at first, but someone on the staff sent me a map and there it was under the cherry tree. I shifted the blossoms and gave the plaque a little polish.

For every society that has well-organised cities there must be settlements on the fringe that occupy leftover spaces, and are filled by people who don't necessarily fit in, or who can't afford to fit in. Birdlings Flat plugs a gap, like a back-eddy in a river where flotsam spins endlessly around. Currents drift through us all, and people are washed here by curiosity or contemplation, perhaps with a desire to hide or escape, maybe looking for a bargain because they are poor, some because they

want to create art, or because there's nowhere else to go. Some came because they actually find peace at Birdlings; it becomes a home.

One of the accidental consequences of buying my bach was that friends also took an interest in Birdlings Flat. John Madgwick bought a hut that was known as 'the dolls' house' because every room in it was tiny. Geoff bought a bach next door to mine. So his story is intertwined with mine and we both arrived at Birdlings Flat for similar inchoate reasons, drawn into a landscape that is not typical of New Zealand — but this is Geoff's story.

When I first asked Geoff Spearpoint why he came to Birdlings Flat he gave me an unexpected answer: 'You. You started the whole thing.' His partner at the time 'knew a bloke called Mark Pickering, so she brought me out to meet Mark'.

Geoff is compact, physically strong, with nut-coloured skin and a face with a rim of white hair (similar to foam on a coffee cup) and well creased by squinting into too much sunlight and sapphire-tumbling mountain creeks. He walks in a deliberate manner, almost overstriding with his heavy pack slanting his back. He does not go fast, but he has huge stamina, and can tramp all day and well into the night if he has to.

He knows the Garden of Eden like the back of his hand — a comment that will be baffling for non-mountain people reading this — but to any serious tramper or mountaineer in New Zealand it resonates immensely. He has written and co-written many tramping guide books, and books about the spirit of 'the hills'. He is, as one friend put it, 'a tramping phenomenon', one of an older-style school that still remembers japara raincoats, tricounies on boots, tramping without maps and large bonfires with singing girls. On his first overseas trip to South America to climb mountains in 1972–73 they caught a cargo boat.

> 'Birdlings immediately reminded me of the Pencarrow coast where I spent a lot of time as a kid. I had grandparents who lived at Eastbourne, and I spent a lot of time rock climbing at Baring Head. I felt at home.
>
> 'I have never seen Birdlings as a dump, just a place with rough individuality reflecting a harsh coast on the edge of

emptiness. Even though it is close to the city it has its own wilderness character. It follows no one, and the people and their relationships reflect that.

'There's a certain anarchy in the way things are done here. People here have great friendships, and occasionally great animosity, emotions reflecting living at the edge, not under anyone else's domination. It's not the same in the suburbs.

'There's a lot of reasons why I live in Birdlings. I wanted the benefits of the city as I'm quite social, and like movies and theatres, but I didn't want to get caught up in city living. It's half an hour from the city, and it was cheap land then. That was a factor. I had some savings and didn't want any debt. I wanted a base, somewhere to keep stuff, develop a kinship with somewhere.

'Birdlings is a bit like Antarctica, which looks white to outsiders, but those who spend time down there discover that it has lots of colour. At Birdlings the sea colours change so much, from opaque and milky, to dark turquoise, and often with such beautiful clear seas you could be on a ship jutting into the Pacific. The horizons at Birdlings are 360 degrees, with phenomenal skies, and the rich nor'west sunsets create a sky full of colour. It's cinematic.

'It's a wild landscape, and the skies are part of that. People in New Zealand are not used to going into landscapes that are vast and wide and flat. No trees, big skies, greys and blues. Walk out onto the beach at sunset and the cliffs are a blaze of fire, a blaze of red on the cliffs. A great place to be in contact with nature.

I interrupted him: 'For many people there's not much nature here,' and Geoff jumped on that.

'It's all nature. Full of life, some unique to Kaitorete Spit, with a great host of rare plants, seabirds, desert insects, and lizards. Out at my gate yesterday there was a pied shag sitting on a post, and I've seen pods of orcas offshore, whales spouting, a basking shark within a few metres of the shoreline, fur seals, leopard seals, and lines of shags commuting from the cliffs to

feeding grounds along the coast, while inside my section there are literally hundreds of geckos and skinks.

'I'm not a fisherman, I'm not a hunter, I have far too much empathy with animals, so I get no pleasure from killing them. But the beach is a popular fishing spot, and fishers enjoy setting up with their rods, chatting, daydreaming and waiting for the big one. Not so keen on the plastic and debris left behind sometimes, though.

'The wind is its own master, and it's part of that wilderness thing again. Cloud banks of southerlies come through with a hiss and a roar, rattling fast and passing quickly, and the temperature drops twenty degrees. But then you end up with calm weather and sunny skies. The nor'easter is the bad wind and it thrashes the garden. It's cold, irritating, frustrating, though actually, the majority of the time there's no wind at all.

'Barb [Barbara Brown] and I set out to establish a garden. First thing we did was to build fences to keep the wind out, and then divide up the spaces with trellises and baffle the wind and create "outdoor rooms". We brought in truckloads of soil, twenty cubic metres in total. The truck driver tried to drive along a street that peters out and got stuck in the gravel. He had to dump the soil on the road and I wheelbarrowed it to the section for days. I tried to create an oasis, tucked away, because I have all the openness I need through the gate on the beach.

'I definitely feel this is my place, and feel a sense of belonging, it's comfortable, a home, a base, connection with the land, and a pleasure to return to it. But it's not really about ownership.

'The land owns itself, and will always own itself, and we are rather arrogant to think otherwise. We are just temporary custodians. I love the mountains, I've been a tramper all my life, but Birdlings is a wonderful counterfoil to the mountains. To come back from a wet tramp to this coastal place, which is dry, barren, sunny, hot, horizontal, yellow and brown, beside a sea full of waves breaking, is magic. With a bonus that all the wet gear will be dry in seconds!'

Finally, after I switched the recording off, Geoff tossed my original question back in my face.

'What brought you out here?'

I didn't have an answer, at least not immediately.

A palimpsest is an ancient manuscript on parchment or vellum that has been scraped clean of the original words and then used again for another manuscript. Because vellum was expensive and rare, it was quite common to reuse it, and scholars with the aid of ultraviolet light and other tools can often read the original manuscript underneath the later written layers and so reconstruct a lost document. It's an analogy for Kaitorete Spit.

It has been scraped clean several times, but within and underneath the layers of stones are traces of what happened here, hints of structures that can be seen on Google Earth, found on old maps, or in historical accounts. The land is a succession of palimpsests, recording actions, activities, constructions, desire and greed. There was something for everyone on the spit, but only if something was taken away from something else. We're good at greed, but the gains can't be added up to make the losses good.

About 1000 years ago the area of Birdlings Flat and Kaitorete Spit was probably lightly forested with shrubby pittosporums and flax and kowhai on the lakeside, lived in by small moa and other birds. The barrier beach would have been narrower, piled up with thousands of years of boneyard-white driftwood, and the lake levels were higher and rimmed with reeds and toetoe. Periodically Te Waihora or Lake Ellesmere would have forced a breach through the shingle tongue. Lake Forsyth or Wairewa was open to the sea. When Maori arrived, they found the lake teeming with fish, eels and birds. They established pa and kainga, burnt some of the forest, hunted the spit. Many moa bones have been found and there are traces of eeling traps dug in the gravels. The lake was opened deliberately for the movement of species and to encourage the elvers back in by the 'nutrient signature' that flowed into the ocean. Over 1500 individual archaeological sites have been recorded on Kaitorete Spit. It was a thriving place.

But there was death here as well as life, and although the old place names have disappeared, they are still in tribal memories. Otuweruweru was a small settlement halfway down the spit, and Kaikanohi was a point on the spit nearer Taumutu 'so named because a chief caught his wife in adultery there, gouged out her eyes and swallowed them'. There was fierce fighting on the spit during the Kai Huanga ('Eat Relation') feud and muskets were used by Ngai Tahu on the spit for the first time in Canterbury. Near the old Birdlings Flat railway station is Maro kura titi, an ancient and tapu burial site.

By all accounts Maori fought hard to retain ownership of Kaitorete Spit. J. W. Hamilton, a Native Land Purchase officer, explained in 1866: 'From all the Maoris have told me, and so far as I can understand them I doubt if ever the Kaitorete Spit was ceded by them.' A pa reserve was set aside but 'mistakenly' sold to Europeans, and when the Provincial Government tried to buy the land back the price had quintupled.

The European settlers displaced Maori as Maori had displaced the moa. The spit was used as cattle grazing and most of the shrubs and driftwood burnt off so as to make the droving easier. Exotic grasses and plants were introduced for sheep, and new birds arrived. Exotic names were also introduced; it was now called Ninety Mile Beach and Birdlings Flat after W. E. Birdling, an early farm manager. One map showed Taumutu as the 'antipodes of Spain'.

As the settler population in Canterbury grew, the swamplands were drained, and Lake Ellesmere was lowered to its present size to give access to the lowland pasture around the lake edges. Lake Wairewa was permanently closed. A railway was built, roads constructed, an 'aerodrome' was built in the Second World War and the army conducted training exercises in the dunes. Intensification of stock started to pollute the lake waters and caused algal blooms to grow in Lake Wairewa, and the death of dogs if they lapped the waters. The *Christchurch Press* complained in an editorial in May 2015 that Ellesmere was the only lake in Canterbury that when photographed from the orbiting space station looked like a golfers' putting green. They welcomed the attempted restoration of Te Waihora by Ngai Tahu.

I became a scavenger too, and I was soon out on the beach with a hand-saw to cut off good-sized chunks of driftwood and drag them back

to my wood-stove. But the other guys had chainsaws and quad bikes, so within a few years the place got cleaned out and the piles of driftwood outside each person's bach got bigger. I guess we didn't want to miss out, but the joke was on us. Driftwood is lousy firewood: it burns too quickly, and it's full of small pebbles that blunt a chainsaw — but everyone wants something for nothing.

Kaitorete Spit has been used, loved, occupied and prodded endlessly such as a post-mortem doctor might inspect a particularly interesting corpse. However, this land lives, although not in the way many people see it. People pick up stuff, chuck stuff away, adding and removing, stealing, sifting, remembering and dismembering. It's a tactile surface where we leave a mark, even if it's only a footprint, and those thin archaeological layers of disruption and occupation are recorded and mingled together in the desert dust. Dry light tattoos the skin. Stones growl as the sea moves.

One autumn night many years ago I walked down to watch the eelers. It was a church night, intense, with stars that wriggle as you stare. The dark trenches were filled with water from Lake Wairewa, pointing out towards the sea, but with a dead end, a trap, luring the eels into them. The eels had to sneak through the trenches and then wrench their bodies twisting and desperately gyrating over the 100 metres of gravel to the sea. The eelers stood as dark priests. Big Maori guys. Stabbing their torches into the black trenches with feet stuck in the gravel, sullen.

'The bastards aren't running, eh?'

'Jeez it's cold, but they'll come.'

There was a hissing noise as the surf retreated and the frost was crackling on the gravels, and then a muttered 'Christ…'

A sudden plunge and whisk of the gaff and the black eel flew and squirmed on the pliant earth as the knife cut down. The big fleshy men were intent on getting a feed. Then another eel, and another, fat black worms from the ancient earth. I saw one eel, a smallish one, its body black as nemesis with starlight pinpricks, flickering over the gravels. A few seconds later it was gone; perhaps it made it? In the morning, split and gutted, the eels hung on the drying racks, catching the sunlight in orange ribbons.

But the eels that escaped that night, where did they go? Swimming deep somewhere, silvery and piratical, out to the oceans and a tropical trench to spawn and die.

I'm not sure why I'm out here tonight, under silky light and hearing the dotterels chip-chipping on the grainy sands. Perhaps nostalgia? I'd sold my bach many years ago — to Barbara, who sold it to Geoff, who onsold it to Graham — and it still looks the self-same compact white shed that I'd owned and littered with my junk. I'd nailed a painting of a shag to the inside of the outside toilet, and it hangs there still, slightly swaying.

In a sense I've never left Birdlings and there's residual bits of me lingering, both physical stuff I've left behind and the more powerful but intangible layers of memories that usually make me smile, and sometimes make me sad. Memory is a palimpsest too; layers of recollections obscuring and interfering with other memories. So here I am, on a featureless spit that was once called a wasteland and is now labelled a wilderness, wandering in my own thoughts barely thirty kilometres from my bed in Christchurch. I suppose there are there many homes inside us and this is one of the homes inside me.

That afternoon I'd driven along Bayleys Road and taken a rough gravel track past the university research station with its wires strung on posts. I parked on a barren plain of stones with some dandelions and a pin-cushion plant, but not much above ankle height. There was a cluster of macrocarpa trees in the distance and a few sheep pecked away at nothing much, and way beyond them a white fleck of a mountain that I was pretty sure was Aoraki/Mt Cook. Just by standing upright I'm the highest thing around. I walked over to the main baches where Geoff had a few stories.

His car had been stolen at Rahu Saddle the weekend before and the bastards had pushed it over a bank. He couldn't see why they had to trash it. He made coffee and passed around biscuits. His lounge is full of books from floor to roof — 'the furniture of the mind' — and Geoff has a copy of most of the mountain books published in New Zealand. Some were written by him, and they all contribute a wellness, a belief in the intrinsic strength and love of land.

Later I wandered back through the dunes, gleaning I suppose, since old habits die hard. Quaddie tracks run everywhere and these days the middens are very twentieth century, with piles of broken glass and plastic, a few car tyres, an old television with wood panels, and some rusted metal that could be a bicycle. The spit has always been used as a rubbish dump. Once I found an abandoned army Bren gun vehicle half smothered in the sands, its metal turret riddled with bullet holes. We still find it difficult to be kind to the landscapes we occupy, and constantly dodge the question — 'how do we trust the nature inside us?'

Back at the car I had a cup of tea to rinse out my mouth and watched a few streetlights pop on. To the west some aircraft contrails were lit pinkish-purple by the sunset and a plane banked to the north with its lonely flashing light, quite lovely against the indigo cloud. Roger Deakin mulled on 'how strange and beautiful such sky-litter can be'. On the far spur behind the baches a car probed slowly up the Bossu Road, its headlights searching from side to side as if seriously worried it was going to drive off the edge.

Throughout the night the sea changed tone as if hunting for a tempo it could live with. Disturbed by undercurrents, abrasive, thrashing between imaginary sheets, then eventually it smoothed into a long settling roll. It wasn't a lullaby, but I slept like an infant, and in the morning scratching and yawning, I saw a man with a dog and a trail-bike leaning against a fence-post in the sun, about a hundred metres from my car.

I was a bit vexed that someone had crept into my space — like Annabel I'm selfish with my landscapes — but something about his body shape made me look more closely, and I then drove over and said, 'Gidday, Murray.' His eyes flickered blankly about my face and the car, trying to place me, to get some clue. I have this problem too, so I introduced myself. Murray Smith was my neighbour when I owned the bach, and he'd bought his hut not long after me. 'I'm seventy-five,' he said, and he looked well.

No wind, a warm blue sky curled with white wood-shavings of cirrus, and it was an easy genuine conversation that morning, leaning against the fence-post and wondering where twenty years had gone. What I understood of Murray's history was that for a long time he was full-time

caregiver to his mother until she died, then he shifted into the bach. He used to hunt up the Ashburton River in the Lake Heron mountains in his old Land Rover, and he told me a few recent yarns.

> 'Don't get up there as much now. Fish a bit. The red cod are thin, though I get some mullet and kahawai occasionally, and I saw a pod of forty Hectors dolphins once and followed them down the spit.'

We pretty well ran through the whole gossip on the Flat — 'Did you hear that Geoff got his car stolen at Lewis Pass?' — how the sections are filling up and new houses shifted in. He shook his head: 'Three hundred people live here now. Can you believe it?' The dog had licked me everywhere it could and was itching for action, so Murray got back on the trail-bike and with a wave tootled off, and I glanced around and finally realised that I had the answer to Geoff's question. It was the horizontals.

Cities are full of walls and verticals, lampposts and hurrying commuters, stiff office blocks, and even the sky is oblonged between the skyscrapers. Out here is the curve of earth with open boundaries of light that mediate between our senses and the never-ending, never occupied emptiness. Space is a gift, I think, a part of our inheritance, and Birdlings has it in abundance. As Geoff said to me, 'The landscape enters you, you gain from it.' Between the razor edges of sea and sky are endless horizons that create a tempered, chilled-out, soliloquy sort of landscape.

Pacific.

BOOKS & SOURCES

■ *Robin Morrison*. Photo in *Encounters: the creation of New Zealand a history* (2013), Paul Moon.

■ *Geoff Spearpoint* Interview, February 2014. Only sections of the interview are reproduced here. He was awarded the Queens Service Medal for services to recreation in 2017.

■ *Greed*. There are only twenty-five references to greed in the Bible; and the seven deadly sins are not biblical. However, Jesus in Mark 7:22 talked of aspects that defile humans from within, and one of those was 'greed'. Once the basic needs of people are met — food, shelter, warmth, companionship — then we seem to have two great drives: we want to be noticed, and we don't want to miss out.

■ *Submission by Te Runanga o Ngai Tahu*. Statement of evidence of Iaean Cranwell to the proposed Canterbury Regional Policy Statement.

■ *Annabel Allison & Michael Bayley*. Interviews, May 2015. Interviews conducted separately.

■ *Wildwood* (2007), Roger Deakin.

■ *Rockets*. A rocket launching pad is marked on the topographic map. From 1963 to 1964 several Arcas rockets (All-Purpose Rocket for Collecting Atmospheric Soundings) were fired from Birdlings Flat. They were American-designed and built rockets, two metres long and loaded into a launch tube that was designed to lift five kilograms to over sixty kilometres' altitude. The same week I was there (July 2015) an Auckland company called Rocket Lab announced to the media an ambitious plan to launch twenty-metre rockets from the Bayleys' farm to place satellites into orbit. Michael and Annabel could have told me when I chatted to them the week before, but they were sworn to secrecy. Later, the site was shifted to Mahia Peninsula in the North Island with their first successful launch of satellites into orbit in January 2018.

■ *Murray Smith*. Conversation, 2014.

MAGISTERIAL

WHIRINAKI FOREST

The discontinuity is at the carpark, or even a fraction before it. After turning off Highway 38 at Te Whaiti, you then drive down Minginui Road onto the unsealed River Road, which winds dustily through manuka and scrubland to a carpark under a grove of pencil-thin sky-raking rimu trees. There's no segue in the transition, no gradualism between the save line and the chop line. First scrub, then giant rimu. The logging stopped here in 1982 and it was a close-run thing.

Jobs at the Minginui Mill were lost, and there weren't that many jobs in Te Urewera in those days, and certainly not now. Most people in Minginui are still unemployed. People in town said it was silly trying to save a few trees, and that the rimu would be better off as polished floorboards, or timber decking, or a bold statement door in a posh Parnell villa. You could have made a lot of house fittings out of the Whirinaki forest they said, so I thought it was time for me to have another look at it. To see the furniture of the forest.

For several days we walked amongst massive trees and huge tree ferns that glisten with drips of light and water. Everything is encompassed, with dark trunks and branches that grip each other in a tight lattice and allow flecks of blue in but snatch at every piece of sunlight until it drops to the ground exhausted. My tramping companion into the deep dark woods was Nic Bishop, who had returned to New Zealand in 2012 and kept looking about him with a satisfied air and saying — 'This is paradise.'

On the first night we stayed at the Jailhouse Lodge where Gary and Darlene run the only accommodation at Minginui, and they also do car shuffles. The All Blacks were playing the final of the Rugby World Cup (this is November 2015) and Gary rattled on our door at 5 am to see if we wanted to watch the match on the telly. I didn't hear a thing, but Gary was grinning broadly as the All Blacks walloped the Aussies. We were all in a good mood as we drove up to the Okahu River carpark and he left us to the trees for five days. I think they looked after us pretty well.

This chapter flits from tree to tree, forest to forest, like the patupaiarehe that are supposed to live in them. From the tall podocarps of Whirinaki to the taut lines of plantation pines in the Kaingaroa Forest. I've added a historic account of a journey through the Urewera forest

by colonial tourists, and for contrast a day-long session in the alpine forest of Kahurangi National Park. Some people see forest as a threat; my neighbour gave her unwelcome opinion of my cabbage trees, but on the other hand, in Japan, walking slowly amongst trees is considered a spiritual encounter, *shinrin-yoku* or forest bathing — flow they insist, is better than speed.

So this is hardly a precise walkers' guide to a forest journey but more of a meditation on trees and our attitudes towards them: the rapacious, the fearful and the elegiac. Although I wandered off-track into other woodlands, I always came back to Whirinaki and I planted a tree at the start of each section.

TOTARA

In 1907 the nineteen-year-old Kathleen Beauchamp went on a three-week camping expedition into the middle of the North Island. It was a large party, with four other women, plus three men along with horses and carts, and all the paraphernalia of tents and pots and mattresses. Although they only spent four days in Te Urewera, Kathleen's diary was called the *Urewera Notebook* and editors and commentators have bent over backwards to give these dashed-off notes more significance than perhaps they really deserve.

Literally 'dashed', as that was almost the only punctuation she used. Snippets of thought, observations, girlish likes and dislikes, and sometimes she rather oddly talks of herself in the third person as 'Kathie', all scrummaged together in a chaotic and impressionistic writing style that gave severe headaches to subsequent editors. Their difficulties were considerable. One line was first interpreted as 'the shadow of Pohataroa' and was later retranslated as 'the wizard London'.

Kathleen was young and impressionable, a well-brought up middle-class girl, and looking quite a proper young lady in her Edwardian dress as a 1907 photo shows. The colonial party did not really venture far into the Te Urewera country at all. They followed the telephone line and road to Te Whaiti where they crossed the Whirinaki River and stayed a night. Next day they trekked along a 'good horse track' — which essentially follows the same road as today — through to the Ruatahuna Valley,

camped here one night, then they returned to Te Whaiti. Some of the men in the party walked to the pa and marae at Mataatua.

In those days a massively dense tawa and totara forest overhung the road to Ruatahuna, and the track led onwards into the deepness and darkness of Lake Waikaremoana and the mystical mountain of Maungapohatu. The charismatic Maori prophet and faith healer Rua Kenana had established himself at Maungapohatu in 1907 and his influence was pervasive among the Tuhoe who were resisting European progress.

It must have been a strange atmosphere in Te Urewera then. Ancient paths were crossed against modern road surveys. There was passive resistance and public conquest, with patu-wielding warriors watching the military troopers set up their camps. The government was concerned about the 'sedition' of this non-violent rebellion, but matters did not come to a head for several more years. But the growing — even brooding — tension between the two cultures would have been palpable, increasing Te Urewera's sense of 'otherness' and perversely engendering a mood which would have appealed to these educated and colonial tourists.

In a way it's what they'd come for. They were visiting a culture and a forest that they fully expected would disappear soon, and Paul Moon expressed this in *Encounters: the creation of New Zealand*:

> 'By the beginning of the twentieth century, it was still possible for Europeans to look on a few remaining tracts of bush — such as Te Urewera — and imagine them to be the last vestiges of unadulterated primordial jungle. Here was where that other New Zealand — indigenous, wise in the ways of nature, steeped in tradition, and stubbornly resisting the ways of the modern world — eked out a living from the trees, the rivers, the wild fauna that inhabited the misty valleys, with maybe the odd concession to the outside world appearing in the form of a few people puffing away on pipes: Goldie sitters in their authentic environment.'

What did Kathleen make of the forest?

> 'Even in bright sunlight it is so passionately secret', and a mite later she says 'and always the bush — this hushed sound of water running — on brown pebbles — it seems to breathe the

> full deep — bygone essence of it all...'When they visit a waterfall she gets quite lost: 'leaping crashing, snow white — like lions fighting — thundering against the green land — & the land stretches out ineffectual arms to hold it back — It seems there is nothing in the world but this shattering sound of water — it casts into the air a shower of silver spray — it is one gigantic battle — I watch it and am one with it.'

She was intrigued by Maori, but she preferred the 'original' Maori, not the kind that had been 'spoiled' by civilisation. She notices the women and girls particularly:

> 'a worn but rather beautiful woman who smiles delightfully, Yes — she has five children tho she looks so young…'. 'Then meet a Maori again — walking alone — barefooted and strong — she shouted Te Nokoto — and Kathie's heart is warm again.'

At one point she writes, 'I am a vagrant, a wanderer, a gypsy tonight', which doesn't seem a bad foretelling of her future, a future that was frantic and short.

In 1908, after some five years of schooling in London and travel to the Continent, Kathleen Beauchamp returned to London and had a surprising amount of sex. Over the following few years she had a severe crush on one man, got pregnant with another, and at twenty-one made a bad marriage to hide the pregnancy, but did not consummate it, and fled on her wedding night. She later claimed she had a miscarriage in Germany by lifting a heavy suitcase to the top of a cupboard. She had a lesbian affair or two (even before 1907), and then married John Middleton Murry in a turbulent and confused relationship that did not stop her having another torrid affair with a French writer.

She had long discarded Kathleen for Katherine and Beauchamp for her middle name, Mansfield, and she lived furiously as an intense 'bohemian', as if she had intuited that her life was running out. She swam deep in English intellectual waters and knew Virginia Woolf and D. H. Lawrence. In a desperate attempt to mitigate her tuberculosis she spent her last year in a sanitorium run by a strange mystic showman called Gurdjieff in Fontainebleau near Paris, and she died there in 1923 at the age of thirty-four.

In effect, when she visited Te Urewera, 'Kathie' had already lived half her life, and that first half barely counted. Many forest ferns live longer than Katherine Mansfield, which seems a graceful, if unfair, analogy.

RED BEECH — TAWHAIRAUNUI

The track brushed its way up the Okahu Stream sliding past massive red beech trees and crossing slight saddles. Underneath the canopy there were noises and dark spaces, a dense 'passionately secret' matrix where rivers and streams morph in and out of each other, and ridges blend into other ridges until it's almost impossible for strangers to comprehend the lie of the land. I gave up trying. It's not possible to see more than fifty metres anywhere, except up at the bits of jigsaw sky. Te Urewera, we began to realise, is more sensed than seen.

Rogers Hut was cluttered with gear belonging to the stoat trappers. We boiled the billy in the sunshine and realised that we could get up to Mangakahika Hut quite easily now. At a stream crossing two trail bikes were propped up and there was the sound of a chainsaw. Quite suddenly a young Maori lad popped out of the bush.

'Heh, how's it going?'

'Good. What about the big game last night? You didn't get to see it?'

'Nah, got it recorded.'

'We'd better keep quiet then, eh?'

'Yeah, I'd better go.'

He said this with a grin and vanished back into the trees before I blabbed the result.

The Urewera forest once stretched from Gisborne to the Bay of Plenty. There are no open tops — except the minuscule alpine beret on top of Mt Manuoha at 1392 metres — and not many clear river flats. Cloud and mist can occupy the valleys for weeks and months on end, and it is a place that still emotionally and physically resists the outside world. Faced with an ocean of trees, Maori learned to navigate Te Urewera, and they came to rely on it for sustenance. Every tree had a meaning for them, and they could taste differences in the stream water, and knew where the fat wood pigeons roosted, where to find the dark pools with

freshwater mussels, and where the big tawa trees dropped their black olive-sized fruit, as sweet as plums. Birdlife was plentiful, and koura or freshwater crayfish could be caught in the rivers.

Anything this vital and valuable would be fought over. Elsdon Best interviewed old Maori kaumatua in his book *Tuhoe: Children of the Mist* and their recollections were sharp when it came to surprise war parties and the exaction of utu. Raiding parties criss-crossed the forest and the warriors were always watching for the sketchy marks of rival tribes and trying to avoid leaving tracks themselves.

Today, on the fringes of Te Urewera are small settlements such as Minginui, Ruatahuna and Maungapohatu, where the descendants of the old warriors have pulled away from urbanisation and the lure of the bright city. The Maori sovereignty flag is a white koru torn horizontally between a red and black background, and it's more often seen here than the New Zealand flag. Te Urewera is no longer a national park as such but a conservation area, managed by a joint Tuhoe and Crown trust board. In effect public access is granted by Tuhoe.

Outside Mangakahika Hut that evening some kaka sounded far away and I wanted them to come closer. Then just on nightfall there was a furious, almost irritated scratching in the forest, and although I went to investigate whatever it was the thing had melded into the darkness. I can well imagine that being in the woods after dark could be some people's idea of a nightmare: the disturbed shuffle of roosting birds, weta rubbing their back legs, a spooky scuffle of rats, or the haunting whistle of a kiwi, all unidentifiable sounds that can put the nerves on edge. But, then again, no real forest should be silent at night.

RADIATA PINE

Pinus radiata originated in California where they grow slowly in a limited coastal range and are known as Monterey pine. The tree was introduced to New Zealand in 1859 and now composes almost ninety per cent of this country's forestry. Kaingaroa Forest is 300,000 hectares of radiata pine forming New Zealand's largest pine plantation, thirty kilometres wide and a 100 kilometres long. It occupies the space between Rotorua, Kawerau, Taupo and Te Urewera and laps wall to wall like a tufted

carpet, its straight lines pushing against the Kaimanawa forest in the south and broaching against Whirinaki forest in the east. It has turned Mt Tarawera into an island.

Radiata is a soft malleable fast-growing tree, perhaps not a connoisseur's wood, but this forestry is valuable to New Zealand, which has developed an efficient utilitarian industry around it. The trees produce a crop every twenty-five years in the fastest possible time, and this timber is processed through massive mills into dwangs, studs, cardboard boxes and paper pulp. Forestry creates jobs for planting and pruning gangs, jobs for the skidder operators hauling out the logs, and work for the drivers of the juggernaut trucks that barrel along the super-straight roads and any little pesky tramper's car had better get their shit out of the way.

I'm not complaining. Without pine trees as an alternative crop all the great native forests in the North Island of New Zealand would have been logged to extinction by now. There were a half-dozen sawmills at Minginui at one time, and there were howls of protest in newspapers, radio and television when it was suggested that the jobs might have to go to save native trees. I remember a bunch of us driving up from Wellington to look at Whirinaki before it was wasted.

However, this story has a happy ending. In 1982 a concerted campaign by a hotchpotch of tree huggers, academics, botanical freaks, sensible scientists, hippie students, liberal politicians and greenies, people despised by the loggers and forestry companies, managed to make the government listen, and as with Manapouri and Pureora, Whirinaki marked one of the crisis engagements in New Zealand environmental activism. Whirinaki is not just a pretty forest, it's one of the places where we came to our senses.

> 'Human beings depend on trees as much as on rivers and the sea. Our intimate relationship with trees is physical as well as cultural and spiritual: literally an exchange of carbon dioxide for oxygen.'

At the southern end of Whirinaki forest is Plateau carpark where the two forests stand together; two cultures in fact, two different ways to look at trees. On one side of the carpark are podocarps with kaka whistling in them, and twenty metres away is the pine forest boundary. The milling

gangs came through a year before and the landscape that I saw in 2015 still looked apocalyptic. It's messy stuff mining the forest, and it leaves a chewed moraine of tree branches with mountainous hillocks of bark and wood chips, rotting into the mulch for next year's planting.

The plantation had been pushed hard against the Whirinaki forest boundary, and the milling had scourged too close for the three big rimu that presided over the carpark. My evening photo of them shows their limbs raw, black and dead, catching the full moon in shattered hands.

CABBAGE TREE — TI KOUKA

My elderly next-door neighbour Jocelyn (not her real name) suggested I 'do something' with my cabbage trees.

Like many people she had good reasons why they were not welcome in her garden. The leaves jammed her lawnmower and filled up the roof guttering. Birds are attracted to roost in the cabbage trees (particularly starlings) which means that she gets more bird poop on her windows. The trees block her views, block the sunlight, and once she remarked in a peeved tone that the leaves rustle too loudly in the wind.

When I collected stories about trees in the local *Christchurch Press* newspaper over the winter of 2015, I was surprised at how much unhappiness they caused. Strong winds from a storm had torn off branches and broken windows. A large fallen tree had crushed a car. Power companies were called out after snow had fractured trees, which fell over the cables and left several hundred houses without power for a day. In one accident the driver was killed when his car spun off the road on ice and wrapped around a tree. At a community board meeting a resident complained that 'they' (the city council) were putting too many trees into their local park which would become 'a refuge for stalkers, perverts and other bad people'.

Trees always get the blame. They do us no ill, but we slaughter them on a massive scale. We need the oxygen they produce and huddle by the fire they give out. We build our homes from them and they re-energise our soils, stabilise the river banks, filter our water, and in fact they don't harm us in any way, but we treat them like crap. Joan Maloof remarked on this viciousness.

> 'If we equate a tree's life with a human life why do we show trees so little respect? One clue to answering that question is that we don't always show respect for human lives either.'

The Auckland writer Graeme Foster felt deeply about trees and described historical kauri logging on the Coromandel as arboreal genocide. It was the taking of *all* of the kauri that bothered him. But for many people trees are just a nuisance. I don't think Jocelyn would want to come to Whirinaki, and if she did she would be disturbed by a cunning and absorbent forest where everything is obscured and everything rustles.

SILVER FERN — PONGA

Fronds fell like frayed net curtains, worn and smoked brown by sunlight. They crunched underfoot. Large tree ferns like ponga and katote left chaotic messes on the forest floor, with huge piles of brittle orange that appeared to radiate heat in ember-like pyres. Along the Te Hoe River track the ferns formed a standing army of wispy sentries, apparently an honour guard for the nobility that stands further back. Paul Moon talked admiringly about the ferns as 'motifs of regeneration', and how 'the fronds, or at least images of them, did not just fall to ground, though. They also migrated into tattooing, or moko.'

In the national flag referendum poll of 2016, the silver fern never quite made it onto the flag, but one day it will. There are ferns on our war graves, ferns all over our black-kitted sports teams and athletic stars, and ferns on our beer and butter exports. Actually, the 'silver' on the underside of the fern is coloured an ashy grey, an eco-skeleton of the topside. The unfurled potent part of the fern leaf is known by Maori as koru, and this is used as a symbol on its own account, often imprinted on a black background like te po, the night, which suggests the manner of how ferns uncoil in the shadows. New Zealanders self-describe themselves as 'modest' or 'working under the radar', or even rather proudly of 'punching above our weight', so it's curious that two of our foremost national symbols, the kiwi and the silver fern (three if you count the koru), are light-avoiding creatures from the deepest darkest forest.

Just before Central Te Hoe Hut (we popped in for a visit) the valley track turns uphill. My geriatric 1974 inch-to-the-mile map marked the

hill track as a dotted line rising steeply up the spur, but the reality is a complete surprise.

The benched track had been chiselled out of the side of a cliff for 500 metres or so, and a metre-wide ledge sloped up steeply with a hand-wire bolted into the rock for the nervous. It's a dramatic change of tempo. There are apocryphal reports of people crawling up on their hands and knees, and one party of trekkers wrote in the Upper Te Hoe Hut logbook that if you are coming from Upper Whirinaki Hut 'to turn back now!' — but really, it's not that bad, certainly not worth the exclamation mark.

Brad Lett is the Department of Conservation ranger at Murupara office, and he explained to me over the phone that the benched track was built in 1992. It was conjured out of thin air because someone in head office wanted a loop track. After detailed surveying and planning, they flew in miniature bulldozers and had gangs of men working for months with chainsaws to create the track. The men trained in abseiling techniques and dangled off ropes as they cut into the cliffs with rock-drills ('Yeah, we made a lot of noise so you guys could have a quiet walk'), and the blasted-out rock and the debris was pushed over the side into the stream. Much of the later work was done by hand as the gang chipped away with pickaxes and grubbers in hard sweaty enthusiasm. It's an impressive piece of backyard engineering, but, just as the track was ninety per cent completed, it was abandoned.

Brad said that he left DOC in 1993 and so he never found out why the track was left unaccomplished. Perhaps the money ran out, or the same someone in head office lost enthusiasm for the project. Platform tracks are time-consuming to maintain and one can easily imagine the bean-counters in distant headquarters might grumble at the maintenance costs. Perhaps we could write it out of the budget? Make the track disappear?

It hasn't, and for all its failings it's beautifully crafted, and I relish the way it marches purposely uphill and cuts through the cliff corners and makes a nonsense of the topography. It basically goes into spaces where no track should properly go, and that it even exists in the first place is a tad miraculous.

'This is a bonus,' I said.

'Very nice,' replied Nic.

Then a few minutes later it was gone.

'It was good while it lasted,' I remarked sadly.

'But of course it wouldn't,' Nic replied.

MOUNTAIN NEINEI — KAHURANGI

Whirinaki is mostly a lowland forest but that's not typical of New Zealand. Most of our remaining forests are in the mountains, and it seemed fair to contrast Whirinaki in the North Island with a higher altitude forest in the South Island. This tramp to the 1000 Acre Plateau in Kahurangi National Park was in the winter of 2015. In one long day we walked through four different types of forest.

It was eight in the morning when we left Matiri Hut, with the lake soporific under fog and the mournful bleat of Canada geese over the water. My tramping mate Sven Brabyn took the lead with Jessie, his miniature border collie, at his heels, anxious, obedient, watchful. Sometimes she might venture a few metres ahead, but she always regularly checked up on the boss. If I fell behind she might come trotting back and size up my progress.

'She likes you,' said Sven.

'She's a sheep dog,' I replied, 'mustering the straggler.'

The bush track was steep, the forest ebony. Red beech trees were covered in sooty mould on the trunks, and the roots twined and gripped each other like black octopuses. Honeydew aphids live in the fungus-like mould, and each white excretory canal held a glazed drop of sugar. The leaves on the ground turned yellow and gold, the actual size and shape of soggy cornflakes. It was late May, wet, musty, calm, and occasionally brilliant fungi erupted beside the track: bright red caps, fluorescent blue, orange stalks. More often the fungi had just had a brain explosion and become a shapeless mass of rotting gloop.

After 300 metres of climbing we moved up into silver beech, which was airier and lighter. Then it got shed of that costume and became clothed in dracophyllum on the rocky spur, with palm tree-like leaves and orangey branches. Long wood-curls of leaves lay on the ground and hook grass grew in isolated sunny clumps. I said to Sven that it looks like Australia.

From the draco forest we re-entered silver beech again, this time tangled with huge blocks of limestone that had fallen off the escarpment and been ensnared by large tree roots. The track dodged under them, around them and sidled them. A kaka called once, a parakeet flew by, and when we stopped robins appeared, looking at Jessie. The dog returned the stare. The break out from the bush was satisfying, the plateau rolling with folds of gold and frozen tussock. We used the dry twigs of turpentine wood to give our small billy fire a great boost, and the wood-smoke glued to our hair and clothes and curled into a blue sky.

As we crossed the plateau the sun melted the frost and weakened the mud sufficiently for us to break through the crust. This is a strange part of the planet. Small streams of plate-like limestone cut across the plateau, with odd shingle domes that resemble gold-diggers' tailings. Escarpments ring the plains with bluffs. The waratahs kept coming and the track undulated and squelched into the folds of land, through a bonsai forest of olearias and bog pine. The mountain neinei or dracophyllum was stunted into candelabra, with arms akimbo as they watched us pass by — occasionally making a grab.

We had sun on Larrikins Hut for twenty minutes until cold blank temperatures set in. The hut had an old-fashioned open fireplace so I filled it with a big old-fashioned fire, whilst Sven dragged in logs and cracked open the spleen of the wood with the hut axe. Even at dusk the fire didn't produce a great deal of warmth and Jessie looked somewhat disappointed. The process of burning was enough to consume the wood but barely enough to heat us, so we sat close to the flames and munched on biscuits.

No one had been to the hut since early May. It was destiny dark at 6.15 pm, the silence full bodied. Above the hut, dominating the clearing, Mt Haystack looked enormous with its cliffs of strata lined with snow. It had been a fast, quick day tramping through layers of forest and forest silence, and we needed every minute of those ten hours of daylight. Now we had fourteen hours of darkness, and we needed those too.

SILVER BEECH — TAWHAI

Nothing lasts. Nic and I reluctantly left behind the beautifully graded trail on the Urewera ridge-top and spent two hours scrambling up and down a bush track, dodging under toppled limbs and stepping between tangled roots. There were heartfelt grunts as I bashed my head on an overhanging branch. Lichen laps over the roots and dense kidney ferns are clumped about the trees. There's been no rain for a week and the ferns have curled themselves up into little green balls of denial, squeezing every drop of juice into their vitals. The forest needed rain, we needed a benched track — ahh!

It was only a kilometre to the hut now, downhill as well. All the hard work that had gone into the track's manufacture had been softened, and what was left was a calm, barely trodden trail which slopped about the hillside contours. With the sun filtering through the beech forest we flowed down to Upper Te Hoe Hut in a tunnel of shades of nameless green. Before we even knew it, we'd been forest bathing.

Upper Te Hoe Hut sits on an elevated bush terrace above the river like a stage where the trees are the audience. No one had been here for two weeks. On average about one party every fortnight reaches the hut, and they are not altogether happy chappies with complaints in the logbook of windfalls, absent track markers, and of course the demon 'ledge'. Nic cooked away as the evening dimmed and I watched and waited in vain for a kaka to fly across the bush amphitheatre. Here we were in the ancient heartland of the Urewera forest, but all I heard that evening were two warbling blackbirds and a song thrush. There was a notice on the hut wall about 'The Battle for the Birds', DOC's newest rescue campaign.

The next day we climbed up into the ridgeline of silver beech and mist, where the ground was sleepy with moss and trunks blurred into layers of grey and green that melded into a tonal mush which added more than a tinge of gothic melancholy. Nic got his camera out for the first time and started clicking rapidly. We could hardly see more than thirty metres anywhere and muttered in hushed voices as if we'd just strolled into a posh art gallery.

Whilst Nic eyed up camera angles, I watched for movement in the trees, but there was nothing. In five days of tramping through Whirinaki

we saw one tomtit, a robin, a wood pigeon, heard a single kakariki and some kaka but never saw them, and listened to one kiwi in the distance with its screaming regurgitating call. I don't recall spotting a single cluster of birds, and in the high-altitude forest at 1000 metres or so there was a silence that was foreboding. As we entered the wide grass clearing beside Upper Whirinaki Hut a bush falcon, the first and only one we heard, spotted us and loudly announced its annoyance with these human busybodies. We hurried onto the next hut.

RIMU

'The rain fell with unimaginative insistency,
as if the sky was stuck on a certain setting.'

It started about 3 am. A slushing, gargling sound, and the Central Whirinaki Hut roof started to drip — and then waterfall.

By dawn it was pummelling down, plopping off the roof onto the verandah and meshing and swishing into the forest as if fine net curtains had been drawn across the trees. The forest immediately cheered up, and as the trees sucked up the moisture their leaves unfurled and became vivid green water-catchers. Ferns got aroused, and the birds began to be boisterous as bits of water flew off their wings. From the refuge of a dry verandah I tried taking photos of the branches of a nearby rimu tree, bent double over with the weight of spangly water drops. Even a debutante would struggle with that many pearls, of course eager to show them off, but scared of losing them to the ground.

After lunch we stepped into it. The drops thudded against our parka hoods and the Whirinaki River was swollen with the impetus of the rain. Streams of tea and pinot noir ran under the track and surface bubbles held a minuet on the glaze of water. Limestone rocks permanently carried ripples etched in stone, and the moss on the river rocks made them glow as furry emeralds. I watched a pair of blue ducks closely from the river bank. They saw me, but turned their backs, and swilled their beaks busily from side to side into the soft gravels, hunting for insects and occasionally flipping over large stones to dig out underneath them.

We quickly lost sight of each other in the rain storm, lost sight of everything except the single path wriggling in front of us. The inner

core stayed dry but every other part of me got soaked, although that wasn't necessarily unpleasant. There were strange new noises as the rain splashed everywhere and the drops skidded from leaf to branch, and sometimes hitting the ground so hard that they made the leaves jump into the air as if they had been pulled up on a string. I saw a skink, its eyes bright with ambition.

On two occasions Nic distinctly thought he heard voices talking. He said they seemed happy voices, and he was quite sure they were real, expecting to see a gang of people marching up the track. Once he even stopped dead on the track because he thought I had yelled out, but I wasn't anywhere in sight. He was so sure that I'd called out that he walked back to check on me.

It's not unusual to hear conversations in the forest. The wind in the branches or water running over rocks can easily sound like human voices, and although we might deny it, when we enter a forest we grapple with old atavistic fears that are sunk into our psyche. To get lost in the woods is chilling. Maori believe the Urewera forest is infested with patupaiarehe, red-haired and pale-skinned goblins, who could be both harmful and kindly depending on their mood. At twilight the patupaiarehe play their flutes and ensnare people with their spells; no one can walk in a forest without hearing them.

As we tramped down the last section of the Whirinaki River I got busy with my camera and kept taking photos of the empty track threading its rapturous passageway through the trees. Sometimes I put Nic in the photo for scale, but more often than not it seemed better without the human body. I can't explain that; it's just that the forest didn't seem to need us. Every now and then a big rimu hurled itself upwards as thirty metres of intense upright furniture, with the bark slaty grey and pressed with whorled fingerprints. Nic pointed out two giant rimu that were almost touching each other. Humans he said, would never plant trees together like that.

After five days and four nights in the forest we arrived back at the carpark and waited for Gary to pick us up.

Why do we walk in forests? I don't know. Perhaps it provides a plausible mechanism for a belated sense of gratitude to a natural world

that gives us life support. And it was sweet of the government to build the Whirinaki track — not because so few taxpayers use it, but because its only purpose is to soothe, and I sense we feel virtuous doing so. Maybe it gives us time to reflect and ask a vexed question that we struggle to answer: what is the human destination?

Even with all our ecological and scientific tools we barely understand the woods, and we've forgotten what it means to be part of a forest. This enclosedness is disturbing to our modern sensibilities and I'm not sure we even want to remember the past that once belonged to us, for the forest offers a philosophy of a different world, one we have eliminated from our lives. Only amongst trees do we hear voices.

BOOKS & SOURCES

■ *Trees*. The trees that are mentioned in the front of each section are totara (*Podocarpus totara*), red beech (*Nothofagus fusca*), *Pinus radiata*, ponga (*Cyathea dealbata*), cabbage tree (*Cordyline australis*), bamboo, mountain neinei (*Dracophyllum traversii*), silver beech (*Nothofagus menziesii*), and rimu (*Dacrydium cupressinum*).

■ *Forest bathing and bamboo*. In Japan the elegant stems of bamboo are considered especially restorative, and they are often densely planted outside Shinto shrines. Bamboo is a grass, not a tree, albeit a grass on steroids. Some species of bamboo grow 1 mm every 90 seconds, one inch every 40 minutes. Giant bamboos can grow up to thirty metres.

■ *Tramp notes*. The route we followed started at the Okahu Road carpark eleven kilometres from Highway 38. We tramped to Skips Hut, Rogers Hut and to Mangakahika Hut that day, about seven hours. The second day was up to Upper Te Hoe Hut via Central Te Hoe Hut, about eight hours. Third day was over the ridge to Upper Whirinaki Hut and onto Central Whirinaki Hut. A seven-hour day. The fourth day in the rain was a short three hours to Verns Camp, an open-sided shelter. The fifth and last day was two hours to the River Road carpark.

■ *Maps*. My topographic maps for Te Urewera were bought as part a rummage sale of 200 inch/mile maps. The main part of Whirinaki forest was on N95 Te Whaiti 1970 (second edition) with only partial contours.

■ *Nic Bishop*. Nic is a wildlife photographer. He started writing in New Zealand with books such as *Untouched Horizons* (still my favourite, I think) and *From the Mountains to the Sea*, and *The Natural History of New Zealand*. He shifted to America with his wife Vivien where his career really took off, and he specialised in wildlife photography for children's books. They returned to New Zealand in 2012.

■ *The Urewera Notebook* (2015), Katherine Mansfield, edited by Anna Plumridge.

■ *Alpine areas Te Urewera*. There are other alpine open spaces in Te Urewera, at Te Rangaakapua at 1326 metres and at Maungapohatu at 1366 metres, but these I believe are cleared areas.

■ *Tuhoe: Children of the Mist* (1913), Elsdon Best. In general, the Tuhoe tribal area is north of Highway 38.

■ *Ngati Whare*. The tribe has a website. Overall, Ngati Whare comprises about 3000 people, but only a fraction of these live at Minginui, which has a population of about 100. The tribe has launched the Whirinaki Te Pua a Tane Regeneration Trial with the intention to replace exotic forestry blocks (pine trees) within five kilometres of Minginui with indigenous forest, both to 'enhance the mana of Ngati Whare' and to 'enhance the mauri of Whirinaki Forest'.

■ *Maori sovereignty flag*. There are different versions of this flag. Rua Kenana had a flag that was essentially a Union Jack with the words 'Kotahi Te Ture mo nga Iwi Rua Maungapohatu' superimposed on top of it. 'One law for both peoples Maungapohatu'.

■ *Pinus radiata*. In California as many as eighty per cent of these pine trees are infected with the fungus *Fusarium circinatum*, which would have a catastrophic effect on New Zealand plantations if it were accidentally introduced.

■ *Encounters: the creation of New Zealand* (2013), Paul Moon.

■ *Wildwood: a journey through trees* (2007), Roger Deakin. If you are a lover of trees, this book is for you. 'There's more truth about a camp because that is the position we are in. The house represents what we ourselves would like to be on earth: permanent, rooted, here for eternity. But a camp represents the true reality of things: we're just passing through.'

■ *Central Te Hoe Hut*. We only stopped briefly here. Three hunters had flown into the hut by helicopter and whilst the two younger guys had gone off for a shoot, Hugh had stayed behind as 'camp mother'. He was pleased to see us and happily boiled up a brew for lunch. 'We come every year,' he said, 'and we don't pick the roar so we have the place to ourselves.' He thought the blue ducks were taking a hammering as they saw four last year and only one so far this year. 'We went fishing yesterday evening and caught a trout, it was a big one but skinny with not much weight on it. Wouldn't yer know it, was the same bloody trout we caught last year, and threw back. Must have lost several pounds in a year.'

■ *NZ Tramper website, blog 'mad pom'*. He wrote about the disappearing Whirinaki track ('God knows where it's been in the meantime') in 'Whirinaki Crossing' and 'Waioeka–Urewera Crossing', which are detailed tramp descriptions of tracks few people attempt.

■ *Walking the Woods and the Water: in Patrick Leigh Fermor's footsteps from the Hook of Holland to the Golden Horn* (2014), Nick Hunt. It recounts his journey on foot from London to Istanbul. Hunt was following in the steps of his hero Patrick Leigh Fermor, who accomplished the same epic in the late 1930s when he was eighteen, and wrote two books, *A Time of Gifts* and *Walking Between the Woods and the Water*. Fermor walked because he had no money, whilst Hunt walked as an antidote to modern life.

■ *Brad Lett*. Phone conversation, November 2015. He was the biodiversity ranger based at the Murupara Department of Conservation. Brad was able to supply quite a few extra details about the area. The new foot-bridge above Upper Whirinaki Hut (perplexing in its isolation) isn't currently part of a larger scheme, although it might come in useful if DOC resurrects the idea of a Whirinaki–Te Hoe Great Walk circuit. The South Road from Plateau carpark to Minginui gets infrequent maintenance but will probably remain open as it is still the most used access. Waipunga Road to Plateau carpark is shared maintenance between Timberlands and DOC.

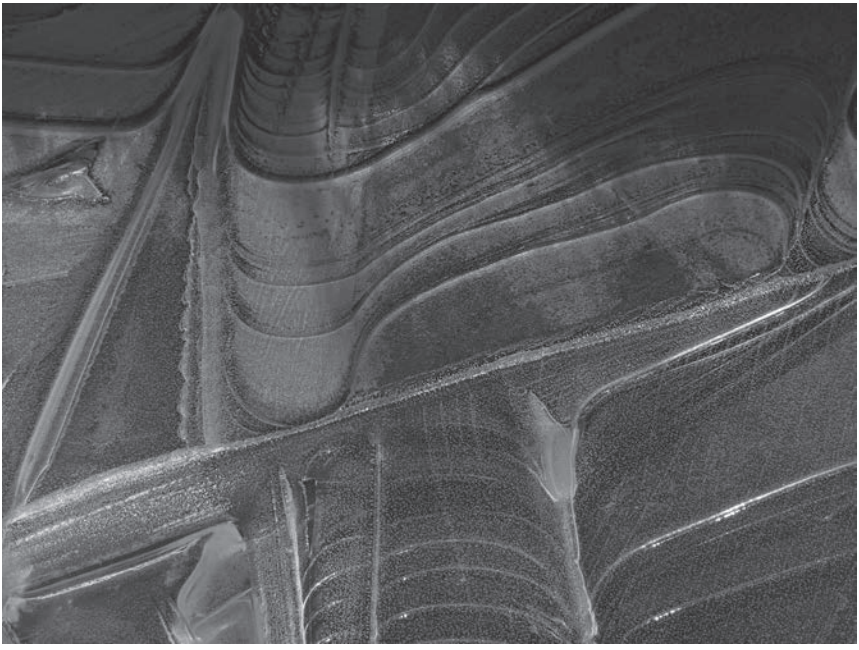
■ *'Battle for the Birds'*. This is the official DOC title for the huge effort of predator control around the country in 2015–2016. In 2015 DOC organised a 1080 poison drop over the Whirinaki River, plus they have established a network of predator trapping lines.

■ *Coromandel Walks* (1979), Graeme Foster. After most of the kauri was logged the gumdiggers came in and burnt down the remaining forest so as to extract the valuable kauri gum that lay in the soil.

■ *Teaching the Trees: lessons from the forest* (2005), Joan Maloof.

■ *Nursery stories*. Once forest covered Europe so medieval fairy stories laid on the dangers pretty thickly. Hansel and Gretel got lost in the woods and nearly got eaten by a cannibalistic witch, and Red Riding Hood almost got gobbled up by a wolf. Versions of Red Riding Hood have been dated to France in the tenth century and Hansel and Gretel originated from the Baltic and East European regions. Perhaps this is why we see menace in trees; we have not been that long out of the woods and we still populate them with our own fears.

LAKE HERON



A winter storm. Sleety rain droops down the valley with crystal light that has been charged by reflections from the far snowfields. At the hut doorway I see glimpses of spurs. A black edge, a drawn charcoal line that leads nowhere, except into curling clouds. Perhaps the artist had run out of ideas, or they thought, in a Zen-like moment, that a single black line was enough. Another log into the fire-box. In my mind's eye the homeward commuters are struggling with dark wet streets, and wipers that smear greyness on the windscreens. City bus stop shelters hold figures in black. Streetlights stay on half the day and newspaper adverts introduce premature spring specials in the hope that this will speed the arrival of the bright season.

But in the mountains it doesn't matter; in fact the mountains own winter. They gain in magnitude, their flanks steeped in dazzling white as if they are armoured knights. Winter storms get their exceptional power because they are supported by the unseen presence of the mountains pushing back against us — huts are dots, roads are smudges, people are reduced into nothing — as rivers of light pour through the mountain passes on their way to Canterbury.

Walking out from the hut I look back over my snow prints. One way to think about a landscape is through its trails. Some are historic, some are real, some imagined. As ideas, 'utopia' and 'nowhere' have wandered along their own paths for centuries and even found their way to Lake Heron. Some trails are the ones we make, and others are the ones we follow.

It's called the Ashburton Gorge Road, although it's not much of a chasm. At Blowing Point bridge the 'gorge' is more than a kilometre wide. With no tight bends and plenty of time to look around, it's seductive to continue driving as the hills lean away. It's the sort of road that draws people along it, even if it's a dead-end.

Station names are painted on mail boxes and school bus shelters — Mt Somers, Inverary, Mt Possession, Barossa, Hakatere — and images pass quickly: a flicker of yellow broom, a freshly squashed possum carcase, a white-faced heron poking about the gravel flat. Willows turn red along the Ashburton River, and black and white magpies strut

their stuff as cars whoosh past, taking their insect tips with a gaze of indifference that would do a pair of Italian waiters proud.

The road follows what is a natural pathway to Lake Heron, one the Maori summer hunting parties took when they came up to the lakes for eels and birds, which were abundant then. The settlers grabbed their chances too. It's good droving country, and by the early 1860s stone huts were built and boundaries fixed along the ridge lines, with post and wire fences constructed to over 2000 metres' altitude. By the end of the nineteenth century all the open air around upper Lake Heron had been fenced in and effectively captured the texture and colour of tussock hillsides that are universally known as the 'high country'.

At the Hakatere Junction the road splits into two tremendous choices: the right-hand branch goes to Lake Heron and Upper Lake Heron station; the road straight ahead goes to Erewhon Station. The old 1862 stone cookshop has been restored, one building has been turned into a museum — and it's really good. The 'dogs' are real photos of border collies enamelled onto steel plates about five mil thick and pointing alertly to the doorway. Story boards inside tell how this country got invented. One station housewife regularly walked several miles each week just for some feminine company.

It was along this same no-exit road that swaggers trudged to the sheep stations from the 1870s onwards. Walking, working, scrounging, all manner of men thrown onto the road and eking out a life, looking for work or food, a nomadic tribe displaced by economic uncertainty and wanderlust. They carried a blanket, a pannikin, matches and tobacco, slept under the starlight hotel and became old and enfeebled and destitute on the road. In *The Good Logs of Algidus*, Mona Anderson described one swagger rather well:

> 'He was a small man, rather like a Sydney silky dog, even to the crest of his untidy hair. He had been well-educated, loved music, and was devoted to the old mouth-organ that he liked to play to anyone who would listen.'

He was called John the Baptist, no one knew why, or seemed sure of his real name, and when John the Baptist asked Mona Tarling why she wasn't married, she said teasingly, 'she couldn't find anyone'. The old

swagger slapped his knee and said, 'I know just the man, the manager of Algidus Station.' He immediately wrote a letter recommending Mona to Ron, neither of whom had met. Mona was embarrassed when she found out and wrote to Ron to apologetically explain the situation, but the letters got switched, and hers arrived before the swagger's, leaving Ron Anderson more than a little mystified. They married in June 1940, but John the Baptist had been knocked over by a car a few months earlier and died on the way to hospital.

After the drovers and swaggers came the mountaineers. From about the 1890s prospective climbers invented their own route-finding pathways into the Lake Heron hills, picking up tips from the musterers, and assembling crude maps that were often wrong. The first successful climb of Mt Arrowsmith was in 1912 by H. F. Wright and J. P. Murphy, though they initially confused Couloir Peak with Mt Arrowsmith. That muddle was sorted out with a reckless and high-altitude face traverse of two kilometres over exceptionally steep terrain — 'Murphy always managed to find some way round' — and they reached the summit in twelve hours from the Lawrence Valley. There's a picture of J. P. Murphy in *The Mountains of Erewhon*, pipe rammed in the mouth, the quintessence of manly nonchalance and strength.

My trails have been modest. Tramps to Double Hut, and Manuka Hut, and around the backside of Mt Somers. Once a ski trip into Erewhon skifield when it was known as Powder Valley. On a day tramp up Mt Barossa we found a small crop of native edelweiss looking like French *petit fours*. An amateur geologist had hammered away at the unassuming rocks on the top and revealed quartz crystals, and two large shards had been left on a rock — deliberately I felt — so I took one home.

Winter tramping up the Cameron River to Cameron Hut was something else. Right underneath the Arrowsmith massif, at the last fumble of moraine where the snow lies blowsy and unclad on the rock, I looked up and saw a smithy wind banging blows on the ridge. Great shafts of rock strung into the sky. The English winters I'd known in my childhood were more polite, snow toppling gently out of trees or swept in a dreary mist along a grey road, but this was froth and iron at once in a land blown to such white that in the dark it dazzled; a new beginning before God made any witnesses.

The description 'high country' must puzzle overseas visitors. They ask, you mean the mountains of the Southern Alps? Sort of, actually not really, it's the bit before the real mountains, though no one draws a line to separate them, even if that were possible.

The high country is an idea, or an archetype: part poem, part factory, undoubtedly romantic but also hard-nosed. Much of it has been manufactured into a working land for sheep and cattle farms, but from a distance these 'farms' look like mountains. The sheep are so spread out that it's a strain to see them, and only when they are mustered — once or twice a year — do the white specks form an avalanche that runs down the ochre hillsides into the yards and shearing sheds.

Something else happens here. Far more than any other landscape I know of, it has become a storyteller's land, both mythic and primal. Grafting farmers, adventurous loners, hard-case characters who cling to an old-fashioned weatherworn language of 'hard yakka', 'bit of a dag', 'long drops', 'wop wops', 'good as gold', 'smoko', 'box of budgies', 'he's a real drongo', 'one out of the box' and 'she'll be right'.

Where the tussock grew the sheep went, and they were followed by the boundary keeper, the shepherd, the fencer with packhorses, the musterer and his dogs, and eventually their stories trickled back all the way down into the New Zealand consciousness, and have stuck in there. The high country means space and aloneness, sucking in people who yearn for grandeur and peace and a kind of uncityfied freedom and wildness. It pops up in advertisements selling beer, or 4WD vehicles, or whiskey, rain jackets, fishing gear or hunting rifles, all the manly things that men yearn for:

'Upon the upland road
Ride easy, stranger,
Surrender to the sky
Your heart of anger.'

Mr Samuel Butler was a well-educated Victorian young gentleman of twenty-four when he rode into the high-country area of Lake Heron in 1859. He considered himself a painter, could play Bach's fugues on the piano, and was a keen advocate of Darwinism when it was still a

radical theory. He was rather bad tempered, as most Victorian gentlemen seemed to be, and was a developing writer and an intelligent explorer. Truth is, he was better at exploring than sheep farming: 'As soon as I saw the mountains, I longed to get to the other side of them.'

What was Butler looking for when he came to Lake Heron? Independence, yes, certainly an escape from a claustrophobic Victorian family and a dominant father. After his New Zealand sojourn, Butler painted a strikingly modern self-portrait of himself, capturing his own brooding intensity. Perhaps he wanted an adventure, although New Zealand was an awful long way to go and the lengthy sea journey had its dangers. The first boat he was booked on, the *Burmah*, disappeared into the Southern Ocean never to be heard of again.

Butler had enthusiasm and great energy, the Victorian virtues, and as other writers have pointed out, the qualities of his fictional Erewhonians — rigour, doing the right thing, forthrightness, being your own man — are uncannily similar to the colonial personalities that Butler met: 'Men are shrewd and sensible, as alive to the humorous, and as hard-headed. Moreover, there is much nonsense in the old country from which people here are free'.

In 1860 April Butler rode up the Rangitata River with a companion and discovered the parcel of land which he called Mesopotamia, the meeting of two rivers, which he 'took up'. He built a small hut there. Butler precisely describes the journey he took to get to Mesopotamia in his *Forest Creek manuscript*, but as it did not have any place names it had puzzled me, so I decided to sort out the muddle by following Butler's route. On a fine day I parked my car at the Hakatere Station boundary and opened up the photocopied instructions:

> 'Suppose you were to ask your way from Mr. Phillips station to mine, I should direct you thus…'

This bit was easy. Henry Phillips was based at Hakatere Station, at the junction of the Potts and Lake Heron roads, and the historic stone cookhouse is still standing. What Butler describes is a tussocky, hummocky, arid ochre plain, now called Fagans Downs. The drays would have to climb high to avoid the oddly named Spider Lakes, and there is the natural benched line of 'dray road' on a higher terrace to the north.

It's less than forty minutes' walk to Spider Lakes where one solitary white heron became agitated, and several pipits perched on rocks and flicked their fidgety tails. Hare paths tunnel through the tussocks and overhead a harrier watched me in a slow beat of circumlocution.

> 'Work your way towards yonder mountain — pass underneath it, between it and the lake, having the mountain on your right hand and the lake on your left — if you come upon any swamps go round them or go through them if you think you can — if you get stuck up by any creeks you'll very likely see cattle marks if you follow the creek up and down (a creek is a stream) but there is nothing there that ought to stick you up at all if you keep out of the big swamp at the bottom of the valley…'

Fagans Downs are now part of the Hakatere Conservation Park and are covered with old four-wheel-drive ruts and tangled fence wires, which gleam with cobwebs in the early morning sun. Practically at every step a small shiny brown skink shot out, sometimes several. I noticed one had seized on another's tail and they swirled about in a desperate tornado. There's no doubt that Butler's 'yonder mountain' is Mt Guy at 1319 metres, shaped like an English plum pudding.

By roughly following the 700-metre contour I edged under Mt Guy and jumped across the small creeks without getting my feet wet. Then I was forced up to the 800-metre contour by a tricky labyrinth of six or seven streams, including Craddock Stream and Kenneth Creek. The dray wagons would have had to climb too, there's no other plausible way to force a bullock team through these incised gullies.

> 'After passing that mountain — follow the lake till it ends, keeping well on the hill side above it, and make the end of the valley, when you will come upon a high terrace above a large gully with a very strong creek at the bottom of it — (this is the odious but colonial way of expressing a powerful stream)…'

Lake Clearwater is four kilometres long and the swamps would have been lusher and soggier in Butler's day. The Potts River 'high terrace' still comes as a surprise.

It's a 150-metre escarpment and a hard drop to the Potts River below, and now, although Butler makes no mention of it, he would have enjoyed

an awe-inspiring view across the vast Rangitata River to the Two Thumbs Range. Spiky mountains jostle everywhere. The pyramidal Mt D'Archiac is the queen of the snowy chess set and sticks up at 2875 metres and, surprisingly perhaps, still didn't have a name in 1859.

I sat down on a rock amongst the alpine flowers and some orange and white lichens with stiff 'fingers' that mimic coral. Butler talked about a 'stupid Gentian' but had no real time for flower watching, and he remarked in his utilitarian manner 'that the settlers were here to make money and showed good sense in sticking to that plan'. In the diaries of many early settlers they made little comment on scenery or plants or birds, and these huge ice peaks and glacial moraines were only a means to an end. You don't make money sitting on your chuff.

> 'Get down the terrace where you'll see a patch of burnt ground,
> and follow down the river bed till it opens on to a flat.'

The chink in the escarpment is a steep stream which was later called Ross's Cutting after the shepherd and boundary keeper Malcom Ross. This was a bad place to descend with a bullock team, but getting the bullocks up was hellish. It meant splitting the load and double-yoking the wagons uphill.

At the Potts River bridge I sat and waited. I'd walked sixteen kilometres from my car, and now hung about waiting for a driver to head back my way, and I was also beginning to wonder if I shouldn't have placed a mountain bike here as a 'plan B'. A young Australian couple in a hired car stopped and asked the way to Edoras. This is also known as Mt Sunday, a small hillock, which became the capital of Rohan in the film trilogy of the *Lord of the Rings*. Could they pick me up on the way back? Sure, and they did an hour later. Then I drove back to the bridge and walked down the Potts River to the Rangitata River. Butler brushes past a whole lot of difficulties in the next paragraph:

> 'Turn to your left and keep down the mountain sides that run along the Rangitata, keep well near them and so avoid the swamps — cross the Rangitata opposite where you see a large river bed coming into it from the other side...'

From the Potts River it's nine kilometres down to where the Rangitata River cuts in hard to the bluff. Forest Creek is opposite, so this has to be the crossing, and it's barely 500 metres wide. It's a horrid spot. The

grey-blue waters were described by Butler as 'the colour and consistency of cream and soot', and the river is concentrated in two or three evilish channels, congested and turbulent.

The long-distance Te Araroa Trail also arrives at the Rangitata River and comes to an official stop. Te Araroa organisers have declared that both the Rakaia and Rangitata rivers are 'Hazard Zones', and walkers are advised against crossing. Indeed, by a special dispensation, the Te Araroa website assures trekkers that the Rangitata River still counts as a crossing, even if they don't actually cross it.

But in 1860 Samuel Butler didn't have this luxury, and as he approached on the dray wagon he recognised 'to my horror' his cadet, who had been waiting ten days to cross. Somewhere up at the Forest Creek hut, Butler's Irish farmhand had been slowly starving to death.

Drowning was such an everyday and common consequence for the early European settlers that it was sometimes called 'the New Zealand disease'. Rivers like the multi-channelled Rangitata did not exist in England, and settlers had no prior experience of these crossings, but Butler was a skilled horseman, and he would have been acutely aware of the dangers. Boulders rolling under the river, log debris forced down by the strong discoloured currents, and hidden 'quicksands' (which were usually soft gravels) where horse and rider could simply disappear.

After viewing the river from the hillside, Butler's first attempt nearly ended in disaster. The current was deep and strong, and as he nervously manoeuvred his horse back, it started flailing in 'quicksand' and they both got upended in the water, fortunately onto a shingle bank. The cat in the sack on the pommel 'mewed in a manner that went to my heart'.

Now soaked, he was determined to see 'if my Irishman was alive or dead', so he turned upriver where the stream divided, and with his two cadets carefully negotiated the various streams, noting that the flood waters scarcely touched the 'horse's belly'. Forest Creek was a 'brawling torrent', but they managed four crossings of that, and to Butler's relief he saw the 'twinkling light on the terrace where the hut was'. The cat survived the wetting, and the bullocks and dray were left behind for another day.

Butler called his first hut a 'V' hut when it should really have been called an 'A' hut. It is in effect a roof on the ground, uncomfortable and cramped, but most of his *Forest Creek manuscript* was written in it, sitting by the beech log fire on a river stone. He devoted two pages to that single heart-thumping river crossing, which makes me believe it was a defining moment in his colonial life, a crucial test that he knew he had passed. No other crossing was to be as difficult, but he would have to make these crossings time and time again, fording the Rangitata and Rakaia river 'Hazard Zones' as he went back and forth to Christchurch.

Quite quickly Butler grasped that he needed more land for a successful sheep farm. Over the next few months he rapidly and cleverly assembled a small empire of nine runs in the Mesopotamia area (including a brief holding in part of Upper Lake Heron Station), increasing his pasturage and stock by buying out other settlers. He built a bigger hut, better positioned, and even shifted a pianola up to it. He was energetic, and lucky, and he acknowledges this.

> 'How it happened that the £4400 I had from my father had become £8000 in between 4 and 5 years… I cannot conceive; the marvel is that I had not lost every penny of it — but so it was. My sheep had bred; wool had kept high and so had sheep; runs which were pretty cheap when I reached New Zealand had gone up greatly in value. I had got hold of mine bit by bit and pieced it into a compact, large, well-bounded, and in all respects, desirable property; but I was heavily involved with my merchants [in debt], I saw that if things fell — as they presently did — I might easily be cornered.'

With his friend John Holland Baker — the future surveyor general of New Zealand — they explored further up the Rangitata River, scrambling up to a high col that looked towards the Whitcombe Pass. It's still called Butler Saddle, and next to it is Chowbok Col, named after a character in his utopian satire *Erewhon*. Butler subtitled his novel *Over the Range*, and the map he inserted is a genuine hand-sketched map of the Rangitata area. The map is so authentic that it made me wonder if the first readers in Europe thought there was an actual physical place called 'Erewhon'. This would be a rather good joke.

Butler had a genuine and keen enjoyment of the mountains, but he chafed against the lack of intellectual stimulation, and the sanctuary he found at Mesopotamia was temporary. It was the utopia of financial independence and freedom that he wanted most of all, and once he had achieved that, he left.

I met Anne Palmer through the Canterbury University tramping club. She was attractive, fit and a go-getter. She was studying law, but switched to the outdoors, and after an adventurous decade of climbing and guiding at Mt Cook, she married Philip Todhunter and settled down at Upper Lake Heron Station with their three children. Their station along with Mt Arrowsmith Station and Clent Hills Station is one of the highest in New Zealand, for they are bang on the 700-metre contour. The questions I wanted to ask Anne and Philip never did get asked in the end. It wasn't my fault; I had a list.

Is it a sanctuary or a prison? Are you conscious of the light? How is the high country changing? What bits of landscape touch you? Do you feel antagonistic to the landscape at times? Do visitors expect you to always be in love with the land?

We had rented their farm cottage and went around to the homestead at 7.30 pm, judging that was the likely time they would have finished tea. Not at all. It turned out they'd been home just half an hour earlier, after shifting cattle in the dark, and Philip had already done a full day's heli-skiing with clients. We tried to leave but they kept talking us in to staying, this despite the fact Anne was leaving at 6 am to take the kids to Dobson skifield, where one of the boys had ski races on, and Philip was off heli-skiing next day as well. Not only city folk live in the fast lane.

A gin and tonic and the conversation became a liquid around us, running, sloshing, dashing past objects, sometimes pooling in a small swirl of introspection. I can't recall any of it clearly, and the bright-eyed boys, Oscar and Alex, chipped in too, but one thing I do remember. When I first asked Anne to meet up for a chat about what the land meant to her, they were in the midst of dealing with the aftermath of a massive snowfall, and all the destruction of fences, crushed outbuildings, trapped stock and roads blocked by the sweet white fluffy stuff that was

as hard to shift as wet concrete. They were engaged and exhausted by the landscape; they certainly didn't want to talk about it.

So the interview never happened, and probably never will. An irony of sanctuary is that people seek it in remote landscapes, but these places can't be lived in without sacrifices. People who live there see them as work sites, living zones of the everyday. Land that is not viewed outwardly like scenery but is captured inwardly and absorbed into the psyche. They live so close to this landscape that it almost becomes an appendage, and trying to describe these feelings to someone is akin to asking how they feel about their left arm: does the job, it's useful, what more can you say?

Of course, there's much more to be said, but it wasn't the right time. It was a great night.

Sir Thomas More coined the word 'utopia' in 1516 for the title of his book that promulgated an ideal world where people could live in harmony. Most of the philosophy seems to be his own quirky reflections, though he gave a nod to ideas from Plato's *Republic* and Christian views of an earthly paradise. More's 'heaven' was set on an island in the Atlantic Ocean, and there is some doubt whether he meant it as an actual world or as an ingenious satire on English society. The word 'utopia' is ambiguous. In the original Greek, 'eu-topos' implies a 'good place', but 'ou-topos' suggests it is 'no place'.

Most man-made trails leave blunt imprints — footprints, roads, pack-tracks — but ideas are more subtle. They stutter into existence, often mocked and distorted, then democratised as they spread far and wide, and often becoming unrecognisable as they wander through the milled minds of civilisations. Whether we admit it or not, most of us have an inner notion of what would make our own private paradise, but the idea of utopia itself has had a peculiar journey.

In *Zone of the Marvellous*, Martin Edmond noted that so intense was the desire for mythical lands that ought to exist that they appear on early maps and in books. Land of Parrots, Sunda Land, Davis Land, Locach or Beach, the Golden Chersonese, Terra Incognita, Luca Antara, Lemuria, Land of Mu. He points out that Australia and New Zealand

had a presence long before European people even knew they existed. Some scholars believe Sunda Land really did exist, joining Malaysia to Bali, and was buried when the oceans rose 10,000 years ago.

Fiction is equally full of mythical places we can believe in, such as Shangri-La, Middle-earth, El Dorado, King Solomon's Mines, Atlantis, the Fortunate Isles and of course Erewhon. Should you die, then the afterlife has enchanting worlds: the Garden of Eden, Heaven, Paradise, Elysian Fields, Valhalla, Arcadia. In these visions the notion of paradise is not just about scantily dressed women bringing sherbet, but about defeating time, resisting earthly change and resting in a perpetual place of pleasure or retreat that never alters. A fantastic fantasy.

Even space was not neglected for dreamers of impossible civilisations. In the 1890s Percival Lowell, an American businessman and astronomer, was utterly convinced there was evidence of canals and cities on Mars. He established an observatory in Arizona and made beautiful hand drawings, rhapsodised how these people would look, and even persuaded many people to agree with his notions. Indeed, the current (and semi-scientific) search for life on other planets and other solar systems has the whiff of the utopian about it. It is almost as if we are willing star-hopping advanced civilisations to pop in for a visit and save us from ourselves.

In the thirteenth century an absurd utopia arose, called the Land of Cockaigne.

> 'Roasted pigs wander about with knives in their backs to make carving easy, where grilled geese fly directly into one's mouth, where cooked fish jump out of the water and land at one's feet.'

Houses made of barley sugar, streets paved with pastry. This fairy tale was collected by the Brothers Grimm, and it has been suggested that this parody was a relief from the medieval peasants' misery. For some reason the word Cockaigne became associated with London in the early nineteenth century, again perhaps as a joke, for London was by then the world's largest and most squalid city, a byword for hell if you were poor. Out of 'Cockaigne' came the word 'Cockney'.

The nineteenth century in Victorian England was a time of colossal, violent change, during which there was a huge displacement of people

who were (so it seemed at the time) welded and enslaved to massive machinery akin to what was visualised in the German expressionist film *Metropolis*. Steam and power, tyrant factory owners, dumb obedience from numbed populations, navvies working on the railways, young girls in the mills and small boys and pit-horses crawling in the coal mines.

Many educated Victorians reacted against the appalling poverty and deprivation of the industrial revolution. Charles Dickens railed against it, and his novels actually changed the social mores of the time. Thomas Carlyle looked back to a heroic era. The Pre-Raphaelite painters such as Gabriel Rossetti, Holman Hunt, and John Everett Millais returned to the medieval style, with paintings of unimaginable colour and languid damsels that look both naïve and erotic, a sort of Victorian gentlemen's porn. William Morris pushed for a return to country skills and, as a by-product, invented the Arts and Crafts movement. Karl Marx wanted revolution.

John Ruskin started a utopia. He was arguably the most famous artist, critic and essayist of the Victorian nineteenth century, and in his reaction against industrialisation he decided to create an ideal community. In 1871 he founded a society called the Guild of St George, which still exists in a small charitable form, and with a website. It was an early environmental riposte to the chronically polluted cities that were consuming England, and Ruskin's idea was to recreate a contemporary life in the countryside for the benefit of the working man, using craft and traditional agrarian skills to create a balanced life.

It drew on socialistic and Marxist ideas that were already circulating at that time. However, the guild was strictly organised in a medieval manner, with Ruskin as the Master, and various grades of Companions. Ruskin designed a code of practice, dress styles and coinage.

It was very well meant, and the whole thing fizzled out of course, as it was bound to do. It was really a benevolent dictatorship, and Ruskin, who was born a wealthy man, knew little about the working classes. Ruskin could foresee the psychological problems of modern industrial life, in the way that Karl Marx could, but did not foresee that the growth of consumerism would largely satisfy and sedate the new industrial classes. It was the new opium. It worked, and it's still working.

The idea of utopia kept travelling, and together with Ruskin's notions and that of other Victorian thinkers, created a trail that returned to New Zealand in the form of a Scotsman with the unusual name of Cathcart Wason. He was eccentric in the best English style. Six feet and six inches tall, autocratic, a commanding speaker and defiantly odd: 'Earlier in the present session Mr Cathcart Wason caused a flutter in the Parliamentary smoking-room by knitting woollen stockings.'

Wason bought a run on the banks of the Rakaia River in 1869, which he named Corwar after his family home. The soils were wind-blown loess, but fertile, and Wason tackled his new run with passion. He established a model English village at Barrhill on a grid pattern. The four estate streets were named after English trees — Sycamore, Lime, Birch, Oak — planted in a square with oaks in a circle around the school and church. Twenty-eight sections were divided for the population of the estate village, which was intended to hold all sorts of mixed artisans.

Wason was an early planter of shelter belts — 'a refreshing relief from the bare monotony of the plains' — including *Pinus radiata*, which he subsequently used to build some of the estate's houses. He planted oaks, walnuts and poplars, imported Lincoln sheep breeding stock, exported refrigerated merino mutton, and installed a water race to power machinery. He was thoroughly modern. The little church and school are early examples of uses for concrete.

The first time I came to Barrhill in the 1980s it was depressing. Wet and grey, the water had ponded on the grass verges, and the avenues of stark August trees shorn of leaves emphatically reminded me of the England I grew up in. All it needed were rooks cawing. The church was open, and empty, and it smelt musty, as so many rural English churches do. Wason might well have been pleased that his re-creation worked so successfully.

But his little village idyll did not prosper. After ten years the fifty or so 'villagers' drifted away. It was isolated, and like all utopias and Ruskin's strange little community, it was fashioned by one man to his purpose, not necessarily theirs. Only the church and school, and some of the fine trees, remain. The plains Wason tried to reforest have actually become starker, as shelter belts have been removed to accommodate the massive irrigation booms for the current craze of dairying. Wason, despite his

innovations, might have felt disappointed. He returned to Scotland in 1900 and became the Liberal Member of Parliament for the Orkney and Shetland Isles.

I visited Barrhill again in 2014, this time in the summer, and took my photos against a strong nor'wester with fine loess tossed into the air in a brown smoky haze. The 140-year-old oak trees stammered in the wind, but they seem to be holding up quite well. The church was still open and still empty. Samuel Butler would have ridden past this bleak site on his way to Christchurch (though there was nothing there then), and he might even have met Cathcart Wason in one of the gentlemen's clubs in London, particularly those that catered for ex-colonial men.

But utopia really belongs to the mind: an intellectual idea with persuasive and charming power, but the only people who gave utopia a go on the ground abandoned it in the end. The hot air blew strongly as I drove towards the blotted-out mountains of Erewhon.

The forecast predicted a fair-weather gap in July and I wanted to walk up to Boundary Stream Hut. A big southerly storm had dropped a metre of snow at Lake Heron the week before, so I threw in a shovel just in case. I needn't have bothered. A warm wind had washed most of the snow away, churning the rivers into a sort of liquid greywacke and leaving hillsides striped like old pyjamas. Then the frost concentrated, and two kilometres up the rough track the car wheels spun on the ice. Outside the car it was like standing inside a champagne glass. Luminous light was being forced through winter air, which made me feel sober and drunk at the same time, and with every lungful I sucked in litres of chilled silence.

In the frozen wheel ruts there was a dazzling set of ice designs, a fragile ephemeral architecture of criss-cross girders and wavy ribbons, tiny ziggurats, and elegant frosted contours that mimicked the soft contoured hills around them. The air bubbles trapped in the ice culture resembled so many millions of tiny amoebas. On the earthen ground there were patches of solifluction or frost-heave, where the ice has been elongated as if squeezed from a toothpaste tube. Some ice-heaves were over three centimetres long, and each had a tiny earth beret on top. By midday all this fine crystal heavy machinery had melted.

At a creek my bowl of mountain water tasted sharp and clean (really, it had no taste at all) and within a minute four insects were struggling in my instant swimming pool. A spider, a grasshopper, a beetle and a sandfly. Two minutes later, another five other insects joined them: a pool party! I'd never noticed most of these small black insects until they had extinguished themselves in the water, but I fished them out as best as I could, except for the sandfly; charity only goes so far.

The pitch of the mid-winter sun was low and the thin light slipped seamlessly from morning to late afternoon. Noon never really arrived, and the background sky stayed a darkish blue as if night were waiting behind it. I walked faster, keen to get to the hut before darkness. In four hours' walking there was one pipit, a single harrier and the tracks of a lone deer that crossed the snow road: a landscape of one.

There were lots more birds here once. Thomas Henry Potts in his 1882 book *Out in the Open* recorded native quail and tui whilst mustering at Hakatere. He saw kaka and weka on the Rangitata flats, probably the laughing owl (now extinct) in the upper Ashburton River, and the South Island orange-wattled kokako (also extinct) in the Havelock Valley. Paradise ducks were noted in flocks of 400 to 500 near the Potts River. There were numerous bittern and white heron at Lake Heron.

From the 1850s onwards the settlers and surveyors came up here, burning as they went. Pyres of flame and smoke created a new pastureland. Burning, overstocking, grazing, rabbit plagues, rats and mustelids destroyed the dense matrix of alpine shrubs, skinks and arid woodland to such an extent that what Professor Arnold Wall found in 1920 was 'quite heart-breaking to the plant collector'. Hundreds of kea were shot in the 1880s. Wall commented that we rate our own existence highly, and we don't want to think of those other worlds we were destroying. The land wasn't empty, it was just full of human ego. The silence that is so engulfing and profound now is the result of a sustained industry to make profit out of sheep. and what's left is beautifully barren. A shadow of itself, but a shadow full of light.

The low saddle at the head of Paddle Hill Creek has two tarns, and the Te Araroa Trail turns away to Mystery Lake. Boundary Stream Hut is snuck down on a river terrace surrounded by forty-gallon drums half

buried in the banks, which are actually kennels where the sheep dogs would be chained for the night. The hut logbook said the last person was here in May, early May. Thankfully there was enough wood for a fire. I scrunched up some dead matagouri, gleaned some sticks from an old fireplace, found two leftover logs and a single old leather boot, which burnt magnificently. Two hours from Christchurch and on dusk there is solitude that can be cut with a knife, and a blackness that makes the stars appear to fall like static waterfalls, interrupted by the strange dark 'holes' of the Magellanic Clouds. The hut muttered to itself as the iron cooled and creaked like a rheumatic old man. Within an hour the ground was frozen.

Boundary Stream Hut might have been built in the 1920s, I'm not sure. The early musterers enjoyed sacking bunks, a mud floor and corrugated iron for walls, just one sheet in thickness. The hut would have been regularly used up until the 1990s, and might still be getting some use, as there are cattle nearby.

Now there are such luxuries as a concrete floor, new bunks and mattresses, but with walls that are still only a single sheet of corrugated iron thick. DOC has rearranged the iron, which has left rows of holes that let in the daylight, and each piece is stamped with a brand I've never seen before — 'TW&J Walker Wolverhampton'. The manufacturer would have been amazed and proud that their product has come all the way from their dark satanic mills into this crystal light, to a place not far from the direct antipodes of the Black Country.

At night the moon suffused through the nail holes in the hut walls, making it seem as if stars had materialised inside the hut. People yearn for retreats and sanctuaries. A utopia of calm, a place where you can be in prayer without praying. This high country is meditative yet created by enormous violent pulses of light and ice, wind and frost, which have scraped this landscape down to the knuckle bone. As concise as a Zen *koan*.

BOOKS & SOURCES

■ *The Stations of the Ashburton Gorge* (1996), compiled by John Chapman, contributions Noel Guthrie.

■ *High country books*. On the Christchurch City library database there were 538 titles under a search for 'high country'; this is a sample. History of sheep stations: *The Early Canterbury Runs* by L. G. D. Acland, or *Mesopotamia Station: the first 100 Years*, Peter Newton. Station autobiographies by the families that lived and struggled there: *Life on a Five Pound Note*, Evelyn Hosken (Simons Station), *High Country Family*, Betty Dick (Lilybank Station). Many hunting yarns for red deer, thar and chamois such as Philip Holden's *Hunting & High Country* and innumerable land management and ecological assessment reports, probably only the tip of a massive bureaucratic iceberg. There's a detective story, *Died in the Wool* by Ngaio Marsh (1945), a Mills and Boon romance, *High Country Governess* by Essie Summers (1987), and several horse journeys, notably *High Country Journey* (1955) by Peter Newton. There are songs, government reports, documentaries, television shows, and poems of course, the most famous being James K. Baxter's 'High Country Weather'.

■ *The Good Logs of Algidus* (1965), Mona Anderson. Anderson had previously written a book called *A River Rules My Life* about Algidus Station, which has become a classic.

■ '*High Country Weather*', James K. Baxter.

■ *Winter*. At Cameron Hut in the Arrowsmith mountains I left my sodden socks dangling outside on a hut guy wire and in the morning they were bone dry. The water had sublimated out of them, something that happens at very dry temperatures, usually below minus 10° Celsius.

■ *Samuel Butler at Mesopotamia* (1960), Peter Bromley Maling. The *Forest Creek manuscript* of thirteen pages was actually written by Butler in his little hut. It expands considerably on his journey up the Rangitata. The hut has long gone but a plaque marks the spot in Forest Creek.

■ *A First Year in Canterbury Settlement* (1863), Samuel Butler. Butler was a remarkably energetic explorer. In March 1860 with J. C. Watts he explored up the Harper and the Avoca rivers and got through to the bush line under Mount Greenlaw, in sight of Avoca Col. They turned back because of snow and guessed correctly that the pass only led back into the Waimakariri

River. He also went up the Hurunui to Harper Pass and looked down the Taramakau River. Again in 1860 he travelled up the Waimakariri River alone with his horse Doctor and observed 'one saddle low enough to be covered with bush', the Bealey Valley. The editor commented that if Butler had headed up to the pass it might have forever been called 'Samuel's Pass' instead of 'Arthur's Pass'.

■ *Early exploration*. In many cases the run-holders and shepherds were pioneer explorers as they frantically searched for new grazing land. Quite recently on a tramp up Mt Cloudsley (2107 m) in the Craigieburn Range we were surprised to find we could look 'right through' Arthur's Pass. No doubt early shepherds or musterers who came up here in the late 1850s would have also noted that this was a possible main divide pass through to the West Coast.

■ *John Ruskin*. The composer Jean Sibelius once remarked that you should never worry about what a critic says 'because nobody ever put up a statue to a critic'. Well, in Christchurch there is a statue to John Ruskin, on Ruskin Street of course.

■ *John Cathcart Wason*. Wikipedia 2013. Biography, *Te Ara Encyclopedia of New Zealand*. He visited East Africa and urged greater settlement for British settlers, complaining that he was obliged to travel on a 'German liner'. In 1916 he published a virulent anti-German pamphlet on the Kaiser, which he called *The Beast*. Versions of the *The Beast* (1916) and *East Africa and Uganda: Or, Our Last Land* (1905) are available to read free online. *The Beast* details German atrocities at such length and in such explicit detail it makes for unpleasant reading. Robert Graves in his autobiography *Goodbye to All That* suggests that most tales of war atrocities on both sides were exaggerated or false. Cathcart died in 1921.

■ *Mt D'Archiac*. Julius von Haast named the mountain in 1861 after the French geologist Vicomte D'Archiac.

■ *The Mountains of Erewhon* (1978), T. N. Beckett. One keen mountaineer was Edgar Williams who in the 1930s push-biked three times from Christchurch (about 160 kilometres one way) to have a go at Mt Arrowsmith and met bad weather every time. In 1952 a certain 'E. Hillary' went up the 2333-metre Mt Taylor on a 'training climb' and left his signature on the wall of a hut.

■ *Zone of the Marvellous: in search of the Antipodes* (2009), Martin Edmond. In the 'Erewhon' chapter Edmond talks about Samuel Butler, Sidney Nolan and Colin McCahon.

■ *Utopia (1516)*, Thomas More. In a 1518 edition the artist Ambrosius Holbein drew the Utopian island in the shape of a skull, a sort of memento mori to suggest the brevity of life. This implies that people of the time thought Thomas More's book was a metaphor, and Utopia was not meant to be taken as a real place.

■ *Cockaigne*. Wikipedia 2013. Also *Dreaming of Cockaigne: Medieval Fantasies of the Perfect Life* (2001), Herman Pleij. The American hobo folk song of the 1930s, 'The Big Rock Candy Mountain', contains similar fantastic ideas: 'a lake of stew, you can paddle all around it in a big canoe…'.

■ *Percival Lowell*. Wikipedia 2013. The refutation of Lowell's canals on Mars did lead to speculation about what he had seen. Because he used a technique on his refracting telescope known as 'stopping down', so he could view planets through daylight skies, it was suggested in 2003 that Lowell had turned his telescope into 'a giant ophthalmoscope giving Lowell an image of the shadows of blood vessels cast on the retina of his eye'.

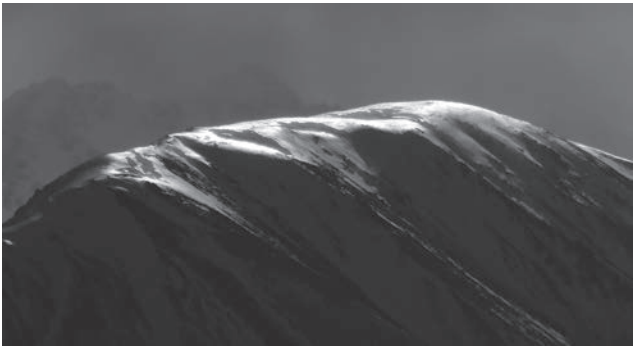
■ *Civilisations on other solar systems*. The physicist Stephen Hawking pointed out we should be careful what we wish for. Any sophisticated star civilisation that arrived would probably enslave us or wipe us out. That's what the Spanish did to the Incas, and the English did to the Australian Aboriginals.

■ *Birds have pathways*. An ornithologist acquaintance pointed out a black shag that was flying up the Ashburton River valley and remarked that its flight path was part of its usual morning run, heading over the pass and into the next catchment. The sky is full of bird trails, he said, but you have to look for them.

■ *Falcon versus plover*. In the Swin Stream we watched a native falcon plummet down on two spur-wing plovers on the tussock flats. It missed. The plovers are clumsy, loquacious birds, and we didn't think they had a ghost of a chance against this missile. One plover took to the air whilst its partner stayed on the ground. The falcon for some reason pursued the airborne plover, but the plover's wings are broader and fuller, and it immediately used its advantage to climb higher and higher. The falcon followed valiantly for

several minutes, but the plover kept on ascending and eventually the falcon gave up, with a slightly dispirited droop.

- *Erewhon: or, Over the Range* (1872), Samuel Butler.
- *Out in the Open* (1882), Thomas Henry Potts. This book lays claim to being the first conservation-orientated book published about New Zealand.



MATUKITUKI VALLEY

Aspiring. Heartland, deep guttered, with truncated spurs and head walls sliced away by a scalpel, draining the mountain fluids. Everything mountains should be are here: high, over-reaching, sequestered and awful. When John Ruskin, the nineteenth-century art and literary critic, first saw the Swiss alps, he was thrilled and inspired, and told his readers that they should go to experience these rugged mountains for the same purpose. So they did, millions of them, and they are still going. Modern trampers trek into the Matukituki Valley for the same purpose, and to embrace the contrast between a humdrum city and unreachable heights. To be awed.

New Zealand is full of strong landscapes and picking just three for this section was always going to be a problem. I looked for unabashed scene-stealers, places where you experience an undiminished passage of strength and values from them to us. Places with gravitas and integrity, and a certain aloofness. Aspiring fitted the bill. Of course, we've mucked around with it, trying to make money through stock grazing and now mass tourism, but we haven't developed it out of existence, and simply by being in amongst these massive structures influences our well-being, or should do — 'there is power in the spaces we leave blank'.

There are two branches of the Matukituki River and they split underneath Fog Peak, not far from where the road comes to an end at Raspberry Creek. The branches act like parentheses that curl around the emphatic mountain and word of Aspiring. The west branch is the popular approach to the mountain, with several huts and tracks that lead towards the ice climbing slopes; Cascade Hut is up here. The east branch is baulked by the enormous cliffs that drop off Mt Fastness and Tantalus into the Kitchener cirque. That's the way to the Rock of Ages biv and Mt Sisyphus.

I wrote this chapter based on several tramps to the Matukituki Valley from 1980 and as recently as 2017. It's about appreciation, and how creativity, film-making and poetry helps us to do that. I've thrown in one soliloquy as well, for this is a fine land and I know I'm lucky to be here. For me a mall or a suburb is an amusement park with no obvious amusements, and I guess there are many people who feel the same way about mountains.

Wet, black walls of rain, half weather and half mood — 'mountains nuzzle mountains, white-bearded rock-fronted in perpetual drizzle' — with speckles of fresh snow above the bushline. When I looked up, the mountains had been edited away, and I got splotches on my glasses. Waterfalls were turned on like busted faucets, and a chronic wind flecked bits of sleet in my face. Like the cattle whose heads sloped into the ground I kept my chin down — what else can the poor devils do? — and they barely moved aside for me, or else thought I was just another beast.

Cascade Hut is a box on the cusp of wilderness. In fact, two Ministry of Works boxes were tractored here in 1932 and butted together with a lobby in between. The New Zealand Alpine Club charges for use and there is a lock with a combination. After twirling the numbers, the lock unclicked, releasing two keys, one for each hut, and I found the same thing in each room. Stale cobwebs on the tiny windows, four bunks and four mattresses, a table, battered chairs and a large old-fashioned fireplace. It was thirty years since I last stayed here, so nothing much has changed, except perhaps the addition of a 'Backpackers Bible'. I filled the fireplace with beech leaves and kindling, then poked some dry toilet paper into the pile as a quick fire starter. Beech wood burns well, and I guided the fire through its birthing stage onto larger branches and logs, and then sat back and watched the flames converse and chatter amongst themselves. The heat was good, but almost incidental to the companionship. Surely no one has ever sat next to a fire and felt lonely?

Now there were four of us: the empty valley, the solitary hut, the crackling fire, and me.

Old memories came back, which made me smile. How two kea joyfully slid down the iron roof, their claws dragging and screeching until we threw stones at them to shoo them away. And there was another night when a huge storm came through as we camped nearby, and two of us were flushed out of our tent at 2 am by a flash flood, and we drudged miserably back to this hut and slept on the floor because all the bunks were taken. I first met Geoff here. I was snoozing in the hut in 1980 waiting for the rest of the tramping gang to turn up, when I heard a bang at the door. A hairy guy, hairier even than me, had arrived with

an enormous pack. I gave him a cup of tea and surreptitiously lifted his pack, a ninety pounder, I guessed. So I offered to carry some of his load up to Aspiring Hut where he was warden for the summer. Later Geoff came along with us, up to Liverpool Biv, where we got delayed for three nights by Huey, and I snapped a photo of him heading back down to the valley. He was the last person we saw for two weeks on our Olivine mountain traverse.

> 'What is the secret that hides behind the landscape? What are the half-glimpsed shadow-lines that draw us in? What mystery of energy or presence is it that we feel around us when we find ourselves alone in the bush, surrounded by the unfolding expanse of the country: plants, earth, ranges, sky, each element shaping and defining all the others.'

This is Nicholas Rothwell musing about the Australian landscape, but he could just have easily included New Zealand. There's a rawness about both countries, a scale, something indecipherable, a tempo that doesn't yet run along at human speed. Both countries were colonised late in European terms, and as the settlers exposed the bones of the land they somehow mingled pleasure and guilt. Yes, the settlers achieved something, but they destroyed a lot of good stuff as well. But facing these truths makes us loud and fidgety because it means admitting that we don't count for much and our bright vanity will be belittled and extinguished in an aeon or two. In *Sacred Geography*, Paul Devereux mused that 'it is only in our modern culture that we have stopped speaking and listening to the land'.

Rothwell would have concurred. He believed that being alone in the bush gave him time for 're-calibration'.

Hmmm... In Icelandic they have a stodgy word, *gluggaveour*, which can be translated as 'the kind of weather that is nice to look at but not to experience'. Looking through the hut window all I can see is grey mush being blown sideways. Sometimes I think I'm starved of rain in town, so no complaints tonight. The drops sounded like impatient fingers on the hut roof, with plops of spittle dripping from the iron cornices. A little light snow caught on the trees, and just before dark two kea perched on a tree limb above the hut and watched as I broke and smashed the fallen

branches into useable lengths. I lit a couple of candle stubs, and drew closer to the fire. The cattle drifted into blackness and the valley tucked itself into its own shadowy saga as the river grumbled and snored ceaselessly.

In 1949 Brian Brake was only twenty-two when he had the youthful and creative idea of producing a cinematic poem to Mt Aspiring, calling it 'The Ascent of Mt Aspiring'. He wanted to capture the authenticity of nature, and its power in 'a new kind of documentary', he remarked. Brake had already directed an earlier black and white newsreel on the opening of Aspiring Hut called *Prelude to Aspiring* in Easter 1949, so he was familiar with the landscape and the organisational difficulties. The new film would be financed through the National Film Unit and filmed in colour, at that time a daring choice.

Brake lined up the talent. Music would be by Douglas Lilburn, aged thirty-four, and poetic words for a script would be provided by James K. Baxter. Painting storyboards were sketched by the nineteen-year-old John Drawbridge. They were all young men, at the beginning of their artistic careers, fresh to the Aspiring landscape and full of new ideas about what art should and could be. In December 1949 they gathered in the Matukituki Valley.

It was a marvellous idea for a film, but it was never completed, although in a prescient way the creative blood of these four young men pumped on and on. The long days and nights they spent together bunked down in Aspiring Hut arguing about art and religion paid off handsomely, for it generated James K. Baxter's poem 'Matukituki Valley', and in 1963 John Drawbridge produced a massive mural in New Zealand House in London, expressing the mountain scenery in fierce abstract juxtapositions of colours and shapes. Brian Brake went on to direct *Snows of Aorangi* in 1951, which in 1959 was the first film made in New Zealand to be nominated for an Academy Award. Douglas Lilburn did all right too.

The film *Aspiring* was supposed to be the story of a climb to the summit, and Brake hired some top mountaineers to assist with the climbing scenes and safety know-how — Geoff Milne, George Lowe and Ed Cotter. Some slight film footage remains. There are climbers with

A-frame packs and coils of rope leading a packhorse laden with gear up the valley to the hut. A woman serves cups of tea. Then climbers are seen slogging up French Ridge to the old hut. There is even a snippet of film showing the climbers inside a snow-cave with candles lit and lightning flashes illuminating the snow walls in strange patterns. The weather was awful, and the month-long project quickly ran out of time and money, but some of the climbers did sneak in a quick ascent of Aspiring, standing on an icy top that hardly had room for two people. Geoff Milne described the summit as a 'saucer on edge'.

The final blow to the film project came when one of the main actors in this 'documentary', pilot Christopher Johnson, died in a plane crash whilst looking for other lost climbers. He appeared in some of the remaining footage, and so Brian Brake left the film to his widow as a memorial, where it remained forgotten in an office cupboard for almost fifty years.

Baxter's well-known poem nearly didn't happen. On a deep crossing of the Matukituki River, Baxter lost his footing and got dunked into the river, losing his dignity and the pack with his typewriter in it. The pages of film script were literally washed away downriver and as George Lowe hauled out the wet poet he remarked wryly, intending it as a joke: 'I suppose it will all be blank verse from now on, eh Jim?' Amazingly, other tramping parties entering the lower valley found these typed sheets plastered and stuck onto rocks, and brought them up to Aspiring Hut, to Baxter's delight. Almost all of the material was recovered, the typewriter dried out, and the film script written — but it was never used. Instead, some of it got recycled as the basis of the poem 'Matukituki Valley'.

Baxter said that he occasionally walked down from Aspiring Hut to Cascade Hut for a bit of solitude, and scribbled down his ideas out of the rain and the nibbling sandflies. But Jim Baxter's moods swung between reclusiveness and garrulousness, so he quickly returned to the main hut and piled into luscious arguments that he fuelled with poetic gusto. Baxter was only twenty-three when he came to the Matukituki Valley and had married the year before in 1948 to Jacqueline Sturm. Of marriage he remarked ruefully and truthfully: 'I used to think marriage had a lot to do with sex, find it has practically nothing. Affection, harmony, even

washing nappies or worrying about money are far more central. A shared endurance test, not a garden of Greek statues.'

His experience of mountains was equally matter-of-fact, and as far as I can tell was never repeated. He saw wilderness in conflicted terms: 'the mountain is half enemy, and half a mother's breast'.

A modern documentary, *Aspiring*, was made in 2015 and follows a by now elderly John Drawbridge as he returns to the Matukituki Valley, saying simply, 'I didn't want to copy art but inhabit it', and he marvels out loud that nothing has changed. The huge mural he constructed in The Beehive parliamentary building in Wellington ran around the curved walls as a sort of flickering celluloid, changing as the human angle and the light changes, almost imitating the way you might walk past mountains. In the doco there's a glimpse of Lilburn in his electronic studio explaining his compositions, and best of all there are some excerpts of Baxter reading his poetry in a rather stiff and strained English voice. Not a hint of a Kiwi accent.

For those four young men the Matukituki Valley seemed to squeeze the poetic world and natural world together in a vice of gigantic proportions, their ideas and creative impulses merging, until all the juices ran together, its purity undiminished fifty years later. Drawbridge said that the sojourn up the Matukituki Valley was the most 'extraordinary experience of my life', and Baxter and Lilburn remained lifelong friends. In a fashion these young artists came up the Matukituki to learn how to create New Zealand art and develop an artistic national identity — 'we are waiting to be born yet will not leave the womb' — they were Englishmen learning how to be New Zealanders.

We are underlings down here, minions even, trying to assemble small parcels of meaning to keep us from howling. I enjoy the human world, but it's barely sane. Our heroes have shrunk. Modesty, self-effacement have been replaced by celebrities who shriek their fame and commercialise themselves into their own brand, something which in the olden days we used to call 'selling your soul' — but there is another option.

In the Cascade Hut logbook I spotted a name of someone I'd never met, but I've seen often enough as a scribble of words in other hut

logbooks. There are other names too, of people (who are mostly men but not always) living lives of nuance and concealment; there's no other way to put it. They arrive and disappear, with a laconic note of satisfaction and a skiff of a route description. No trumpets for them. Some of their routes are breathtaking and daring, if they leave mention of them at all. Where do they go, where do they come from?

They move like ghostly neutrinos through the human world, avoiding collisions, living a life not over-synchronised and with space for sweet and sour achievements. They don't struggle against disappearance; in fact they almost seem to welcome it. There's no public identification of their skills and enterprise, and it takes a great deal of expertise to negotiate the wildness of New Zealand for a lifetime and stay alive. Their passages remain a blank verse, and as far as I can tell they prefer it that way. They make a virtue out of invisibility. So these three paragraphs are just a passing salute to them: noticing the unnoticed.

We left the Rock of Ages biv at 6.30 am. Rachel stayed behind, reading her book and guarding against the kea, though none showed up. The first hour was across Aspiring Flats under the Kitchener Cirque and up the Rainbow River to the ice tunnel. A winter avalanche had swept out over the river and the water had eaten away at the ice, creating a sizable cavern we could walk through. This early in the morning the ice was still firm, but when we ducked through the tunnel on the way back in the late afternoon, the ceiling had become a gushing waterfall. At the top forks we veered up a gravel stream and then onto a tussock spur and stopped for a cup of tea just as the sun reached us. I suppose we were about on the 1100-metre contour. From where we sat we looked under the massive cliff-faces of Mt Fastness and Mt Moncrieff with ten or more 'donkey's tail' waterfalls zimming over — I know there's no such word but it feels right — and as the sun fell on the waterfalls each one had a rainbow permanently imprismed in it.

We climbed up a steep tussock spur and came across several cairns. I added some more as well, and they turned out to be useful on the way down, acting as reassuring markers that plotted the best course through the bluffs. Wilmot Pass looked close now, but there was still an hour of

sidling up to the low point where I got vertigo immediately. It's 1000 metres down to Ruth Flat, with the Tartarus Icefall breaking off the Volta Glacier, and toppling in lumps down to the valley. Deep green valleys of forest, spurs forced upwards into ridges, and pavlova lumps sweeten the waterfalls. This country is so huge that it's hard to get all the mountains in one eyeful, so I was forever scanning around, latching onto a detail like an edelweiss, then swivelling up to the heights again.

Sven clambered down to a lookout, but I didn't have the stomach for it. We left the packs behind and cautiously walked up Mt Sisyphus, which was steep, and the rocks on the peak were distorted in crazy shapes and patterns. One clump looked like a stack of corrugated iron.

Our eyes followed up the Coxcomb Ridge of Mt Aspiring, and I imagined that on such a perfect windless day there would be a veritable queue of climbers heading to the top. Well, good luck to them, we had this little summit to ourselves. In Greek mythology Sisyphus spent his eternity rolling a rock up to a summit, and then watched it roll all the way back down again; so he must have been a tramper. At this moment, sitting in the sharp sunshine and with the excellent oxygen of altitude, there are worse things to be.

That evening we all headed down-valley and camped under the red beech trees on sphagnum moss, and I slept outside the tent, which was a big mistake. Sandflies pestered me until darkness, then small black moths fluffed around my face, and later several large white moths emerged and were lured to my body heat. Finally, when even the river sounded sleepy, several large flying beetles — I think that's what they were but it was dark — sprang into my hair, and one even wriggled down into my shirt. It was a fitful sleep.

We left camp early and crossed the Matukituki River smartly to Cameron Flat carpark, and took to the long and dusty road down-valley, with eager cars of walkers coming the other way. Breakfast was in a shrieking cafe playing Pink Floyd's 'Money', then a drive through the hot Mackenzie Country with the summer holiday traffic buzzing like blowflies, and finally home to Christchurch by the afternoon, with a soft southerly curling over the Port Hills like a blanket and a daughter just back from India.

'When God made this place,
He made mountains and fissures,
Hostile, vicious, and turned,
Away his face'.

The song cycle *Arawata Bill* has fifteen poems and each line treats the wilderness like a coiled spring, ready to snap and hurt you. For the hermit prospector of the title there were rivers to drown in, angled bony ridges to fall off, branches that scratched your face, and at night, moss to lie in and bury some of the pain. No one quite captured the flavour of New Zealand mountains as Denis Glover did: the sheer endurance of land, its rude textures, the bewilderment of wilderness.

Glover elevated the old gold-digger into the status of a universal wanderer, a dreamer and someone with 'a faraway look in his eyes'. The poems give a rhythm to the old man's musings; muttering aloud to himself, retreating to comfortable memories, and preferring that strange entrapment that afflicts everyone — that it is easier to remain in your accustomed habits than to try to break them. Arawata Bill was probably a little mad, searching for 'rubies', which were actually garnets, and gold, from which he made just enough money to furnish the next expedition. He led his packhorse Dolly cautiously up the valleys and on the way built gigantic cairns (which I've seen for myself) that can still be found on Simonin Pass in the Red Hills.

The cairns, I suppose, are like the legend, with bits getting added and topped up as time goes on, until you wonder wherein lies the truth of anything. There's a fair bit of Glover inside Arawata Bill, as there has to be, and Glover swore that he'd seen 'Wata Bill' himself, on the old Lake Wakatipu ferry that plied between Queenstown and Glenorchy in about 1935. Perhaps he did, for the story always wins out in the end and it would complete that circle. A wanderer of spaces meets a wanderer in words.

Glover was more of a sailor than a tramper, but he enjoyed the hills, and he carried a swag with John Pascoe once or twice:

'You taught me to cross a river Johnny, in a way crafty and clear,
but what more can I say of the mountains, Johnny,
what more of the mountaineer?'

I saw Denis Glover once. He was being shown around Victoria University in about 1979, I think, a small possum-eyed man, with a red nose peeping above the beard and an old sporting jacket that almost swallowed him. On the steps he gave a perceptible wobble and the English professor made a grab for him before he simply rolled downhill. It was 11 am. A year later Glover tripped over more steps at Breaker Bay, and this time there was no one to catch him.

'It got you at last, Bill,
The razor-edge that cut you down
Not in the gullies nor on the pass
But in a bed in town…
You should have been told,
Only in you was the gold…'

Kea! Kea!

I heard that first, as Sharks Tooth peak reared up, snapping at the newly minted sky. Outside the sun was tipping points of fire on the mountains and the air was thick with frost and silence. Up-valley, the Matukituki River ruffled in a gentle drone, and sun-fingers caressed deep into the sleeping valley. There was no one at Aspiring Hut so I ignored the 'no boots' rule and clumped inside the huge hut trying to sense the ghosts of past painters and forgotten poets, but there was no sense of anyone. It was just a cold empty room.

There used to be a big brassy telescope at the lounge window where you could scan the crisp ridges of Mt Aspiring, and maybe fancy yourself up there on top of the meringue glaciers. An old photo of A. P. Harper hangs on the wall, he was in his eighties then, and alongside him is a troop of young keen men in a line on a New Zealand Alpine Club camp in 1939. It all seems so long ago when we also lined up outside Liverpool Biv, eight young men in a line in 1980… The weather was crap. Huey trapped us in the hut for three days, fretting.

From Aspiring Hut the track leads gently through forest and alpine meadows, and then quietly deposits you on the top edge of Shovel Flat, a graceland of grass with those strong upward curves of mountains that make the sky curl over as well. The falcon saw me first and gave me a

contemptuous once-over with his wings and 'kekked' loudly; there were parakeets everywhere, chattering, scolding each other and busy raising chicks in a spring frenzy. When we first came here in 1980 Shovel Flat was a wasteland of gravel after a recent slip had sludged thousands of tons of rock and scree over the river flat, but today it was covered in flowers and ripening tussocks with seed heads already forming. It's so beautiful you can see why people believe it must be some sort of garden.

I nestled down into the tussock like a hare into its form, and this simple act completely ruined my ambition to climb up to Liverpool Biv that day. Okay, I wasn't surging that much anyway. The cramped cabin that eight of us squeezed into in 1980 has now been replaced by a new Liverpool Hut, which you can clearly see from the valley floor, but I also saw that unfortunately the hill hasn't been replaced yet. Thirty-six years is a long time between visits, and there's a part of me that regrets the loss of my obsession with 'destination disease', but I also realise with a keen pleasure that although the urgency of getting there has gone, it hasn't left a vacuum.

As I chewed away at a grass stalk, tiny orange butterflies went in and out of focus, and there was a 'crump! crump!' of toppling snow as the sun melted the upper rock faces. On the left a fresh avalanche fanned out unblemished like a white wedding gown, and across Shovel Flat boulders had been arranged like pieces of lounge furniture, covered in an unlikely marriage of red lichens and carpet-green moss. A pipit made a rapid 'twee' call.

We need to be in awe of something other than ourselves. It's easy to forget how to express gratitude, and being slumped here makes me accept that getting slower and older is not that bad really, at least compared to the alternative. Old age doesn't have to be a descent into fear and grumpiness, of intellectual impotence and disconnection. In fact, I believe in the rightness of old age, a love of little things, the value of wisdom, the ability to see light and shade, and to appreciate the ambiguities of life without anger. We ought to be able to rest our fingertips lightly upon the soul of everything.

'…one sees the frail darting swallow the self for what it is,
a brief positioning of forces, a trace in time'.

'Hello'.

I knew she hadn't seen me, that's why I spoke first. Of course she jumped a mile, stared about her, and it was only when I stood up and brushed the tussock from my hair did she relax and smile.

'It's a great day.'

She was on a mission. She had already driven from Wanaka that morning, ridden her mountain bike to Aspiring Hut, and was well on her way to Liverpool Hut, so after some inconsequential chit-chat and a quick 'cheerio' (in a rather English tone I thought) she swung on down the track with bare legs and a rapid muscular walk that put me to shame. I took several photos of her as she strode across Shovel Flat, squinting until I could no longer tell if she was a real or an imaginary dot.

Sigh, 's'pose it's my turn now,' I grumbled to the pipit, and Sisyphus stood up, scratched his scalp, yawned, stretched, lifted on his pack and begrudgingly joined the dots. I really did regret leaving that possie and glanced back twice. The recalibration had been going so nicely.

BOOKS & SOURCES

■ *Blank spaces*. This remark was by Isao Takahata, a Japanese film-maker, notably of the cartoon film *Grave of the Fireflies*.

■ In Icelandic the word *gluggaveour* can be translated as 'window weather', 'the kind of weather that is nice to look at but not experience'.

■ *Nicholas Rothwell*. 'The Landscape behind the Landscape', lecture 22 October 2014, transcript National Library of Australia. A lecture on how the Australian outback affected him. In part, the second paragraph reads:

> '…a time of re-calibration, when received ideas fragment and one begins to take a surer grasp of the world: the things that have true resonance in one's being come to the fore, one sees again the sights of childhood; memory returns, and clears the way to further knowledge; one sees the frail darting swallow the self for what it is, a brief positioning of forces, a trace in time…'

■ *Sacred Geography: deciphering hidden codes in the landscape* (2010), Paul Devereux, p137. He raises some interesting points. Modern societies are centred on gratification rather than gratitude; malls are consumption temples. The creation of national parks like Mt Aspiring may be a deliberate antidote to this, but it's a separation of prayer from desire that wouldn't have occurred to an older culture. In Bali I noticed how the original village landscape was structured around thankfulness, with temples on every corner and the brightly dressed women balancing bowls of fruit offerings on their heads. Even now, the tiny leaf-woven boxes of *canang sari* are placed daily outside every shop or hotel, sometimes even in cars, everywhere in fact — quiet gestures of gratitude.

■ *Mt Aspiring*. The summit was on my list, and I imagined the triumph long before it ever happened — which it never did. In 1985 we got to Bevan Col where we met some climbers who had just found two dead mountaineers at the base of 'The Ramp', the standard route up the north west face. We watched the helicopter circle and pluck the bodies from the ice plateau and the names of the young men were printed in the newspaper a few days later.

■ *Farming Under Aspiring* (1993), Jerry Aspinall, and *High Country Legacy: four generations of Aspinalls at Mt Aspiring Station*, Alex Hedley (2012) covers the history and functions of Mt Aspiring Station.

■ *John Drawbridge*. Working late at night on his London mural, Drawbridge recalled a voice lurching out of the dark, singing. Inia Te Wiata had been watching and burst into an operatic solo.

■ *Aspiring* DVD, 2015.

■ *Brian Brake: lens on the world* (2010), Te Papa Press.

■ '*Poem in the Matukituki Valley*'. Baxter cheated, as the Stargazer and Moonraker peaks cannot be seen from the Matukituki Valley.

■ *The Life of James K. Baxter* (1990), Frank Mckay. See chapter 'The Young Married Man' for marriage and Matukituki Valley. See also *New Zealand Listener*, 23–29 July 2016.

■ *New Zealand solo accounts*. See *Mountain Solitudes: solo journeys in the Southern Alps of New Zealand* (2000), Aat Vervoorn, or *Bushwoman: a search for the perfect place* (1995), Sigrid Crump.

■ *Men Aspiring* (1967), Paul Powell. The author details the desperate search for Johnson and the crashed Harvard plane. In another chapter, where a large party was trapped in a snow cave on Bevan Col, he recalls recovering a stash of food and the kerosene left by the National Film Unit under Mt Joffre. The food tasted of kerosene.

■ *Rock of Ages Biv*. Paul Powell's party discovered the Rock of Ages after they were driven out from another rock in a 'deluge of nor'west rain'.

> 'The rock wasn't one of these claustrophobic holes that you crawl into in soggy indifference, to share darkness with spiders and long-legged cave wetas. High-roofed, well lighted, and dry, it had a pleasant vista of the Rainbow Valley and Fastness. Giant beeches, where keas nested among the roots, or called at dawn and nightfall from the branches, screened it from rain and wind. I called this refuge "Rock of Ages".'

■ *Arawata Bill*, 1949, also John Pascoe. See Denis Glover, *Selected Poems*, 1981. 'Arawata Bill' really did exist, and his name was William O'Leary. He died in a nursing home in Dunedin.

■ *Habits*. See *The Passenger* (1975), Michelangelo Antonioni. 'However hard you try, it stays so difficult to get away from your own habits.'

■ *Huey or Hughie*. He is the weather god of trampers: 'Send her down, Huey!'; also the god of surfers: 'Send her up, Huey!'

■ *Wilderness*. The word 'wilderness' has had a strange trajectory. Adam and

Eve were cast out of it, and Jesus spent forty days wandering in it. The film *The Man Who Shot Liberty Valance* (1954) — directed by John Ford — was set in the American Midwest of the 1860s and in the last scene the wife turns to her husband and says (as I vaguely remember it) something like, 'Look at what we've achieved, once this was a wilderness, now it's a garden.' Nineteenth-century settlers in the Matukituki Valley saw themselves as heroes by domesticating the wilderness, and they used the word in its biblical sense. But by the twenty-first century, 'wilderness' in natural areas has come to mean a pristine, valued place, but then it gets seriously muddled. People started to refer to cities as 'concrete jungles' or even 'suburban wilderness', as if it's the cities that have become the wastelands.

■ *Liverpool Biv*. In fact I only got to Pearl Flat in 2016, and it wasn't until 2017 that I finally made the walk up to the biv. See *A Tramper's Journey* photo on p105 for 'the boys at the biv'.

INSIGHT

HARWOODS HOLE

The hole is about forty metres across and almost 250 metres deep. It's an opening high up on the Takaka plateau, a landscape which has been nicknamed the 'marble mountain' because it is a giant lump of metamorphosed limestone. It's a short thirty-minute walk to the hole through eerily silent beech forest with leaf litter that crunches underfoot. Tree trunks are crusted with large green lichens and when they somersault to the ground they reveal splattered omelette underbellies. Pale yellow fungi of honeycomb balls cling to the branches of silver beech, and pustules of orange and blue fungi peek out amongst the fallen leaves.

The cave pit is surrounded by trees with exposed roots and blocks of rock waiting to topple in. The floor of the hole is a talus slope formed from thousands of years of debris and the occasional bones of moa that have fallen in. In 1960 cavers first explored the pit, and a year later found their way through the Starlight Cave resurgence that connects to Gorge Creek, almost 600 metres lower down. The hole was conquered but remains irresistible. A mouth, a space that shouldn't be there, which sucks you in, and although you might feel scared by its power, it's hard not to try to peer into it.

I couldn't quite bring myself to chuck a stone in, but the two backpackers who showed up had no such qualms. They also tried harder than me to look into the hole, clambering around the precipice rocks, daring each other to go further, and I got queasy looking at their antics. Then they threw a rock in. Were they appeasing the god or trying to wake the dragon? Maybe it's our way of dealing with fear and vertigo — 'Take that! I'm not scared of you, you big fat black yawn!' — but they looked puzzled when they could hear nothing in reply.

There are different kinds of darkness — evening, descending, twilight, shadows, caves, doubts.

Alfred Hitchcock made the word sound sinister — 'Good eve-ven-ning' he would drawl on his television horror show — dragging the word out into three impossibly long rounded English syllables. But to me 'evening' suggests a softening moment, a soufflé of light. As I drove onto the Takaka plateau in late afternoon, the yellow air was gentled

with stretched shadows that fingered across the road to find solace on the other side.

The farmland is a joke, really. Manuka and pittosporum force their way between strange rock stumps that jut up like knuckles and fossilised teeth. Streams drain into the limestone fissures and sheep fall into the sinkholes and karst cracks. In this late heavenly light, the blackened tree stumps have a crucifix intensity, both moving and alarming. The land was called 'Canaan', perhaps in reference to 'the promised land' or 'a land of milk and honey' — a humorous irony, I guess, that must have worn fairly thin.

The road itself is rutted, narrow, and white with quartz grains that crumble into dust on the verges. A cattle grid munched on my car tyres, then once over a tight saddle the road plunges down into a forgotten basin where moss-covered boulders sit quietly, and trees stretch out their huge branch hands beseechingly. A few sheep looked fat and unhurried, and fence-posts are costumed with woolly pale lichen. The loose battens are held together by cobwebs that in soft misty mornings gleam like dewy dartboards.

Hardly anyone lives up here now. This huge limestone mountain acts as a natural breakwater between Tasman Bay and Golden Bay, and most of its mass is in the Abel Tasman National Park. The park is a famous coastline of sublime yellow and orange beaches and jostling water taxis that ferry the dreaming and pre-bronzed backpackers from one crowded hut to another. There's the action! Boardies, bikinis, beautiful people, and every cove with a dozen multi-coloured kayaks and foreign accents, and young people wading through azure water at low tide where the manuka crackles in the heat and cicadas drown out the human shrieks.

A thousand metres higher than the bustling coast, the plateau keeps its privacy. Wherever the Canaan road crosses a dry riverbed, you can guess that the creek water has escaped down into the sub-strata, and these disappearances create an uneasiness between the bright brittle land and the hollowness underneath. Things become absent; water, people and noises vanish into thin air so on one level it was perfectly reasonable that on that evening I would drive into the centre of an unoccupied village. It was peculiar. Here are the props, but where are the actors?

On the left of the village was a pizza stall with no customers, and a row of composting toilets was lined up with nothing much to do. A latticed kraal compound with a large shelter was backed into the beech forest. A gate was half open, and across the open grasslands there was a carved friendly bearded Druid in a tree stump, and to keep him company an imp-like totem squatted on top of a tall post. Someone enterprising had purloined the entire collection of roadside plastic markers and turned them into a funky post-modernist stone circle, but the gathering arenas were deserted.

There was a small sign which said 'Camping Notes', so I read them carefully, and then circled the paddocks like a cat looking for a place to curl up. Eventually, I settled on a spot under a beech tree on the far forest edge, carefully edging in backwards, as if I also instinctively wanted to disappear — but I'd been noticed.

A lonely harrier wandered along the tree-top line, sharply staccato against the setting sun, and gave me an imperial once-over as it continued its hunt. Opening up the car hatch seemed to be an immediate signal for other residents to come and have a look-see. A bumblebee ditzied inside and became locked in an exhausting tussle with the windscreen, whilst blowflies zinged in and out with idiotic logic. A black and white tomtit jiggled along a tree branch with a welcome 'wheedly, wheedly, wheedly'.

My first socially significant guest was a male robin, his chest puffed up in a dandy yellow waistcoat. He perched on legs as thin as paper clip wire and gazed at me with serious grey eyes, cocking his head sideways. As his confidence increased, he hopped further into the car and even onto the steering wheel, inspecting everything (ignoring the exhausted bumblebee), pecking, prodding, unimpressed by the plastic buttons, and keeping a half-eye on me, and then for no reason panicked when he couldn't fly through the windscreen. And what do robins do when they panic?

I cleaned up the mess, shooed out the bumblebee — who knew hosting could be so stressful? — just as a kea landed with a vain flash of red and blue underwing. Talk about ego! A right D'Arcy if ever I saw one, strutting on the ground and 'aware of every inch of his handsomeness'. With a quick peek to make sure I wasn't watching, the parrot surreptitiously attacked my rubber Crocs with a sharp twist of

beak and then did a taste test with a pinkish leathery tongue. They are thieving, rapscallious, fascinating birds, with feathers gorgeously layered in soft lapis-lazuli as smooth as an Abel Tasman sea-cove. A gang of five kea had been harassing the good folk at Kaiteriteri beach a few months ago, so they were ensnared and brought up here, and so far, surprisingly, they have stayed.

The kea flew off. The afternoon drew down. Out of the corner of my eye I saw a human figure move towards me in a slow parabola across the dimming pasture.

After a few minutes Geoffrey Young arrived for a chat, with a Nikon camera around his neck. I offered some tea, he declined, but he did accept a biscuit.

He was the summer caretaker in 2013, looking after the collection of empty compounds and structures that in February becomes the Luminate Festival of art, music and culture. It's an ephemeral ritual space that conjures itself out of thin air and briefly becomes a busy 'town' of several thousand people, then folds away, vanishing, as if it had slipped into the cracks underneath.

The open spaces and fields of Canaan are privately owned by the Canaan Trust, a collection of twenty-five shareholders. They run sheep to keep the grass down and out of season charge $5 a night for camping, a toilet and a tap. Geoffrey said their water comes from a resurgence, which usually holds out even in the driest summers. He told me it takes a year to organise the festival and they get 3500 people, with over 800 workshops. Zero waste is their aim, in other words customers bring their own coffee cup, but this year the festival was off. They were buggered he said, they needed a break.

Luminate is part of a worldwide trend. In *Off the Map*, Alastair Bonnett described a festival in Spain called 'Nowhere' in which their central hub is appropriately called 'the middle of nowhere', and they take pride in disconnecting themselves from their site once the festival is finished:

> 'This is why being able to shape a working living place, from scratch, and then see it filled with happy, excited people,

> enthuses enough of them to make it happen every year. The thrill of creating Nowhere seems to be heightened by the "leave no trace"…'

In the festival off-season Geoffrey mooches about, takes photos, does volunteer work for DOC, and keeps the place tidy. He believes the sheep eat the beech seedlings so there's little 'regen' happening. Stoat trapping has reduced numbers, but lack of stoats means more hares, which also eat beech seedlings so 'you can't win'. Possums are scarce, but no one is sure why.

We got onto the topic of caves. He is keen on caving, and told me about some of his cave-diving experiences. The Golden Bay area has deep stream resurgences where the only way to explore these caves is to dive underwater. 'You need,' he said with a grin, 'exemplary self-control'; not to panic in a world which is wet, dark, cold and deep, having encounters with an underworld no one has ever seen before. I remarked — not meaning to sound unkind but it came out that way — that he only needed to have one slight inattention to a technical detail, or a minor failure of his diving gear, and he was 'a goner'. He didn't argue, but said they take extremely good care of their equipment. With another faint smile, he wandered off. I'm sure the camera was an excuse to check me out, but he was a nice guy.

> *'The day was going, and the dusky air was taking the living things that are on earth from their fatigues…'*

I packed my things away, and with my social business done closed the hatch and disappeared into my personal rabbit hole like Alice. No one else came to camp at Canaan that evening, though a couple of beat-up campervans drifted in and out, with the men and women looking amiable and hairy.

Twilight under the forest brought a welcome sense of engulfment, as if the branches had knitted the air together. The oldest trees here are big-boled black beech and I know it's nonsense but I can't shake the feeling that they have an awareness of themselves. Tiny wind gusts released showers of orange leaves that pattered like rain on the car roof and swirled inside. Many months later I found some beech leaves had

lodged inside the glove compartment, and one had somehow managed to squeeze inside my Velvet Underground cassette tape. When I crackled up the dry leaf, it smelt of forest air.

In 1949 John Pybus saw a photo in the evening newspaper of a formation called 'The Cathedral' in Karamu Cave near Hamilton. Henry Lambert was the founder of the New Zealand Speleological Society in 1949, and since Lambert worked for the Paykel company nearby, John went around to see him, and was astonished as Lambert's office door opened automatically. He had never seen a self-opening door before, and clearly Lambert was 'a clever chap with electronics'. Lambert was affable and gave John a cave map of Karamu, charged him 'three bob' for membership fees, and gave him the first two editions of the society's newsletter which Lambert had written entirely himself. John was member number 4. He was then aged twenty, and he was eighty-five in 2013 when I talked to him.

His first cave was Karamu which he visited with a friend called Warwick after university exams had finished. They went down by train and stayed in a barn belonging to an ancient Major Hillary who had fought in the Boer War. They spent thirty-six hours in the cave, saw the formation 'The Cathedral' and heard the 'crackle, crackle, crackle' of rats eating their Weet-Bix. It was awkward dragging the frame pack through the narrow bits; John was dressed in surplus army clothes, with a flying helmet on his head instead of a hard hat.

He found visiting an unspoiled, unseen world exciting, and sometimes dangerous. John remembers that in the Luckie Strike cave in 1955 (which had a lot of fine formations) they got caught by a swollen stream in rising waters. One of the party was Yvette Williams, New Zealand's 1952 Olympic gold medallist long jumper, who was unusually strong. When they got back to the waterfall a knotted rope had been left to climb up, but Yvette didn't 'bother with that nonsense' and pushed and pulled people up in energetic quick time.

Photography quickly became John's passion. For big caves he might take forty to fifty flashes, using up two batteries on an electronic flash unit in the process. The flash wasn't to be in view of the camera and

he used Kodachrome slide film balanced for daylight. It was a military operation getting good photographs. Cameras were set up on tripods, shutters locked open with a cable release, numerous flashes taken, then the command 'close shutters'. Cameras were packed in towels and wrapped in plastic bags, and they had to wait several weeks before the film was developed. It was always hit and miss whether the results were good or bad, but John got some evocative shots, and he donated a large collection of 660 of his early photos to the Waitomo Cave Museum.

In 1954 Jessica Lehmann was working as a waitress at the Waitomo Hotel during the school holidays and became interested in caves. Teaching in Otorohanga in 1954, she wrote to the president of the Speleological Society, Henry Lambert, and was told if she was at so-and-so place, on such-and-such day, she would be picked up and taken to a cave. So she was — also on the truck was John Pybus.

That weekend she found herself being lowered 200 feet down a wire rope ladder into a void called the Lost World, and it was only after the ladder swung away from the overhang did she realise that she had little idea what she was in for. This was no easy stroll down a darkened passageway. She collected some cave 'pearls', calcite balls precipitated around a piece of rock, and found moa bones.

She didn't get claustrophobic and wasn't alarmed by the dark. Everything was so new, so strange, almost euphoric. She enjoyed venturing into side-passages, and on one trip was reprimanded for getting ahead of the group. There were few women caving at the time, and she had her name on the front page of the *New Zealand Herald*, as Henry Lambert enthusiastically supplied copy to the newspapers on this novel and challenging sport.

After the first weekend, there were many more caves, such as Karamu and Waipuna. The cavers were an enthusiastic bunch, although somewhat happy-go-lucky. In Whites Cave near Waitomo, Jessica and a nine-year-old child were completely left behind, and they had to find their own way out. The parents had apparently forgotten about their son, and John had apparently forgotten about Jessica.

She ruined the needles on her sewing machine constantly repairing her overalls, as the washed clothes were heavily impregnated with mud.

She didn't have a carbide light and, in the caves, usually just carried a torch. She and John were married in 1955 and she was pregnant when John was at Harwoods Hole in 1960. She vividly remembers the 'horrible phone call' when John rang and told her of Peter Lambert's death.

In the Christmas of 1958/59 a small group gathered by Harwood's Hole. Peter and Helen Lambert, David May, Richard Scott, Catherine Donald, Malcolm Laird and David Kershaw. This was the first attempt to descend the hole enabled by a winch built by Richard Scott. The caving history book *Delving Deeper* explains:

> 'The result was superb — a winch weighing 250 kg powered by a Villiers four stroke engine and gearbox with a clutch from a Matchless motorcycle. At the end of the 5 mm, 1.2 tonne breaking strain, galvanised steel cable was an adapted parachute harness with a steel seat.'

Scott was dangled in the seat harness first, and Peter Lambert was suspended far enough to see down the enormous shaft. In the end it was 'David May, still a schoolboy in shorts, the first to reach the bottom. It proved to be 183 m from the take-off point and 253 from the surface.'

Next year, in the Christmas holidays of 1959/60, a large number of about twenty cavers based themselves at the Sixtus farm near Harwoods Hole. They used the winch that Scott had made the year before; this winch is on display in the Waitomo Museum. The exit cave from Harwoods Hole to Gorge Creek had been confirmed by using 'fluorescein', and the exit hole at Gorge Creek was widened with a chisel and hammer. Three cavers made the successful trip up through the 'Starlight Cave' to Harwoods Hole.

John Pybus went down the hole and explored and photographed throughout the cave, and later was employed at the top of the hole on the safety rope. As the people were winched up, they had to leave the winch cradle and step onto a ladder to complete the climb out of the cave. There was a huge drop below them, so first they tied on the rope of which John was in charge.

About 8.30 in the evening, just as Peter Lambert came up to the ledge, and was about to put on the safety rope, a large limestone boulder

(which people had been sitting on for most of the week) cracked, split, and chunks fell off into the hole. One hit Peter Lambert critically and several pieces narrowly missed the men still deep in the hole.

Lambert was hauled up and placed on a stretcher of pack frames and saplings. A doctor arrived at midnight, but Lambert died two hours later. Cavers rushed to the site, but there was nothing anyone could do. The three men left down in the hole decided to wait out the night and told the others by the telephone connection that after they had de-rigged the cave, they would exit via the Starlight Cave. A small memorial with Peter Lambert's helmet was left at the base of the hole and is still there.

John Pybus stores his cave photographs in carefully organised black folders, and when looking through them I was particularly taken with his photo of Harwoods Hole, peering up from the bottom. It is one of the earliest photos ever captured from inside the cave and it is beautiful. Blackness and light struggle to compete. The well of light is pouring down, reaching the sketchy floor, and the walls are craggy and ill-defined and pulling slightly apart like a heavy curtain. It's really a piece of theatre. A dark hole looking down, a slice of heaven looking up.

On top of Takaka Hill in summer I watch the shadows arrive slowly. Blue light becomes wispier, and as the evening creeps across the grassy plateau the shadows lengthen and intensify each object in its own personal mystery. Trees become giant, their outlines entangled with the dark ground so the blackness flows both ways, making the earth more plastic, pliable. Shadows are a type of *yugen*, which in Japanese aesthetics is an allusion to something beyond what can be said. The language we have about shadows is unsettling: 'he came out of the shadows', 'he had a shadowy past', 'we were shadow-boxing'.

A world without shadows would be rather boring. In literature Peter Pan chased his shadow around the room, and he was pleased when Wendy sewed it back on. In the film noir mystery *The Third Man*, the director Carol Reed uses shadows in the Viennese streets and sewers as an extra evil character, and menacing shadows are the staple of Gothic and horror films. Yet shadows have a kindlier side, and getting to sleep might be difficult without them, since the night is a giant shadow.

The Egyptians believed that because a person's shadow or silhouette is always present, then this *sheut* contains something of the person's personality. The pharaohs stored their *sheuts* in boxes, for without a shadow a person couldn't be vital or even real. Silhouettists were popular in the eighteenth century. Willoughby had his profile clipped by Marianne in the film *Sense and Sensibility*, and somehow by removing all the internal information she revealed a more knowing shape in the stark outline. He was more than he seemed. The gravitas of our persona spills into our shadow, recognisable but absent, in the way the atomic bomb at Hiroshima blasted against some human victims and bleached the stones behind them, so that it left their shadowy imprint on walls and pavements.

The Chinese have complex and beautiful thoughts about shadows. The yang is the light, and the yin is the dark, each with a spot of opposite colour like a beauty mark. Yin is the soft shadow and moonlit night, feminine, mysterious and concealing, and Yang is bright sun, hard, male, exposing, focused, revealing. As the sun shifts, they slowly change places, both become each other, and yet neither. The duality is in the dynamic, the movement, and the motif that shows the two tadpoles embracing each other.

There are shadows of a different kind on the plateau as well. Here and there are the straight sawn stumps of trees in the forest, or an old crumbled line of a stone wall along the roadside. A hand-adzed fence post still contains the strike and force of the hits, as the settlers worked hard, too hard, as testament to their forgotten sweat. One of those working men was Jim Henderson, born and raised on the Takaka plateau at Kairuru, and he wrote his biography *Down from the Marble Mountain* in a vaguely apocalyptic tone. For Henderson, the early settlers represented a nobler breed and he felt the current crop was decidedly rotten: how else to explain a paragraph such as this?

> 'But over all is a quality of determination, and self-respect. The same determination and spirit bred among New Zealanders is about to break through our selfish mediocrity today, to be directed not against trees and bush covered landscapes, but against greed, privilege and poverty, sickness, wilful pollution,

> the duplicity of politicians, and slaughter in uniform in other people's wars. It can be felt in the air, this clearance, this coming.'

Henderson wrote an interesting chapter on Joe Sixtus and his son Edgar. Joe arrived at Canaan in 1918 'on the razor-edge of poverty and independence', and cleared some sixty acres of bushland with axe and fire. In 1924, at the age of fourteen, Edgar arrived to help his father and slowly a farm was created. When Edgar got married in 1940, his father and wife retired to Kaiteriteri as Edgar resumed the struggle with 'the promised land'.

Black and white photographs from the 1920s show a Canaan that resembles a blackened, ruined Ypres. Stumps of trees are burnt to upright matchsticks, with unhealthy, hungry sheep fossicking about. Later there are pictures of a growing family, and a homestead assembled in hope as much as anything else. The road was finally built in the 1930s by pick and shovel, and Edgar Sixtus recalled that in the long snow-bound winters they had to warm the tools before they could use them.

Now the tableland looks effortless. The punishing work ethic that created it has dissolved into a graceful parkland that any casual visitor might feel has been purposely moulded for meditation, and it sets the stage for the Luminate Festival. Anxiety? Stress? A gentle summer of love is reinvented every couple of years as New Agers, Hippies, Alternative Lifers or the simply Bizarre drift across the green auditoriums in a purplish haze…

But no matter how many drugs they ingest, they wouldn't have seen it as I saw it that evening. Empty and complete. The pasture turning a moony baize in the half-light, with large fluffy moths of sheep settling on the grass, and the first morepork sounding in the tree above my car, with his calling card echoed by another morepork across the vanishing spaces of Canaan as the light is slowly chewed, swallowed and digested.

In Paparoa National Park there is a creek called Cave Creek North that winds through the forest and karst syncline and is then sucked into a hole called Armageddon. The entrance is a large jaw unhinged, and as we clambered into it, I had a Jonah-feeling of being swallowed.

At first the scramble down is exciting and awe-inspiring. The prehistoric cave walls crinkle with faint light, there's a throaty roar of the creek, and mosses drip and twing.

Then further down, not much further, the darkness becomes total. A suit of blackness pressed in on our senses. Switch off the torch and it's another world, a suspension. I moved my arm and saw nothing, and I found my body swaying oddly. There were rocks under my feet but otherwise I might be floating, as if earth tides were dragging me deeper into darkness. I didn't like it much. Without light, without knowing which way is up or down, your situation is in perpetual ambiguity — limbo — which is where the Catholic Church places unbaptised infants and humans ignorant of Christian salvation. It's supposed to be an improvement on purgatory, but total darkness for me was a worse version of Hell.

Ancient shamans understood the psychology of caves. They realised that being absorbed into mad darkness and then being reborn into sane light meant that caves could be used for purification rituals. It's a terrifying journey down, but there is a determination that you might emerge as something new. Caves have also been adopted as a metaphor for the subconscious mind, and the Greek philosopher Plato used it as an analogy for the human condition. He thought that people were trapped in illusion and gave the example of his famous 'cave' parable.

> 'Men are chained,' he said, 'and unable to move, or turn around. Behind them is a fire which they cannot see, but it throws shadows of themselves onto a screen, which is the only thing they see.' 'You have shown me a strange image, and they are strange prisoners.' 'Like ourselves,' I replied…

Even if they were released to the light, Plato thought these 'prisoners' would be terrified and would want to be rechained. He argued that if we are presented with the truth we would run away from it, for we are simply too mortal for our own good. Plato described his cave nearly 2500 years ago and in trying to understand the analogy he proposed, I've attempted a modern way to recast his idea. I've used the male pronoun.

I imagined a man on his own in a room with four walls, all of which are giant mirrors. He can always see his reflection. However, the man

has been told that beyond these mirrors is another world, a world so infinite, interconnected and beautiful that he would never want to leave it. He has been given a hammer and told that he can smash the mirrors at any time so that he can enter this other world, but he will never be his self again. He cannot go back. His sense of identity would merge with this other world and he would in effect vanish, and he would never see his image in any mirror again. He hesitates.

What is real? Is being in a room of mirrors just as real as the world beyond the mirrors? At least he knows this world and can see himself. If he smashes the mirrors, there might be nothing there. As far as he can see, this 'room' meets his needs, it's not perfect, and often he is unhappy, but it feels 'real'. Then he is joined in the room by another man, then another, his friends and family join him, and eventually the whole world is with him in this room of mirrors. If it was hard to smash the glass before, how much harder is it now? Since everybody shares his illusion, how can it be an illusion?

Whatever the inconveniences and illusions of our 'room', it provides us with our identity, and with this notion comes pleasure, and few people would have the strength to break the mirrors to risk losing a temporary pleasure to enter a world where pleasure or suffering may not exist. Maybe Buddha broke the mirrors. Perhaps Jesus did.

No moon tonight. Tossing and turning, my weird dreams erupting briefly into consciousness, looking repeatedly at the car clock — 3 am — and under heavy cloud it's as black as it can get on the Takaka plateau. Humans are disadvantaged by night and we know it. We use bonfires, streetlights and headlights to peer through the dark nervously, like ancient hunters, just in case something might be looking back at us. The fog on the plateau, or cloud, I'm not sure what it is, chilled the night and blotted out the shapes of most things so the limestone rocks became drenched with beads of cold sweat. Mist like this freezes the sense of time, and gives density to old stories around a campfire that sizzles with sadness.

It's 5 am now. There's no sound at Canaan, not even a bird call. Because the sunrise (according to my internal clock) is dragging the

chain, I wriggle around turning on the radio, make a cup of tea, munch a biscuit, and during all that kerfuffling I miss it. Eos, the she-God of Dawn, had sneaked in behind my back and a grey ridge line had pixelated. It reminded me that Robert Graves in his book *Goodbye to All That* had a good story about dawn from his experiences in the trenches of the First World War. The Allies on the Western Front always had a few extra minutes of advantage because their enemies were highlighted against a dawn that they hadn't realised was identifying them as targets. Dawn then became an exchange of deadly shadows as the night eased and daylight crept into its position.

On the plateau the overnight wind brushed drizzle against the trees and there was a wet glaze on the leaves, but the forecast on the radio made it likely that the rain was moving through quickly. I was pleased to see my robin chum turn up just as I was about to leave, but I'm not letting him in the car this time; sorry mate, no hard feelings. As a goodwill gesture I grab a stick and scrape away at patches of twigs and leaves and expose the bare earth. When I look back, he's digging furiously into it.

Driving out, I passed two cars coming in, one looked stuffed full of cavers and caving gear. It could be felt in the air, this clearance.

■ *Harwoods Hole*. The depth of Harwoods Hole is difficult to measure as the entrance terrain heights vary, as does the sloping floor height. But 253 metres is generally agreed.

■ *Subaru Gypsy*. In writing this book my living arrangements were simple. I had a mattress and sleeping bag in the back of the Subaru wagon, and with the hatch open I could sleep flat and straight. I had a food box, a twenty-litre water container, a billy, and a gas primus, with the hatch propped open to prevent an early obituary. The passenger seat was my 'office' with maps, books and numerous chargers for the iPad and camera. The glove box served as a medical cabinet and elsewhere I fitted in a clothes bag, foot pump and a camp seat. It's a compact, snug and remarkably efficient 'tent' on wheels. I could park and be in bed in five minutes.

■ *Kea*. Although often called an 'alpine parrot', kea are wide-ranging and can often be found in lowland river valleys and forested areas close to the sea, such as Okarito and South Westland. In December 2016 I spotted one beside a lambing paddock near the Aorere River, close to Collingwood.

■ *South Island yellow-breasted tomtit*. Often called by birders the 'wheelbarrow bird', because of its squeaky repeated call.

■ *Off the Map: lost space, feral places and invisible cities and what they tell us about the world* (2014), Alastair Bonnett. A study of places which includes those in the subtitle and 'forgotten islands'.

■ *The Divine Comedy* (1308–1320), Dante. *The Inferno,* descent into hell.

■ *Cave Creek*. The disaster of Cave Creek, where fourteen young people died, happened at Cave Creek South, ten kilometres away. A different cave, a different catchment entirely.

■ *Delving Deeper: half a century of cave discovery in New Zealand* (2003), Moira Lipyeat, Les Wright. Malcolm Laird, *Christchurch Press* obituary, 18 July 2015.

■ *Jessica Pybus and John Pybus*. Interviews recorded November 2013. John Pybus joined the New Zealand Alpine Club in 1951 and has been a member for sixty-three years. He remembers a base camp trip to the Matukituki Valley in 1954 as one of the instructors was A. P. Harper, the founder of the Alpine Club in 1880, and an old tramping mate of Charlie Douglas. Despite being in his eighties, A. P. Harper managed an ascent of the Governors Ridge track, a mere 1200-metre climb.

■ *Hiroshima*. There are several photographs of the human 'shadows' in existence; someone holding a ladder, someone with a walking stick, and someone sitting on steps. These steps were subsequently removed and placed in the Hiroshima Museum. Thermal radiation from an atomic weapon travels in a straight line and bleaches surfaces unless it is blocked by an object that does not allow the bleaching. This creates a 'shadow' effect, but there's no evidence that the bodies were instantly vaporised on the spot.

■ *A History of Western Philosophy* (1945), Bertrand Russell. Plato's philosophy including the famous cave parable is described here. His chapter on Socrates is also excellent. What's intriguing about Russell's long life is that he was too old to fight in the First World War, and yet he was an active opponent of the Vietnam War. He died aged ninety-eight in 1970.

■ *Twilight and dawn*. They are technically divided by six degrees of separation into three phases — civil twilight, nautical twilight and astronomical twilight.

■ *Wildwood: a journey through trees* (2007), Roger Deakin. 'Twilight is surely the gentlest, most natural way to prepare for sleep, and yet it is a pleasure we deny ourselves with the switch on the bedside lamp.'

■ *Goodbye to All That* (1929), Robert Graves.

BREAM HEAD

The entrance into Whangarei Harbour is as tight as a closed fist. Each arriving ship has to take a dog-leg into the harbour, swinging about Bream Head, stay close to Home Point, turn briefly towards Urquharts Bay then do a sharp wheel left through the narrow 800-metre-wide channel under Mt Aubrey. Even the big oil tankers heading for Marsden Point refinery have to squeeze through this corset-like strait, and no doubt the captain and steersman are concentrating but any passengers on board get a good eyeful of the scenery that in the nineteenth century they called 'sublime'.

Otherworldly and statuesque pinnacles of stone rise sheer out of the forest, and jagged headlands fall onto waters of turquoise and beaches of white sand. Maori had different stories and legends for these rock sentinels, but the highest was called Manaia, which is also the name of a mythological creature that had a bird for a head and a human body. Manaia is the messenger between mortals and spirits, and a guardian against evil. The manaia was often carved in jewellery and wood, frequently in an elegant figure of eight with a bird-like beak, and sometimes shown with three fingers, representing birth, death and life. Occasionally, a fourth finger is shown, no, not shoved up at any passing Pakeha, but pointing the way to the afterlife.

The early colonial visitors who approached the entrance to Whangarei Harbour were captivated by these splinters of rock, and they used their pens and brushes and eyes. There are at least four sketches of Bream Head in the Alexander Turnbull Library collection. Edward Ashworth's precious sepia and ink sketch from early 1844 shows Bream Head side on with a Maori canoe in the foreground. Godfrey Charles Mundy's pencil sketch from 1847–48 takes a similar view but places a European sailing vessel in the front instead of the Maori canoe.

Painted sometime in the 1850s, Charles Heaphy's 'Turneresque' landscape shows precisely the same viewpoint, but this time with a full-rigged clipper ship sailing by and with several Maori canoes. It's a dreamy, almost impressionist painting, except the word 'impressionist' was not coined until 1874 and the impressionistic style would not reach New Zealand for another fifty years. Heaphy's father, though, was an artist, and had shown the young boy some of English artist

W. J. M. Turner's luminous paintings which were a clear precursor of the impressionist movement. At the remarkably young age of seventeen, Heaphy was appointed resident Artist and Surveyor of the first New Zealand Company, sailing on the *Tory* and arriving in Wellington in 1839.

Most colonial artists could not resist adding a degree of exaggeration to the height of the Bream Head spires, making them more romantic in the 'rearing up' style of the time. Heaphy was no different, and he was even accused of being a 'great seller of New Zealand', but he was drawing what every artist of his time saw. This was the fashionable pose. European painting was preoccupied with the 'awfulness' of nature, its grandeur, its thrilling and terrifying aspects and the artists enthusiastically flossed up the scenery they saw. The mountains became sharper and craggier, the colours richer, the rivers more foamy, and these watercolour sketches, hand-coloured postcards and rich oil paintings made their way back to England and established New Zealand's reputation as a romantic and tempting tourist destination.

It's a theme that has never entirely left us. Modern Kiwi artists still over-saturate their prints and boost their paintings with vivid colours, as if our landscapes were permanently imprinted with the gorgeous light of stained-glass windows, and it turns paintings into wallpaper. It takes courage and a Colin McCahon or a Ralph Hotere to see the black.

This chapter is mostly about looking — and about killing.

Ocean Beach is at the eastern end of Bream Head. At the carpark wild bamboo and banana plants are flush alongside native bush. Green and red rosellas chatter like monkeys through the pohutukawa trees, a bellbird barks an alarm call, and small silvereyes pick out the seeds from the sticky black karo. Mynas are everywhere, nosey and gestapo-like, taking off in a whirr of rapid black and white wingbeats that imitate those silly plastic windmills we had on sticks at funfairs. It's a cosmopolitan assemblage of wildlife that is typical of Northland, an incoherent mixture of endemic birds and escaped pets, fertile and voyaging, ill-bred and noble, plant natives and plant immigrants piled on top of each other, each fighting for their own space. Fighting is a good theme for Bream Head, for one way or another war has come here.

On the beach the light is as thick as cream, and the track up the long grassy spur is a grind to the old radar station. This is just a concrete hut, a cracked pathway, and a metal support post for the rotating radar mechanism. The rest — the dormitories, officers' quarters, ablution block — have all vanished and the bush has shuttered the view. Up to twenty young army men worked here in the Second World War and, according to the information sign, they were as bored as hell.

It's an amazing outlook. Coastal hills break apart from the sandy coves and the crinkled blue-jean ocean has studs of rock stacks and islands popping through. Through a gap in the bush to the left there is a rock pinnacle. Initially, I saw a hint of Queen Victoria in the black costume of granite and quite imperious stare, but as I focused a Maori warrior chief resolved itself out of the basalt, his hair topped by three huia feathers, and his head turned over his shoulder as if looking back yearningly to his Polynesian homeland. Maori who lived here would have seen a significance in these grey spikes, gods certainly, maybe lingams. Later I learnt that this well-known pinnacle was nicknamed 'the old woman', and I can see that shape also — but my shape was better.

Higher up, the track reaches a scarfed ridge-line and two welcome swallows flickered around in joyful loops, which only increased my sense of vertigo. Deep down a fishing boat pottered by. I stopped by a side-trail which led to a splinter of rock along a cheval ridge (a 'horse's back'), but I lost my nerve here, well, good riddance, it never was a very good nerve anyway. A kingfisher called nearby, and kiekie and black supplejack hung in a spider's web of vines. As the cloud wreathes started to clear, the dark spire of Te Whara emerged as an impressive oblong slab of ignimbrite like a Maori mere, a warrior rock. He had a grassy toupee on top, but the sheer sides of Te Whara descend for thirty metres, unbalanced, overhung and always ready to topple over and fall upon the enemy. Truly a heroic rock, and taking lunch beside it seemed almost discourteous.

The desire to keep watch is life or death for the animal that is prey, or the animal that hunts. For humans it was crucial to identify threats, to spot the enemy approaching before they spot you — no one wants to be taken by surprise! — and since height gives a natural advantage in warfare, Maori often built their pa on high points. But summits were

also used as lodgements for their important dead, so the rocky peaks of Bream Head have become a melding of the sacred and profane. A last resting place and a watch-tower. A place to look out for your enemy, and a place to have a vision of god.

The attack on any pa was not easy. Manuka stockades could be four metres high with chiselled tips. Deep trenches were dug to the approaches, and gaps in the walls allowed the defenders to stab and pierce the attacking warriors. Fighting platforms called puhara or pourewa were built above the stockades and critical gateways. Sometimes these platforms were 'twenty feet' in height, supporting three to five warriors so that darts and stones could be thrown down on the attackers. The heads of slain foes might be strung from the puhara as a warning to enemies, and often a watchman would stand on the platform at night sounding a wooden gong at intervals, which acted as a signal to attackers that the pa was on the alert.

Most fighting pa (they can be called forts) were built with natural defences in mind, on hilltops, or on a cliff in the crook of a steeply banked river. Many were designed for retreat in times of danger and would not necessarily be occupied permanently. The besiegers would try to cut off access to water supplies — a weak point in most pa — but the pa defenders stored water in pits, or canoes or gourds called taha, or wooden containers made out of matai. Direct assaults were time-consuming and costly and, in many instances, pa were taken by stealth. The attacking party might creep up unnoticed, or observe that the sentries had fallen asleep, or scouts (kiore; also Maori for the Polynesian rat) were sent ahead at night-time to find a weakness in the stockade.

In his book *The Pa Maori*, Elsdon Best details every trick and counter-trick that was used. Attackers might sling fire-sticks or hot rocks into the pa in an attempt to set fire to the huts, and the defenders would place earth on the roofs to stop this happening. If the attackers tried to stack firewood against the stockade the defenders would try to burn the kindling early, or else sally forth to shift the firewood away and burn it. If the pa was successfully set alight the defenders would have to fight their way out, a risky strategy, but this was a life or death endeavour.

No mercy would be shown to the defenders. The men killed, the women raped and children turned into slaves. Maori pa society was brutal, unimaginably cruel and short-lived. Captain Cook observed that Maori were engaged in a constant cycle of revenge amongst each other, and the pervasive desire for utu, or payback, meant a life lived in fear.

After the Europeans arrived, traditional pa became increasingly untenable. The introduction of muskets forced Maori to adopt new strategies: trenches were turned into rifle pits, loopholes were made. Fighting platforms were now too exposed, and so earthworks were increased to absorb the bullets, and later the British cannon. The availability of European muskets also intensified the slaughter. Chiefs such as the Kapiti leader Te Rauparaha went from leading small-scale raiding parties to practising a form of localised genocide, and the Maori population plummeted, as European diseases accelerated the decay. On the plus side, Europeans brought new ideas, metals, food crops, and also Christianity, which was seen by some Maori as the only way to break the vicious circle of utu.

On the high ridge between Bream Head and Busby Head several pa have been located, and it was probably from here that Maori spotted a strange moving 'island', with oddly costumed men, having the cheek to haul in their fish. Probably afraid of this taniwha, and bloody annoyed, they gathered their men and arms and took to the waka, for the peninsula was worth defending. Captain Cook caught enough tamure or snapper to feed his crew for two days, fired some warning shots at the approaching waka, and named the point 'Bream Head'.

This little contretemps illuminates why an archaeological terrain map of the Bream Head area resembles a pointillist painting, with the dots of hundreds of Maori historic food sites, middens, ovens, storage pits, pa and kainga. The fishing has always been good here, and it has been asserted that the population of Maori living at Whangarei Heads was one of the highest in Northland. The sea provided the abundance that supported this population, and the *Bream Head Maori Word Bank* has an impressive assemblage of 250 words associated solely with just this peninsula, and of which nearly half are about kaimoana — seafood or shellfish. Many fish and shellfish names are familiar to New Zealanders:

kina, kahawai, pipi, hapuku, koura, paua, moki, patiki. Others are less known, such as hoka (red cod), rimurapa (seaweed or bull kelp), papaka (paddle crab), kukupara (little black mussel), the fearsome kera wera or orca, and papahu or dolphin. There were words like rama (to catch a fish by torchlight), puputai (sea foam or spray), hao (catch in a net), taunga ika (fishing ground), and karoaroa (a coastline where the landing is difficult). This was a fertile place, a rich feeding ground, and nearly everything tasted good.

Ka pai!

In New Zealand they reckon you can tell a man's character from his shed. Peter Mitchell's is tidy, well organised, labelled and efficient. At fifty-seven (in 2013) he is fit, and when he took me on one of his possum and stoat trap lines that morning, he jumped over trees and down steep slopes with the agility of a goat. Only three years older than him, I lumbered my elephantine carcase along at a pace that was clearly slowing him down.

'I'm taking you on one of our easier trap lines.'

'Thanks, I appreciate that.'

His trap line runs between the main ridge track I took yesterday and the sea, a sort of secret parallel trail. It's only a partial track, marked sporadically with tape and little ground wear, a scramble in and out of forested gullies. Bream Head is too steep to have volunteers maintain the trapping lines, so Peter Mitchell does a lot of the work himself. Now he has help, but when he started three and a half years ago, he was largely on his own. Money was quite tight, funding apparently up in the air, and it's a tough lifestyle sort of job, which he thrives on, and he is clearly making a difference. Peter is a pretty good exemplar of what a good keen man can do.

He spends little more than thirty seconds at a possum trap. Checks it, resets it, flicks out the old bait clip, puts in the new one, and sprinkles a mix of flour, icing sugar and cinnamon as a lure. The mustelid traps need more care. He replaces the rabbit meat, and checks both traps are running perfectly 'like a Swiss watch'. He remarked that the stoats are wary and 'you only get one chance at them'.

The results of this systematic trapping of mustelids, possums, cats and rats have begun to tell. Peter pointed out bark bits on the ground, chewed off by kaka, which are noisy and cackling in the canopy. As we move from block to block, ducking, diving, manoeuvring under the rock pinnacles, you can immediately tell where the rats have been eliminated by the abundant birdsong. He hopes to get rid of rats entirely, an amazing goal.

At morning tea we chatted and Peter's passion for the job was evident. I was struck by the detailed and scientific approach he took to trapping. He almost seems to sense where the predators will be, how they spread through the land, and which gully they will strike in next. His knowledge of his enemy is quite uncanny, and his traps are waiting for them. He is in constant contact with other experienced rangers doing similar work and follows the blogs and newsposts to get the latest results on new trapping ideas and systems.

Seventy years ago, it was different. City folk admired the young farmers, clearing the land and bringing the burnt hill slopes into pasture for sheep. It was part of the settler mythology that New Zealand had to be transformed, whatever the cost, as Montague Holcroft wrote in 1940:

> 'They burrowed in with axe and fire, until homes could be built and farms established a long way from the coast. Up and down the scars grew deeper. Smoke billowed from the ranges and darkened the plains where men worked destructively.'

Somewhere this social dynamic was changed, so we are no longer settling the land but salvaging it. It is now the turn of conservation workers and volunteers to win people's admiration, trying to plant bush, rescuing bird species, and fighting back at formidable enemies of possums, rats and stoats. Every year these guys are getting better and cleverer at their jobs; but that doesn't mean they're winning.

Peter will take time out for fishing and surfing, and he can't really imagine himself living in any other place. The landscape claims ownership of him, and he feels a sense of responsibility towards it. He and his wife Cathy have a house almost within sound of the surf, and they hope to retire here, although (I don't say this out loud) conservation workers never really retire. They are driven, it's in their blood, and if there are rats to be killed they will be out there doing it.

Bream Head has over a thousand species of plants, birds, insects and eight confirmed species of lizard, including a brand new one discovered by Peter and Cathy in 2012. The Bream Head skink is new for Northland, and maybe New Zealand. There are plans for translocations of birds such as whitehead and North Island robin, and maybe even saddleback in the future, though the saddlebacks are sensitive to rat predation. Peter sees these show-stopper efforts as more the cream on the cake; it's the forest itself, the life-force inside the kohekohe, mahoe, pohutukawa, lizards and kaka that make his every day worthwhile.

At lunch we separate, and as I plod up the Peach Cove track to the ridge line I can hear the DOC workers up the hill hammering planks of wood as they construct staircases along the main ridge. On one of the new boardwalk staircases someone had written disapprovingly in green felt pen: 'Improve town and leave nature alone'.

Out to sea, there's a glimpse of distant islands turning blue in the ocean haze, and this is really the point. Bream Head isn't alone, it is part of a matrix of refuges like the Hen and Chicken Islands, the Mokohinau group, Tawharanui Peninsula, Little Barrier Island and Great Barrier Island. Birds such as bellbirds, kakariki and kaka will fly between these refuges, and begin to repopulate areas that they were once exterminated from. It really seems to come down to whether you prefer birds or rats, and the answer, for most people, is obvious.

We can't leave nature alone now: we've buggered it up too much.

The word 'lookout' is contradictory and almost meaningless in English. You are encouraged to lean out at a 'lookout' for a better scenic view, or people can bellow a warning 'Look Out!' as spears or bullets come your way. You can also be on the 'lookout for trouble', such as an advancing war party, and try to spot them coming from your secret lair or 'lookout'. Go figure.

The old military 'lookout' at the abandoned Home Point gun battery has fine views over the silky waters of Urquharts Bay to Mt Manaia, and then around to Mckenzie Bay where holiday baches jostle down the hillsides trying to get the best views. Bush smothers the spurs and pohutukawa trees lines the beaches with red fuzz. Out on Whangarei

Harbour the gulls soar and squabble around tired fishing boats, as they retreat through sea channels burnished by a dusting of sunset golds.

But for a military sentry in the Second World War, the gun site lookout was an interminable, humdrum job. An artistic soldier, perhaps inspired by the view, or just plain bored, painted a mural on the concrete above the gun portal. It is a landscape of Whangarei Harbour viewing towards Marsden Point, except that in 1943 the oil refinery didn't exist. It's a long, stretched painting that matches the slit entrance of the gun portal and it was designed to help the gunnery spotters as they ranged their targets. The painting has its own naïve charm, elongated with shining waters and low pastoral hills in the distance.

At first during the Second World War it was not considered necessary to establish a coastal battery to defend Whangarei Harbour. Only the small coastal vessels could manage the narrow zigzaggy channel, and, anyway, the harbour authorities complacently decided, they could easily render the harbour unnavigable by the simple expedient of switching off the harbour direction lights!

By April 1942, the army had had a change of heart, and built the Home Bay battery on Bream Head, and unusually, positioned the one five-inch United States naval gun to fire inland. The gun was practice fired only three times, and, somewhat to the surprise of the gunnery officers, it attained a distance of twelve miles when the supposed range of the weapon was only nine miles. From Home Bay that shell soared over Marsden Point, well beyond Whangarei Harbour, and ploughed somewhere into Tikorangi Hill. By 1943 the gun was dismantled and taken somewhere more useful.

Bream Head battery is a curiosity because of the efforts to make it look 'like a farm and seaside residences'. The armoury and barracks were built to resemble a two-storeyed farm house, and rocks were cemented onto the smaller buildings to make them resemble, well, rocks. Over £1,500,00 was spent on military sites in Northland alone during the Second World War, an expenditure largely driven by a paranoia whipped up by newspapers, which got politicians to initiate hundreds of costly defence structures. Throughout New Zealand there is a vast grey and concrete empire of gun-pits, watchtowers, pillboxes and damp echoing

tunnels, which were seldom used and eventually abandoned. They are still there, and standing by the gun emplacements at Home Point it is possible to listen to the ghosts of the people who lived and worked here during the Second World War.

They were mostly young men, with hopes and desires, grouches and foibles, just like us. Hanging about gun batteries and radar lookouts, teenage boys many of them, slouching with fags dangling from their lips, moaning at another army snafu and listening to the static news read by Alvar Lidell on the BBC. They'd josh each other with the latest catchphrases from the popular BBC radio show *ITMA* (*It's That Man Again*). Mrs Mopp: 'Can I do you now sir?' Colonel Chinstrap: 'I don't mind if I do'. They would imitate the German spy, 'This is Funf speaking', or the hopeless removal men, 'After you Claude, no, after you Cecil', and my personal favourite, the depressed laundry woman Mona Lott: 'It's being so cheerful keeps me going.'

Hearing Glenn Miller on the radio would set them dreaming and talking of meeting girls in Whangarei at the Saturday night dances. Stuck on a lonely harbour entrance day after day, they were bored, as we would have been bored, going through army routines of spit and polish, and pretending to watch when no one ever came, swearing at the weather and yearning for action, for something, anything, to happen.

It happened. And they missed it, by about two years in fact. That's why they were there of course, for the radar lookout on Bream Head was a classic case of shutting the stable door after the horse had bolted. War had been to Bream Head and it was stealthy, effective, and perhaps most surprisingly, didn't kill anyone. On 13 June 1940 the German raider *Orion* slipped through Colville Channel and started to lay mines around 8 pm, 228 mines in all, her full complement. The bright moonlight made visibility rather too good for the German captain's liking, but cloudy drizzle later helped disguise the ship's presence.

The Alexander Turnbull Library has a German map of the raider's course, skirting Great Mercury Island and Cuvier Island, and laying mines across Colville Channel. Then the *Orion* went north of Great Barrier Island, resuming mine-laying in a circle around Mokohinau

Islands and Marotere Islands (in the Hen and Chicken Islands), finally stopping about twenty kilometres off Bream Head. Every mine had been laid and the *Orion* turned away at dawn.

Through intelligence and the interception of radio signals and code-breaking, *Orion* was aware of the presence of the British cruiser HMS *Achilles* and auxiliary cruiser HMS *Hector* in the Auckland region at the time. Keith Gordon in his book *Deep Water Gold* considered that the German raider's real targets were the British cruisers, a target of sufficient importance to discharge all her mines in one go. During the mine-laying the *Orion* had several scares. A largish vessel crossed one of their mine leads, drawing at least twenty-five feet, and the mines were set at eighteen-foot depth. Fortunately for the Germans, the dissolving detonator caps were still inactive. Even worse for *Orion*, two larger vessels appeared out of the darkness. *Achilles* and *Hector* were believed to be returning to port on that night, and it would have been ironic if the German raider had been caught laying mines to sink the two warships that chanced upon her.

Orion's luck held. All ships passed by, and she finished the mine-laying operation about 2.30 pm and slipped smoothly out of the Gulf. *Orion* made it back to Germany. Her captain Kurt Weyher reached the rank of Konteradmiral (Rear Admiral) and died in 1991, at the age of eighty-nine. He was an artist and painted two scenes of what he remembered from that tense night. The moonlight on the raider as she laid her mines, and the dramatic sliding into the deep of the liner *Niagara* that hit two of his mines twenty-four hours later. A nurse on board *Niagara*, Hazel Munro, recalled:

> 'Rudely we were awakened by a jolt that shook the ship from stem to stern, so violent was the shock, that I and my cabin mates knew that something was wrong…'

Calmly, the boat was evacuated in the early hours of the morning and the passengers and crew from the ship's boats watched as the *Niagara* 'slowly stood on end and sink beneath the surface'. No lives were lost and they were duly rescued. Munro remarked: 'The whole episode had been carried through with a calmness and fortitude worthy of a British people.'

On my last visit to Bream Head I stayed in the holiday cottage of an old retired couple, Dougie and Meg Chowns. They were enduring with grumpy graciousness the disadvantages of ageing. Meg had recently had brain surgery and said she 'wasn't feeling very sharp'. Doug was a professional artist, ebullient, opinionated, cheerful, and there were lots of his watercolours of Bream Head on the bach walls. He waved at them dismissively: 'Pretty pictures,' he said, 'but they sell.' He once had his own studio in Whangarei, but in the last few years he admitted the art market had faded away.

The next day I grunted up Mt Manaia, or as someone had scrawled in the bach visitors' books — 'Mt Mania'. There are 1088 steps to a dizzying platform on the top with no handrail. The views also made me gasp. Urquharts Bay was a dainty seaside town, and the fretted rock line of Bream Head seemed to be giant fishermen permanently poised over the ocean. Marsden Point was pretty in its Monopoly-board playfulness, with a sugar-candy tower painted red and white. I took a snapshot, but as usual I used the camera to visually edit what I saw. I was happy to include the rock pinnacles but filtered out the farmland and the boring housing.

The walkers' platform of Mt Manaia isn't quite at the top, for perched on a rock pinnacle about thirty metres higher is a white wooden beacon that marks the actual trig summit. I'm surprised the local Maori allowed the surveyors to place it there. These tiny volcanic peaks are tapu platforms, as close to the sky gods as anyone would want to get. Here, the bones of chiefs were placed, but not entirely because they wanted to be closer to heaven, but rather they did not want to be turned into fish-hooks. Elsdon Best in *The Maori As He Was* explains this:

> 'The Maori had ever a keen dread of enemies tampering with his dead. Where bitter enmity existed between two peoples, it was considered a fine thing to obtain bones of the enemy's dead, and from such bones were fashioned fish-hooks, spear-points etc.'

Tribes went to great lengths and stratagems to conceal their chiefs' burial place. They might hide them in a cave, or pretend to bury them in one place but then shift them to another site, or conceal the bones in a deep sand dune which was easy to cover up. All this effort so that the remains would be left undisturbed. How Maori got the bones to the top

of Manaia is bewildering. It is rock climbing of a high order, and how did they overcome the tapu that surrounds a powerful chief? Perhaps the warriors washed themselves afterwards in water to remove the taint.

Intertwined with these ancient burial rites are magical stories told of Manaia and his family of basalt spires. Of how hills from the west ventured to the east when unexpectedly daylight appeared, and they lost their power of movement and became fixed in this place. Or how the warrior Manaia carried off the lovely maiden Pito, chief Hautatu's wife. Hautatu came for revenge and just as he was striking with his mere, Hautatu, Manaia, Pito and her two children were turned by the sky god Rangi into stone, and there they wait in eternity to be released.

People have been drawn to Bream Head repeatedly, climbing up high and looking outwards. Some arrived to make a home or a refuge or construct a ritual funeral space. Some came for inspiration. Some for fish. The army boys constructed military bunkers and waited. The native birds hung on somehow, and the rangers now attack the possums, rats and stoats that will never cease invading. Here there's escape and contemplation, and on one busy summer's weekend I spotted walkers, black-coated surfers, shell-gleaners, dog-walkers on the beach, swimmers, bird-watchers, and family picnickers who brought the entire paraphernalia of sustenance. There were fishermen on the rocks, divers on zingy boats, and the oddest person of all — someone a bit like me — who drives alone to the carpark, switches off the engine, and simply stares out at the horizon.

Looking.

■ *Paintings*. All of the paintings and drawings can be viewed online on the National Library of New Zealand website. Art critic Louis Leroy coined the word 'impressionistic' as a derogatory comment on an exhibition of artists in Paris, but the rebellious painters like Degas, Renoir and Monet adopted the name with pride. The Scottish painter James Nairn is considered New Zealand's first impressionist painter in the 1890s, though Frances Hodgkins is the first New Zealand-born painter in that style.

■ *Charles Heaphy*. Several of his painting are oddly exaggerated, like his Mt Egmont landscape and logging in kauri forests, but he could also draw accurate landscapes, such as his sketches around Wellington Harbour.

■ *The Pa Maori* (1927) and *The Maori As He Was* (1924), Elsdon Best. Although Best himself is rather fusty, these detailed studies of the attack and defence stratagems used on pa, and on Maori burial practices, are fascinating. To put things in perspective it is worth noting that at the same time as the warlike pa period in Maori culture, the English were engaged in their own utu. A succession of wars starting from the Hundred Years War in 1337–1453, the War of the Roses 1455–1487, the Spanish Armada in 1588, the Thirty Years War 1618–48, and the English Civil War 1642–1651. Of approximately 300 years between 1337 and 1651 in England, there were thirty-two years of peace.

■ *Maori burial customs*. The funeral rituals for chiefs are complex and vary from tribe to tribe. See Papers Past online, *Marlborough Express*, 1908, *Auckland Star*, December 1924.

■ *Ka pai*. Means good, or very pleasant. 'Kai' is food so there is a play on the sound of the words.

■ *Encounters: the creation of New Zealand* (2013), Paul Moon. Montague Holcroft was writing in a 1940 essay 'The Deepening Stream'.

■ *Bream Head Heritage Assessment* (2012), Jonathan Carpenter, Department of Conservation.

■ *Peter Mitchell*. Interview recorded in 2012.

■ *Home Point*. *Auckland Star*, 4 September 1945.

■ *ITMA*. The lead writer of the radio show was Tommy Handley who got the title from an actual newspaper headline about Adolf Hitler. Dorothy Summers voiced Mrs Mopp, Jack Train voiced Colonel Chinstrap, Ali Oop and Funf.

Mona Lott was voiced by Joan Harben. Sophie Tuckshop was voiced by Hattie Jacques. Cecil and Claude were voiced by Jack Train and Horace Percival, and RAF pilots famously copied this phrase as they queued for attack.

■ *Defending New Zealand: ramparts on the sea 1840–1950s* (2000), Peter Cooke. A monumental two-volume study of New Zealand's coastal defences, with good illustrations and diagrams. I especially like the lookout post built on the Takapuna foreshore that was made to look like a real house (it's still there). One irate ratepayer wrote a letter to the newspaper complaining about why the army was building such lavish accommodation in a time of war and austerity.

In every war New Zealand has rushed to build coastal defences. To counter the Russians in the 1880s, Fort Jervois on Ripapa Island in Lyttelton Harbour was installed with latest six to eight-inch Armstrong disappearing guns. They were mounted on a 'hydro pneumatic mounting' which used the recoil of the discharged shell to 'disappear' back into the protection of the gun emplacement. Once installed, Fort Jervois was proudly considered 'the most powerful single work in the colony'. The guns were never fired in anger.

During the Second World War the army constructed three huge 9.2-inch batteries in Whangaparaoa and Waiheke Island in Auckland, and Wrights Hill in Wellington. The barrel of the 9.2-inch weighed twenty-seven tons on its own, and the whole mounting, cradle and barrel weighed an astonishing 130 tons. An extensive subterranean network of tunnels and magazines had to be burrowed out, plus quarters for soldiers and officers. The batteries were finally completed at the end of the war at a cost of £1.2 million, which is equivalent to $100 million in today's money. These guns had a huge range and the 9.2-inch Stony Batter weapon on Waiheke Island could in theory hit Coromandel — should Coromandel prove troublesome — over twenty kilometres away. When the Wrights Hill gun was first proof fired in June 1946 (the war had finished a year earlier) windows were broken in Karori. There were complaints. The batteries were mothballed in 1953 and scrapped by the 1960s.

■ *Armstrong Disappearing Gun*. The Taiaroa Head six-inch disappearing gun in Dunedin was restored to a functioning state in the 1970s and is claimed to be the only working gun of its type in the world.

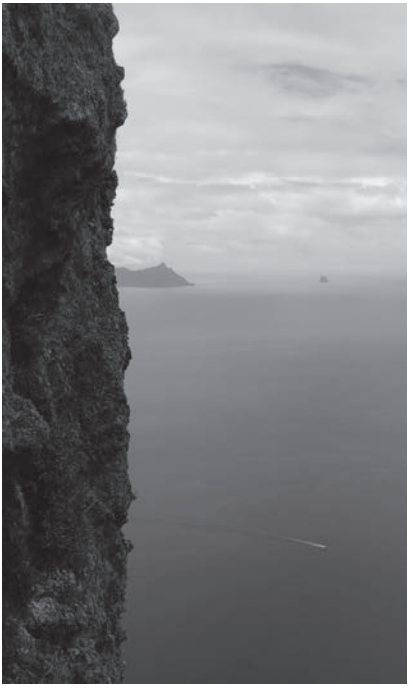
■ *The Sinking of the RMS Niagara* (1940), Hazel Munro. Alexander Turnbull Library MS-paper-6396.

■ *Gold from the Sea* (1942), James Taylor. Written by the Australian journalist who was on board the *Claymore* during the salvage for gold. There was £2,397,000 bullion on board the *Niagara*. Some of the live German mines were still bobbing during the salvage operation (they destroyed one or two by rifle fire) which recovered ninety per cent of the gold utilising a diving bell.

■ *Niagara's Gold* (1996), Jeff Maynard. Good ripping yarn of the salvage of the liner *Niagara*.

■ *Deep Water Gold: the story of RMS Niagara — the quest for New Zealand's greatest shipwreck treasure* (2005), Keith Gordon. Covers the main story plus detail on robot and human dives to *Niagara*'s deep site.

■ *Boketto*. The Japanese have a particular word for staring into space: 'boketto' — 'gazing vacantly into the distance without really thinking about anything specific'.



CAPE MARIA VAN DIEMEN

Walking along the empty beach that morning there was a sharp flurry of wind that lifted the diamond fragments of sand just above the gravity line. For a few minutes I'm flowing amidst silken sheets. At that moment a dust devil materialised, grabbed handfuls of sand and whirled the grains in tight vital spirals and vanished into the bright blue air. Maori call them tukauati and believe that inside the whirlwind is a spirit warrior, gyrating anxiously, trying to escape. In Maori hau means wind, or breath, or even vital essence, and as a verb it can also mean to attack or hit. Hau pukeri means strong wind, and kua pau te hau means to run out of breath, or to be used up, but there's no danger here of running out of puff.

Cape Maria van Diemen has an average wind speed of over thirty kilometres an hour, a grinding mechanism that makes the land gasp and sing, and also plays a weird type of hide-and-seek. A single night's storm might expose 400-year-old Maori middens as piles of shell crockery, and next day? Smother them for another century. Against this invisible force people struggle to find a balance. Footsteps erased, eyes grimed with sand, cheeks burnt a bright baby red. It's the wind that keeps this landscape honest (and empty) and out on the beach it doesn't feel comfortable, but it does feel exhilarating.

Yesterday evening I'd driven up to Cape Reinga where a whipping rain bent the tussocks into rows of huddled galley slaves. Two shocked and bedraggled backpackers peered out of the shelter at the deserted carpark and waited for someone to arrive. They had Swiss flags sewn to their packs. There was no one except me, and it was getting dark: 'Did they want a lift?' 'Non.' Their friend was coming, they said, anxiously. The famous lighthouse was hardly visible, and sea and sky had blended into a grey impasto.

At the Tapotupotu Bay campsite my tent shrank under the overnight onslaught, and I pretty much abandoned any walking plans. Next morning, I woke up to find the wind pushing blue patches through lumps of cumulus, which got me got excited and I hastily chucked everything in the back of the car and drove up to the Cape Maria carpark. It was bright and sunny, and the wind was humming in a nonchalant fashion, just like any super-model who has completely forgotten her tantrum. I laced my boots and wondered about the Swiss guys.

For a hundred kilometres Highway 1 runs from Kaitaia to Cape Reinga through the middle of the Aupouri Peninsula, a journey that gets you further and further into what they call the far north. The land is low lying and sandy, and although forestry blocks provide a sort of lateral strength, the peninsula is strangely spineless. There's a reason for that. In geographic terms the Aupouri is a tombolo, a giant sandspit created by wave refraction, currents and long-shore drift that has shifted sand and debris over thousands of years and 'tied' various islands together, until it made a sandy peninsula that pokes a juvenile finger into the eye of the Pacific.

They never get frosts here. It's dry and lush, green and poor. Totara trees sprout as hedging, and beside the endlessly empty and beautiful beaches there are orderly towns of summer homes, many of which are deserted for ten months of the year. There are million-dollar yachts behind marina security fences, and also homes that consist of an old garage and a new satellite dish. A bach near Kaitaia had hundreds of sweet oranges smeared and rotting on the driveway: 'Help yourself,' the owner said with a shrug, 'no one wants them.'

Distant estuaries glitter in complex and Byzantine inlets, giving the impression that silver candelabra had been hammered flat. Their edges bristle with mangroves. Several times I saw signposts in a language I didn't understand: 'Katavich Road', 'Matich Road', and 'Srhoj Road' (I mean, how are you supposed to pronounce that?), and there was an old store petrol pump with a rusting Shell sign. At the top end there's a glimpse of a furnace of white that are the dunes of Parengarenga, and along the sandy roads small kids yell and ride bareback. Every second face I saw was Maori, and there's always a marae wherever the roads join together and make a place.

Cape Reinga nowadays is a tourist mecca and buses leave Kaitaia early on a tight schedule. They head up Highway 1 to the lighthouse, grab the photo ops, and depending on the tides, will blast back via Ninety Mile Beach on what is a long weary day in a hot bus. Foreign customers must find the landscape a bit monotonous, and despite their best efforts end up with photos of heat, dust and sand. The Aupouri Peninsula doesn't reveal all its secrets at once.

Well, this time it was going to be different. I hoisted on my pack and locked the car, just as the first campervan of the day whizzed by on its way up to Cape Reinga. A turquoise storm-cloud was looming over Cape Maria, underlined by a band of intense yellow, colours which I quickly imprisoned in my camera as a keepsake. I crossed the stile and headed for the far dunes, off to do what the Dutch call *uitwaaien*, literally a walk in the wind. A break to clear one's head.

Winds and voyaging, treasure hunting and escaping, these are some of the ways and means by which we search for something.

For centuries there was no accurate means to measure the wind, until Rear-Admiral Sir Francis Beaufort established his 'scientific' system in 1805, which was widely adopted in England at the time. He related the wind conditions to the effects on the sails of a man-of-war, in particular a Royal Navy frigate. At zero all sails would be up. At Number 6 many sails would be furled, and at Number 12 the vessel was steering under bare mast poles, no doubt with a prayer or two, since 12 was 'Huge waves, sea completely white with foam and spray'. On the Beaufort scale the winds at Cape Maria equate to a Number 5, a 'fresh breeze', and it is this fierce prevailing westerly wind that caused one of the strangest near misses of New Zealand's short European history.

On 14 December 1769 Captain James Cook in the *Endeavour* identified 'the Northern Extremity of this Country' as the ship was rounding North Cape. Gales and clear weather on 15 December and 'about 15 Leagues from the Land notwithstanding we used our utmost Endeavours to keep in with it. Clear weather on the 16th but a long way from the land', and on the 17th only '3 or 4 miles from the Shore'. Some sunny patches on the 18th and on 19 December as Cook formerly named the land they had been tracing 'North Cape'.

At that precise moment coming in a clockwise direction was the French explorer Jean Francois Marie de Surville in the *St Jean Baptiste*, weathering around North Cape on 16 December. Surville had just sailed down the Tasman Sea without seeing Australia, though he got so close that his crew smelt the 'aroma' of land. He was desperate to find shelter and rest for his scurvy-riddled crew, and with the westerlies at his back de Surville clawed

closely and quickly around the corner of the Aupouri Peninsula. His log records 'the sea was very rough and the ship was labouring heavily'.

Meanwhile, Cook had been forced into two long tacks away from North Cape. After each tack he turned back to North Cape to measure its longitude more accurately, and by fluke, de Surville's ship had slipped through the time 'gap' that Cook had left. If the crews had seen each other it would have been a shattering surprise. Neither ship knew or expected each other's existence. No European explorers had visited New Zealand since Tasman in 1642, and now two passed within fifty kilometres of each other — in eighteenth-century exploration terms, a hair's breadth.

Whilst de Surville and his crew enjoyed a well-deserved R&R in Doubtless Bay, Cook, only sixty kilometres away, was having terrific problems battling around Cape Maria van Diemen. He was driven well north of New Zealand on Christmas Day 1769, and by 28 December a gale had sprung up, a 'meer Hurricane' in Cook's laconic words, and this continued unabated until New Year's Day:

> '…it will hardly be credited that in the midst of Summer and in the Latitude of 35 degree S. such a Gale of wind as we have had could have hapned which for its Strength and Continuance was such *I hardly was ever in before*. Fortunately at this time we were a good distance from land, otherwise it would have proved fatal to us.'

The italics are mine. This prolonged gale forced the *Endeavour* way offshore and Cook's chart shows a crazy path as the barque struggled with damaged sails and tired men in a 'rowling Sea', around the tip of the North Island, finally spotting Cape Maria van Diemen on 2 January 1770. He then sailed down what later became Ninety Mile Beach, but failing to see much of the land, doubled back almost to the Cape again. Looking along the low-laying land of the Aupouri Peninsula, Cook was unimpressed. He saw the peninsula as a sailor must, vicious, barren, and a deadly trap, and he slashed at it with his pen:

> '…the land is of a moderate height, and wears a desolate and most inhospitable aspect. Nothing is seen but long sand Hills with hardly any Green thing upon them, and the great Sea

> which the prevailing Westerly winds impel upon the Shore must render this a very Dangerous Coast. This I am so fully sencible of, that was we once clear of it I am determined not to come so near Again…'

From the carpark the track follows a fenceline across a pasture of fresh sprung grass, close-cropped by brown cows with gentle eyes. They stop mid-chew and stare. Down through the manuka forest the track releases itself onto the beach, and the wide sky gets wider and the debris of the sea is thrown playfully and ghoulishly about. There's a bone-yard of driftwood, rotting seaweed, plastic buoys, bits of green netting and a red rubberised fisherman's glove.

On the sandy plain there were some fresh firm bootprints, made that morning I was sure, but I never saw the visitor. A man perhaps, from the depth of the print. He followed a definite course, striding immediately down to the high-tide line, and sweeping north along it towards Tarawamomao Point and then back again south, looking for something with quick and systematic steps. Not dawdling.

Something from Christopher Kemp's book *Floating Gold* jogged my memory. He had tried to meet up with a clandestine group of ambergris hunters of Northland. After storms they drive along the beaches such as Ninety Mile for a rapid inspection of the high-tide line; some use dogs to smell the ambergris. The storm last night had been violent, but I saw no peculiar lumps on the beach, but then I didn't know what I was looking for anyway. As the value of ambergris rises, a certain paranoia creeps in. Collectors will arrive at dawn, scour the sands and disappear onto another fancied spot. A queer, obsessed people, searching for a substance that has a bit of witchery in it.

I took off my boots and waded through Te Werahi Stream, but the barefoot experiment on the black spiky rocks of Te Herangi Hill was a failure, and several ouches later I put my boots back on. The ridges were a palette of burgundy and ochre, with pingao grasses looking bleached and forlorn. A single gull studied me in perplexedly. The neck of sand that joins the mainland to the Cape Maria headland had been wiped clean by the wind, and the air was infused with a salty, sweaty stickiness.

A trail of sorts sneaks up through the coastal shrubs to the lighthouse, but I have to say I'm a mite disappointed. I would have enjoyed meeting the bushy-faced lighthouse keeper with his jaunty peaked cap, and barnacled hands clutching his pipe and staring into the boundless horizon. What I got was a squat, round ice cream tub of plastered cement, with no door and 'DESO 1987' written into the base quickly before the concrete set.

In the 1880s there were lighthouse keepers across the way on Motuopao Island, a desolate and difficult posting for the keepers and their families. Their monthly reports grumbled that westerlies would pile sand up to the windows of the houses, and drinking water depended on uncertain rainfall. Bullock drays would take at least a week from Kaitaia, and supplies had to be swung across on the flying fox. Eventually, a new lighthouse was built in 1940 at Cape Reinga, and the tub (the Cape Maria automatic beacon) was installed in 1943.

I leaned against the sun-warmed concrete and ate lunch. A gentle gold light stroked Cape Reinga six kilometres away, and layers of dark stratus appeared as rain squalls smudging the horizon. It's beautiful to an outsider like me, but wild landscapes are not so romantic if you have to live amongst them. The weather shifts quickly, and these dangerous capes, blackened cliffs, crumbly orange rocks, and sour yellow sands are exposed and isolated. But the explorers always returned, lured by old charts, rumours, eagerness ('simply by sailing in a new direction you could enlarge the world'), as if trapped inside stanzas of old sagas that promised much but always, as an after-thought, tolled the same warnings. The Aupouri Peninsula is shaped like a beckoning finger, or a fish-hook.

Abel Tasman named the cape on 5 January 1643 in honour of Maria, the wife of Anthony van Diemen. It was the last piece of mainland New Zealand they saw and Tasman observed cheerfully (for he was glad to be rid of the place)...

> 'a great Sea came shooting from the north-west, which made us not a little joyful, as here we might get a through passage...'

Van Diemen was the governor-general of the Dutch colony of Batavia, the present-day Indonesian capital of Jakarta. Tasman had already

slavishly bestowed the governor's name on Tasmania, 'Anthony Van Diemen's Land' as he called it (later shortened by the British by dropping 'Anthony'), and he was probably concerned at the reception he would get in Batavia. The Dutch authorities were not impressed by Tasman's lack of exploratory zeal. He had apparently sailed around mainland Australia without seeing it. He had four seamen killed in Murderers Bay (Golden Bay). He had spotted giants taking 'mighty large great steps' on Three Kings Island. He had failed to make a single landing on this new land.

In defence of Abel Tasman's timidity, *fluyts* such as the *Zeehaen* were unhandy sailing against winds, though the smaller 120-ton *Heemskerk jacht* was more manoeuvrable. Accurate longitude was hard to establish, and all-important decisions on board were made by a ship's council of the captain, supercargo and first mate, which meant decisions erred on the cautious side. The worst error in Dutch eyes was that Abel Tasman had revealed no wealth potential from these regions, and so the Dutch never came back. Or so I supposed.

Many years ago, my late father-in-law Stephen Barker loaned me a book with the Latin title *Terra Australis Cognita*. His copy was Volume 2 published in 1788, but the book was first published in Edinburgh in 1766–1768, and in the quaint script of the times uses an 'f' instead of an 's', so 'fee' instead of 'see', 'paffage' instead of 'passage'. This makes for tiresome reading, but the compensation is a book full of roguish pirates like William Dampier, vagabonds and ne'er-do-well swaggerers like Sir Richard Hawkins, and impractical megalomaniacs like Ferdinand de Quiros. It also includes Abel Tasman's voyage to New Zealand. Captain Cook almost certainly had an earlier edition of *Terra Australis Cognita* on board the *Endeavour*, as he battered his way around the cape.

In the 1788 edition the editor, John Callander, inserted an unexpected morsel prefacing Tasman's account:

> 'Tasman only viewed this coast, without landing on it. The Abbe Prevost tells us, that the Dutch visited this coast again in the year 1664, but gives us no account of the captain's name, nor any extract from his journal. By some strange mistake he adds, that this land extends from latitude 44 to latitude 64 degrees, that is, almost to the Polar Circle.'

When I first read that passage my finger paused, resting and tapping on a page that was 226 years old. The paper was brittle and yellowed, mottled with brown blotches that are called 'foxing'. There are ancient dates in the left margin, and orphan words at the bottom of the right margin, put there apparently to make the reader turn the page more quickly — as if they need encouragement. The Words crammed in, sentences full of Capitals and Strange Names, anxious to spill the beans about Exotic Islands, Barbarous Beasts and dusky Bare-Breasted women, tales created mainly by randy sailors after all.

How often had this book been opened? I sniffed the page. There was no scent of ocean, but a strong smell of dust and printer's ink, and possibly, fancifully, a taint of tobacco. I could well imagine a pressman wearily pulling the tympan down for the umpteenth time that day, his pipe spilling ash on a page that he could not read, a smell gradually obscured by time, but still able in a few minutes to transport me to a seventeenth-century world of mystery and undefined edges.

Incognita.

From the cape the track turns south-east along the cliff edges of Maungatiketike Point, with flapping flax, hebes and glimpses of Twilight Beach. At Pitokuku Point the sands invade through the coastal scrub right down to the beach and a sluggish tea-stained stream curls and pauses, waiting for a top-up from each high tide. The desert surface was peeling and had become coagulated; bits of it broke off in my hand as if it were toffee. Walking on it was like stepping on top of a *crème brûlée* and then breaking through to the gooey white sand underneath. Inland was the strangest library I've ever seen.

Scattered without any logical pattern were pillars of hard sandy rock, about the size of a chair or a small writing desk, and each one was etched and serrated as if stacks of ancient yellowing manuscripts had been stored here. Every 'book' stack must have taken hundreds of years to create and was slowly being transformed into fairy dust. Wind and erosion teased out the filo-pastry layers and when I touched an edge it fell to pieces.

Twilight Beach (Te Paengarehia) stretches in a sickle-shaped curve with three kilometres of sand highway to the sea-spume that hangs over

the headland of Tehepouto Point. The afternoon was sunny and warm, light as liquid as the waves, with black oystercatchers tripping daintily along the tide-line and terns that flickered and dived with the erratic skittishness of paper aeroplanes. No roads lead here, not a single quad bike track. The moistened sheens of sand were primed as a printer's lithographic stone and I reached the beach in a haze of contented, blurry solitude.

At the south end is a campsite with water and a conical shelter, and my camp there in the evening, with the sun setting over the Tasman Sea and light zephyrs from the west, was a treat. Almost as soon as the sun tucked itself into the sea there were stars. Shadows and night merged within minutes and I realised that actually it's an odd name for a beach this far north — there's little twilight at this latitude.

By 11 pm I still couldn't sleep, and pushing away the sweaty sleeping bag I wandered barefoot along a beach as smooth and black as lead. A dark shape made me hesitate, before it broke into the chatter of an oystercatcher. Invisible spur-winged plovers fretted at my arrival, and a duvet of cloud rucked over the slumbering headland. The surf felt milky warm as if it had come straight from a cow, and as it tugged underneath my toes I invented onomatopoeic words to describe the sea's noises — 'dressling', 'schooming', 'borming'.

I had read that some of the twin-hulled Polynesian catamarans were longer than Captain Cook's *Endeavour*. The *pahi* of Tahiti, the *tongiaki* of Tonga, the *ndrua* of Fiji, the *baurua* of Kiribati. These were serious ocean voyagers, and all the Pacific island groups had their own designs, typically fifty to seventy-five feet long with a hut and fireplace on board. Loaded with pre-cooked fermented breadfruit, pounded taro and coconuts, and carrying upwards of thirty to fifty people, these boats could sail for a month or more, which enabled Micronesian and Polynesian peoples in less than a thousand years to reach practically every island dot in the vast expanse of the Pacific.

The navigational skills of the Pacific peoples seem nothing short of fabulous, and David Lewis in two of his books (the titles are enough to make a sailor want to jump on a *jacht* and head for an atoll), *We, the*

Navigators: the ancient art of landfinding in the Pacific and *The Voyaging Stars: secrets of the Pacific Island navigators*, detail their skills.

They used star paths for steering, and cloud formations to expand the target atoll. Experienced navigators let their bodies feel the sway of differing swells, and deduced wave patterns and intuited the currents. They traced the mysterious phosphorescence or *te lapa*, 'underwater lightning', which often indicated the presence of islands. They utilised a whole language of sea and sky messages that have been forgotten, and they relentlessly explored the biggest ocean on the planet. It was an incredible achievement, although David Lewis pointed out:

> 'it is possible to sail to almost all the inhabited islands of Oceania from Southeast Asia without once making a sea crossing longer than 310 nautical miles'.

The coconut was the Polynesians' secret weapon. It has three nodes on the drupe that resembles Edvard Munch's famous painting of a scream; the Portuguese or Spanish word 'cocos' actually means 'grinning face'. It is difficult to think of a more useful food source on a long voyage: a sweet drink in the young coconut, and edible flesh inside. The husks could be used to catch rain or could be burnt as fuel to cook fish. They were salt resistant and buoyant, easy to store, and hard to spoil. They also contained vitamin C, which prevented scurvy.

Actually, the Polynesian voyagers were way better off than the untested concoctions Captain Cook used. His ship's log recorded 'Rob of lemon', which was a type of syrup made of lemon juice, although the vitamin C was boiled away in the preparation. 'Sweet wort' was made from barley (also useless), and 'portable soup' was a meat extract that was both tasteless and useless, according to the scientists who tested some ancient samples in the 1930s. Only the 'sauerkraut', a type of fermented cabbage that Cook had on board, had vitamin C in it.

My feet were getting heavy and, finally, a yawn escaped. My midnight wander had left a trail of fresh minted footprints on Twilight Beach and also a question in my mind.

Some of the earliest known Maori occupation sites in Northland have been found near here. It is possible that amongst these humped dunes and seeping salty streams is the place where Polynesian culture became

Maori culture. So, could the first footsteps in New Zealand have been made on this beach? I'd like to think so, but those Polynesian voyagers did not reach blindly south and make a lucky hit; they knew what they were doing.

Each spring the long-tailed cuckoos, koekoea, arrive from the Pacific islands, and make their way down through New Zealand's forests even as far south as Rakiura, where they mate and then lay their eggs by preference in a brown creeper's nest. The cuckoo has an unpleasant harsh screeching call, and it will feed on the eggs and young of other birds, which furiously mob the koekoea. In autumn the cuckoos fly back in an astonishing non-stop journey of around 3000 kilometres to islands in an arc across the Pacific — the Solomon Islands, Fiji, Samoa, the Cook Islands, Tahiti, even Pitcairn Island — and the birds had been noticed. Now the long-tailed cuckoo may look like only an adequate flier, and it would have been reasonable for the Polynesian sailors to believe that the bird had not travelled any great distance, but they were in a for a shock.

About 800 years ago the explorers launched their voyaging canoes and followed the cuckoo's spring flight, brilliant sailors undoubtedly, but this was a leap of faith far beyond anything they'd attempted before: 'On a fine morning, in the Name of God, into the nameless waters of the world…'

Darkness flowed along the beach and the honeyed mud oozed and stuck between my toes. Phosphorescence simmered in the surf. A flash from the lighthouse and a severe bright dot was voyaging swiftly north through gaps in the cloud. Although I have occasionally seen the space station, it is incomprehensible to me, like a moving Star of Bethlehem. The astronauts are up there looking down on us, their journey as numinous and frightening to its occupants as those who arrived in this land on the first canoes.

Finally, their skin creased with sunlight and salt, they saw New Zealand, perhaps the high peaks behind the East Coast or the bright shallows of the Aupouri Peninsula. The voyagers might have pulled the boats ashore at Twilight Beach weary and triumphant, watching for movement, smelling for the whiff of smoke, their senses anxious and

poised. Was that tussock twitching in the breeze or an enemy waiting in the dunes? The first sight of a moa must have been a shock to them, and it would be good eating if they could kill it. After the lengthy voyage they would have been strangely unnerved that there was no one to greet them, or for that matter to throw spears at them. No one at all.

Emptiness is still the norm at Twilight Beach. A steady number of overseas back-packers start the long Te Araroa trail at Cape Reinga and Twilight Beach is their first campsite. How many complete the gigantic walk is unknown, and perhaps it doesn't matter. I offered to pick up two English hikers outside Kerikeri, but they replied in broad Brummie accents that they had 'a strict no hitch-hiking policy, thanks all the same'.

'Good luck.'

'Ta, mate.'

Behind Twilight Beach campsite an overgrown four-wheel-drive track leads onto a hill marked as '111 m' on the topographic map. In the early morning light, I dubbed it 'Red Hill' because it had turned into a lurid pink lump, and resembled something out of a children's play-dough set. Eroded gullies of red and yellow earth and dust ran down to the desert itself.

I snapped a photo and then ploughed over the sand patterns, which were cross-etched like a skin's membrane with cancerous black blotches of stones and brittle sticks of cartilage. The desert is raw and beautifully created, and it's easy to miss the nitty-gritty details: polished ventifacts a few millimetres across, a body husk discarded by a cicada, minute barchans of red and blue sand being pushed in parallel with the wind.

The tracks of a three-pronged bird crossed my line — a kiwi I thought — and I admired the way it walked *en pointe* over the rippling surface. Further inland the scalloped sands recorded the daily shockwave of wind, and beyond them there was a gleam of a lake a kilometre away where jointed rush and toetoe formed a fuzzy zariba. Two paradise ducks sounded a welcoming alarm as they manoeuvred over the limpid surface, but landscapes often give this illusion of placidity.

In 1947 a gentleman gumdigger named Alfred Reed made his way slowly onto the remote grounds behind Scott Point and Twilight Beach.

He was one of the old school, an original, who'd spent his boyhood on the gumfields of Northland between 1890 and 1895, and he wandered across the dry earth nostalgic and alert. He was seventy-one but hadn't lost his touch, and looked over this biblical landscape of white sands and ephemeral swamps with a seasoned gumdigger's eye.

> 'I was now on the farthest outpost of the gumfields; the ground had not been touched for many a year; it was probably the only remaining gumfield suitable for the old-time one man, spade-and-pikau digger; I'm sure, had time permitted; I could have earned a living here for weeks.'

It's curious how much human activity is a sort of treasure hunt.

I first met Milan Jurlina in 2011, a white-haired, genial hulk of a man with a strong Dalmatian accent, and a memory of great clarity when he looked back to the gumdigging days. He was eighty-four. He had been brought up, and still lives, at Sweetwater, just inland from Awanui, at the base of the Aupouri Peninsula. Milan himself rarely dug gum, but like his father before him, Clem Jurlina, he became a gum buyer and storekeeper, right up into the 1960s when the gum trade all but ceased. In his shed he has several hundred sacks of kauri gum, probably the last hoard of this size in the world. When he broke open a piece for me it smelt sweet, of roses and nectar.

Polished kauri gum feels orange and plastic, tough, bright, somewhat unnatural. The whorled textures and livid veins make it appealing as a mantelpiece ornament, yet it is of little value that way. Most of it was melted. In the 1890s seventy per cent of oil varnishes made in England used kauri gum, and the popularity of linoleum kept the kauri gum market alive until synthetics became widespread. At the peak of the industry in 1900 there were an estimated 20,000 gumdiggers in Northland (and some in Coromandel), spread over 800,000 acres of gumfields. Between 1850 and 1950 nearly half a million tons of kauri gum was exported from Auckland, which returned perhaps $100 million in today's money. It was an enormous industrial enterprise, an amber gold rush.

In the 1920s Sweetwater was something of a nexus for Dalmatians, a meeting place for gossip, with five billiard halls, coconut shies, hoop-la,

merry-go-round and silent films. The two brothers Clem and Mikola Jurlina ran a store from eight in the morning to nine in the evening. Typically, the gumdiggers would come late after work and wash up, and the store supplied everything the gumdiggers needed. From tools to cured bacon, clothes to soap, books, drums of salted sardines and cod, painkillers, shoes, everything in fact, except alcohol. The gumdiggers found that at the sly grog shops. Business then was good. Once the Jurlinas ordered a ton of flour and it was sold to customers before it ever arrived at the store.

The gum bought at Jurlinas would be assessed (white gum was the best), cleaned, graded and then put on a bullock wagon down to the river harbour at Awanui. Scows sailed the gum to Auckland, where it would be shipped all over the world. A couple of scows were still working in the 1960s.

In 1935 Milan thought there were about a thousand gumdiggers still working in the swamps, but that number started to decline quickly. The Jurlinas themselves saw the writing on the wall and moved into farming cattle and sheep. Milan said regretfully that there is no money in kauri gum these days, but there has been a resurgence of interest in swamp kauri for carving, mainly for the Chinese market. One day Milan recalled a buyer turning up, interested in testing the Jurlinas' swamp for kauri stumps. A few days later, the buyer came back and thrust $30,000 of cash into Milan's hands to secure the rights to the swamp kauri he'd found.

The Jurlina family hang onto their history, and their massive shed is stuffed full of gumdigging artefacts so that a lifetime of trading has been preserved. There were stacked dusty sacks of gum almost to the roof, a hurdy-gurdy (a hand-rotated sieve used to separate the gum chips from the mud), two-metre-long gum spears for probing, specially tempered 'Skelton' spades, and an old car weighted down with lumps of blackened kauri gum. Across the road there is a small inconspicuous hut, and as Milan unlocked the door for me, there was a twinkle in his eye. He knew I was in for a surprise.

It was their original gum buyer's office, still set on runners so it could be sledged about the gumfields. It was like a time machine. Yellow brittle washing lines of old invoices dangled down from India, Germany,

Sweden, England, Italy, America and Australia. Ancient calendars recorded another century. Maori heads carved out of kauri gum sat on the dusty shelves bewitched and watchful. Every corner of the office was jammed with the memories and business of fifty years ago, with thick ledgers on the table and the careful copper plate recording of the accounts scripted beautifully on the watermarked paper. Even the dust tasted of kauri gum. Then Milan fired up the Polyphon.

He inserted a large metal disc perforated with plectra into a large decorated cupboard-like machine. As the disc turns the plectra catch on a ratchet mechanism which in turn plucks the reeds, and the music of another century started to tinkle and resonate in the little hut. It was a waltz, I think. He showed me how the Polyphon worked and operated it by inserting a penny. The sound is ethereal, wistful, metallic. The sort of music that melancholy angels might make on a xylophone on their day off.

Late afternoon. The sun loomed though the low stratus like a polished fifty cent disc, and back at the carpark it was cool and the wind was picking up. Admiral Beaufort might have classed this as a '6' on his scientific system: 'strong breeze, whistling heard in overhead wires'. The *uitwaaien* had cleared my head, yes, but I had a blister, and was poking at it in a pointless way as a hired car snappily pulled up. The engine ticked away and a pretty girl got out, clicked a photo as a memento, smiled at me, and then drove off to Cape Reinga. I sighed, feeling smelly and scruffy.

There's talk of a wind farm up here, and you can see why. Ngapuhi are the Maori tribe who claim traditional rights and kinship over the Hokianga in Northland, and one Ngapuhi leader, David Rankin, cheekily claimed in September 2012 that the wind itself was a property right for Maori under the Treaty of Waitangi. It was, he said, a taonga or treasure. This caused a fuss, with one Member of Parliament calling it 'opportunistic' and stating it will 'increase the feeling of separatism between Maori and non-Maori'. Rankin later cheerfully admitted to the *Northern Advocate* newspaper that 'In reality, no one owns the wind…'

He was just stirring, like a dust devil. Hau.

With their Polynesian heritage, it is hardly surprising that Maori have a spiritual relationship to wind, akin to that of water. They also believe a person leaves a certain amount of hau, or presence, in every footprint they make, so anyone with evil designs could gather up the earth of the footprint and use makutu over it. My footprints have vanished, so bad luck to the evil doers. In the twilight the land did look empty, but it was just me.

■ *Cape Maria van Diemen*. The Maori call this Waitapu Point; if you draw a straight line south from the cape the next land you reach is Farewell Spit in the South Island.

■ *Aupouri Peninsula*. On a map it resembles a giraffe's head and neck, with the 'mouth' at Cape Maria and Surville Cliffs as the 'horns'. These cliffs are the actual northernmost point of the North Island, not Cape Reinga, but everyone ignores that.

■ *Borrowing scenery*. The Chinese have an expression, 'borrowing scenery' or 'stealing scenery', which means the way we position a window in a house so as to 'borrow' the sea setting, or the mountain setting, it frames. A camera does the same thing: immediately transferring an outside scene to an internal space.

■ '*Landfall in Unknown Seas'* (1942), Allen Curnow. A poem commissioned to commemorate Abel Tasman's voyage. Douglas Lilburn set it to music.

■ *Wikipedia 2013*. Searches on all subjects, including tombolo, Captain Cook, Abel Tasman, Polynesian voyagers, coconuts, long-tailed cuckoo, etc.

■ *Sea of Dangers: Captain Cook and his rivals* (2008), Geoffrey Blainey. This covers Cook's and de Surville's voyages in detail, and their famous near miss. In 1767 Samuel Wallis on the British frigate *Dolphin* arrived in Tahiti and claimed (absurdly) to have seen 'Jews' who had arrived from a rich southern island called 'Davis Land'. De Surville loaded up his ship for trade with these fictitious merchants, and on the voyage just missed seeing New Caledonia and Australia. With his scurvy-ridden crew he made landfall off Chilca in Peru, and in a desperate effort to get help, de Surville drowned when his dinghy capsized in the surf. The Spanish impounded de Surville's ship for three years, so by the time the crew reached France their story was old, old news. The cargo of spices and luxury goods, which he carried to sell to the mythical Jews of Davis Land, was sold to the French instead.

■ *Captain Cook in New Zealand: extracts from the journals of Captain James Cook* (1961), edited A. H. & A. W. Reed. Cook took almost a month to get around North Cape, constantly trying to triangulate Cape Maria van Diemen. His persistence was important for reckoning longitude. He found Tasman was out by 116 nautical miles.

■ *Francis Beaufort*. Wikipedia 2013, also *Defining the Wind: the Beaufort*

Scale and how a 19th-century admiral turned science into poetry (2004), Scott Huler. Francis Beaufort was shipwrecked at the age of fifteen, joined the navy in 1787 and rose from midshipman to captain by 1810. It was Beaufort who introduced Robert Fitzroy of the *Beagle* to Charles Darwin, and who encouraged the Antarctic voyage of James Clark Ross.

■ *Abel Tasman: and the discovery of New Zealand* (1992), B. J. Slot. Slot concluded that Abel Tasman was 'neither a pleasant man nor a gentleman'. However, Tasman's career was little affected by his shortcomings as an explorer. He was immediately sent on another voyage in 1644 to the Australian coast, then called New Holland, though he missed seeing Torres Strait. His mission to intercept and loot Spanish galleons in 1648 was also a failure. Tasman was suspended as a commander in 1646 for hanging a crewman without trial (the crewman survived), yet his oddly competent, diffident, loyal, heavy drinking, erratic career seems to have done him no harm. He was reinstated in rank by 1651 and by some accounts was a considerable landowner in Batavia, where he died in 1659 at the age of fifty-six.

■ *The Merchant of the Zeehaen: Isaac Gilsemans and the voyages of Abel Tasman* (2001), Grahame Anderson.

■ *Terra Australis Cognita*, see p280. This edition is extremely rare, still in the Barker family, and Steven Barker left a note on how it came into his possession.

> 'When the General Assembly Library was disestablished all books published before 1800 were supposed to be transferred to the Turnbull Library but some got missed and sold by tender to Brewster in Nelson. I purchased it for $225 in 1994 and wrote to Turnbull [in 1996] to find more about it. They replied that there are only 3 other copies of this edition known (two in the USA and one in Scotland) and please to let them know if I ever want to sell! It is not for sale!'

■ *Printing*. It might seem strange that a printer could print a page that he could not read, but after the page was set by the compositor (who could read) the type was assembled and given to the machine minder or pressman, who operated a screw-down press, and concentrated on producing a clean, crisp impression. One sheet at a time. It was heavy, manual, repetitive work.

■ *Floating Gold: a natural (and unnatural) history of ambergris* (2012),

Christopher Kent. In the volume *Terra Australis Cognita* (see previous page), there is a paragraph on ambergris which grapples with this baffling substance, and it is worth reproducing in full. I have inserted the 's' but have retained the marvellous punctuation.

> 'Ambergris is thought by some to breed in the whale's belly, by eating of a certain herb; but that which carrieth likeliest probability is, that it is a liquor which issueth out of certain fountains, in sundry seas; and being of a light and thick substance, participating of the air, suddenly becometh hard, as the yellow amber, of which they make beads, which is also the liquor of a fountain in the *German* seas [Baltic?]: In the bottom it is soft and white, and partaking of the air it becometh hard and stony. Also the coral in the sea is soft, but coming into the air it becometh a stone. Those that are of this former opinion, think the reason (why the ambergris is sometimes found in the whale) to be that he swalloweth it, as other things which he findeth swimming upon the water, and not able to digest it, it remaineth with him till his death'. (Page 31, chapter 'Sir Richard Hawkins to Magellanica').

■ *Twilight Beach*. It was named after the wreck of the schooner *Twilight* in 1871.

■ *Polynesian Navigation and the discovery of New Zealand* (2011), Jeff Evans. A detailed account of the Polynesian navigation techniques, and the making of the canoe *Hawaikinui*. It was sailed from Tahiti to New Zealand in 1985.

■ *We, the Navigators: the ancient art of landfinding in the Pacific* (1972), David Lewis. *The Voyaging Stars: secrets of the Pacific Island navigators* (1978), David Lewis. These two books explore the same theme in different ways, with a great deal of textual overlap. The first is a more scientific account of the voyages, the second a personal account. Both are absorbing accounts of a world vanished.

■ *Kiwi*. There are no kiwi on the Aupouri Peninsula, so perhaps the tracks I saw were of a banded rail. In forty years of tramping I've never seen one.

■ *Long-tailed cuckoo*. It is interesting to speculate that without the annual migration of the long-tailed cuckoo, Polynesians might never have discovered New Zealand, and Captain Cook would have arrived to a land of moa and giant eagles.

■ *Tarara: Croats and Maori in New Zealand — memory, belonging, identity* (2008), Senka Bozic-Vrbancic.

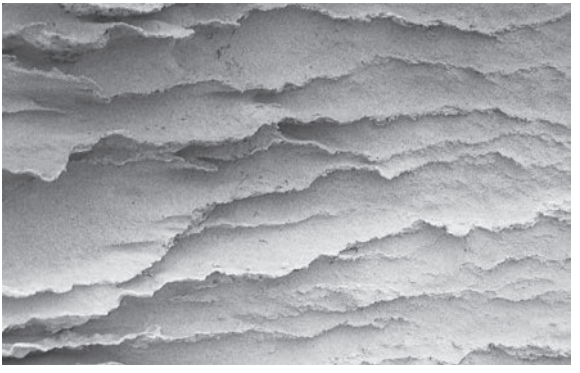
■ *From Distant Villages: the lives and times of Croatian Settlers in New Zealand, 1858–1958* (2008), Stephen A. Jelicich.

■ *Milan Jurlina*. Interview recorded September 2012. Milan Jurlina was born in June 1928 and by the early 1940s he was working for his father, Clem, as a jack of all trades: driving the trucks, sorting the gum, nailing the rimu boxes of gum for shipment, and soon haggling with the gumdiggers themselves, travelling from Kerikeri to Kaikohe. Once he had left school, Milan's younger brother Dick joined the family firm, and later became a full business partner with Milan until his death in 1989. Milan did not think that 'Dalmatian' or 'Dallie' was an insulting word. The nationality of the gumdiggers changed as the country changed names: Austrian, Yugoslav, Croatian.

■ *Polyphon*. They are still manufactured in Germany, and you can hear them played on YouTube.

■ *The Gumdiggers: the story of kauri gum* (1972), A. H. Reed. A rare first-hand account of gumdigging. Sir Alfred Reed founded the seminal New Zealand publishing company A. H. & A. W. Reed, and was a prodigious walker. He is considered in the *Guinness Book of Records* to be the oldest person ever knighted at ninety-seven years of age.

■ *David Rankin*. Quote from *Northern Advocate*, 12 September 2012.



REMOTE

KAHURANGI POINT

It was a black night when we finally attempted the river crossing. A high half-moon created stubby shadows on the sand but only lit up the white of the surf, not the dark bits in between. Our torches barely touched the sea with light and the roar of water was grouchy. As we waded along the underwater sand shelf, the boundary of land melted away and soon everything seemed in movement. Sven was striding ahead and seemed to know where he was going, whilst I caught glimpses in my torch of Nic's legs pumping through the dark water.

On the sandbank itself the water was antagonistic. Rips and cross rips as the sea surged one way, and the stained brown river pressed out with a force that wasn't expected. There was a maddening clash of sea noise, with the foam and scum spun around. It was disorientating, mesmerising. Nic later commented that it momentarily appeared to him that Sven had gone mad and was walking out to the sea and the swallowing surf.

So he veered off landwards into the dark and I followed him. Paul behind me said there was a surge coming, and a thick wash of foamy ghoulish water pushed past. Sticks in the water. Flotsam. Suddenly there was a sand dune ahead and in a few seconds we touched the south bank. The crossing had taken two minutes.

When my German flatmate Stephanie was asked about her tramp to the Kahurangi coastline she remarked wistfully: 'It's only beautiful.'

And then she added, 'Golden Bay is such a long way from anywhere,' sighing, because we both know how lovely it is. The Anatori River is beyond that even, furthest from anywhere (or a town called anywhere) in New Zealand I think, but a gravel road going there crunches and swears under the tyres and edges past causeways and sequestered estuarine inlets, through a fantasy land of grassy limestone bluffs nibbled to the bone by sheep.

We left Milnthorpe at 1 pm. Nic Bishop from Auckland, Sven Brabyn and me from Christchurch, and a local man, Paul Kilgour, who acted as our personal guide supremo, telling us stories on every corner of the winding road. This bare spit of land was Rakopi, where the Public Works

Department camp was set up in the Depression of the 1930s. The PWD was the largest employer in the country in 1935 and families were given tents to camp amidst the manuka scrub.

The PWD workers' job was to push a road into Westhaven Inlet, opening up the farmland further south towards Kahurangi Point to relieve the flax millers and timber haulers of their isolation. Farmers at Anatori were still exporting their wool by scows and dragging their supplies across the vast low-tide mud of the Whanganui estuary. They thought the road, simply called the 'Dry Road', would be a blessing. It's a masterpiece.

We followed it and the ravishing scenery slipped past us. This is Echo Point, there was a sign once, Paul said, but someone nicked it. Apparently, a good scream comes right back at the screamer, several times. On another corner Paul pointed out a strange geographic anomaly, a lake or lagoon in Bone Creek, trapped by a single metre of a gravel and forest bar. On and on we went, over ten tidal causeways (or was that twelve?), then skirting the massive flax swamp of Mangarakau, once the site of a flax industry but now a nature reserve, which occasionally catches fire. The limestone bluffs seem ever more fairytale-like, and according to Paul — teller of tales — this is cavers' heaven. The sheep pecked around the Paturau River, there was a gate on a bridge to open and close (the only gate we saw in a hundred kilometres), and finally we were down to the deep tannin ford of the Anatori River. A full stop.

The road doesn't end here, but to cross the river requires a four-wheel-drive vehicle. So we parked beside the gravel hillocks used by the road workers and alongside the caravans of a row of elderly whitebaiters. They had already established their territorial claims along with barbecues and tarpaulin shanties, stacking them full of wood, then sitting and gossiping, a good three weeks before the season starts. A sort of neighbourhood watch as Paul gently put it, so we hardly needed to lock the car.

At the Anatori River ford it took only a few strides for our thighs to be in brown water flecked with pustules of foam like the gentle swirls of barista-art. The road went over a hill for five kilometres and down to the sheep station at the Turimawiwi River. The Harwoods are a well-known

Golden Bay family and this was their farm. Paul had rung up Dave Harwood to let him know we were coming through and we met him at the out-station door. He was welcoming, and sat us in the dining area with strong cups of tea and yarned about his time in Chile running a sheep farm. 'We never lost money on it, but we never made money either. They do things differently there,' he said with a meaningful look. He took a cruise down to Tierra del Fuego, 'glaciers everywhere, hundreds of them' and they even landed near Cape Horn.

The Harwoods run 'eight thousand stock units' in an efficient and industrial-style farm at the edge of the Kahurangi wilderness. It's a tough business making a farm pay this side of nowhere, and the farm had an air of still breaking in the bush and bringing the land to heel. Sheep trails through the sand dunes and cow pats alongside the pristine rivers. It's edgy, isolated, and the weather chews up the place from time to time.

The remnants of cyclone Ita had drifted from Australia three weeks previously and given the West Coast a good thrashing. Thousands of trees fell over, and roofs got blown off in Westport. The claw-like winds must have been close to 150 kph, shredding the macrocarpas at the Harwoods out-station, and the sand pushed right up onto the back walls of the dining area. One shed roof was torn off, and the corrugated iron walls were sandblasted clean of paint. The tractor windscreen had been turned into a fog: 'Never seen such a wind before,' Dave remarked.

Two cups of tea and a packet of Toffee Pops later it was time to go. The two dogs nuzzled up to us expectantly, pretend hunger in their eyes. These were pets; the working dogs barked frustratedly from their kennels as we tramped by on a four-wheel-drive track through the soft dunes. We walked slowly south into an evening of heavy cloud and a strange torch-flare of sunlight as the sun was quenched in the sea. Because the low tide wasn't for another three hours, we had to wait for the Anaweka River to subside and the surf to retreat. If Paul had not been there, we would not have immediately realised that the crossing point was right out into the surf, on a hidden sandbar.

The low tide was at 9 pm. Sven tested the crossing in the last wash of daylight; the route to the far bank was by no means clear-cut. The Anaweka River lagoon was emptying in a rush and pushed the sand bar

back out into the surf line in a broad arc, so that the shallowest part of the crossing was in amongst the crashing surf and confused swirl of water, where the river and sea met. It was the last place you'd want to walk.

Stars appeared like popcorn in a cinema night, and the biting westerly wind made the sand grains shiver at ankle height. It got colder as we waited, and although we set a time limit for a sensible moment to cross — which we calmly and rationally decided would be at half-seven — at six-thirty we lost patience and crossed anyway. We found Raukawa Hut in the dark, a friendly old musterers' hut on the Harwoods' farm, and we soon got the wood stove going and boiled the billy. Sven cooked dinner as I drank tea and watched socks steaming over the wood-stove.

It was good feeling being on this side of the river, although we all knew that the Anaweka River wasn't the main obstacle. Big River was coming tomorrow.

'Tyde' is an Old Anglo-Saxon name for time. The Anglo-Saxons divided their day into three parts or tides — morningtide, noontide and eveningtide — and old-fashioned words like Shrovetide still hang around inside our language. Tides have become a metaphor for passage, inevitability and fatalism, a constant flexing of the sea that is so reliable that it is a type of stasis. We happily mingle the ideas of time and tide when we talk about 'the turn of the tide', or 'he cannot stem the tide'. On the North Sea coast of Jarrow, the Venerable Bede (673–735), had already observed that the moon was the probable cause of tides, and for him the sea was a source of many prayers and blessings, but it also brought a terrible curse — the Vikings.

By 1028 King Cnut boasted that he was lord of England, Denmark, Norway and (probably with unintentional humour) 'some of Sweden'. He organised his kingdom with ruthless efficiency and centred his empire on a turbulent North Sea which both enabled and frustrated his control. Despite the previous Viking predations on the monastic communities of England, however, Cnut was at heart a Christian king, and later repaired English churches, refilled their coffers, built new churches, and to further demonstrate his piety he was carried on his throne down to the shoreline and ordered the tides back. We laugh at him now, but we've completely

missed the point. He was showing the limits of his power to his followers, a famous story retold by the Christian monks not about King Cnut at all, but about a god who commands even kings. Can a king stop the tide? Can a king halt time itself?

But when the 'tydes' on Kahurangi coast halted us we felt baulked, and unsure how to respond. To rush at it? To swim? To sit down and wait?

It wasn't that the geography of lagoons and draining estuaries was stopping us deliberately, but we didn't seem to be in pulse with the sea; as if we had forgotten to sync ourselves with nature. It's a difficult trick. I remember as kids that we never bothered to command the waves but danced before them, running along the North Sea scattering helter-skelter with squeals as the waves churned back. We'd been so used to playing with the sea that it didn't occur to us that it might want to play back.

It was cold. Clear. August. With our bright raincoats on, our reflections doubled ourselves, the colours of the parkas and packs running like paint onto the oily sand. Multi-coloured beads rolling free. As we left Raukawa Hut the moon hung in a soft blue sky, pulling the tide back as we walked south leaving a clean slate every twelve hours. Occasional red-billed gulls winged over and a pied shag sat uncomfortably on the sand in a flat-bellied posture quite unlike how a normal shag sits. It was clear it had taken a battering from the storm only two days ago. We noticed, and so did the gulls.

The tidal platforms resembled pieces of a jigsaw puzzle, cracked and ill-fitted with runnels of untouched sand between them, and green sea-grass slicked and neatly combed in one direction. Trapped in the cracks were whole cities of puffy sea foam, leaving sticky trails of bubbles behind on the black sand. Small streams interrupted the beach in the shape of an s-bend of an exposed spine. The speck of the lighthouse was pinprick white, then gradually became elongated as we got closer.

In places there were quad bike trails, with someone having spun their tyres on the tidal platform, leaving skid marks. Paul was disgusted. He strode along the coast in bare feet, and his long white beard made him look like an Old Testament prophet. He had walked down to Kahurangi Point at least 'twenty times', he said; it was his promised land.

At Big River we had to pause, and it was invaluable having Paul here. He pointed out the route, which looked wet. The lavish forest came right down to the lagoon, with two paradise ducks warning us away. As we waited, the tide in the estuary moved out slower than breathing, without fuss or noise, escorted by the oystercatchers and two white-faced herons. Sven and Paul went off into the surf to fossick out a way through, but it was plain we'd have to be patient. Either our tides times were wrong or the lagoon simply had too much water to discharge. There are few places left in New Zealand now where you have to wait for a tide, so I suppose we should have enjoyed it, but we fidgeted. How do you fit an itinerary into a landscape?

After a forty-minute hiatus the sea retreated, reluctantly it seemed to me, but Sven had got most of the way and then Paul, keeping well into the rolling surf, suddenly skipping the last fifty metres to the far shore. We waved and he came back for his pack and we filed out onto the invisible sandbar, which was a slightly queer feeling, but we didn't even get our knees wet.

This beach is still the road. On a summer's weekend, with a low tide at noon, the sands are busy with quad bikes and 4WD trucks, which is why we came in winter. No one at all, the beach as it was before wheels. We talked about the idea of treating Kahurangi Point as a 'Remote Experience Zone', a landscape which you can only reach by your own physical effort, no mechanical means allowed. This 'road' eventually climbs up to the hut door of the Kahurangi Keepers House, and there's a quad bike trail right through the blistering white dunes and onto the Kahurangi River. Only here, finally, is the road stopped by the difficult cliffs and black headlands that go twenty-five kilometres down to the Heaphy Track.

Of course, once the road was intended to go up onto the ridges of mountains, following fold after fold for twelve kilometres up to the Heaphy Track and Gouland Downs, and turn along the coast, eventually to Karamea township. It never made it, though road surveys and serious investigations went on for years, with many reports written. A hut was built for the surveyors and this old Ministry of Works (MOW) hut still sits in a roadless limbo. At one point they were going to remove the hut until Paul (amongst others) put up a fight to save it as 'historic'.

It's still there, six bunks waiting for guests, beautifully isolated, a hard day's journey from Kahurangi Point. Paul regaled us with stories of his overland treks to the MOW hut and the Heaphy Track. There's no actual track, and ten hours was his best time, but he once took fourteen hours on his own. It's dense, matted, entwined, untrammelled bush — and he loves it. He never saw anyone else on these treks (of course!) but he told us the tale of how once he found an old sardine can on a stick as a track marker. No big deal, but last year he was chatting to an old-timer at Golden Bay who looked astonished: 'I put that sardine can there, on that stick, twenty years ago!'

> 'Father sat in the lightroom, his knitting on his knee, his big hands working steadily. The revolving lantern threw an endless parade of lights and shadows on the internal balcony above his head. Well-oiled machinery purred beside him. Inside the lantern frame the pressure-fed mantle hissed the hours away. The loud tick-tock-tick-tock of the lighthouse clock on the wall emphasised the solitary nature of his watch. Wind and rain beat on the outside panes, moaned in the cowling on the roof or flapped fruitlessly at the outside walls.
>
> Every half hour the pall clanged, announcing the arrival of the weight at the bottom of the well. He lay down his knitting and wound steadily until the weight banged gently at the floor on which he stood. He descended to the floor below, pumped up and adjusted the kerosene pressure, checked the barometer then returned upstairs to his knitting. Some nights were calm and still. He lingered longer on the balcony, listening to the waves breaking on the shoreline, the night birds wheeling and crying in their everlasting search for food. A thousand stars might glitter overhead, as distant and cold as the ever-changing, disappearing moon. The sea was there always, changing and breaking, breaking and changing, throwing back glittering shafts of gold to a lordly moon or reflecting the light in a wide river of pulsating quicksilver. He loved this life.'

This is Mabel Pollock's poetic imagining of what her father experienced

as a lighthouse keeper. Lighthouses have an allure as lonely outposts which were once complete communities in themselves. They always stand on remote romantic headlands or islands, which heightens their physical sense of purpose and danger, and face outwards, their electric eyes wandering the surface of the sea. They guide, they shepherd, they pinpoint the something out of nothing.

Some of the books on lighthouses are famous, including Virginia Woolf's book *To the Lighthouse*, which isn't really about lighthouses at all. The crippled hero of Paul Gallico's novella *The Snow Goose* lives in a derelict lighthouse in Essex, but it's really a book about friendship, honesty, bravery and even conservation.

But for the lighthouse keepers it wasn't so romantic. They found the work hard, and often thankless, a daily struggle to maintain the mechanisms and routines in the teeth of hurricane winds. The journals and letterbooks returned to the head office were full of gripes about difficult personalities, inadequate equipment, poor quality food, or food supplies not arriving at all, and the pay was barely enough to raise a family let alone save for the future, yet, and yet, they always reapplied for new postings. Something gripped them: the tension between timetables and timelessness, between fixed regimes and the slow oceanic rhythms.

It wasn't easy for the adults, but the kids who lived at lighthouse stations — Mabel Pollock wrote a marvellous book called *The Children from the Lighthouse* — fondly recall a tough but wonderful life, self-reliant, on the brink of wilderness, besieged by silence and sea sounds. A life that is hardly possible to live these days.

Mabel Pollock's father was Hugh Jamieson and the lighthouse service became his whole life, first training on the Pencarrow light, then shifting on to The Brothers lighthouse. He was transferred to the Kahurangi lighthouse in about 1925. After an accident with an axe, he rode to Collingwood for medical treatment, and on his way to Nelson he stayed at a farm in Motupipi where he met the farmer's two daughters. About ten months later he took his new bride, Dorothy 'Doff' Jamieson, back to Kahurangi to live.

The head-keeper's wife, Mrs Page, neither 'welcomed nor wanted' the new bride. Sometimes Mrs Jamieson would use binoculars to inspect

Mrs Page from a distance, and sometimes Mrs Jamieson would find a pair of binoculars looking back at her! Three sons later, the Jamiesons were shifted to another station, which turned out to be a fluky piece of good fortune.

In 1929 a massive earthquake at Kahurangi Point dislodged the land where the keepers' houses and huts were built, and only by a miracle was nobody killed. The men and children were not in the houses and the only woman — the dour Mrs Page — was outside and literally left hanging onto a fence as her house slid away into the sea. The lighthouse was partially engulfed by the landslide but survived, and after two months it was working again. The families lived in sheds by the wharf until replacement houses were built.

Kahurangi lighthouse was originally built in 1903, the iron sides of the tower made in a Thames foundry and landed by scow at Big River. Then the huge plates were shifted by dray cart around the beach and winched up on a temporary tramline to the cliff site. The first keepers' houses were built close beside the lighthouse so the houses and womenfolk were battered and pummelled by a maddening, god-awful wind. The lighthouse service was run in a military operation with a strict hierarchy of head keeper and second keeper, and this status also passed down to the wives and children. They didn't like whingers, and you had to put up with the conditions and be extremely adaptable. As one wife succinctly put it, 'If a link in the chain broke, you made another link.'

It was a day of inactivity, almost a ceremony, and the West Coast light swam and vibrated around us. A largish fishing boat moved on the line of the horizon and a jet trail was being melted away. On an average day at Kahurangi Point no one can be seen but their busy purpose is still felt — the fishing that was going on, the jet-setters above negotiating the plastic trays of cuisine.

Everyone likes the idea of shutting out the human hubbub for a while but going wild carries certain risks. Remote might mean out of our control, and what happens if the access is blocked? After all, we're used to getting our own way, and a time-heavy journey to an unknown 'somewhere else' like Kahurangi Point isn't always agreeable. Despite

these doubts there's a tangible beauty and reward in reconnecting to a landscape that takes its slow time — and expects a certain deference.

The trampers' hut at Kahurangi Point is actually the two lighthouse keepers' residences joined together and repositioned out of the wind and facing into the sun, a luxury the keepers' families never enjoyed. It's a balmy spot, with a barbie outside and garden seats to loll in. There is a huge lounge and kitchen area, a bathroom with an actual bath, junk rooms and four bunkrooms, so we had one each.

We walked to the lighthouse, which is not particularly interesting. A white concrete tower. But on the steep grassy slopes we could still detect the vague hummocks and splits of the scars from the earthquake almost a hundred years before. Then we scrambled down to the shore and ducked in and out of the sea-cliffs which had been cut into overhangs by the surf, gouging out a curling template from the soft mudstone. The sea was lazy with a surface sheen and a big ungirdled swell that hinted at its power. There were white lacy collars of surf around the necks of headlands, and playful ribbons of light as the water intermingled with turquoise bands and dark shadowy rips that ran back towards Australia.

Paul showed us a cave beside the Kahurangi River, and we walked up a short side-creek to a waterfall. Nikau palms stood as feather dusters, spirals lapping up their trunks and the pale white flower heads rotted on the ground like squashed octopuses. The gold creek water had a tinge of maroon when I washed it through my hands. On the beach Paul turned over quite a lot of driftwood looking for a poisonous katipo spider, unsuccessfully. He knew where the cell phone coverage was and took Sven up onto the highest dune for his fix of woman.

Back at the hut Nic was having a lunch that consisted entirely of a packet of biscuits. I made tea, about the fifth cup today, and we sat outside on the back steps in the sun. He didn't offer me any of his biscuits. I didn't expect him to. We crunched apart. Happy.

There's a tension between dynamic and meditative, the high achiever or the hippie. I have watched elderly Chinese perform tai chi, which to my mind mysteriously combines activity and inactivity, a type of slow dance, beautiful even to observe, as if by graceful movements they are trying to cease the ceaselessness of it all.

At dusk the sea sounded like long rips of linen as the swell broached, and perversely, by closing my eyes, I could fancy there was traffic droning in the distance although we are 1000 kilometres from a motorway. A morepork owl cleared its throat with a drawling upward screech. Out of the darkness came 'more pork', 'more pork', which I think sounds more like 'horrrk korrr'. The half-moon was as bright as the lighthouse's searching beam and two shooting stars zipped past. A coastal trader came into view, or rather its green navigation lights did, floating exactly and cautiously on the horizon between two dark bands of blue-black.

'Horrrk korrr', 'horrrk korrr'.

I remember that during the summer school holidays my mum would push me out of the door in the morning with a sandwich and an apple and state firmly: 'Go on, play on the beach with the others, back before tea.' Well, it was a long time ago and we did things differently then, and childhood seemed to run at a different speed.

We threw stones at bottles on breakwaters (once even putting a message in a bottle and bunging it into the sea hopefully) and explored the crumbling clay cliffs that faced the North Sea where the bulrushes grew out of mysterious and stagnant green ponds, a place full of secrets and hidey-holes. My older brother taught me rude words which we would yell out at other adult walkers — 'Oi! fungus features!' — and scurry back into the earth gullies like rabbits. We got very grubby.

I used to watch the cocklers go out on the low-tide muddy sandbanks of Herne Bay, carrying their large rakes and bringing back baskets of cockles shaped vaguely like a brittle human heart. My dad would smack his lips when buying a small bag of freshly steamed cockles. The net folk would also catch shrimps; the ones we bought were mostly red, but a few were brownish, and in all seriousness my father explained that the red ones fed on drowned pink human bodies, and the brown ones fed on black bodies. There weren't many black shrimps, he said with a wicked look, because there weren't many black men in Herne Bay in 1965.

My parents regularly used to 'go for a stroll' on the local downs, but if you scour books and newspapers these days for slow words, they are as hard to find as a quiet space in a cafe. I made a list: dawdle, wander,

meander, saunter, pootle, mooch, doodle, daydream, idle, muck about. Today's T-shirts have 'Play hard! Work hard!' on them because action people consume things, and having a quiet think doesn't help retail. Half the time I think we rush because everyone else is rushing.

Looking back, I realise that my own boyhood was closer to Mabel Pollock's than to most modern-day children's, and I'm thankful for that. I suppose it's true that any nostalgia is an ache, revealing and revelling in what we've lost, but it's not necessarily a permanent loss. I believe that when we venture into a wild place it's as if we are voluntarily self-placing the links that join us to the land — kids do it with a squeal, the adults a trifle self-consciously — but it's still play.

Back at Big River again and it was disconcerting how things had changed. The underwater sandbar that we'd skipped across two days ago now had big curling surges across it, swills of dirty foam and scurrying water, and even at low tide it looked unpleasant. Even more worrying, the lagoon was huge, and when I stuck a stick in the sand beside the lagoon edge the waterline never changed in thirty minutes. Even at low tide, the lagoon was still bloody deep — hmmm — someone murmured, 'Where's a King Cnut when you want one?'

We stood on the rocky tidal platform as Sven counted the minutes between wave surges. A big surf came through every six or so minutes, easily enough time to get across, but when the rollers did slosh in they would have knocked us flat and either pushed us into the deeper water of the lagoon or, worse, dragged us out. We did not fancy a wetting, or a drowning. Paul had wandered off upriver to the traditional crossing place, and when he came back he was more reserved than usual. Usually the crossing was knee deep, but there was a lot more water in the lagoon. 'Doable,' he said thoughtfully.

The choice was this: a possible swim across a still deep river or a risky dash across the moving surf? There was some dithering, and no real discussion that I remember. At that moment the sun illuminated the forest at the head of the estuary and poetically stretched a ribbon of gold across as if it were a start line. Treating it as a good omen, we trudged up the river bank. I'm a hopeless swimmer and I did not want to take the lead.

Paul went first and started to ease his unhurried way across the river and the two hundred metres of shadowed lagoon. It appeared to be slack water and a few rain splashes created expanding dimples on the brown surface that was the colour of stewed tea. We followed in an approximate and stately line. The cold water got into our boots, then up to knees, thighs, then a chilled crutch, and finally it was waist deep and the packs started to lift on our backs. In summer it would have been pleasant, treading the silky mud underneath and feeling vaguely buoyant as a spaceman on the moon. Nervously, I raised myself on tippy-toe to try to keep my chest above the waterline, and then there was a tiny, half-imagined and imperceptible lift in the silt below my feet, and smoothly we emerged onto the far bank. A rainbow came out in celebration.

On the main beach we steered close to the surf line on the firm sand, with the light brassy and the edge tingling with energy as we moved north with a cool sou'wester pushing at our backs. Squinting into the sun, all I saw were black silhouettes as if we'd strayed onto a Victorian photographer's silver oxide plate. Fifty years ago, I was skipping by the North Sea and now I'm striding along the Tasman Sea, but inside I still feel the same joy to exist in these moments.

At the Turimawiwi River four human fragments came together to make a decision. Should we continue on the beach under the sea-cliffs or go inland along the road?

The tide was coming in and we had about an hour to walk four kilometres. Paul and Sven fancied the beach, but I was all for the road and then I remonstrated to myself out loud: 'Stop being a wimp, Mark!' So we hustled up the beach under the gorgeous Kaipuke cliffs layered like a custard and cream gateau, but now and then sliced deeply by a knife-sharp stream. There's a trap here, so we travelled fast through the rock and debris as the waves licked at us. Nic almost got caught. The sky blackened and a few spots of rain followed us back up the road to the car. I like endings, almost as much as I like beginnings, and on the Anatori riverbank the old whitebaiters were still waiting. They've learned the language of slow.

BOOKS & SOURCES

■ *Yesterdays of Golden Bay: glimpses of past industries and PWD camps* (2001), Pauline Blincoe. This book has many marvellous black and white photographs of bygone days. Most of the men and women were happy to get a job at this remote location; they survived, even thrived, and looked back with a certain fondness to the mud, sweat, hardship, camaraderie, social bonds. Their children ran riot in the bush, thinking it was just a big game.

■ *The Sugarbag Years: an oral history of the 1930s depression in New Zealand* (1974), Tony Simpson. One of the few books about the New Zealand Depression.

■ *Remote Experience Zones*. Some people might remember that in the seventies and eighties REZ were placed around 'Wilderness Areas' as buffer zones. No helicopters, 4WD vehicles, trails bikes etc., only leg power allowed. Many mountain areas had them and they were marked on the maps. They were a good idea (before their time, really) and it would be nice if they made a comeback and also incorporated other ideas such as 'natural quiet'. There's no reason why REZs could not apply to coastal areas as well.

■ *Tydes*. The word has complex origins. It's related to the Old Frisian *tidia*, to proceed, but also to Middle Low German *tiden*, to hurry up. The Norse expression *titha* means desire. Old English has the word *tid*, meaning a portion of time, possibly from the Proto-Germanic *tidiz*, a division of time.

■ *Speaking a Silence* (1981), Christine Hunt. 'Madge' was at Kahurangi lighthouse. No dates, no real names.

■ *The Children from the Lighthouse* (1993), Mabel Pollock. This was written from a child's point of view, mostly at Cape Brett lighthouse, where she calls herself 'Kate'. I went searching for Mabel in Devonport, Auckland in 2009 and discovered she had died there in 2001, aged 98.

■ *Leading Lights: lighthouses of New Zealand* (1991), Grant Sheehan, Anna Gibbons.

■ *Kahurangi earthquake*. *Evening Post*, 21 June 1929, sourced from *Papers Past*.

> 'We lost no time in getting out of the bush onto the cleared ground above and here we came upon a weird sight. Fissures were opening and closing in the grass slopes before our eyes, for all the world like the work of a giant lightning sketch artist. Cracks of anything up

> to six inches were opening about our feet, and we had the greatest difficulty in standing upright as the ground heaved and trembled.'

■ *The Sea is My Neighbour: a lighthouse keeper's story* (1963), T. A. Clark.

■ *In Praise of Slowness* (2005), Carl Honoré. Available as a digital book. Recording the 'slow food' cult in Europe, and in Italy the quirky 'Tempo Giusto' movement where musicians try to play Mozart more slowly, he includes a quote from Franz Kafka: 'Remain sitting at your table and listen. Don't even listen, simply wait. Don't even wait, be quite still and solitary. The world will freely offer itself to you to be unmasked.' There's also a heartfelt quotation from an exhausted commentator about London in 1871:

> 'The wear and tear of nerve-power and the discharge of brain-power in London are enormous. The London man lives fast. In London man rubs out, elsewhere he rusts out…'

■ *Slow words*. Many of these have an English or Anglo-Saxon bias about them. When the English want words of action and passion they turn to the French or Italian: élan, verve, flair, viva!, joie de vivre, panache, aplomb, esprit de corps, tour de force, brio, bravo etc.

■ *The Incredible Voyage: a personal odyssey* (1977), Tristan Jones. He tells an amusing anecdote of the strange relationship we have with speed and time. He was travelling down the Ria del Plata River on his boat *Sea Dart* with his Bolivian deckhand Huanapaco, who had observed the passing of fast speed boats:

> 'Why does he go so fast?' asked Huanapaco.
>
> 'He's in a hurry. Wherever he's going he wants to get there fast.'
>
> His bronze face furrowed deeply in thought.
>
> 'Why does he want to go so fast?' he asked me, half frowning.
>
> 'Oh Jesus Christ, to save time of course!' I replied testily.
>
> After another pensive moment he asked quietly.
>
> 'What does he do with the time he saves?'
>
> For that there was no answer.

The philosophy of this anecdote rings true, but it may not be. See *Wayward Sailor: in search of the real Tristan Jones*, Anthony Dalton (2003), who analyses Jones's exploits and finds many of his sailing adventures were indeed incredible, often highly exaggerated or even entirely invented. The actual name of the Bolivian 'Huanapaco' was Edwin Mejia.

■ *Cnut or Knut or Canute*. Take your pick.

MAVORA LAKES

On a hot summer's day on the Mavora walkway the skies were fleecy with cirrus trails, and the clouds piled up like ice cream blobs, unbalanced and melting on a base of searing blue. The mountains crisped and uncrisped in the strong light. Stopping for a handful of river water, I slumped on my back and gazed upwards for a few minutes. It was quite a show. Cauliflower cumulus was drifting with the westerly wind, deliciously exploding into extreme slow-motion galaxy spirals and whirlpools, evaporating, changing endlessly into maelstroms of pure nothing.

I progressed up the valley this way, stopping, sweating, lying down. At a stream I splashed handfuls of water over my singed face and found that I was not thirsty, just suffocated. The hut stank of heat, and when opening the door the hot air rushed out rather than in. Lying on the bunk, I waited for the cloud shadows to reach me.

I'm a bit vague about when I first went to the Mavora Lakes. Perhaps it was that hot summer in the 1980s. The hard mid-winter trip wasn't until later, and that was followed by odd photographic sorties here and there, with camps, walks and notetaking. The lakes appeared in several of my guide books so they meant a lot to me, but fortunately I don't seem to have made them any more popular. The lakes seem beguiled by calm, untroubled, but as many guide book writers do, I feel a guilty sense of betrayal in my craft. We go to beautiful places, so beautiful we want to keep them to ourselves, and then do the opposite by publishing and exposing their charms. We behave like pimps.

I've chosen to recall four different journeys I made to Mavora, and for convenience and beauty I have given each visit a different colour: yellow, white, grey (parts one and two) and blue.

YELLOW

The AA signpost off Highway 94 put it in an odd way: 'Mavora Lakes 37 kilometres' and underneath in parenthesis, '37 kilometres of gravel road'.

Oh. Immediately the tyres crunch and the greywacke dust plume billows behind and it takes a long time to unblur the bright farmland. The few farm houses spread oil on the road outside their driveways to stop the dust from smearing their homes and gardens, but any entrance into this valley is conspicuous and it feels that the car is going faster on

the loose gravel than it really is. Approaching cars are announced by their own rocket-like outburst of grey smoke and we whoosh past, as two missiles in flight.

The Mavora feels like an excursion into one of those old-fashioned holiday posters which have been over-coloured, simplified and portrayed empty of people. The valley floor is nearly two kilometres across, with pleats of forest leading up to bare fleshy tops and virtuous snow-touched mountains. The tussocks are burnt by the spatial heat, and the distant river is a series of glittering, susurrating glissades. It's big country, on a scale that is a replenishment for a constricted city soul, although my driving habits are so deeply entrenched that I have to make a conscious effort to ease up on the accelerator.

The peaks have prosaic mustering names, Bald Peak, Hummock Peak, Smooth Peak, Bare Peak, Pasture Hill, and many mountains have no names at all, though every single one would have been climbed (perhaps all were first climbed) by musterers and their ardent dogs. This is pre-eminently sheep country now and the few white dots on the rolling yellow hillsides are reassuring. Forestry looks geometric and calculating. In several places, beehives are grouped in colourful Manhattans, and the bees suck off roadside weeds with strange English names such as vipers bugloss, white yarrow and the star-primped Deptford pinks. In the searing summer heat, the browned-off and dead woolly mullein stalks faintly resemble the Jewish menorah, or seven-stemmed candelabra. A harrier spiralled over the spurs, and when I stopped for a photo I heard a falcon 'kek, kek, kek'.

After thirty-five kilometres the road splits. The left-hand branch turns to the Mavora Lakes, whereas the Mt Nicholas Road continues into the calm emptiness of the Von River with only a few tiny human qualifications: a poled telephone line, a line of shelter-belt macrocarpas, a single-lane bridge.

Driving down into the Von Valley there was a big mob of sheep coming towards me on the narrow road. Tourist promoters love to label these events as 'a New Zealand traffic jam', but if you meet one it's a pain in the arse. I pulled over onto the verge, switched off the engine and waited, scratched my head, yawned, and fidgeted with my camera as

about a thousand sheep shuffled past at a nervous and hesitating pace, grabbing at grass nubs on the way and harassed by huntaways when they threatened to veer off into the gullies. There's thick dust in the air, a trail of pellets, sheep crying, and a confused mess of prints on the dry gravel roads. The drover was leading his horse and gave me a nod. When I drove back an hour later the flock had melted into the hot land.

On the long winding road back towards Mavora I saw a single figure walking towards me, a hitchhiker, going the wrong way. I wound down the window. He was a young blond-haired German, with a burnt happy face and a neatly tightened backpack. He was heading for Walter Peak Station and Queenstown. How was he going to get across Lake Wakatipu? He shrugged, and then laughed: he would swim of course! 'It's a cold lake,' I said, obviously. 'Ja,' he nodded, but he didn't understand.

He had the confidence of youth and that it would all turn out all right. I've hitchhiked through Germany myself — through grey industrial streets and preoccupied towns — so I wished him luck, and as I waved goodbye I glanced back in the rear-view mirror and I could see him striding off confidently into this vast valley as if he owned it. Walking into pure brightness.

WHITE

The ice had caked in the wheel ruts and the car slurped from side to side. Snow sheets lined the road, thin, because when I stepped onto them the crust broke and the green moss was only a centimetre underneath. The beech trees had a dusting of white and there was total stillness in the air. The frozen grass stalks had turned into stiff spaghetti — God, it was cold! The South Mavora Lake is 600 metres above sea level and sleeping in my car that June night I could feel a frosty cancer creeping into my bones.

The morning sky was vague, and the scrunch of my boots in snow was the only sound as I trudged up the four-wheel-drive road beside North Mavora Lake. Mist sat around the milky hillsides and small pools of light broke onto the water. Two bellbirds competed at a distance, echoing each other as the lake elongated their calls. The snow on the top of the mountains was as clean as brand-new teeth.

I didn't expect to see anyone, not in mid-winter, but there were steps ahead of me, and quite fresh. The edges of the footprint were uncrumbled, made perhaps a few hours before, and in the immensity of this valley I got quite excited and made an effort to catch up.

But Careys Hut was empty, cold, and there was no entry in the logbook. At 3 pm the sun had slunk out of the valley and there was a pile of beech wood by the open fireplace. I picked it up and it smelt fresh. The clean cuts were red. Perhaps the guy up ahead (I always assume it's a man) had chopped that kindling, in which case I was a day behind. That night the fire and candles created all sorts of shadows, and sometimes my own shadow was replicated several times flickering against the walls, so it really seemed I had company after all.

In winter this land shuts down, quite literally. Whiteness rules. The Mavora walkway is closed, the hut water-tanks drained of water. The frigid world gets as solid and immobilised as iron, the ways cold and very deep, and the landscape chilled like the voided words of a T. S. Eliot poem. The low sun filled my eyes with blinding crystals.

From Careys Hut it's about two hours to Boundary Hut, then a long trudge of eleven kilometres to Taipo Hut on top of a snowy blanket that was slowly freezing again. This hut was an identical joyless twin to Boundary Hut, cold and useless as a frozen beer. No fireplace, no wood, no person, so although it was late I pushed onto the old Pond Burn musterers' hut. The stranger's footprints marched on ahead.

The Mararoa River valley is a kilometre wide here and the mountains top out at 1800 metres. In winter the shadows stretch right across the valley, and slam down on it as tightly as a lid on an iron pot. Pale green lichen catches on the matagouri thorns like sheep's wool, and the briar rosehips become tiny sacs of blood. Is that him? A figure. Did the stickman thing move, or is that my eyes jiggling to make him walk? When I stared he seemed to stare back, and when I stopped the man stopped. What was he up to? I suddenly felt ashamed because I selfishly didn't want to share half of my space, but I needn't have worried. It turned out to be a black tree stump, with one branch akimbo.

Perhaps the stranger had stayed two nights at the Pond Burn musterers' hut, for there was another big pile of chopped wood sitting

beside the huge open fire. He was, I must admit, a very helpful phantom. The smoke from the chimney oozed into the valley like a fog, and despite the cheery beech log fire my boots froze that night. I hoarded my last inch-stub of candle and snuffed it out early.

We spend as much time alone as in company. Men in particular often seek the adventure and solace of a solo journey — 'he who travels furthest travels alone' — but other people see them as outsiders, perhaps admiringly, but still odd, risk takers without an audience. The solo traveller draws on stronger mental reserves than most people can or will, but this personal choice means isolation, and great strength can turn into obsession and mania. Robert Macfarlane talked about the tension between 'homing and roaming', the comfort of the hearth, the lure of the open road.

The Latin word for 'wandering alone' or 'solitary rambler' is solivagant, and you can sense vagrant and vagabond lurking in this word, for society has always been ambivalent about the solo traveller. There's envy in people's stares, a certain apprehension, and many of our names for wanderers are not exactly flattering: gypsies, vagabonds, swaggers, journeymen, troubadours, widsiths, rovers, hawkers, pedlars, tinkers, bums, beachcombers, hobos, sundowners, moonlighters, tramps, wayfarers. People set adrift by tides of life, and then finding they are unsuited to any other sort of living.

After a short walk from the hut I reached Pass Burn saddle where I took a meaningless photo looking towards the Greenstone River, then turned back into the snowy winter valley of the Mavora. It was my third day without seeing anyone.

I could talk to myself, of course, and occasionally I've found it convenient to invent a sort of shadowy third-person persona, especially when I am trying to make up my mind about the best direction to go in — 'Mark, what about this route?' — but sometimes these companions don't always agree with me, which is bit of a worry. The footprints in the snow were real but the figure was always beyond me, stepping strongly ahead as if he were foretelling my own presence. My footprints slotted into his as if we knew each other in some unfathomable way, but I felt I was always trying to catch him up and intuitively sensed that I never would. And I never did.

On Ernest Shackleton's desperate crossing of South Georgia Island in May 1916 there was a 'fourth man':

> 'I know that during that long and racking march of thirty-six hours over the unnamed mountains and glaciers of South Georgia it seemed to me often that we were four, not three. I said nothing to my companions on the point, but afterwards Worsley said to me "Boss, I had a curious feeling on the march that there was another person with us."'
>
> *'Who is the third who walks always beside you?*
> *When I count, there are only you and I together*
> *But when I look ahead up the white road*
> *There is always another one walking beside you.'*

GREY — PART ONE

The first and only English tramp I saw was sitting on the front steps of a church that was closed. The sun was shining, a spring day in Herne Bay, Kent. He was dressed in layers of old shabby clothes, with a bushy beard and an old trilby hat perched on his head. He had just pulled off one of his boots, rubbing his sockless and dirty feet with delicious pleasure, a wide grin on his face and a look of benevolence at the passing world, which included a shy eight-year-old boy pushing his bike on the pavement, unable to stop staring at this odd creature from another planet. This was freedom, and dirt, and something else that I sensed but did not realise until many years later. A breaking of cords, of chains, of strictures and structures.

My mum would tell me off if I played in the mud, or wandered off into the woods alone, so I spent a lifetime doing exactly that. Now here I am trudging alongside Mavora with smelly socks and wet boots, heading up to Forks Hut on a grey wet day. Living like that tramp. There were no fresh tyre tracks on the twin muddy ruts and the horse droppings were old. Big banks of cloud sheared off the mountain tops and a squelchy fog settled down to the waterside. On the mountain slopes patches of tussock had peeled away and scarred the raw surface with eczema, and a sort of spidery black lichen crept over the lakeside stones, as if small surprised tarantulas had taken a home there.

The rain beat me in the end. Careys Hut was dry and Forks Hut was another ten kilometres further, so I temporised, lit a fire, and then couldn't drag myself away from it. I flicked through the hut logbook and started to count how many people had come here alone. The rain got harder.

Several times I was sure I heard a four-wheel-drive groaning up the track. I even heard the gears graunch, and the engine struggle and over-rev, but when I went outside for a look there was nothing at all. I did this several times and later I was delighted to find out that there is an actual word for this anxiety, *iktsuarpok*, from the Inuit language. It means constantly going outside to see if anyone's coming. One of the problems with solo walking is that your ears populate the silences with imaginary people, or, perhaps another way to put it, people who are real but don't arrive.

In the 1890s a Welshman, W. H. Davies, lived as a hobo in America. 'Beating' the railroads, hitching on boxcars, dodging the railway bulls (or security men), and avoiding the train's brakemen. He met and teamed up with people who had colourful monikers — Brum, New Haven Baldy, Australian Red, Washington Shorty, New York Fatty, Cockney More, English Harry and many, many more — and he wrote about this life in a book called *The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp*, which was hugely popular. The copy I'd borrowed from the library had been reprinted thirty-one times between 1908 and 1950 — now that's astounding. Davies had unwittingly captured a reading audience of desk-bound clerks, factory slaves and waistcoated husbands in the over-cluttered Edwardian drawing rooms of the new terraced townships. Men who were yearning for, and enthralled by, the open road.

But the hobo life wasn't all cakes and ale. Davies almost died of malaria, lying three days on the banks of the Mississippi River, and he witnessed a lynching near Memphis. He was beaten up by 'negroes' in New Orleans, and later fought a pitched battle between whites and negroes, where after the men had slunk away, one black man was left dying on the ground. Codes of honour were kept and broken, loyalties lasted then melted, work disappeared, money squandered, and he shifted elsewhere, wandering from town to town.

When he heard of the great Klondike gold rush Davies travelled into Canada with 'Three Fingered Jack', who hated going fast because 'it broke his heart to hurry through good towns whose inhabitants were all the happier for being called on by needy men'. At night, at the town of Renfrew near Ottawa, Davies tried to follow 'Three Fingered Jack' by grabbing onto a fast passenger train, but in a horrible moment slipped, and fell into the night, his foot severed by the train wheels. Later his leg was amputated at the knee. 'All the wildness had been taken out of me, and my adventures after this were not of my own seeking, but the result of circumstances.'

Uncertain and melancholic, Davies returned to England in his mid-twenties and minus a leg, yet perhaps because he had few other choices, he resumed the tramp's life. He describes pedlars selling laces for a few pence, grinders who offered to sharpen tools, and gridlers, who mournfully sang hymns on street corners (the more mournful the better) to excite a few coppers from people momentarily touched by the pathos of things. Realistically, most of these men were beggars. Pennies were given to get rid of them, but there was always another tramp or two coming up the road, and there were thousands of tramps in England before the First World War.

GREY — PART TWO

In the morning I gave up. A nor'wester came screaming through. The upper valley filled with smoky rain and the wind propelled columns of dark cloud as if they had come marching out of smoke stacks. The lake briefly turned deep blue when patches of sun glimpsed the surface, and rainbows every hour smudged the brown hillsides with tinsel. Squalls fell upon the lake and tormented it all day with whitecaps and williwaws.

The rain ran against my parka and legs and into my gaiters and boots as I walked down-valley. The beech forest was a black fuzz, and despite my best effort my glass lenses got greasy with rain, and then worse after I tried to wipe them dry. New Zealand is usually a playful landscape, splattered with primal colours, but that morning it was as black and white as an old King James Bible. With my parka hood up I felt like a hermit journeying between chapels.

As W. H. Davies himself ruefully admitted, the problem for the tramp was rain, and as he himself got older the problem of poverty seemed interminable. He started to write poetry but how to get it published? Eventually, he borrowed some money, published his poetry book and sent copies to famous people. One such was George Bernard Shaw, who became Davies' 'trumpeter'. The tramp suddenly became a success, and he had his portrait painted by a leading painter of the day, Augustus John, and a bronze bust sculpted by the famous Jacob Epstein.

In New Zealand or Australia W. H. Davies would have been called a 'swagger'. The working itinerant was everywhere in the New Zealand high country in the nineteenth century (and early twentieth) — drovers, shepherds, boundary keepers, roadmen, gumdiggers and gold-diggers, the half-mad Arawata Bills, the dusty swaggers — the high-country stations depended on them to some extent. Random herds of men turned up on the off-chance, were hired cheaply, and kept on doing the unpleasant labouring jobs until the work ran out. Then they were dismissed. The Mavora Valley would have seen swaggers bashing up here from the 1870s to the 1930s, and like the hobos in America they developed a lingo. If they found work at any station they would 'bust their cheque' in a wayside 'shanty', and sleep in the 'starlight hotel'.

John A. Lee is perhaps the only man to both live the swagger life and write about it. Lee hit the road at a young age; he was actually on the run from borstal. He walked throughout New Zealand, cadging, begging, taking up work, dodging the police. At that time there were thousands of swaggers on the road and John A. Lee romantically called them 'unstandardised men'. He wrote several fictionalised books of his experiences: *Children of the Poor*, *Delinquent Days*, *Shining with the Shiner*, and the factual *Roughnecks, Rolling Stones and Rouseabouts*. He became a political firebrand and phenomenon, rising to Minister of Housing in the first Labour Government of 1935.

There are striking similarities between Lee and Davies. Both were born into poverty and were petty criminals as children. They each lost a limb — John A. Lee lost an arm in the First World War — and both started writing later in life brutally honest accounts of their experiences. John A. Lee's book *Civilian into Soldier* ends with the soldier's co-

habitation with a prostitute in London. W. H. Davies in *Young Emma* talks frankly about prostitutes he engaged on his search for a wife, and his eventual infection of his wife with venereal disease. But while Davies was a shy man, Lee became a table-bashing proselytiser.

So trudging down the Mavora that day there's a sense I'm following old ways, and in some aspects nothing has changed; being a tramper or a swagger is not one bit glamorous without sunshine. I was suspicious that the heavy rain at the head of the valley was nudging me along, for every time I looked over my shoulder it had sneaked a little closer, reminding me of that children's game where you suddenly spin around and try to catch the other kids creeping up. The serious rain got to the carpark at the same time as me and, as there was nothing more to do, I changed into dry clothes and drove away as the windscreen wipers drawled grey back and forth, smearing the rain on as fast as they took it off.

BLUE

After a long drive from Christchurch we fluffed around in the carpark in the fading afternoon, sorting out gear and sneaking in extra food tidbits. My pack got heavier. Whilst I waited for the others to get ready — Sven was leaving his white spirit primus under the car as the fuel bottle was leaking, Nic was counting his biscuit packets — I vaguely drew an *enso*, a Japanese circle, on the carpark gravels with a stick.

Some artists start with an *enso* every morning to spiritually centre themselves before the day's works. My circle was just a circle, and not very round, but it started the journey, and after we had shouldered our packs and set off from the car it occurred to me that our six-day tramp would be almost a perfect *enso*. We crossed the swing-bridge across the Mararoa River and followed the track through beech forest to Kiwi Burn Hut. The hut was empty, but the fire soon filled it, and we talked into twilight of this and that, catching up on each other's stories. We three old men were all in our sleeping bags by 8 pm and someone was definitely snoring.

The track over the saddle was there, but it might as well not have been. Pink tape was splashed generously about but windfall, scrub and pole beech did a good job of hiding it. For an hour or so we were not

happy and emerged, scratched, into the Upukerora River and onto the four-wheel-drive track. The Army Hut was empty and dark, with a bad smell under the hut and cluttered with junk that hunters had left behind. We lit a fire and had some tea. Our routines were becoming established and the little bit of night music of rain on the roof was exactly per the weather forecast.

We eased along the forest track up the Upukerora River, or 'Upuk' as the hunters put it in the logbook. Nic remembered it as being a bit dull, but I recalled the dense beech being sprinkled with tendrils of the red mistletoe shredded off in a wind, and every now and then a cascade of puffy strawberry fungus fallen onto the moss. Nic regularly pointed out orchids I was about to tread on. His eyes were tuned to them, whereas I was looking at the tree bark. Every tree had a different skin, with lichen colours that ranged from brown to black, sometimes a red staining, or dappled orange, or spittles of yellow. There was ribbed bark, freckled bark and bark mottled by green lichens as if bacilli had invaded. Some bark pulled apart like half-tube slabs of piping. Others curled at the edges, pliable as vellum.

At the top flats Sven got a fire going and we had a well-earned brew in the sunshine. About 200 metres above the valley floor we discovered a pleasing parkland of limpid tarns and beech copses. There were no fireplaces, or bits of rubbish, or cut trees that might indicate that other people had camped here, or even passed through, which seemed astonishing because it was such a perfect place. There was a healthy debate about where to camp, which I lost, and after scouting around we settled on a site with a fine outlook, plenty of firewood and one flaw which became evident at nightfall. The rain drifted in and the wind pushed it under the fly. Soggy.

It's usually my job to light the morning fire, get the beech wood crackling and the tang of smoke up the nostrils of the other sleeping beauties. Mist filled the valley and we were talking aloud about the weather forecast and wondering where our blue had got to. With the iPhone on and the GPS set we knew to within five metres where we were, and the Acheron Lakes emerged slaty-green and grey, silent with an occasional tinkling sound of scree as it shifted on the slopes above. Then

the sun leaked through the grey fog and started to fill the alpine slopes.

Nic suddenly found a higher gear and we followed him, climbing up the rocky slopes that graunched on our boots. The views over Fiordland got better. We reached a scree col at 1500 metres with no name and parked ourselves by a tarn that quivered like a Van Gogh painting. This was the highest point of our tramp and looking into the head of the Windon Burn we could see far below Forks Hut, which resembled a garden shed at this distance. Sven said he wanted a cuppa and fired up the primus. I'm sure everything tastes sweeter at the crux; the biscuits crack with more crunch, and throwing caution to the wind I ate four in a row.

Forks Hut turned out to be scruffy. The wood stove was askew and an over-friendly mouse ran over our boots, so it was just as nice to sit in the warm afternoon tussocks and soak up the blue. A band of cirrus flew overhead like a white x-ray of a ribcage imprinted on carbon paper. Nic wandered about looking for a photo. Sven fell asleep. I stared upwards and started to doze off — cirrus, cumulus, stratus — I was sleepily trying to make up my mind whether cloud was a sort of wallpaper that never stays still or a television screen that is always flickering. Blue is such a buoyant colour; it's odd that we get the blues.

A blowfly sucked at the sweat on my arm and a long-legged spider was tickling my foot, no doubt assessing whether the gap between my toes was a good place for a web ambush. Then the sandfly bit.

Instead of following the four-wheel-drive on the east shore of North Mavora Lake (see the grey section), we tramped down the west shore to West Burn Hut. It had a dusty mud floor and a big open fireplace, and boaties had dragged all sort of oddments over to the hut, including a portable barbecue and a road sign. The cirrus cloud was hard combed to a fine hair as it moved rapidly across the mountains and we knew it was a bad sign, probably a front on its way, but we'd got the hard part done, and felt that satisfied contempt for the odd bluster of nor'west wind that shook the hut in the evening. At 2 am when I went outside there was an astonishing sight: here was my *enso* again, a full golden globular moon, which illuminated the lenticular clouds so brilliantly that they looked like silver spaceships.

We hadn't seen anyone for five days until South Mavora Lake when we suddenly bumped into a family party of walkers, who'd crossed the footbridge by the carpark and were eager to get to grips with the wild. The wife was clutching a location guidebook for the *Lord of the Rings* film trilogy, and she asked in a slightly anxious tone if 'this was the Silverlode River?' 'The what?' 'You know, on page 156 it says the blah blah of the ooblah was filmed here', and she pointed to the page hopefully. Really? The kids looked embarrassed. Goodbye! Goodbye! And we drifted away bemused by the weirdness of it all and entered into the red-beech forest on the true right bank of the Mararoa River.

It was magisterial and gracious and the ferns curtsied as if we were ambassadors entering their court. Along a high river terrace, the pathway was gilded with flecks of gold leaf from the loosened beech leaves and we left tender bootprints on pillows of green moss. There was a pair of yellowheads (mohua) up in the canopy, vocal but invisible, and next year they might not be there at all as the rats and stoats are eating them into extinction. Everywhere anorexic stumps of old trees had rotted away to a mere upright sliver, and they poignantly reminded me of the elongated sculptures of Alberto Giacometti — haunted people, reduced to shadows, but casting about anxiously for their owners.

But this isn't a sad forest. It felt complete and rich in itself, with an inner strength and fellowship that was beyond the range of a cellphone connection. As night deepened around our bush camp, the trees went black against the sky and the fire stirred the leaves in a small private wind. Dark trunks served as back-rests. No insects emerged, and this great old forest had no rustles or creatures stirring in it except us.

Our banquet was a 'mulligan' of what was left over after six days tramping, and for my part I don't think I ate with any great hunger. I was satisfied enough being here. Past vagabonds and swaggers would have been absorbed into the forest as we were, and their stories would somehow become entangled with the fire itself, as ours were. The flames reflected from three pairs of spectacle lenses could well have been dragons' eyes.

We were back at the carpark by eleven and dropped our packs with a satisfying thump. It had been a good trip, and we got all the blue we

wanted. Sven looked under the car and found someone had nicked his faulty primus — 'hope it blows up in their faces' — and I was pleased to see that my *enso* was still half there in the carpark gravel, despite several fishermen's cars coming and going. I rubbed it out.

■ *Cloud*. High-moving cirrus in New Zealand usually implies a front is on its way, often a nor'wester which brings heavy rain to the Southern Alps. They can endure for a week. Southerlies hit the east of the mountains with a short sharp shock and a drop in temperature. Sou'westers range on either side of the mountains with cold squalls, hail and can be interrupted with short periods of fine weather. Northerlies can bring wet weather to the mountains as well, only the easterly is benign. New Zealand is a windy place.

■ *South* (1919), Ernest Shackleton. In many ways Frank Worsley's account of crossing South Georgia is more gripping than Shackleton's, and he wrote two accounts: *Endurance* (1931) and *Shackleton's Boat Journey* (1933), republished in 1999 as *The Great Antarctic Rescue: Shackleton's boat journey*. Why he wrote two distinct versions is not clear; both books have details that the other doesn't. For example, the dangerous glissade on South Georgia is covered in great detail in *Endurance* but hardly at all in *Shackleton's Boat Journey*. The description of their arrival at the whaling station is brief in *Endurance* but fully elaborated in *Shackleton's Boat Journey* — so both accounts have to be read to get the full picture.

> 'While writing this seven years after [1923?] (almost), each step of that journey comes back clearly, and even now I again find myself counting our party — Shackleton, Crean, and I and — who was the other? Of course, there were only three, but it is strange that in mentally reviewing the crossing we should always think of a fourth, and then correct ourselves'. *The Great Antarctic Rescue: Shackleton's Boat Journey* (1933, 1999).

■ T. S. Eliot, *Journey of the Magi* (1927) and *The Waste Land* (1922).

■ *Solivagant*. In literature mythical figures are condemned to wander on a grand scale, the Wandering Jew, Kundry (the female alternative), Cain, Odysseus, the Flying Dutchman, the Ancient Mariner.

■ *The Autobiography of a Super-Tramp* (1908), William (W. H.) Davies. Apparently the 1980s pop group did get their name from Davies' book. In 1906 Professor Layal Shafee did an exhaustive study of hobos in America and estimated the number at about 500,000. By 1911 that had increased to 700,000, almost one per cent of the American population. During the 1930s Depression this number soared to millions.

The language of the hobos has crept into our lexicon: 'Main drag', 'glad rags', 'catch the westbound', 'moniker', 'on the fly', 'easy mark'. Some expressions didn't quite make it but I could put them to good use, such as 'California blankets' for newspapers, and 'a mulligan', a collective hobo stew of anything they had.

■ *The Tramp*. Charlie Chaplin first introduced his famous character in 1914, and it remained popular until the 1930s. It certainly might have helped W. H. Davies in making his career path plausible, and even romantic.

■ *Young Emma* (1980), W. H. Davies. Written in 1924, in his introduction George Bernard Shaw described Davies as a 'a free knight of the highway, lived like a pet bird on titbits'. Davies makes begging understandable, even natural, a Marxist redistribution of income, except that it was, and still is, largely the poor that give money to beggars.

■ *Roughnecks, Rolling Stones and Rouseabouts* (1977), John A. Lee. This is a good general introduction to the working men and swaggers of the late nineteenth century. Johnnie Lee has fallen out of fashion these days, but *Civilian into Soldier* is still one of the greatest books written about the First World War.

■ *The Lord of the Rings: Location Guidebook* (2011), Ian Brodie.

■ *Droving*. Originally, I had a longer section on droving in the Mavora chapter, but because it did not suit the rhythm of the text I removed it. However, some of the source material is of interest, so I have mentioned it here.

■ *The Drovers of Snowdonia*. Article on web. Drovers were known as 'porthmon'. It would take three weeks to bring cattle from Wales to London, and the corgi was often employed as a droving dog. Welsh drovers acted as a conduit for news, gossip and ideas, and it's said that the Welsh mountain villagers heard of the Battle of Waterloo in 1815 from the returning drovers. Travelling was dangerous then for single women and it was a tedious but safer option to join the drovers. Jane Evans of Carmarthenshire travelled with a droving team on her way to join Florence Nightingale's nurses in the Crimean War. Scotland had a huge network of droving roads, and the drovers met the cattle-dealers at a 'tryst' or market. The word carries echoes of 'trust', an essential prerequisite for drovers (or lovers for that matter) since most cattle business was done on credit.

- *The Droving Days*, L. E. Swan (1941–1952).

  'When I think back to those droving days, my thoughts are they were great days, sitting down on the side of the road, having a cup of tea and a sandwich. My dogs would be sitting around me waiting for a piece of bread. My leading dog would be in the lead of the mob holding them so we could have a bite to eat. It was like having a picnic. When I arrived at my destination I would put my dogs in the gig, climb in myself, and my horse would trot back home.'

MASON BAY

From Invercargill airport the small six-seater plane climbs and cants sharply over the pixelated farmland. A wetland gleams, and down below there's some green grass mounds with white flecks of spoonbills, and then comes Foveaux Strait, a long hungry surf rushing into the shore and forging its wavy imprint on the coastal dunes. Directly ahead is the blunt outline of Rakiura or Stewart Island, and to the west there's Centre Island, but even further to the west there's a small islet. I catch a glimpse of it through the murky plane window, although often it's completely submerged beneath sea-smoke.

Solander Island is little more than a rock, about 330 metres high, with sheer sides and no easy place to land. Several sealers were marooned here between 1808 and 1813, and their desperate plight is now a pitiful footnote in history. They were put ashore in 1808 to hunt seals, and the sealing ship *Fox* returned in 1809 but for some inexplicable reason failed to pick the men up, and the ship was subsequently wrecked on Amsterdam Island in 1810. The marooned men were forgotten. That same year, by the most excruciating bad luck, more sealers got washed ashore on Solander Island as castaways, which sounds romantic — except that it wasn't.

These eight or so men struggled to exist. There was no spring on the island, so they relied on fresh water from rain collected in briny pools. There was no food, except seals and titi or muttonbirds. They lived in a damp claustrophobic hole still called the 'sealers cave', and the story goes that after five years (let's just repeat that, *five* years) one man went mad and had to be killed by the others. They were truly living in the wild 'immerged into a state of entire hopelessness' (as author Robert McNab puts it), but eventually the men were rescued by another sealing captain who vaguely remembered them being abandoned there and popped in on the off-chance.

This chapter is more or less about the wild and the castaways that find themselves in it. Those sealers were desperate to leave the wild, and we're jetting into it. They had five years to cogitate on what the wild meant; we've got seven days.

Solander Island has gone west as the plane skims around the Rugged Islands, and with Codfish Island on the starboard side the pilot lines up for our landing at West Ruggedy beach. The touchdown was smooth. I've taken these flights before and each time I have initially felt a powerful sense of being abandoned as I watch the plane roar away empty, half wanting to call it back.

The light on the beach was enriched as if it were plasticine, and I was sure I could grab a handful of it and mould it in my palm. Bladder seaweed had accumulated in knotted bundles on the high-tide line, and ochre kelp splayed into the sea like the hair of a young girl swimming. As we waited for the next flight of people to arrive, Phil wandered off along the shore and practically vanished into the foggy sea-mist. Rocks were humped and black in shapes of polished dinosaurs, wet with the outgoing tide, and covered with strange purple jelly things stuck onto the rocks that squirted at a tentative push. It was as if we'd entered the Jurassic period.

The second plane-load arrived, and this time the pilot took a longer and harder look at the shrinking beach, turning tightly at the headland and making a safe prompt landing. After only an hour the tide was coming in and the aerodrome was about to be abandoned until the next day. Two more of our party would come in tomorrow, so we struggled into our packs with a week's worth of food and headed to East Ruggedy Hut, about an hour away.

The hut was chocker with trampers on the North West Circuit, plus several hunters who had flown in and were deeply established in yarning sites around the woodstove, dishing out white-tailed deer stew to all newcomers. It was convivial and crowded.

I erected a fly five minutes from the hut over an old tent site in the bush. A fly is a large square nylon sheet, with cords at each corner that are tied onto trees so it becomes a room without walls or doors; it strains in any wind, frustrated by the ties. Crown ferns act as doorkeepers and the birds can fly completely through in airy escapade, and two fantails did just that.

A fly wouldn't be much use in a real storm, but it stops dew from falling on the sleeping bag and gives a peculiar sense of ownership of a

forested space. Nick Hunt mentioned this strange phenomenon: 'The tent went up authoritatively, magically transforming my status from potential rough sleeper to temporary resident.'

It's easy and lazy to think a forest goes to sleep when we do, but that night all the awakening sounds of a Rakiura night crept under the fly. A morepork. A mosquito with a lot of hungry zees in it. A weta, I think, scraping its back legs. Quite shortly after dark I heard a bustling, rustling sound, and within minutes a kiwi shuffled in. I couldn't see it, it was pitch black, but they are noisy blighters. Snuffles, scratches, a sort of grunt from time to time. It scratched about the ferns looking for grubs and was so close I could hear a quiet clicking sound as its beak clipped together rapidly. Then I fell asleep; it'd been a big day.

Why did we come to this wild place? What was on this shore that we needed?

On Waituna Bay beach the debris is humungous. Driftwood is piled high in greasy hillocks and was puzzling to scramble over. There were large logs as black as basalt pillars, chunks of off-brown seaweed, and buoys of all colours from pink to bleached blue and iris yellow. Stuff has been stranded, washed ashore, torn-off, dumped, cast up, then tumbled and clawed back out, only to be thrown onto the beach and stranded yet again. There were lots of fishermen's plastic crates and so many red and orange plastic gloves that passing trampers have tugged them onto driftwood sticks to utilise them as zombie track markers.

The driftwood will burn, after some coaxing, and Doug got a huge fire going fiercely as the high tide got higher and higher, so it was a race between boiling the billy and getting a sousing. Codfish Island was a blurred lump in the rain and mist, and the strong surf pushed and tugged at the pebbles. It's not a shore on which anyone would flick out a beach towel and sunbathe, and the sandflies would make short work of you if you did. I've been told by a local fisherman that the sea is teeming with fish, and I can believe it, but on that day it felt lifeless. We did see one seal.

It was to take us two days' tramping from East Ruggedy to Mason Bay via Big Hellfire Hut. Most of the time we wore parkas. Rain mished

in with the sunshine, with harsh doses of chilled wind and wet boots sloshing through the mud. Everyone got bitten by sandflies, we lost gear at every hut, and got sweaty and smelly. Why did we do it? I guess we thought it did us good. Maybe it was an antidote to materialism — except we consumed a lot of stuff to get here — and perhaps it gave us a chance to be reconciled with wild landscapes and accept that they have value and soul; but in all honesty, none of us would want to live here.

Torrents of air bombard Rakiura's west coast with rapid fronts, pummelling squalls, blows, sou'west busters, and intense storms that raise a huge surf and bring in millions of tons of sand and shingle. It also attracts flotsam and jetsam from a whole hemisphere. At 47 degrees latitude Rakiura sneaks inside the Roaring Forties and this chronic wind has been measured at South Cape — which is the bottom tip of Stewart Island — at an average of forty-five kilometres an hour, every hour, of every day.

After a hurried lunch at Waituna Bay we followed the track into the forest which was not only comforting, but several degrees warmer. The light drooped through the dark aisles of matai and rimu trunks until it got soaked up by the blotting paper humus. It makes perfect sense to me that we built our cathedrals to resemble forests — silence and sanctuary — although frequently the silences do not always seem entirely natural, as if the plants and birds are holding their breath, exhaling as we pass. At eleven in the morning a kiwi scuttled right out in front of Paula and me with a comical Mrs Tiggy-Winkle burst of energy, then quickly dived under the blechnums and crown ferns where it waited invisibly until we'd gone.

Bellbirds smothered a massive rata tree and took a lot of pleasure in trying to gazump each other with louder and louder calls. On the ridge crest a tui glided sharply underneath, and on its outstretched black wings were two brilliant iridescent blue flashes. Big Hellfire Hut is built on top of a massive sand dune and through the bushy turpentines and alpine olearias you can hear the surf as it gets remixed with bellbird calls and the eternal westerly wind. I took a photo of a spongy grey lichen that reached halfway up a trunk, as if the sea-foam had got stuck on a stick after the tide had ebbed away.

It was probably thirty years ago that I stayed in quite a decent two-person hut at Little Hellfire Beach, but it must have been swept away by a tidal surge, for the hut site is now marked with a shambles of fishermen's junk and a chunk of whale vertebrae. Someone has reassembled a shelter — knitting the planks and driftwood together — and we huddled out of the tearing wind.

At Mason Bay it was like being thrown inside a vast washing machine, with suds flying and the opaque air mashed up in tones of grey. Everything about us was erased as we flickered through; our voices, our footprints, even our silhouettes disappeared. Further along the beach a whale jawbone was being blizzarded into white, and on the surf line a drift log was covered with thousands of a strange small shellfish (a type of barnacle I think) suddenly thrown into the open air and desperately waving about on rubbery feet. A fast squall from the west brought rain that stung and made my pack vibrate. Black clouds boiled overhead and the wind whipped the marram grass into thousands of metallic eels. The momentary storm blundered past, leaving blue sky over The Gutter and a vivid sun that pumped silver light down on the land as blunt and cold as the rain had been before.

One of the pale German backpacker girls who had followed us from Hellfire Hut said — the only time she spoke to me — that she was frightened on that day on the beach. She'd never seen such huge waves before and felt her senses squeezed between the high sand cliffs and the rollercoaster surf which gnaws at the beach. The volume is set somewhere between a jet engine and white noise from a television set, and the roar of Mason Bay can be heard in Halfmoon Bay township nearly thirty kilometres away.

The thirty-bunk public hut is inland behind the dunes and coastal forest. In February it was a happening place, with people arriving and disappearing all day long. Two serious grizzle-haired Australian men flew in at lunchtime, their first night on the ten-day North West Circuit. They had big plans. After Rakiura they were 'doing' the six-day Hollyford Track, and then, they explained to me in a determined tone, the five-day Dusky Track. They peered at maps, looked out of the window and fidgeted with their plastic mugs, wanting to get on with it.

A small tour group with a boisterous Kiwi guide flew in and put up tents, ready for the next day's walk to Freshwater Hut. A DOC ranger arrived, with two cheerful volunteer older ladies who were restoring the historic sheep dip. More arrivals. An American couple, father and daughter, tramped from Hellfire, as did an affable Kiwi couple. A solo Frenchman in flip-flops passed through on his own race against time. I gave him a chocolate bar: 'Merci', then he vanished. A plane landed with a quartet of Invercargill walkers who were doing the Mason Bay experience in one day: landing on the beach, walking to Freshwater Hut and then a fast jetboat out. There were also four DOC staff staying at the new Homestead Hunters Hut with kiwi hunting dogs in muzzles.

An excited squeal of 'kiwi' caused an exodus from the hut. On Rakiura they feed during the day and a sighting is almost guaranteed. One pecked its busy way right past the hut door, and the DOC guys reckoned there must be ten pairs in the vicinity of the hut. That evening there was a theme of satisfaction in the hut, with trampers boiling spaghetti, peering at the hut warden's posted weather forecast, chatting, playing cards, doing crosswords, and steam emerging from a dozen cooking pots in a sweaty humidifying mist. So if you wanted to get away from it all perhaps Mason Bay in February wasn't the place. Yet all of us came seeking the wild.

'I was out walking one evening,
not meaning to go very far…'

I've sung that line from the Irish folk song the 'Black Velvet Band' several times but I'd not bothered to grasp its musical irony. Here was a young lad, frisky, on the make, strolling in Dublin on a Friday night with the boys, and as you'd expect some heavy drinking took place in a bar. A pretty girl catches his eye and chums him up, then places a stolen watch in his pocket, and the next thing he knows he is being transported on a one-way trip 'far from his friends and relations' to Van Diemen's Land. The convicts must have joked about the strange Dutch name, the island where 'men die', which wasn't so far from the truth. Port Macquarie or Sydney was a doddle compared to Tasmania, and Port Arthur was notoriously where the bad boys went.

We sang a lot of songs around campfires. My old tramping club songbook is full of stirring Irish ditties about rebellion and vagabondage — 'Botany Bay', 'The Wild Colonial Boy', 'The Rising of the Moon', 'Wild Rover', 'Whiskey in the Jar', 'Bound for South Australia', 'Fields of Athenry' — and we laid into them with relish.

There are hundreds of songs from that era: Irish ballads and sea shanties, lilting love laments, and rougish ditties. We supposed they were all chanted on the lips of convicts, whispered and torn from broken hearts; they are terrible songs of dislocation and transportation in which reluctant men and women were sent to another hemisphere to fend for themselves. As far as those shipped abroad were concerned (and the authorities were determined to keep their end of the bargain), they were not coming back.

Once they'd worked off their sentence many of these ex-cons drifted to the bars and brothels of the Sydney waterfront, where they were easy prey for the sealing captains. In the nineteenth century I don't believe there could have been a harsher, more desperate job in the world. Seal voyages were typically two to four years long. The men that were trapped on Solander Island might earn a '108th lay' or share of the profit, but clothes and food had to come out of their 'lay', and the sailors could end up in debt to the captain and owners, and then have to take another voyage just to pay off that debt. It was really slavery, another type of transportation.

What did those sealers sing? Not the 'Black Velvet Band', which was drafted in the 1850s and set in Essex. Nor 'Botany Bay', which was first recorded in 1885 in a musical burlesque called *Little Jack Shepherd* in London, or indeed the 'Wild Rover', a famous drinking song sung from many a greasy pub-room floor, but (and this may seem unbelievable) it was probably written as a temperance song in 1845. Listen to the words again.

'I'll go back to my parents, confess what I've done,
And I'll ask them to forgive their prodigal son,
And if they will do so, as often before,
Then I never will play the wild rover no more.'

And the sealers definitely did not sing the 'The Fields of Athenry', a great nineteenth-century Irish anthem about transporting convicts: it was written by Pete St John in 1970.

Are these songs lies then? Sham songs? It depends. The events happened a hundred years or more before the songs were ever written, but the songs became like castaways themselves, looking for a voice as dislocated as the men and women were. They were constantly re-adapted and retuned by later musicians to fit the times, the country and what people expected from the song. They are true in a peculiar way and, anyway, a rousing chorus is more important than a trifling historic detail — any pub band knows that.

But one song the sealers definitely sang was the real thing, 'Davie Lowston', and it arrived before the European settlers did. It's New Zealand's oldest song in English, written about a group of sealers abandoned for four years on a ghastly speck of an offshore island. No, not Solander Island this time; these ones were landed in Open Bay Islands off the West Coast in 1810. And forgotten.

'We cured ten thousand skins for the fur, for the fur
Yes, we cured ten thousand skins for the fur
Brackish water, putrid seal, we did all of us fall ill
For to die, for to die, for to die.'

Except, obviously, they didn't die. They were rescued by chance by John Grono on the brig *Governor Bligh* in 1814. Frank Fyfe researched the song's origins and believed it was written in Sydney not long after the shattered men had returned with their 10,000 skins. The melody and repeated refrain idea was taken from a popular song on sailing ships called 'Captain Kidd', and the words were probably assembled 'by some old lag in the Rocks area of old Sydney Town, with an ear for a good tale and an eye out for possible free drinks'.

Let's toast him then, that unknown bar crawler with a gift for a rhyme, for most songs either start in pubs or end up in them. Even if they are abandoned — and 'Davie Lowston' was not regularly sung again until the 1960s — someone will discover them, dust them off and make them

real again. And when nothing remains of the actual history, then it is the song that keeps us singing, like that sweet ironic line from 'The Fields of Athenry':

'From a lonely prison wall, I heard a young man calling,
Nothing matters Mary when you're free…'

The next day was a free day, and we all went different ways.

Bernie took off to Doughboy Bay. Maree, Rachel, Paula and Cathy headed down south along the beach towards the old Kilbride Homestead and 'The Gutter', which is a tombolo that connects the main island to the Ernest Islands. I don't know where Phil went, but Doug and I decided that on our day off we would go and have a look at Big Sand Pass, and to check on the cheerful 'girls' who were digging out the sheep dip, and making good progress too. At the new Homestead Hunters Hut the DOC kiwi workers were getting ready for their day's work, the dogs muzzled, sniffing, eager.

On a tip from the DOC guys we picked up a pink tape line that threaded through the manuka forest clipped like a shorn sheep and which led to an open sand channel that fed down from the pass in a mini river. This is not a bad analogy, for the sand was being washed like a rapid over the exposed rock. Struggling up against the blasting wind, the place reminded me of those early 1970s black and photos of a Martian landscape. Not a shred of a plant existed on the pass. I found Doug sheltering behind a rock.

To the north-west was the tiny high blip of Solander Island, otherwise it was simply ocean, huge as usual, the beach marginally less windy and empty except for tiny dots of people moving south. The beach sand was covered with arabesques and rigmaroles, and each tide swept the old patterns away as the wind forged a new design on top. Imagine buying a carpet that changed its pattern every day of the year.

At the Martins Creek Hunters Hut an affable old geezer and his patient son were ensconced for a week. He said that he had been coming here for forty years, but he doesn't hunt much now, just looks, and cooks and reminiscences. When we told them how many white-tailed deer the hunters at East Ruggedy had shot they looked resigned but unsurprised.

He laughed: 'It's the pick of the blocks, but here, we haven't seen one. They're cunning bastards, or else I'm getting old, but wouldn't mind some real meat though, getting sick of this tinned stuff, eh?'

In the afternoon I wandered on alone towards Big Sand Hill, following a labyrinth of dunes as they rucked and writhed inland as a static wave. Once or twice I got a good squeak from the sand. White-tailed deer tracks and kiwi prints were everywhere. Occasionally, there were pancake patches of rock, interspersed with thick glacier banks of creamy sand racked into crevasses.

I had read a research paper on Mason Bay that burbled excitedly about 'aeolian suspension' — which I think means sand stinging in your eyes — and about the orange pingao sedge that lives under this permanent stress and seems to prefer it that way. But marram grass stops the sand from moving, which is why DOC is trying to kill it. It was introduced in the 1930s by the farmers to stabilise the dunes. They wanted to 'hold' this landscape still, not only to benefit the sheep but I think to give themselves a psychological comfort. To tie down the land to its intended purpose — making money.

Big Sand Hill is about three kilometres from the sea, and manuka clings to the top like an ill-fitting wig with sand channels combing past on either side. At 156 metres above sea level, it's not a bad view. I watched a large exotic-looking beetle struggling up the sand, mis-stepping and tumbling back down. When it started up again I gave it a helpful nudge, whereupon it panicked, and plunged back the way it came.

One writer thought humans were a type of weed, scarcely different from thistles or gorse or rats: aggressive, unwanted, in the wrong place, and supremely able to take over and settle in. Sounds a bit like me. A £25 Pom when I arrived in New Zealand in 1974, I made myself at home in this foreign place, singing the people's songs, tramping their mountains, making love to their women. That was some forty years ago, and when you're an inadvertent castaway you tend to notice the other odds and sods.

The sands of Mason Bay have sucked in every type of flotsam: convicts, marram grass, ambergris hunters, rats, shipwrecked sealers, beachcombers, plastic buoys, beetles, wild cats, immigrant Poms, Irish

drinking songs, and once you take this point of view then most of this landscape has been invaded from the off-cuts and leftovers of somewhere else. There's nothing pure here, maybe nothing pure anywhere. In the natural world being a castaway is not exceptional at all, it's the norm and the 'balance of nature' is a lie. It suggests harmony, and since humans are not in balance it's nice to think nature could be, but with no wall around paradise everything has to survive as best it can.

From my little sandy summit the light got richer and deeper over the sea, and crepuscular light bands pierced through the clouds as if an alien spaceship might at this exact moment force itself down the landing rays. A plane took off from the bay, the last flight, and I saw some tiny dots of people on the beach moving north. Cooling air and the taste of salt in the mouth. My insect acquaintance beetled away, and the wind broomed the sand-slate clean and fussed about in a housewifely fashion, obviously dying to get rid of the guests and clean up all the mess they'd made.

This is the road at the end of all the roads. The most southerly highway in New Zealand which begins at Freshwater Landing on the Freshwater River and travels with well-made straightness to Mason Bay across a huge wetland that the sheep farmers were determined to drain. The road was built in the late 1930s as a work relief scheme for unemployed men on Stewart Island. It's essentially self-serving. The Depression gangs built the road to boost the two or three lonely sheep and cattle farmers at the bottom of the world, farmers whose income was highly precarious, yet who gained temporary profitability by being able to supply fresh meat to the road-workers.

The first car that made the journey was a Model T Ford in the late 1930s, but it had to be shipped ten kilometres across Patterson Inlet on a punt. Then it made its spluttering journey across the thirteen kilometres of road to Mason Bay, had its photograph taken, where it then had to retrace its journey on the punt. There is a glorious pointlessness in this isolated road, detached from any real justification for its existence. It quickly started to sink back into what the locals lovingly call the 'chocolate swamp', foot by foot, and some of the old bridge sleepers can be seen some two metres below the teapot-coloured water.

It's a day's steady tramping on the old road to the Freshwater River, which is as black, reflective and mysterious as a goblin's mirror. Flax and yellow kowhai edge the water, which slides in seductive ease with faint ripples and curls as dozens of winged insects skip about on the surface admiring themselves. Kingfishers 'kek kek' from the branches of trees and on the landing stage it's easy to imagine that several metres underneath the dark waters are black eels, patient and poised.

The Freshwater Hut was full so I pitched the fly outside, and that night I could hear the kiwis calling close by, perhaps two or three. About midnight, I woke up with a strange sense of presence.

Something had joined me. That something had sneaked under the fly and lodged itself snugly against my sleeping bag. I could feel a warmth, a small body, and I sleepily and illogically speculated whether a kiwi had got lonely and tucked itself into bed with me. Or a rat. Just as I made a move to find out, the something suddenly dug its claws into my airbed and accelerated out of the fly and I sat up startled and heard the gentle hiss as the airbed deflated and left me on the cold ground. After a lousy night's sleep it was not hard to find the culprit. In the morning a small wild black cat peeped around the hut corner. Its yellow eyes wide and expressionless. The DOC ranger at the info centre in Half Moon Bay explained when I asked about the wild cats at Freshwater Landing.

'The backpackers keep feeding them.'

'They must eat the kiwis?'

'We try and shoot them. The cats, of course.'

Animals thrown away, pets biffed out into the wild and spreading slowly through the island chomping on flightless kiwi and kakapo until in desperation the kakapo were removed to Codfish Island.

In the morning we loaded our packs on board the jetboat — all except Doug who had decided to run all the way to Half Moon Bay and almost beat us — and swished down the Freshwater River, then out into Patersons Inlet. The pilot enthusiastically opened up the throttle and we hammered across the wide water with islands flying past. A lone putt-putt trawler was returning to harbour and two vivid red kayaks hugged the shoreline. The midday sky was silver and the sea was aluminium, two giant metal plates squeezing the horizon and forging a golden edge.

'The inescapable persistence of the past.
The inexactness of the exact present.'

We live long lives but when we look back they seem short. My memories are potent, but I think they are also full of secret conspiracies and misalignments. I've joined the best of these bits together and squeezed out the rubbish, all the false starts and misgivings, the weeks of dullness and dreary seasons as well as some serious mistakes and then quietly announced to myself: 'It's been a good life.' Well, so it has, but memory isn't gospel.

It's more a composite of images, moods and intangible emotions, stitched and edited by the brain to superficially resemble a coherent story, but which I suspect is a lovely illusion which I cling to because it's easier than trying to remember what I actually experienced. We seldom occupy a single present moment but a continuum of memory and actuality, flicking from one to the other like time-travellers with extraordinary ease and guile — telling stories that might happen, did happen, or are happening now. Yet despite all these uncertainties (at times almost self-delusions), memory is the most powerful landscape of all.

I've visited Mason Bay several times now, sometimes sunshine, sometimes storms with black squalls beating across the bay, and always the noise of the sea pawing at the land. I've come at different seasons and with different people, walking in, flying in, but now these visits have meshed with each other, the colours blurred, and the scenic views have been simplified until they look uncannily like the photos I took. Walking along the beach it's as if there are two landscapes in parallel, the real Mason Bay, and the one in my mind's memory, and I'm not sure which is the better. Perhaps they both deserve a hearing, there's truth in both of them, and my brain kindly and unfortunately projects the old imprinted images onto my eyes even as I make brand new footprints.

Well, it might explain a sense of disappointment, firstly, when I return to Mason Bay, and then a slow rediscovery of what it was about the place that keeps me coming back. It made me smile inwardly and nostalgically, and in some odd psychological way the land smiled back. Over forty years I've changed, and Mason Bay has changed. It is an enormously powerful place, shrugging off human efforts to occupy it, yet humans

are so bloody persistent and come with ideas and notions that challenge everything. They introduce plants that alter the views, animals that eat into other plants' homeland, and later when we try to exterminate these animals, we find the task too much, and either learn to live with what we've done or shrug off the consequences.

Yet out of all this interference and struggle emerges a kind of unexpected harmony. The tooth and claw nature of these wild places — indeed all of the wild places in this book — somehow gives these landscapes a sense of completeness: a forest full to the brim, driftwood piled as high as a house, the dead black rag of a muttonbird on the surf line. There's death everywhere, but life everywhere as well.

A New Zealand paint manufacturer has produced a colour which they named 'Mason Bay'. The kindest thing I can say about it is that it is a sort of polite off-white grey, with a hint of sand, a neutral paint I suppose, and designed by people who see scenery as wallpaper. Yet there's nothing remotely neutral here on the beach. There's a pulse. Alive. Wilful. And somehow nature accepts the ceaseless change, the struggle, the unevenness and unfairness of life, and by some alchemy transforms these harms into harmony, and reconciliation. Even in a fierce storm on the beach of Mason Bay, things seem right.

■ *Murihiku and the Southern Islands 1770–1829* (1907), Robert McNab. There seems little reason to doubt the Solander Island story as McNab dedicates five pages to it, in which he tries to unravel the puzzle of what actually occurred.

■ *Sealing in the Southern Oceans 1788–1833* (2010), Rhys Richards. Richards described sealing as the world's first global industry. From America to the Aleutians, the California coast to Russia, South America to Shetland Islands, Australia and New Zealand, and eventually Antarctica, if there were seals, they were slaughtered. The peak trade on the London market was 1793 with 361,903 skins, in the Canton market it was 1801 with 338,922 skins. By 1810 it was mostly over.

■ *The Cruise of the Cachalot: the story of a New Bedford whaler* (1883), Frank Bullen. A first-hand account of sperm whaling with some intriguing anecdotes about Stewart Island.

■ *Walking the Woods and the Water: in Patrick Leigh Fermor's footsteps from the Hook of Holland to the Golden Horn* (2014), Nick Hunt.

■ *Taka: a vignette life of William Tucker 1784–1817* (2005), Peter Entwisle. A somewhat speculative account of William Tucker, transported at age thirteen, sealer on the Antipodes, Auckland Island, and Macquarie Island, who lived and died violently in Otago Harbour. It gives an insight into convict life and why sealing gangs were formed of men who had little choice.

■ *In the Grip of An Island: early Stewart Island history* (1982), Olga Sansom. The old joke about Stewart Island is that you get four seasons every day, except summer.

■ *Mason Bay dunelands*. Article in *New Zealand Geographic*, Nov–Dec 2007. Also Phil Peterson research blog on the movement of sand at Masons Bay.

■ *Song: Davie Lowston*. There are many variants on the verses and on Lowston's name, 'Lowiston', 'Lowerston', and in the newspaper clipping of 20 December 1813 it is 'Lowreiston'. Frank Fyfe, *The Story of David Lowston, a pre-colonial NZ song* (1970), only available online.

■ *The Fatal Shore: the epic of Australia's founding* (1986), Robert Hughes. Many of the transported men's wives wrote to the prison administration in England, begging to be sent with their convict husbands to the ends of the earth. Anything was better than being left in absolute poverty with hungry

children to feed. Few, if indeed any, of these requests were granted.

■ *Road to Mason Bay*. Exactly when this road was built is unclear. A journalist from the *Otago Daily Times*, 14 January 1916, talks of walking a 'government road' to Masons Bay, but this was probably a pack-track. According to the *Auckland Star*, 18 July 1936, the Stewart Island County Council suggested a road be built from Half Moon Bay to Mason Bay as a public works scheme for unemployed Stewart Islanders.

■ *The inescapable persistence of the past*. From the 1975 film *The Mirror* by Russian filmmaker Andrei Tarkovsky, which explores past, present and memory in a non-linear way, which he called 'sculpting in time'. Tarkovsky dismissed 'colour film as a commercial gimmick' and insisted that in everyday life one does not notice colour most of the time. It is as if he is saying we 'see' in colour, but we 'feel' in black and white. See *Wikipedia*.

■ *Idling*. [In the following section] It was Arthur C. Clarke who first made the analogy with a vengeful Odysseus, and in many ways the film *2001: A Space Odyssey* culminates in that idea.

IDLING

I'm back on the Port Hills again, several summers later this time, on top of Mt Vernon enjoying a day where the light is warm and milky.

This time I brought my hand glass and found that the busy little red money spiders resolved themselves into six-legged mites with feelers, still running after something that I can't see. A small orange lichen revealed tufts of coiffed hair, and the surface of the 'rock' turned out to be mostly a dense black lichen that I couldn't scratch off with a fingernail. I amused myself with the conceit that rock climbers on the Port Hills are actually lichen climbers.

On this little rock, the size of a pudding bowl, many layers of lichen species have stacked themselves on top of each other like a condominium on the beach, all trying to get the best view, and the red mites jog frantically amongst these lichen canyons like disco club ravers. There's a whole city here and you've got to wonder whether something up there isn't examining us with a hand glass, marvelling at the little runts running about.

Before starting this book, I had two suspicions. The first was that we are not particularly kind to landscapes. The second was that we often do not notice (or choose not to notice) the places where we live, the lands that we build our lives on. Really the two ideas are connected, for because we don't notice the natural world, we really don't care much what we do to it.

I know the title of the book is ambiguous. It is obvious that the earth is becoming worn out from our demands: plastic pollution washing through the oceans, the Artic melting, all the fish being eaten, the soils depleted. Species extinction is so rapid that many iconic animals will disappear from the wild in my lifetime, certainly in the lifetime of my daughter — tigers, polar bears, snow leopards, elephants — and after the great vanishing, then what?

We haven't a clue really, nor the nous. We're like brats in the playroom left too long on our own, and now our only plan is to hope our children are smarter than us, but what will they say when they see the mess we've left behind? Will they be like Odysseus who returned after seven years of wandering and found his estate wasted? The tenants whined (as they always do) 'we did the best we could'. He slew them. The human species is in a race between our creative genius and our unquenchable rage.

> 'What is man? Storyteller, mythmaker, and destroyer of the living world. Thinking with a gabble of reason, emotion and religion. Lucky accident of primate evolution during the Pleistocene. Mind of the biosphere. Magnificent in imaginative power and exploratory drive, yet yearning to be more master than steward of a declining planet. Born with the capacity to survive and evolve forever, able to render the biosphere eternal also. Yet arrogant, reckless, lethally predisposed to favor self, tribe, and short-term futures. Obsequious to imagined higher beings, contemptuous toward lower forms of life.'

It was the American biologist Edward O. Wilson who wrote this passage and boldly suggested in his book *Half-Earth* that we give half the planet to all the other species.

What a nice idea, but it won't happen of course. Still, it is worth asking: what is the human destination? Are we striving for a constant betterment of living standards, or are we attempting some sort of harmonious existence with other humans, and with nature itself? Will we include other species in our vision of utopia? Or is humanity stuck on its own vicious little Easter Island where we will put up statues to our glory and speculate on what will happen next?

Well, these aren't going to be my problems. I'm happy to count my blessings, relaxing against this warm rock on the Port Hills doing nothing and feeling a bit like the rock itself — absorbed, poised, fulfilled. A wise friend once remarked to me: 'Appreciate without possessing, it's one of the answers, isn't it?'

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