

BODEN BLACK (A Novel)

and

WITH AXE AND PEN IN THE NEW ZEALAND ALPS: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN  
OVERSEAS AND NEW ZEALAND WRITTEN ACCOUNTS OF CLIMBING  
MOUNT COOK 1882-1920 AND THE EMERGENCE OF A NEW ZEALAND  
VOICE IN MOUNTAINEERING LITERATURE

BY

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis has two components: creative and critical.

The creative component is the novel *Boden Black*. It is a first person narrative, imagined as a memoir, and traces the life of its protagonist, Boden Black, from his childhood in the late 1930s to adulthood in the present day. The plot describes various significant encounters in the narrator's life: from his introduction to the Mackenzie Basin and the Mount Cook region in the South Island of New Zealand, through to meetings with mountaineers and 'lost' family members. Throughout his journey from child to butcher to poet, Boden searches for ways to describe his response to the natural landscape.

The critical study is titled *With Axe and Pen in the New Zealand Alps*. It examines the published writing of overseas and New Zealand mountaineers climbing at Aoraki/Mount Cook between 1882 and 1920. I advance the theory that there are stylistic differences between the writing of overseas and New Zealand mountaineers and that the beginning of a distinct New Zealand mountaineering voice can be traced back to the first accounts written by New Zealand mountaineers attempting to reach the summit of Aoraki/Mount Cook.

The first mountaineer to attempt to climb Aoraki/Mount Cook was William Spotswood Green, an Irishman who introduced high alpine climbing to New Zealand in 1882. Early New Zealand mountaineers initially emulated the conventions of British mountaineering literature as exemplified by Green and other famous British mountaineers. These pioneering New Zealand mountaineers attempted to impose the language of the 'civilised' European alpine-world on to the 'uncivilised' world of the Southern Alps. However, as New Zealand mountaineering became more established at Aoraki/Mount Cook from the 1890s through to 1920, a distinct New Zealand voice developed in mountaineering literature: one that is marked by a sense of connection to place expressed through site-specific, factual observation and an unadorned, sometimes laconic, vernacular writing style.

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# **BODEN BLACK**

By Laurence Fearnley

Whenever the opportunity presented itself, my father would lift down the framed enlargement he kept on the shelf above the cutting block and show it to the customer who stood waiting to pay for her meat.

More often than not, I was able to predict what would come next. The conversation which unfolded took a familiar shape. For example:

‘Do you see who that is?’ my father asked, jabbing his finger at the glass.

The woman, not one of his regular customers, took a step forward and peered at the snap, examining the blurred black and white image of two men standing side by side on the summit of a mountain.

‘Your son?’ she responded uncertainly despite having seen me only a few seconds earlier as I started to refill some of the meat trays on display in the window.

‘Boden, isn’t it?’ she guessed, squinting at the picture.

Her response was not the one my father was looking for.

‘No, not him,’ he replied, brushing my likeness with the edge of his stained reddish hand. ‘Not him,’ he repeated, his voice barely containing his excitement. ‘Next to him. The big fella.’

At that point the customer often took the photograph from my father’s hand and surveyed the mountain scene more closely, turning it this way and that to catch the light.

Behind the figures, disappearing towards the bottom corner of the snap, was a long, undulating ridge line, punctuated by small shadowy indentations—foot-prints in the snow. Taking up the remaining background was sky, featureless around the heads of the men, but lower down it was possible to detect a white carpet of cloud. The surface of this cloud was smooth but not flat; it was rippled like sand exposed at low tide.

It was difficult to recognise the figures because both men wore metal-framed snow goggles. The dark lenses obscured the men’s eyes but reflected the partial silhouette of a third figure—that of the photographer. Pushed back onto the crown of the shorter man’s head was a balaclava while the other man, the ‘big fella’, wore a white cotton peaked cap with neck and earflaps—the kind of headwear favoured by soldiers in the desert. Though the sky was clear, the cloth of both men’s jackets was flapping, indicating that the weather was windy. Indeed, if the customer had had more time with the photograph, she should have noticed that the sharp outline of the ridge behind the men was softened by spindrift pluming skyward. But my father made a grab for the picture and, his voice rising hopefully, asked, ‘Now do you see who it is?’

The woman shrugged. She was still uncertain. Could he give her a clue? I remained carefully out of the woman's line of vision, hovering in the small workspace separating the front of the shop from the chiller out the back. I could see the woman but I was too embarrassed to intervene. On the one hand I wanted to disown my father but, on the other, I didn't want to deny him this small pleasure.

I experienced this conflict whenever he began his performance. If it hadn't involved me it would have been bearable. But it required my presence in order for my father to complete the show. And for me the performance was false. I knew only too well that despite appearances to the contrary—my jubilant smile, my raised ice axe—behind the dark lenses my eyes expressed alarm. No one could see it in the photograph but I was scared. My feet were rooted to the spot, my hands inside my mittens were clammy and my pulse, I remember clearly, was racing. Having reached the summit of the Middle Peak of Mount Cook all I could think was: how on earth am I going to get down?

'Tell you what,' said my father. 'Take one more look and if you still can't guess...' He didn't get the chance to finish because at that precise moment a look of faint recognition surfaced on the woman's face. I could see it in the way she frowned, puzzled. An inner voice said, 'It looks like him—but no, it can't be. Can it?' She didn't want to appear foolish but taking charge of the moment—if only to put an end to the game—she mumbled, 'Hillary?'

'Yes!' roared my father, the skin on his face flushing—so proud was he of the photograph and what it implied. 'Sir Edmund Hillary...' he chortled, stroking the great mountaineer's hair with his stubby thumb. 'That's my son Boden on top of Mount Cook and beside him, as you so rightly say, is the greatest living climber of our generation.' He paused, beamed at the woman who, from the look of joy on his face, might now have been his closest friend and ally. Neither of them was aware of me in the background, muttering 'Middle Peak—it's just the Middle Peak'.

At this stage in the game, Nathaniel glanced my way. It was my signal to reappear. I hesitated, however. Perhaps, for once, I could pretend I hadn't noticed or turn my back, retreat into the cold safety of the freezer? Instead, I took a step forward. It was as if the beam from a bright spotlight was falling on me. Whereas minutes before I was my father's invisible assistant, I was now the star act: me with my fingers clinging to a tray full of pure beef sausages.

'Here you are,' said my father as I re-entered the shop. I nodded and smiled at the woman who said, 'Hullo' for the second time that day. As I stood, looking at my feet, I



wondered if my father would launch into the second act. Before I had time to hope that he might abandon the show he remarked, ‘See those sausages?’ He nodded towards the tray held in my hands. ‘I sent a tray of those sausages up to my boy on Cook and I heard back—via Boden here—that Hillary thought they were the best he had ever tasted.’ He shook his head in disbelief. ‘Imagine, sausages made by my very own hands winding up on Hillary’s plate...’ Though a cynic could have detected a hint of false modesty in my father’s expression, he was, in truth, deeply moved. The fact that Edmund Hillary had enjoyed his sausages—and for that I can vouch—humbled my father as completely as if the Queen had placed an order for one of his black puddings.

I could have breathed a little more easily if he had stopped then, but ever the businessman he suddenly winked at the woman across the counter and said, conspiratorially, ‘You should take some for your husband. Sir Ed’s bangers!’ He paused and for one dreadful moment I feared he might add ‘as eaten on Everest’ but to my great relief, he didn’t. He simply reached across to my tray and speared a string with his fork, lifting it up for the customer to see.

The woman looked from my father to me and back again. Her features, soft a moment before, sharpened. Like many previous customers, she weighed us up, deciding whether or not my father was simply having a bit of good natured fun or whether there was something more sinister involved. She refused to be tricked and my father had another trick coming if he thought he could pull the wool over her eyes. But then, just as suddenly, she relaxed. She even smiled. She was willing to indulge my father, provided he played by the rules and didn’t become too greedy.

‘Go on, then,’ she said, ‘cut me off four.’

Her eyes were keen and my father, aware of her scrutiny, made sure to select four of the plumpest from the string. ‘Lovely,’ he murmured as he wrapped them in paper, ‘Ed’s bangers. Fit for a knight.’

The woman handed over her money, her features severe once more. It had crossed her mind, again, that it could be a trick. But seeing the look on my father’s face as he replaced the photograph on the shelf, she permitted herself a faint smile. ‘It must have been a wonderful day,’ she said to me, as she dropped the package into her basket.

I nodded. I wanted to say, ‘Yes—it’s one I’ll never be allowed to forget’ but I, too, had softened. The simplicity and truth of her remark reminded me of that day, the exhilaration and joy I had felt once safely off the mountain and back at our shelter. ‘It was a wonderful day,’ I replied. ‘Remarkable.’

# **FAIRLIE**

My father's public face bore little resemblance to his private one. I discovered this at a very early age and, strangely, it was a lesson I learnt from a photograph. Years before he began showing customers the picture of me on top of Mount Cook, Hillary by my side, I was busy showing my school friends—and others, too—an image of him perched on top of a camel, a vast expanse of desert spreading far behind him. Apart from my father, I knew no one who had seen a camel, let alone ridden one and it was with great pride—and a large dose of superiority—that I explained to my friends that during the First World War he had served briefly with the Imperial Camel Corps.

Without the photographic proof in my hands, I would never have believed that the healthy, suntanned soldier in the snap was the same man I saw limping around the butcher's shop in front of our house. It was very hard, for me as a young boy, to reconcile the two images in my mind. It was even harder to persuade some of my classmates, who, having seen my father hobbling about town, refused to believe that the photograph was real and not some posed, theatrical portrait. Even as I relayed the story of my father's bravery, which I embellished—having no idea if he had been a brave soldier or simply an adequate one, and repeating the little I knew of his being wounded during an attack on Gaza and then slowly recovering in a hospital in Cairo before being sent home—I also had my own secret doubts.

My father was a quiet man who, through sheer willpower alone, gave the impression of being outgoing and confident whenever necessity required him to deal with a customer, a stranger or, sometimes, my mother. He never talked about his war experience and by the time I reached school age he had been weighed down by so much tragedy that he gave the impression of permanently staggering beneath the load of one of the various meat carcasses he lugged from his van to the freezer. He was lopsided with sorrow and yet, bizarrely, no one but my mother and myself ever noticed.

My father attempted to carry the full load of grief, but my mother was as broken, if not more so, than him. I was not to learn of it until I was a teenager, but my mother had suffered several miscarriages between the birth of my twin brothers in 1921 and my own appearance in the mid-thirties. No one used the term 'miscarriage' and, looking back, I cannot but feel pained—on my mother's behalf—by the few enigmatic references I did overhear: whispered terms such as 'problems', pregnancies that 'wouldn't stick', or babies that were 'lost.' All these phrases, which I do not believe were uttered so much

maliciously as carelessly, must have cut through my mother and suffocated her in a cloud of failure and guilt. Never once did I hear such talk escape from my father's mouth. His words conveyed only respect and pride. According to him my mother, like her older brother, Boden—the man I was named after but never met—was a 'toughie', a fighter. Unlike Boden, who died before I was born, my mother battled on and, lo, one day, victorious, another healthy child appeared—me.

Because I did not know about the sad episodes in my mother's medical history, I was not able to appreciate her strength. For as long as I could remember—in so far as my own personal experience enabled me to see—my mother seemed frail, hollow. She spent a great deal of her time sitting at the kitchen table, working away on jigsaw puzzles—1000 piece depictions of exotic locations and grand buildings—which she laid out on a large tea tray, made for her by Dudley, my parents' only friend and neighbour.

My mother, Connie, had been disabled by the grief which burdened us all. In 1941, at the age of twenty, my twin brothers, Ralph and Edward, had been aboard the HMS *Neptune* when it struck a minefield off the coast of Tripoli and sank. The air which we had breathed so freely immediately thickened in our lungs. I remember this quite clearly: the pain in my chest which increased minute by minute, day by day, week by week, month by month until, finally, in desperation to break free from my suffocating surroundings, I begged my parents to allow me to move across the street to live with Dudley and his family. Remarkable though it now seems, they let me go. I can only imagine how this strange living arrangement must have struck our other neighbours. In a small town like ours, I realise now that we must have been the subject of gossip. But, out of respect for my mother's well known fragile condition, no one raised the topic—publicly at least. And so, blissfully ignorant, I remained with Dudley, off and on, for more than two years.

Though I must have been only six or seven years old, this period remains fresh in my memory. I see myself hovering uncertainly between two worlds. It was as if a wall had been erected down the middle of our street. On one side was my parents' house and on the other was the house belonging to my 'Uncle' Dudley and his wife, 'Auntie' Hilda with their children Ted, Geraldine and Frith. On my parents' side of the wall, everything appeared drained of colour. In my family's world, life had been captured on black and white film and then projected back to me on a makeshift screen. Though still a member of the family, I was absent from the film itself—and yet my presence was still strangely felt. In this respect I was the equivalent of an audience member who, once in a while, accidentally comes between the projector and the screen, stooping awkwardly in an

attempt to squeeze between the rows and yet, despite their best effort, creating a large black shadow on the screen.

On the side of the street where my ‘adopted’ family lived, the world I found myself in was full colour. But, though warm and golden, the light was artificial, turned on for my benefit. Because of this, I always felt a little confused. Where I expected shade, there was none. No matter what time it was, whether early morning or late at night, it was as if I was stuck in a perpetual high noon of sunlight, with not so much as a shadow to keep me company.

I walked between these two worlds, crossing an invisible line, on one side of which I would be drained of everything except some faint remnant of will, while, on the other, I was bathed in light. As a result, I never knew where I belonged. Dazzled on the one hand by the generosity and love lavished upon me by Uncle Dudley and his family, I would yearn for a quiet room, one where I could lose myself in my thoughts and a place where not everything was rendered visible. But, retreating momentarily to my parents’ house, I would feel weighed down, burdened by all that went unsaid, or worse, lurked in the dark corners and empty rooms.

I never spoke of my feelings—or the terrible way I felt torn by these extremes. Looking back, however, I think both my father and Dudley must have had some idea of what was going through my head. My father, tuned in to unhappiness—as he needed to be living with my mother—saw what was already there, present within me. Dudley, on the other hand, who was always smiling, always happy and taking pleasure in life, must have seen what was absent. In me, he recognised a child who needed attention, encouragement and affection—all of which he lavished upon me, occasionally to the detriment of Ted and his younger children, daughters Geraldine and Frith.

And so it was that Dudley, a carpenter by trade, began to take me out with him on Saturdays, whenever he had a small job to complete. Frequently Ted came with us but, being that bit older than me, there were one or two occasions—such as when he was busy with inter-club sports—when he stayed away. These outings were magical for a number of reasons. Silly though it now seems, I remember feeling incredibly proud of being singled out by Dudley. I always knew when he was planning to take me because more often than not he would notice me looking particularly glum or quiet over breakfast and reaching across the table would place one of his huge, slab-like hands on my shoulder and give me a gentle shake. In his booming voice, he would ask if I could spare him an hour or two to

hold his ladder and, once he had dealt with the protests of the younger girls—who wanted to come, too—he would butter me a thick piece of bread and off we would go.

On cold mornings there was a chance our departure would be delayed by twenty or thirty minutes—a period that always caused me great anxiety. Dudley's truck—old by any standards—rarely started on frosty mornings and one or other of us would be sent off on the bike to fetch the mechanic who would arrive unshaven and foul tempered in his late model tow-truck; the swear words which he muttered inaudible but clearly visible in the vapour which puffed from his mouth into the freezing air. I was terrified of this man—Ray—and retreated back into the house while Ray aimed words of contempt at Dudley's truck, the tangle of jumper leads, and the day itself as he settled into the job of getting the old wreck started. The more Ray cursed, the funnier Dudley found it and, when he was in a particularly playful mood, he would mimic and tease Ray to such an extent that the poor mechanic would go purple in the face, throw the leads on to the ground and threaten to back over Dudley's truck with his own more powerful vehicle. Rather than attempt to calm Ray, or make amends, Dudley would all but collapse with laughter while I prayed Ray would not carry out his threat, at least not this time.

It used to puzzle me why Dudley never asked my father to help. I was sure my father's butcher's van would have been up to the task of getting the old truck up and running but when I mentioned this to Dudley he would simply smile mysteriously and say that Ray liked to feel needed. Dudley's answer made perfect sense to me but later I learnt the real reason why Dudley always sought out Ray, when, as he admitted himself, it would have been far easier to ask my father. It transpired that Ray believed he owed his life to Dudley and, through gratitude or shame, felt compelled to repay that debt, over and over again.

The story went that one evening, towards the end of June, Dudley had been returning from a job in the small settlement of Burkes Pass when, rounding a frost covered bend, he had caught sight of tyre tracks veering off the road towards a patch of scrub. Though it was almost dark and bitterly cold, Dudley pulled over to investigate and scrambling down the bank happened across Ray's tow-truck, which lay rolled against its driver's door, with Ray floundering around inside. Blind drunk, Ray had been disorientated by the unexpected layout of his cab and had not been able to find the passenger door which was now located on the ceiling, above him. 'It was like watching a bee trying to escape from a closed jar,' explained Dudley. 'And not just any bee—but the angriest bee you've ever had the misfortune to clap eyes on. When I finally got the

passenger door open', he continued, 'the smell of alcohol almost blew me off my feet. Ray was so busy cursing and thrashing that I had to reach down and grab him by his hair—and pull him out. Just as well he still had hair back then, though I dare say he was a good handful balder by the time I finished with him.' Ray could remember nothing of what happened, but, returning to the crash site the following day, and seeing his wrecked truck and the thick layer of frost covering it, convinced himself that he would have frozen to death had he been forced to spend the night in the cab. 'He sobered up pretty quickly when he saw his truck, I can tell you that much,' said Dudley. 'He doesn't drink now, of course.' It was clear that in many ways Ray resented helping Dudley but, at the same time, as Dudley had observed, he felt compelled to help. Some echo of gratitude and a sense of pride in Ray's primal nature obliged him to do so. He needed to repay the man who he believed had saved his life but, on top of that, he needed to re-establish the power he had lost as a result of that accident, he needed to regain his footing as an equal.

It was after one especially drawn out episode involving Ray and his truck that Dudley, Ted and I finally set out after breakfast one morning for the hotel at Burkes Pass where Dudley had a small job to complete. It was bitterly cold and, to make matters worse, my trousers and jersey were slightly wet. I had been pouring warm water over the windscreen of Dudley's cab when Ted's large dog had come bounding down the driveway and, hitting a large frozen puddle, skidded out of control and sideswiped me. Not only was I knocked off my feet, but I was also splashed with water. However, not wishing to change out of my damp clothes and hold up the group any longer, I insisted that I was dry and quickly climbed into the cab, making myself as small as possible so as not to be caught out. The dog, an old huntaway called Bruce, was made to sit on the flat deck at the back which, I am ashamed to say, filled me with satisfaction. Whenever I looked back through the small window behind my head I could see him shivering in the cold. In truth, we were little better off than the dog. There was no heater in Dudley's truck and we had to travel with the windows partially open to help demist the windows. Even so, it was almost a full-time job, wiping the screen with my cuffed sleeve, and every time one or other of us talked our faces would be momentarily obscured by the vapour which accompanied our words.

By the time we arrived at the hotel, I was so cold I had to be pushed into the kitchen, where I stood shivering helplessly in front of the stove while Ted helped Dudley fetch in his tools. My feet were the worst. No longer merely damp, they felt frozen and as they thawed my toes began to sting with such violence that tears rolled down my cheeks.

Just as the pain was becoming unbearable, Dudley came to check on me and seeing my tortured expression ruffled my hair and whispered, ‘Good lad,’ and then did something that I have never seen done since: he wiggled his ears. How he managed this, I have no idea. Many times I tried to understand this miraculous feat but even though I spent hours willing my ears to move I could never wiggle them as Dudley had done.

While Dudley worked, Ted and I played ‘dogs’ out the back of the hotel. To our delight we had discovered a large boulder with a long chain attached to it and for an hour or so we took it in turns being chained up and barking while the other one of us would scramble over the boulder, pretending to throw pebble ‘biscuits’. It was a great game, made all the more enjoyable by the effect it had on Bruce who ran around barking, chasing the stones and jumping up on whoever was chained to the rock, knocking them to the ground.

When, eventually, we tired of this game, we wandered around to a small enclosure beside the hotel where two deer were housed. Though kept as pets, the deer did not seem tame and despite our tempting them with grass neither animal came to investigate. Later, we were given deer nuts to try, and easing our fingers through the netting we were rewarded with the doe feeding from our palms. It nuzzled our outstretched hands, and I remember its breath damp and warm against my skin.

Convinced that this was the best day of my life, I was even more thrilled to discover that lunch had been prepared for us back in the kitchen: a huge plate of mashed potato, fried onion, liver and kidneys. The smell in the kitchen was intoxicating: the combination of the oily, sweet smelling onion blended with the darker, grittier smell of the coal range and then on top of that, and very subtle by comparison, the dry smell of wood shavings, scattered on the ground where Dudley had been working. I am sure I would have fallen asleep following such a feast had not a call come through from a lady on a farm on the far side of Burkes Pass, asking if Dudley could call by to give a quote for a new kitchen bench. Knowing that Auntie Hilda was at her sister’s, I couldn’t figure out how the woman had managed to track down Dudley. To my surprise, he barely raised an eyebrow. ‘Edna,’ he said, smiling at the housekeeper.

‘Expect so,’ she replied while Ted hastily filled me in, informing me that Edna worked at the telephone exchange and tended to know where everyone in the district was, or would be, at any one time. ‘How does she know?’ I asked to which Ted just laughed and gave me a look which implied I was too young—or too stupid—to understand.



I had never been beyond the small settlement of Burkes Pass before and so had no idea of what to expect once reaching the pass itself and crossing over into the Mackenzie Basin. By now the sky was a cloudless, pale blue and although the road from the hotel to the summit of the pass was, for the most part, so deeply shaded that I felt as if we were driving through a tunnel, or a gorge, I suddenly found myself in front of a scene of such beauty that it took my breath away.

Stretching before me, as far as my eye could see, was a vast plain of snow covered tussock and grass. Because of our slight elevation, this plain appeared to me in its entirety, a vast carpet at my feet which spread for infinity—before being reined in by the most glorious, faraway, twinkling mountains I could imagine.

I couldn't believe how much space there was. Everywhere I looked, I saw uninterrupted views of either land or sky. I thought that if I set out walking I would still be travelling well into the night and throughout the following day and perhaps, even, the day after that. I remember turning to Dudley and saying, 'You could walk for ever,' and in response he looked across at me and nodded and I could see—I could honestly see—that he felt the same way. Like me, he was transfixed.

He pulled the truck on to the side of the road and we all got out and just stood looking. I could feel the stubbly, frozen ground through the soles of my shoes and when I kicked my toe, snow—like fine powder—spun around my ankles, landing on my socks like fairy-dust. The light was so bright that I was dazzled but I didn't want to shade my eyes with my hand as I could see Ted doing. I wanted to be dazzled. I wanted to stand in the full glare of the snow field.

I saw tiny pin pricked holes made in the snow where drops of water had fallen from the tussock. I saw the way the snow was an intense blue in the patches where it was shaded by the larger bushes. I saw footprints made by rabbits and hares, a crazy zigzag of steps which went nowhere in particular and I saw a spider's web, caught on the upper twigs of a matagouri bush, glistening like the most precious jewels strung on a bracelet, or a collar or something—I didn't know what because it was more beautiful than anything I had ever seen and I didn't have the words to describe it. I felt it though. Though my feet were once again wet and freezing and my hands had turned to ice, even though I clasped and unclasped my fingers until they hurt—despite all that I could feel the scene in front of me and all at once I let out an incredible whoop of joy and skipped into the air, laughing and laughing; there was so much joy inside me. I couldn't contain myself. For the first time in all my memory, I could not contain myself.

Ted hit me square on the back of my head with a huge snowball. An explosion of ice cold drift went down the back of my collar and I yelped with surprise. Bruce, who had been sniffing out rabbits, ran back at the sound and as he came towards us he leapt across the tussock like a dolphin surfing the waves, and the snow which sprayed off his paws caught the sun and it was as if he was running across a field of stars. And then Ted wrestled me to the ground and Bruce jumped on me, and I could hear Dudley laughing and laughing, and then his voice telling Ted to go easy because we'd get wet and cold but by that time it was too late. We were covered, dusted, head to toe in snow.

I glanced up, and in the sky was a huge hawk. It was hovering just above me and I had the feeling it was keeping its eye on me—it knew I was there and it was watching.

And then, deep in the back of my mind, words began to form. Not words for just speaking but something new, something special—words for creating something. The first two words were 'bright' and 'white' and then, instinctively at first but then methodically, I made a list by going through the alphabet: 'fight', 'height', 'kite', 'light', 'might', 'moonlight', 'night', 'plight', 'right', 'sight', 'tight'. These words were like socks in my drawer that needed pairing off. Some, like 'moonlight' didn't belong, while others, like 'plight' were too fancy. But others made sense to me. The snow, I thought, so bright and white. The sky was bright and light—but big and blue, too. And then the hawk: its terrible might and the way it hovered like a kite.

Even after we got back in the truck, our bottoms creating damp patches on the seat, I kept these words inside me, rearranging them, trying them on, throwing them out and then picking them up again, for one last try. Though I didn't know what I was doing, I had a sense of something vital, important. I was on the verge of some great discovery but I didn't quite know what it was. It was the first time I felt an urge to match something outside of myself with something that was part of me. What was happening didn't seem to be taking place in my head, but in my body—my flesh and muscle—the warm, pulpy meat of me.

'Snow—so white and bright

Sparkling in the sun like a million twinkling diamond lights...'

Time after time I stalled. I couldn't make the words big enough to capture how I felt. Even as a young lad, I knew my words were 'not quite right' but I couldn't make them say what I so desperately wanted them to say. They refused to help. Now, of course,

I'm used to such frustration but back then I felt let down. Still, it didn't really matter—for I had seen the glorious Mackenzie Basin and I had almost composed my first poem.

It was after six when we drove back to Fairlie. The cold, blue glint of the Mackenzie had given way to the gloom of the homeward road and finally, as we neared Kimble, a dense fog enveloped us, seeping through the windows and into the cab as well as obscuring the road ahead. I smelled Fairlie before I saw it. There was a dank, unhealthy odour of coal which made me think of damp newspaper mixed with gas. I could almost taste it on my tongue, feel the miniscule particles of black dust settling on my skin, smuts filling my nose and burning my throat.

For the past hour I had been shivering and despite my earlier joy, I now felt cold and tired and somehow cheated. Though I knew Auntie Hilda would have dinner waiting for us and maybe a hot bath on top of that, I felt out of sorts and once, when Ted nodded off beside me, his head falling against my shoulder, I jerked my body away even though I knew my action would cause his head to clonk forward, on his chest.

Entering the kitchen at last, I found that my mood—rather than being lightened by the warm welcome offered us by Auntie Hilda and the girls—darkened. I was annoyed by Geraldine and Frith's endless questions and even more so by Ted's account of the day. He described everything that had happened—whether the game of 'dogs', the feeding of the deer, the meal in the kitchen or the sight of the Mackenzie—as if everything was equally good. It seemed to me that he hadn't paid attention, properly. He should have known that there was a scale: that some things were good (like the lunch) whereas others (like the sweep of snow covered tussock) were better, more impressive than anything either of us had ever seen before. To make matters worse, he yakked on about the snow fight and when I reminded him about the hawk he brushed me aside with a simple, 'Mummy's not bothered about that.' In fact, he spent more time talking about the way Bruce had leapt about in the snow chasing snowballs than anything else.

It was only after dinner was finished and I was standing at the sink, washing dishes, that I was able to think clearly about all that had happened. Although there was almost nothing I hated more than scouring the saucepan that had contained mashed potatoes—it had something to do with the way the residue of dishwasher-soaked mash felt against my skin—I managed to focus my thoughts once more on the vastness of the sky and the plain, and a sense of calm returned to me.

I worked slowly, carefully, and maybe because of this Auntie Hilda came to check on me. She had put both girls to bed and must have suddenly noticed my absence. Usually

I raced through the dishes, but enjoying the peace and warmth of the kitchen I had fallen into a kind of day dream, one in which I tried to reconstruct everything I had seen in as much detail as possible. As Auntie Hilda began to put away the dishes, I felt an urgent need to explain to her all that had happened that afternoon. From past experience, I knew she was a good listener, for she often sat down with Ted and me in the evening to press us for details about our day. As I began to talk, however, I discovered that I still could not find the words I needed to recreate the scene of the Mackenzie and so, to my surprise as much as hers, I changed tack and, without thinking it through, began to tell her how I had been moved to make up a poem. In truth, I had intended to keep any mention of the poem to myself. I wasn't sure how such an admission would go down with my host family. I had never seen either Dudley or Hilda sit down with a book, though, from time to time, they did read the odd newspaper. I was worried that by mentioning my poem they would get it into their heads that I was trying to be different—when, in fact, I wasn't. But, seeing Hilda's surprised smile, I carried on and recited the first few lines of my verse, adding when I had finished, that it wasn't a poem, really—just an attempt on my part to put what I had seen into words.

I remember the way Auntie Hilda smiled when I was finished. Whenever one of the girls did something like say 'thank you' to a shopkeeper without being told to, Auntie Hilda would beam with pride and then, afterwards, when we were outside the shop, she would make a point of telling the girls how good they were, how pleased she was with them. After hearing my poem, she smiled at me with her mouth but her eyes looked startled, and she glanced around the kitchen as if hoping Dudley might come in and rescue her. She did manage to say, 'That's lovely, Boden. You should write it down before you forget,' but even so she didn't really look at me, and feeling awkward I quickly offered to take the milk bottles down to the gate. It says something about our state of mind that I made the offer and that she nodded enthusiastically, for it was a Saturday and there would be no delivery until Monday. As I turned to go, however, she called me back, and hugging me told me once more that my poem was nice and that, truly, she hoped I would copy it into her special notebook so that she might enjoy it again and again.

Encouraged, I grabbed the bottles and went out into the garden, repeating my rhyme to myself, lest I should suddenly forget it. As I dawdled down the path towards the gate, I was aware of a dark shape moving towards me from the other side of the road. After a moment's hesitation, I recognised the outline of my mother who, like me, was walking towards the gate. For a terrible moment I had the impression I was facing a

mirror. It was as if I was walking towards myself, while, at the same time, I could see quite clearly, despite the darkness, that my mother was wearing her dressing gown and that her hair was already pinned back in rollers, her head covered with a scarf. I could tell that she hadn't seen me and I knew I should call out as it had been two days since I had last spoken to her. Yet, just as quickly as I made up my mind to greet her, I changed it and crouched down by a large hydrangea bush which was growing next to the path.

From my vantage point, I saw my mother reach the postbox and then she raised the flap at the back of the box and bowed down, looking for letters. It was clear to me that she wasn't expecting any but, just as I would have done, she checked anyway. Next she crossed the verge at the side of the street and then stepped out onto the road itself. She took four steps across the road but as she neared the centre she suddenly stopped. I could see her face quite clearly. She was looking at Uncle Dudley's house, her eyes fixed on the dull light which was visible through the closed curtains of the upstairs bedroom where Ted and I slept. She must have stood for thirty seconds, just looking, and again I knew I should call out to her but once more, I couldn't. I saw her standing in the middle of the road and I felt scared. Though she wasn't doing anything peculiar, she looked like a crazy woman in her gown and scarf. Slowly she turned around and began to walk back to her own house—my home. I could hear her slippers scuffing and, although I didn't move, I had that same eerie feeling that we were reflections of each other, this time retreating to our own side of the mirror.

I stayed where I was for a minute longer and then, running as fast as I could, I placed our bottles at the gate and rushed back inside, slamming the door behind me. Fortunately no one saw me and a few minutes later I called out goodnight to my uncle and aunt and clambered into bed, pulling the covers up over my head. When Ted came over to ask what the matter was, I pretended to be asleep.

I remember very little of the next few days. I recall feeling feverish and the doctor being called in to see me. I can picture the anxious look on Dudley's face as he bent over me and I can remember someone placing a thermometer under my armpit and me shivering because I couldn't keep warm. I recall, too, that I developed a cough and that my ribs hurt so badly that I felt as if someone had placed their hands into my chest and pulled my ribcage apart—as if I was a chicken carcass being broken in two to fit into the stock pan.

And finally, when it seemed that every member of the household had peered down at me, eyes full of concern, and then crept away so as not to disturb me, I looked up and

saw my mother, sitting quietly beside my bed, her chin resting on her hand, her mouth obscured by her fingers. Her skin was so pale that, in my feverish state, I would have taken her for a ghost but for one thing. I heard her sob, 'Don't take him, too. Just let me keep one.'

I knew I had betrayed my mother, that I should never have left home or her. When I thought about the trip I had made with Dudley to the Mackenzie I felt dirty. I had no right to be out, laughing beneath the open sky, while my parents sat at home, the rooms empty around them.

I was still a young boy when I moved back across the street. The Second World War was over and for a while I allowed myself to believe that things would be different, my mother had changed. I had heard her beg for my life and I thought she must have fixed herself, that she would now be as normal as any other mother, maybe even happy—like Auntie Hilda.

In the spirit of this new beginning, I began to take a greater interest in school. Up until this time, I had always found lessons somewhat dull. Sitting at my desk in a class that ranged in age from eight to ten and watching as the teacher stabbed at columns of multiplication tables with his walking cane while we recited the times table, I would often find myself praying that old Mr. MacDonald would lose his balance and topple over. Anything to relieve the boredom of his lesson. I recall, too, that around this time, Mr. MacDonald did actually tumble over—sadly not during class but late one evening, while walking home from the RSA—and that for almost two weeks we were taught by a youngish, near sighted man brought in from Timaru, a Mr. Patterson. To our amazement, Mr. Patterson—apart from being all but blind—began each day with a poetry reading. Like many of my school mates, I was initially wary. Mr. MacDonald had introduced us to the ‘pleasures of poetry’ on several occasions. Given that the only poet he admired was Donne, the pleasure struck us as being entirely his. Stalking around the room, a book held limply in his hand, he would suddenly strike one of the desks with his cane and demand of the poor child seated at it, ‘Read on!’ Had the student not been paying attention, an uneasy silence would follow, filled in by the sotto voce promptings of his or her neighbour, whispering, ‘And now good morrow to our...’ If any of the poems made sense on the page, all meaning was lost in the barely audible performance by the struggling ten year old.

Mr. Patterson, by contrast, read the poems himself. This had an instant effect on the class. Half—the boys, mostly—paid no attention whatsoever and spent the ten minutes or so gazing into space or passing notes, while a small group, myself included, hung on his every word. Some lines made an immediate impact and have stayed with me over the



years: ‘When Icicles hang by the wall, and Dick the Shepherd blows his nail...’ or ‘Tyger! Tyger! burning bright...’ Other lines I forgot almost straight away but upon opening a book of verse years later, I might be reminded of one of those long ago readings, a line from John Clare, Browning or Yeats, for example. Of all the poems, however, there was one which I loved purely for its sound. By Tennyson, it began, ‘The splendour falls on castle walls...’ Even now, I sometimes find myself repeating, for no reason at all, ‘Blow, bugle, blow, set the wild echoes flying, And answer, echoes, answer, dying, dying, dying.’

When Mr. MacDonald returned, I once plucked up courage and interrupted him mid-Donne to ask about ‘The Bugle Song’. His response was brief and to the point. I was sent to sit with my face in the corner for the remainder of the lesson and then kept back after school and made to write, one hundred times, ‘I must not interrupt the teacher when he is reading verse.’

Just as school life began to dull once more, so did home life. My mother hadn’t fixed herself. What’s more, despite having begged for my life a short while before, she now gave the impression of barely noticing me. She fell silent once more, lost in thought as she shuffled around the house, smiling distractedly whenever my father or I happened to ask her a question.

During my stay with Dudley’s family I had heard occasional remarks about the war and I knew that my own family was not the only one in town to have been affected by loss. Dudley himself had been sent home wounded from the Solomon Islands. Hilda’s brother, a pilot, had gone missing over Holland and her cousin had succumbed to malaria while serving in the Pacific. I couldn’t understand what it was that made the situation so much worse for my mother than for anyone else. After all, she had me still.

I began to feel bitter. Whenever I happened to see Dudley or Ted in their garden I would turn away if I had been playing outside and return inside where I would sit, reading, until the coast was clear. I began to brood, thinking about how Dudley’s family had tricked me, how they had made me think that life could be joyful and loud when, as everyone knew, it was really silent and dark. I realised that Ray had guessed the truth, that when he swore and raged at Dudley it was because Dudley was incapable of *seeing*, of taking anything seriously. Dudley had no understanding of the way things really worked. He had only to come across the road to my home for a view of real life. But the only time Dudley or Ted ever crossed the street was to ask me if I would go swimming in the river in summer, or lambing at a friend’s farm in spring, or snowman building in winter. My parents always encouraged me to go but I couldn’t. I knew that if I went out with Dudley I

would inevitably have to come home again and then things would seem even worse. The contrast between the two families was too much for me.

So, for a long time, I kept to myself, tagging along with my father whenever he was called to a customer's house to kill a lamb, calf or pig. Though the majority of home-kill animals were brought in to the small compound at the back of the shop, my father often made the rounds of the local district where he would spend an hour or more bent over a lamb or hogget, working with the precision of a surgeon as he sawed, cut and chopped. I would stand transfixed, trembling with a mixture of horror and fascination, as each live animal was led into the killing area, slaughtered and then divided into legs, loins, ribs, shoulders, offal, bone, fat, blood and skin. I could see that my father worked methodically, that he had a pattern in his head from which he never deviated, but I could not make sense of the animal beneath his blade and I always marvelled when, finally stepping back from his work, he would gesture towards the meat and verbally reconstruct the animal for my benefit. Nothing was wasted, no cut with his knife misdirected, and I am certain to this day that had he wanted, he could have recreated any animal in its entirety—save for some blood which soaked the grass by his feet.

I admired my father's skill but it was not the thing that made the biggest impression on me. Back in the shop, my father hung the meat before butchering it, but this was not always an option when he slaughtered an animal on site. More than the slaughter of the animal itself—which took only a matter of seconds—it was the smell of blood and the warm feeling of the flesh that most stuck in my mind. On cool mornings I would look on, watching the steam rise from both the stripped skin and the carcass, and the air around us would be penetrated by a musty, heavy scent which somehow managed to combine the smell of grass, shit, fat—but most of all blood. I could almost taste the air. In my mind a reddish haze hung above our heads like smoke. I could see the blood stick to the hairs on my father's forearms and when he passed a cut of meat to me, to place on a tray, I would be aware first of the warm dampness of the meat—which cooled and dried on my hands once I put it down—and then the intrinsic, interior heat which radiated out from each slab. I was disconcerted by this. In retrospect, I can see that there was an element of comic-book horror at play. I expected the severed heart to beat.

The smell of blood was difficult to ignore and, travelling home, my mind would invariably wander back to the day when I had gone with Dudley to the hotel at Burkes Pass and I would remember the more pleasant, dry, dusty smell of the wood shavings

which had filled the room where he worked and I would become so lost in thought that my father would eventually nudge me and ask if anything was wrong?

Once home, I would follow my father into the laundry where we stood side by side, soaping our hands and arms for one final wash, passing the large cracked, yellow cake between us as the water ran milky down the drain. Our hands red from scrubbing, we wiped them on an old ripped towel hanging from a hook by the door before stepping out into the yard and surveying the scene before us. From where we stood, we saw the Two Thumb range, its bulk visible in the fading afternoon light. We glanced, too, towards the rear of our section where, many years before, my older twin brothers had constructed a tree house in the branches of a huge willow tree. A thick, knotted rope hung limp from a low branch of the tree and this swayed gently from side to side as we watched.

On several occasions I had seen my mother pause while hanging out the washing and look down towards the willow but I never saw her venture towards that corner of the garden. The wooden blocks which my brothers had hammered to the trunk of the tree for rungs had partially rotted over the years and I had noticed that sections of the floor of the tree house had also rotted through. I was careful about where I placed my weight once inside the small building. I once told my mother that the interior walls of the tree house were covered with sacking onto which my brothers had nailed maps and drawings created by them using black ink and paint. I explained that the pictures were signed and that every drawing carried two signatures, so that it appeared that my brothers had sat together, side by side as they laboured over each and every image. I told my mother this because I found it intriguing, and I would have liked to have talked to her more about the twins—brothers I barely knew—but hearing my mother gasp, I fell quiet and it was only then I noticed that tears had sprung up in her eyes and that she looked so grief stricken that I fell immediately silent, ashamed of myself.

My mother was a good cook. Given her all encompassing sadness, I was frequently surprised by the effort she went to in preparing our meals. At four thirty every day she would rise from her chair and make her way to the kitchen and begin, painstakingly, to prepare our evening meal. The care and attention I had seen in my father's eyes as he butchered a beast was matched by my mother as she washed and peeled the potatoes, turning them in her hand as she checked for brown spots and eyes.

In summer she dug new potatoes from the garden and I recall the sound of the knife blade scraping over their skin as she stood quietly, lost in thought. I remember, too,

the squeakiness of the runner beans she boiled for us, how, with each mouthful, I experienced first a crunch and then a squeak as the coarse-skinned strips rolled in my mouth. Back then I hated beans and was only able to swallow them if I covered them in white sauce or gravy.

Of all the meals prepared by my mother the one that sticks most in my mind is tongue. My father was well known for his pickled meats, sausages and offal, and no doubt because he liked the taste of tongue more than anything else, we ate it on a regular basis. My mother, it must be said, expressed no preference at all with regard to food. Though she took great care over what she prepared, she seemed to get no pleasure from eating. I am certain, that had she lived alone, she could have eaten the same meal, day after day, without noticing. I, on the other hand, always noticed when we had tongue. I found the taste and texture of the meat neither pleasant nor repugnant but what did hold my attention was the manner in which my mother thrust her carving fork into the large saucepan of boiling water and then slowly raised the tongue up—the curl of muscle pierced through the centre and dangling mid-air.

Dinner itself was a quiet affair. Because we lived in such close proximity to one another there was little need to discuss the events of the day, the only exception being after one of our home-kill excursions, when my father might comment on the condition of the animal he had slaughtered, the state of a flower bed, the girth of a pumpkin or marrow growing in a vegetable garden, or sometimes offer a small piece of gossip—the fact that so-and-so was in the family way once more, or that old Mr. D had suffered a stroke, or was painting his house or had heard from his son in Auckland.

My mother would smile as my father talked and from time to time I tricked myself into believing that she enjoyed hearing these small snippets of news. I anticipated the time when she would open her mouth and ask a question—but if she was curious, she never expressed it. Like the food she ate, my father's chat was swallowed without comment.

In this environment, I found it hard to ask questions myself. I had the impression that any attempt to draw out the evening meal was futile. If I did add to my father's tale in any way, he would invariably nod and reply, 'That's quite right!' or 'I hadn't noticed' but the conversation went no further, quietly dying. Finally, feeling helpless and unable to cope any longer I would ask to leave the table. To my enormous relief I was invariably given permission to do.

Once free, I would slip quietly through the back door, cross our back lawn and then squeeze through the hedge separating our garden from an empty section on the

neighbouring street. I would wander along a well-trodden path—one which documented my previous escapes—before making my first stop at a farm gate. In autumn I would spend several minutes simply gazing at the paddock, my eyes sweeping its grazed surface for signs of mushrooms. If I was lucky and no one else had beaten me to it I could hope to collect upwards of ten perfectly formed specimens, which I either concealed under a bush until my return home or bundled in my jumper or jacket.

From the paddock I would follow a shingle track which joined the main Fairlie to Timaru road near McLean Park. There was very little traffic and somewhere, in the back of my mind, I saw myself as an urchin stepping out into the great unknown, a character which I can clearly identify now, having read Dickens but which had no precedent back then as my main source of reading material was an occasional *Beano* comic or the children's page in the local newspaper. In truth, there was nothing unknown about my destination. I was walking towards the trees which formed the Peace Avenue leading into our town.

At first I hadn't understood that these trees were not marking actual graves. For some reason I imagined that beneath each tree lay a buried soldier. I was so convinced of this that I created grizzly images in my head, pictures of men in uniform, decaying, the roots of the trees edging, tentacle-like, through and around their fully clothed bodies. Moreover, I did not realise that my twin brothers were not amongst them. I searched for a plaque with their names on it but, finding none, I selected two trees of my own for the purpose. Later, having studied their tree-house drawings, I decided that one tree rather than two was a better option. I chose a large oak, one that I estimated at the time to be at least one or two thousand years old. From the ground at the foot of the tree, I collected acorns which I stuffed into my trouser pockets, one brother on either hip. These acorns took on a special significance and I collected them with the determination of a squirrel storing nuts for the lean winter months.

I would then wander the streets of Fairlie, doing nothing so much as taking in the life of the place, or setting myself small exercises such as cramming as many onomatopoeic words as I could into one sentence. In summer this would strike me as a cheery way to spend an hour or two but in winter the opposite was true.

Located in a basin, Fairlie was often smothered in mist or smog. The combination of thick, icy smog and frozen ground made outdoor activity unpleasant. Many times I would be forced to turn back home simply because I was too cold to continue. On these frosty evenings I would feel my solitude so completely that even the sight of a lighted

window or the faint sound of a radio broadcast would fail to comfort me. And yet, I was seldom alone.

More often than not, at some point on my journey, I would hear a sound—a snuffle or the noise of a body moving through the undergrowth—and I would turn to see Ted’s dog, Bruce, trailing behind me. It was clear he was following me—no doubt he had picked up my scent while out roaming the neighbourhood. Despite knowing me he never came close, always keeping his distance, stopping whenever I stopped, disappearing into a garden for minutes on end and then reappearing several houses later, a dark shadow in the distance. I thought that maybe if I whistled or called his name, he would come trotting up to me but I was too scared to test my theory, for fear of being ignored. To be ignored by Bruce would, I think, have been enough to send me over the edge and so I contented myself with the belief that he had sought me out, that he wanted my company, that we were, somehow, connected in spirit.

For some reason, whenever we reached Sloan St on the final leg of my journey, I would usually hear a woman calling for her cat. I could imagine her standing on the back step, a food bowl in her hand, as she called, ‘Here puss, puss, puss. Here puss...’ As she called, she would strike the bowl with a spoon and the noise carried through the still night, often causing Bruce to bark before running off in search of better entertainment. I never saw the woman, nor, for that matter, did I ever catch sight of the cat, but hearing her voice struck me as a good omen and I would fret or linger on the street on the nights when her voice was silent.

I have little idea what my parents made of my nightly desertions. I suppose they had grown used to my absence during the years I lived with Dudley’s family and that my nightly wanderings seemed little more than an extension of that. They might have regarded me as being ‘different’ or ‘peculiar’, but they never let on. I don’t think they ever asked where I had been but they always received my offerings of mushrooms, or, occasionally chestnuts, with appreciation. And my mother never failed to look up from her knitting or one of her jigsaws and say, ‘You’re back. Good.’ I am sure she would have waited up for me no matter how late I was and I am equally certain that had I really wanted to test my parents, she would have sent my father out to look for me had I not have been home by bedtime.

I must have been living back at home for a year or two when something remarkable happened. My father, who rarely gambled, won a tidy sum of money betting on a horse

called *Lucky in Love* at the New Year races. And, in a burst of joy—almost recklessness—he announced that he intended to close his shop for three days and take us on holiday. We had never been away before and I was all for going to the sea—to Timaru—simply because I had never seen the ocean, except in photographs. I dearly wanted to find out what it was like. I am not sure what I was expecting but, at that stage, the greatest source of my information came from Ted and he had assured me that the sea was unlike any river or dam I had ever swum in. It was warm and sticky, and tasted like sweat, he said. Once, on a recent visit to his grandparents in Timaru, there had been news of a shark sighting off the beach at Caroline Bay. The shark, Ted insisted, attacked a dinghy, nearly sending its occupants into the sea, to be ripped to shreds and devoured. Had not one of the fishermen whacked the shark with his oar, they would not have been able to escape. As it was, the dinghy was damaged beyond repair. Ted had seen it with his own eyes. Tied up beside a boat shed, it had a huge chunk missing from its stern, a gigantic hole which clearly showed where the shark’s teeth had been.

My mother refused to holiday by the sea and my father, despite my protestations, did not force the issue. I was bitterly disappointed and although nothing was said to confirm my suspicions, I could not help but blame my brothers for my mother’s decision. For the first time in my life, I felt angry with them. I had a sense of injustice. It wasn’t my fault they had drowned. Their ship had gone down on the other side of the world, in a different sea to the one I wanted to visit. We were in no danger of attack. There was no logical reason why we shouldn’t go to Timaru.

For the rest of the summer and autumn, the subject of the holiday was not raised again and I turned my mind to other matters, none of which were particularly interesting or memorable. Then, as Easter approached, my father reintroduced the topic and before my mother had time to gather her thoughts he made arrangements for us to spend three nights at the Hermitage Hotel, Mount Cook. I didn’t ask but I suspect that this idea didn’t simply pop into my father’s head. Around this time Dudley had been spending a few days, off and on, working at the Hermitage, and I think he may have helped my father with the hotel bookings. He certainly spoke with enthusiasm about the place. He was particularly proud of the various building projects he had been involved with and impressed upon my parents the fact that everything up at the hotel was ‘top quality’.

Whatever the reason for my father’s decision, the morning after school broke up, we clambered into our van and set off. Even at that young age—I must have been around ten or eleven—I had very mixed emotions with regard to our destination. Except in the

most general terms, I had never spoken to my parents about my previous experience of the Mackenzie Basin. It was not that I had made a conscious decision to exclude them, but rather that it hadn't occurred to me that they would be interested. More than that, I think, I still felt disquieted, knowing that by far the happiest day of my life had taken place in the company of Dudley and not them.

That day had remained in my memory and it had retained all the excitement and joy I had felt at the time. Rather than fading over time, it had become enhanced. There was a chance that my recollection now bore no resemblance at all to the actual, physical location. What had moved me to capture the place in words, in a poem, could quite easily be little more than a figment of my imagination. And what if I shared my vision of the Mackenzie with my parents only to have them discover that I had deceived them? What if the plain was not as big as I remembered it, the sky not so blue, the grandness not so grand?

I had kept my memories and my poem to myself. Though I was desperate for my parents to see the Mackenzie through my eyes, to share my feelings for it, I didn't want to hear them say anything about that landscape that they didn't mean. They had to love it as I had done—or admit they didn't. I couldn't bear the thought of them lying in order to protect my emotions. The Mackenzie had meant so much to me that I needed to know that my parents were being honest with me, no matter what.

My heart began to thud in my chest as we began the slow climb from the settlement at Burkes Pass towards the pass itself. Even though my father's van was far more comfortable than Dudley's truck, I began to shiver and my father, fearing that I was going to be sick, pulled to the side of the road and made me get out.

As he urged me to take deep breaths and fill my lungs, my mother remained in the van, staring through the windscreen, quietly waiting for our journey to continue. I didn't feel in the slightest bit car-sick but I was glad of the break. The journey had seemed slow and oppressively quiet, sombre in comparison to my earlier trip with Dudley and Ted. I was grateful, too, for the opportunity to prepare myself for our arrival at the Mackenzie Basin. I needed to gather my thoughts and open myself to the possibility that the scenery might not live up to my expectations.

Already, I was aware of several ill omens. The hotel deer, which I had fed, had not been in their pen as we drove past. Fearing that they had been butchered, I asked my father if he had encountered them during the course of his work and was greatly relieved when



he showed no signs of understanding my train of thought. Even so, I was subdued, wondering where they had gone.

Close to where we had stopped and adding further to my unease, was the presence of a wild pig skin, head intact, hanging over a farm gate. The skin was large but tattered around its edges. It looked as if it had been pulled from the carcass in a hurry as there were also a number of holes showing through the bristles. There is no reason why I took such exception to the presence of the skin but to my mind it was a bad sign. I think, now, it was almost certainly the head, with its staring eyes, which gave me the jitters.

Eventually, when it became clear that I was not going to vomit, my father suggested we get back in the van as we still had a lengthy journey ahead of us and the day was not getting any longer.

As I climbed back into the van my mother glanced towards me and smiled, asking if I felt any better. When I replied that I was fine, she nodded and then turned her attention back to the view through the windscreen, murmuring, ‘That’s good. I was worried.’

Perhaps to lighten the mood, my father began to talk, listing all the things we might be able to do once we reached our destination. ‘Do you think they’ll have supper ready?’ he asked, before adding, ‘I’ve heard they have their own supply of fresh meat. They meet all their own needs.’ He laughed heartily but it took me so long to work out why that he was on to the next subject before I understood the pun. Though not wanting to appear rude, I did nothing to encourage my father’s monologue. I wanted him to fall silent so that I could concentrate on my surroundings. I needed my own internal silence, a space big enough to contain my thoughts and impressions of the scenery once we cleared the summit of the pass. My father, however, had no inkling of what was going through my mind. Having exhausted the topic of meat, he began on vegetables, saying, ‘I wonder if they can grow carrots up there?’ Carrots, I knew, were one of the few vegetables my father had trouble growing himself. No matter how hard he tried, he could not raise a crop of carrots and that fact annoyed him more than almost anything else. ‘I suppose they can,’ he mused, ‘they’re not that hard to grow—given the right conditions.’

The van skidded in the deep ruts and my mother jerked forward, steadying herself on the dashboard. ‘Bit rough,’ said my father. ‘Do you remember, Connie, the last time we came up this way—when the twins were ...’ His voice trailed off and he returned to the subject of vegetables but I was no longer listening because at that moment we reached the summit and a few seconds later the whole of the Mackenzie opened up before us and my heart gave a sudden lurch.

The sight was not as I remembered but it was no less glorious because of that. Whereas on my last visit the entire area had been blanketed by snow, a gleaming, sparkling plain—it was now golden. The nor'wester had risen and the ground, close to the road, was agitated, tussock swaying and billowing in the strong wind. Fanning out from a central core one second only to snap shut the next, each tussock seemed alive—as if breathing, sucking in the air around it. Though tussock predominated over the land surrounding us, I saw that many other plants were also present. I didn't know the names of all these smaller bushes. Apart from gorse, broom, and matagouri, I could not identify any plants.

My father continued to talk but only a few of his words entered my mind. I was too busy looking around to pay real attention to his observations. The sky, which had been limitless, a pale blue expanse on my previous visit, was now partially overcast. Before me, sweeping the basin, were huge swathes of shadow which cast the ground in tones of blue and grey, right through to a steely black as the clouds obscured the sun.

If I had thought about things in a logical manner, I would not have been surprised by the change in the landscape, or the view before me. I had replayed my snow-blanketed view so often in my head that I had half expected the Mackenzie to be incapable of change. I imagined it would remain intact, just as I had left it. In many regards, *my* Mackenzie was more imaginary than real. And so, if I was disappointed, it was not with the view but with the feeling that I had been left behind, that it had changed without me there to watch it happen. For the first time in my life I had been made conscious of the passing of time. It was also, I should add, the first time I experienced a sense of longing, an urge to recapture the past.

By now the wind was very strong, buffeting the van from side to side as we jolted along the road. Up until this point we had not seen another vehicle but now, at the end of a long straight, we glimpsed a car on the shoulder of the road, several figures milling around it. We were still some distance away and it took a few minutes before we reached the stationary car. My father, assuming the vehicle had broken down—although no one had waved at us, or given the impression of being in trouble—eased our van to a standstill and climbed stiffly down from the driver's seat calling 'Hullo, there!' Seconds later he returned. The group, he explained, were simply enjoying the scenery, snapping images of Mount Cook for their albums. At the mention of Mount Cook I sat up. I hadn't even noticed the mountain. My gaze had been so firmly fixed on my immediate surroundings that I had paid little attention to the distant mountains which rose up against a background

of clear blue sky, beneath an arch of cloud. I was not sure which mountain was Cook. But, before I had time to ask my father for clarification, he continued, 'I told them to save their film. From this distance they'll be lucky if the mountain even shows up.'

We sat in our van, the engine turned off, feeling the full brunt of the wind. My father appeared in no hurry to drive away and I remember feeling self-conscious, wondering what we were waiting for and why my father appeared so intent on remaining put. For my own part, I tried to become invisible and yet, despite that, I couldn't help but steal glances at the men and women who stood posing for the camera, leaning against the bonnet of their vehicle while one or other of them snapped away.

'Maybe I should offer to take their group portrait?' suggested my father, once more opening his door. 'It might generate a fond memory—in case they're not back this way again.' He must have sensed my discomfort for he turned on me, saying, 'Don't be like that, lad. You're going to be sharing a hotel with them for the next three nights—and we want to make them feel welcome.'

My father disappeared beyond the back of the van but I could hear his voice behind us. 'Go on now,' he directed, 'Ladies to the front, gents to the back.' There was a sound of laughter and then my father's voice once more: 'One, two, three: sausages!' This was typical of my father. While most photographers settled for 'cheese', he insisted that 'sausages' created a far more flattering, natural smile. According to him, it was impossible to utter the word without smiling. I could hear someone thank him (though I sensed he was simply being polite, indulging my father) and then I thought the conversation shifted to the topic of the road and I could hear my father warning them of the likelihood of rough conditions towards Simon's Pass and the prospect of having to ford several watercourses, all of which required 'extreme care'. 'If it gets too much, you'll find good refreshments at Tekapo and Pukaki,' he called out by way of a parting gesture. 'The Pukaki hotel is well worth a visit.'

While this exchange had been taking place, I had been trying to identify which of the several peaks ahead of us was Mount Cook. I was almost certain I had chosen the correct one but, scared of misidentifying it, I took the opportunity of my father's return to pinpoint the peak. He gestured towards a spot in the distance. It could have been anything. 'See that big, flat cloud,' he offered when it became clear his jabbing finger was not going to do the trick. I nodded, uncertain even then as to which cloud he meant. 'If you follow that cloud to its right hand end and then drop down to the mountains you'll see one that's spikier than all the others. I nodded, turning my head helplessly from my father to the

mountains and then back to my father. He sighed, began again. ‘You see that telegraph pole?’ Again I nodded. My father leant down, lowering his head next to mine as he pointed out the pole. ‘Look about an inch to the left. Go up—there’s a shadow on the cloud above it—it’s shaped like a chop.’

My head began to swim. I thought I had the mountain in sight but my father’s directions were confusing me.

‘I reckon the lad might need glasses. What do you think, Connie? I’ve always thought he might be short-sighted. You never know—perhaps it runs in the family.’

My mother frowned and then, speaking to me, she said in a quiet voice, ‘It’s the highest mountain you can see. It’s at eleven o’clock.’

But it was so small. Now that I was certain I had the correct mountain, I couldn’t believe how inconsequential it looked. From this distance it was less impressive than the mountains visible from our back door.

‘Course it’s the highest mountain,’ chimed my father. ‘That’s why it’s called Cloud-Piercer.’

That seemed to settle things and, content, my father started the engine, and after skidding in the soft shingle, we were back on the road, jolting towards Cloud-Piercer, which, to my disappointment suddenly disappeared behind a low rise in the road ahead.

It was ninety-six miles from Fairlie to the Hermitage. We had a *Motorists' Road Guide* which predated the war. On one of the pages there were two advertisements: one for Mount Cook, the other for the Hermitage. I noticed that in the guide Mount Cook wasn't referred to as 'Cloud-Piercer' but as 'Aorangi'. I knew the word must be Maori and I liked the way it sounded, but I had no idea what it meant. Apart from that, the advertisement claimed that the mountain scenery was the equal of any found in Switzerland and that the Hermitage itself was the 'Most Luxurious Mountain Hostel in Australasia'. Even as a youngster I was vaguely suspicious of such claims. For many years I had heard my father tempting his lady customers with the tastiest tripe in the whole of South Canterbury, or the most tender beef cut from the finest beasts in the world and, his favourite: liver so full of iron you won't want to risk standing next to a magnet!

The journey had been long and tiring and we were feeling subdued as we covered the final few miles separating us from our destination. The sky, which had cleared during the course of the afternoon, was now cloudless and the sun, hidden from view behind the mountains, cast a soft light over the snow-capped peaks which towered over the valley. Mount Cook itself was cast in an almost salmon-pink light and was far more vibrant to my eye than any of the mountains around it. From its summit a long plume of spindrift was clearly visible, trailing hundreds of feet into the air. The moon, just visible above the mountains, was silvery against the dusk sky. There was a star, too—just one, but every bit as bright as the moon.

It was freezing outside. As we climbed down from the van, my mother shivered and pulled her cardigan tightly across her chest, holding it against her body with one hand while she carried an old, battered suitcase with the other. The bulk of our belongings was packed into one large case, which my father heaved out of the van, almost throwing himself off-balance as he took its full weight. I had my school case—a grubby blue thing which I swung enthusiastically by its brown plastic handle in an attempt to make the blood flow into my arms and chilled hands. Dressed in shorts, my thighs and knees took the full impact of the cold air, and I bounced up and down as I swung my arms, causing my father to step backwards, out of harm's way as he called, 'Steady on! You'll have us all knocked off our feet in a minute.' No sooner were the words out of my father's mouth than he slipped on a patch of ice and landed heavily on his bottom. 'What did I tell you?' he growled, looking up at me and extending his hand for me to help him to his feet. 'You be

careful there, Connie,' he called after my mother who, in her Sunday best shoes, was already skittering towards the front entrance of the hotel.

I trailed behind my parents, reluctant to turn away from the mountain now that only a thin strip of sunlight grazed its summit. I didn't want to miss the moment when the sunlight disappeared altogether and so I half walked backwards, checking my progress every now and again by twisting my head so that I could see over my left shoulder. As I stumbled along, I suddenly heard an eerie sound, a cry that was as sharp as the still air and yet, somehow crazy, otherworldly. It was unknown to me and I stopped and looked in the direction from which it had come. Two birds, dark in colour but with under-wings that appeared an orange-red even in the fading light, swooped down towards us coming to land on the roof of the hotel. As their claws made contact with the roof they began to clatter and slide towards the gutters and despite scrabbling for purchase, both birds skated off the roof entirely, flapping madly in their attempt to avoid crashing to the ground. Giving the impression of being offended by what had happened, they then took to the sky and disappeared around the back of the building, screeching angrily as they did so.

'Keas,' said my father.

I asked him to repeat the word, which was new to me, and then I tried it myself, murmuring, 'kea, kea, kea...' until I understood that that was the sound of their call. It was onomatopoeic.

'Clowns of the sky,' added my father, hefting the suitcase before him.

Even now, many years since that first visit to the Hermitage, I am unable to see the interior of that building with a clear, objective eye. I can describe it neither accurately nor truthfully but only as I first perceived it: the opulence of its interior so magnificent that I could have been entering its Russian namesake (had I known, back then, that somewhere else in the world another Hermitage existed). Though I was to return to the Hermitage as a young man and see its interiors once more, I cling stubbornly to the first, dominant impression created in my mind as a result of that childhood holiday.

And so I will stick to this description, exaggerated and inaccurate though it is: the hotel was ablaze with lights. In all the public areas, hanging from every ceiling, above every table, chair and desk were massive chandeliers. To my young eyes—which, up until that point, had been accustomed only to dull bulbs hanging forlornly over kitchen tables or inserted into standard lamps—these chandeliers were miraculous. It was as if someone had taken a bucket of diamonds, tossed them into the air and then commanded them to

‘freeze!’ These clusters hovered close to the ceiling, suspended high above me and their light was like no other. I felt happier than I had for a very long time and I believe my good mood was the result of being bathed by such bright, pure light.

Decorating the walls of the reception area and dining room were original paintings. Whereas in our home we had one pictorial calendar and several dull floral prints depicting cut stems of pink or yellow roses, the Hermitage had real art works, of a kind I had never seen before. They were huge, too big to fit onto the pages of any book or magazine. They were not life-size of course—even I was prepared to admit that— but because most of the paintings depicted landscapes—winter snow-scenes of Mount Cook or pictures of mountain streams cascading over boulders—I felt they could have been real. Each painting put me in mind of a window, one that opened up onto a view of such beauty that I longed to step outside and discover for myself the landscape rendered visible. To do that would have been impossible—even I knew that—but what I could do was stand very close to each painting and take in every brush stroke, the detail and colour that made up each individual work. When I was sure no one was looking, I reached out my fingers and touched the surface of one particularly striking painting. The image of its moon-lit, snow-covered track leading through a forest towards a small hut lodged in my mind, I closed my eyes and allowed my fingertips to guide me over the scene. The track itself was cool and smooth, whereas the trees, either side, were rough—the paint layered on so thickly that I imagined I was touching real bark, actual foliage. I had never been to an art gallery but I had no doubt that few galleries could compete with the richness of the hotel’s collection.

Of all the fittings that impressed me, I was most taken by the large brass telescope which dominated the day-room, its lens focussed on the Hooker Valley and Mount Cook itself. The view through the telescope exerted a kind of magnetic force on me, simply by virtue of drawing the mountains closer to the hotel than they were, in reality. Sefton, Cook and the others which I did not know by name, not only towered above us, but pressed against us, dominating our hotel, which, by comparison, was small and fragile as if made from eggshell.

But better than all of these things, more stunning than the view, more splendid than the chandeliers, more exciting than the paintings or the telescope was the effect all these things had on my mother. As we were called into the dining room, I heard my mother gasp and, anticipating some new source of anguish, I reluctantly turned to face her. Her expression, however, was one of utter delight. Her eyes shone and her fingertips rested against her bottom lip as, with child-like wonder, she murmured, ‘Is it real?’ A feeling of

bliss went through me as she then placed her arm around my shoulder and pulled me into her, squeezing me tight. I was filled with such joy that I both wanted the moment to freeze, to last forever, and at the same time rush forward as I felt compelled to seize the moment and show her all the things that I, too, had seen. I wanted to share my joy and make her happy. So, rather than staying close by her side and simply being with her—her happy self—I rushed around, jabbering and pointing wildly. ‘Look at this!’ I said as I dodged past the furniture. ‘Have you ever seen such bright lights, so many windows and tables?’ It took several minutes before I noticed that my mother was paying me no attention. She was so engrossed in absorbing her own impressions that she hadn’t joined in exploring mine. I stood still, looking towards her, waiting for her to acknowledge me. But, after a moment, she edged towards a table and sat down, her back to me as she reached for a pressed napkin which she fingered idly as she gazed at some spot in the distance.

I have no recollection of the meal. Though I was aware that my parents carried on a conversation of sorts, my father commenting on the meat, I suppose, or on the activities he had planned for us over the following days, I felt tired, conscious even then, that I had wasted an opportunity, that I should have nestled against my mother’s warm body instead of hastily diving away. I don’t remember what I ate but I do recall the way in which the food balled up in my mouth and, no matter how hard or long I chewed, I experienced the discomfort of swallowing each morsel whole. Maybe I was simply worn out by the day’s journey but I was glad when, towards eight-thirty, I was led down the corridor to our room and helped onto a fold-out cot which had been placed at the foot of my parents’ bed. Only then did I allow myself the pleasure of opening the book I had borrowed from the shelves of the hotel library: C.A. Cotton’s *Geomorphology of New Zealand*. I had picked it up because I liked the sound of the word, Geomorphology, and what’s more, it had diagrams and photographs on almost every page.

I fell asleep immediately, waking only once in the night, when from nearby I heard quiet laughter as several unfamiliar voices called out ‘Goodnight’ to one another. I listened and heard the soft click of doors closing and then, apart from footsteps which appeared to be coming from the room next to ours, the night fell quiet and I drifted back to sleep not waking again until I felt my father’s hand on my shoulder, shaking me gently. He urged me to get up, as morning had broken and we had no time to lose.



So much of that holiday was new to me, far *bigger* than anything I had experienced before. My impression of the grand scale owes much to the view through the hotel windows. Though I had stared through the glass the evening before, as the light was fading, and felt a sense of joy and elation, the scene which greeted me during that first morning at the Hermitage had an altogether different effect on my mood. Standing before the window, taking in the dark, sunless valleys, the distinct boundary between shadow and sunlight on the higher peaks, I was overcome by a desire to climb a mountain. For someone who had never before felt even the slightest inclination to scramble up a peak, I was surprised by my craving. It was a gut reaction, instinctual. I didn't want to spend my day in the shadow looking up, I wanted to be up there—wherever *there* was—I wanted to explore the jagged ridge lines which towered above me, I wanted to be so high that I could see what was beyond what was now in front of me. I needed to see what was on the other side.

My hunger to climb was urgent. Every second spent inside the Hermitage seemed wasted. This was brought home to me when, as I sat with my parents, silently spooning porridge into my mouth, I glanced up and saw two men walk past the front of the building. Unlike my parents, who were dressed in clothes that I knew were only ever worn on Sundays or special occasions, these men wore thick woollen jumpers and knee breeches, long socks and hob-nailed boots. On their backs were canvas knapsacks and one of the men carried a stout walking stick. I couldn't hear what they were saying but they were talking animatedly to each other, laughing as they passed the window and disappeared down a path leading away from the hotel. I was about to turn back to my food when seconds later a young woman ran past the window, clearly trying to catch the men. She, too, was dressed in trousers and boots and her hair, a cascade of golden curls, was kept off her face by a bright red hair-band, which she adjusted as she trotted after her companions.

If my parents noticed the group, they paid them no attention. My father gave the impression of concentrating on his breakfast, selecting each morsel of food carefully and then chewing slowly as if about to grade it according to its flavour and texture. Occasionally, mid-chew, he would nod his head appreciatively and make a jabbing motion towards his plate with his fork, murmuring with mouth half-full, 'Very tasty, not bad at all.' My mother, who, like me, had chosen porridge from the menu, smiled whenever my father nodded vigorously and added, 'It's lovely, just lovely.'

I was pleased to see my parents so happy but, at the same time, I was beginning to feel apprehensive. Both my father and mother appeared to be gaining such pleasure from their meal that I feared being stuck in the dining room for the remainder of the day.

I was desperate to go outside and I became increasingly anxious. My mother's mood could change. Much as I wanted her to remain relaxed for the entire holiday, I was unwilling to believe that she would. At any moment she might recall her previous holiday at the Hermitage—the time she had visited with the twins, my brothers—and she would retreat into herself, once more. It was important that I nudge her outside before that happened. To be in the midst of such beauty would be enough to save her. I knew she had packed one of her jigsaw puzzles and I feared if I wasn't quick enough, she might simply settle down in front of 2000 fragments of the Tower of London and content herself with an occasional glimpse through the window.

Convinced that what I badly wanted was about to be snatched away from me, I blurted, 'Can we go exploring, outdoors?' I had intended the tone of my voice to be casual, jolly even, but it sounded desperate as if I were already certain of defeat. To my immense relief, however, my father replied, 'Of course, lad. That's what we've come for.' He patted me affectionately on the head, adding, 'Just as soon as your mother's ready.' He winked at my mother and she looked from him to me, conscious that I was watching her, willing her to hurry. 'I think we could go to Governor's Bush,' she suggested, smiling at me. 'It's not too strenuous,' she added, glancing at my father. 'Do you remember, Nathaniel, how much we enjoyed the nature walk the last time we were here?'

My father nodded but my heart sank a little. Knowing my mother, I thought it would be foolish to risk going anywhere she had been before, with my brothers. I wanted her to venture into new territory, somewhere that held no associations for her. Perhaps I was jealous, too. I didn't want my mother to spend the weekend thinking about the twins. I wanted her to be with me, emotionally as well as physically.

Within minutes of finishing breakfast we found ourselves stepping outside, breathing in the fresh morning air and looking about in gratitude and amazement. At least that's how it seemed to me. My parents, I suspect, were not so powerfully affected, for my father, after a few steps, hesitated and retied his boot laces, complaining that the uppers were pressing uncomfortably against his bunions. My mother, on the other hand, fussed with a hat she had knitted for me the previous week. I had purposefully left it behind in our room, the flecked lime green wool being too vibrant for my taste and its pom-pom ridiculously large. I was put out to discover that she had not only picked it up but had

brought mittens, too—which she was pressing upon me with alarming vigour. I was far too old for mittens, particularly ones that were tied together by a long length of binding which went behind my neck and prevented either mitten from being dropped should I remove it from my hand. I wasn't a baby anymore, and I was about to protest when a new group of guests burst suddenly through the hotel entrance, greeting my father whom they clearly recognised from the previous day's encounter on the Mackenzie.

Unlike the glamorous group I had spotted earlier, these people appeared as drab as us. There were three men and two women but, curiously, as I looked more closely, I noticed that the women were dressed in a masculine manner: boots, tweed trousers, checked shirts—the collars of which were visible above the necklines of home-spun jumpers. Two men—although dressed in a similar fashion to the women—were strangely prim. One of them had slender wrists and long, tapered fingers. Standing slightly apart from the rest of the group, he smiled briefly at me and then moved away, leaving his companions to exchange early morning pleasantries with my parents.

After a few minutes' chat, during which time the topics of road conditions, weather and breakfast were all dealt with, we parted ways: they were bound for a place called Kea Point whereas, as my parents had already decided, we were off to Governor's Bush.

I thought no more of the group. I was impatient to get underway and although I would have liked to have been striking out for some high peak I knew it was out of the question. The leg injury my father had acquired in the war prevented him from taking strenuous exercise, and his ability to tackle uneven or steeply sloping ground was severely compromised. Though he was able to cope with the daily demands of his trade, he never walked for recreation, preferring instead to potter around our home, gardening or working on his van—the latter taking up an enormous amount of his time and energy. Due to war-time shortages, the tyres had been patched and repaired so many times that my father had joked—somewhat half-heartedly—that they were as useless as his own legs: that either could be expected to give up the ghost at any minute.

My mother, although healthy, had little interest in the outdoors. I never knew her to walk for pleasure. During the summer, when Dudley invited my parents for a picnic, she would invariably make some excuse and remain indoors while I—the lone representative of the family—would pack my towel and trunks and disappear for the day, grateful to be out in the fresh air after a week of breathing in the various odours associated with my father's trade.

I was surprised my mother had so readily agreed to walk through Governor's Bush. While I was delighted that she was prepared to join my father and me, I half suspected that she had only agreed because, given the outdoor focus of our accommodation, she would have felt self-conscious, even a failure, had remained inside on such a beautiful day. As if to confirm my suspicions, I heard her sigh shortly after we got underway and not ten minutes later, she said: 'I forgot how much uphill there was.'

We made a strange group. My father, having done his dash with social intercourse, had nothing more to say. He limped ahead of us, hesitating every now and then as he negotiated the roots of the large beech trees we walked around. My mother, no more talkative, fell into silence. I had the distinct feeling that she was determined to see the outing through—and nothing more. Once more, I appeared to have pulled the short straw, spending my day in the company of tired, worn down adults when, truth be told, I might have been far happier by myself. To make matters worse, I could not run ahead of my father and mother. Something within me told me that such a simple display of freedom would be disloyal, that it would hurt my parents terribly, especially when it was clear they were outside, tackling a bush walk, as a favour to me. I believe now, as I believed then, that they were genuine in their attempt to give me a happy start to our holiday. That they were unable to take real pleasure in their activities was not the point. The point was that they wanted to give me something—and it would have been churlish of me, unforgivable even, if I had not acknowledged their kindness and stayed close by. So, on we walked.

Looking back, I wonder if my aversion to the bush dates from that early experience. Governor's Bush was, by anyone's standards, a beautiful remnant of beech forest. It had all the features one looks for in a forest walk. A pleasant smell—a musty, sweet, woody scent—rose from the ground as my feet tracked over fallen leaves, broken branches, and mud. The earthy scent struck me forcibly, and made an agreeable contrast with the crisp, fresh, mountain air surrounding me. The light that morning was also spectacular. Golden, it tunnelled through the canopy of branches, settling in pools by our feet or spotlighting patches of moss which glowed an intense green. As we walked, small birds would flutter ahead of us, darting from branch to ground and then back again, perching close to where we passed, seemingly unafraid—curious, if anything, about our presence. But despite these wonders, I felt hemmed in and it was only as we reached the highest point and I was able to take in the face of Mount Sebastopol that I truly relaxed and breathed easily. Standing on that spur, surrounded by sub-alpine scrub, I raised my arms and spun around in a manner I was to see replicated, many years later, by Julie

Andrews in *The Sound of Music*. It was an extravagant gesture and immediately after I felt embarrassed, grateful that no one had witnessed my strange performance.

With lunch beckoning, we retraced our footsteps and returned to the Hermitage in good time. As we drew closer to the hotel, my father—who had remained thoughtful throughout the morning—suddenly readjusted his features and called out a hearty ‘hullo’ to an elderly couple who were sunning themselves in front of the building.

It was only after lunch was disposed of and my parents had retired to our room for a quiet lie down that I was able to head off on my own. During lunch I had come to the conclusion that I would follow the direction taken by the man with the graceful hands. For some reason, my instinct told me that his group had a greater appreciation of the mountainous landscape than my own family, and that they would have chosen a more interesting route than the one we had taken that morning. So, dressed in the ridiculous hat and mittens that my mother insisted I wear in case the weather turned, I stepped out into a peerless afternoon and hurried away before either my father or mother had second thoughts about my solitary expedition and called me back.

I walked for thirty minutes or so, following a path that crossed a boulder and scree fan, before it descended slightly and levelled out on open scrub and tussock covered ground. Suddenly unsure of myself—and of the whereabouts of Kea Point—I aimed instead for an isolated, low hill which rose, abruptly, from its flat surroundings. This hill, also covered in low scrub, reminded me, immediately, of a desert island protruding from an otherwise calm, featureless ocean. The hill was the perfect size for one person and I lost no time scrambling to its summit, on top of which I raised a pole made from a damaged sapling. Facing a massive snow and ice covered mountain—which, I remembered, was Mt Sefton—I then turned a slow, clock-wise circle, taking in the Hooker Valley, Footstool, Mount Cook, Mt Wakefield, the Tasman River, the road leading back towards Pukaki and, finally, Mount Sebastopol and the Hermitage itself. For the first time in my life, I felt I was at the centre of the world, that all these wondrous sights were somehow there for my pleasure and that they would remain so for as long as I kept making my slow, methodical circle. Turning my back on any one of these views struck me as wasteful, a crime. If I faced Wakefield, I missed out on seeing what was happening on Cook. Watching Cook denied me the pleasure of seeing the stationary clouds poised above Sebastopol. So, while being in this place gave me an intense pleasure, it also instilled in me a sense of regret. No matter how hard I tried, or how long I spent on my hill, I couldn’t

capture the scene. I had to make a choice, a conscious decision of where to look, of what to focus on—and what to lose.

It was a sound that finally settled things for me. I had been looking at another scrub covered hill, opposite mine and quite a bit larger, when there was a crash followed by a thunderous roar, and glancing up I saw half the face of Sefton disappear behind a rising cloud of spindrift. The initial sound of the avalanche continued for several seconds, its echo seeming to vibrate across the space between us. I imagined feeling the ground around me move, so forceful was the noise and the billowing cloud rising from the lower slopes obscuring the sky. I recalled tales I had read about battleships, stories of Drake's confrontation with the Spanish Armada and in my mind I drew vivid comparisons between the volley of cannon-fire and the avalanche, the might and destruction common to both. It was thrilling but, having missed the avalanche itself, and seeing only its aftermath, I settled down and waited, anticipating a second, even more powerful event.

I sat for over an hour. Every now and then I would hear a crack and scanning the mountain opposite I would search out what looked like a small trickle of snow, falling through some deep gully, but nothing matched the earlier scene I had encountered. Deciding to give the mountain a rest, a chance to recover from its burst of energy, I began to explore my hill-top, cursing myself for not bringing a pencil and paper on which to draw a proper map. Below my summit was a hollow. At some point, I thought, there must have been a pond or perhaps—I secretly hoped—a meteorite which had fallen from the sky, landing where I now stood. For the most part, however, the hill lacked exciting features. There were no caves, middens, waterfalls or wild animals as far as I could tell. It was exactly what it had appeared to be at first sight: a scrub covered hillock rising out of the ground. Yet, having fully explored my island, I believed that I knew it better than anyone else and I quickly came to see it as my special place: my hill, my fortress, my island, my kingdom.

Immediately I began to grow anxious, wondering how I could protect it from others. The knoll created in me such strong feelings of protection that I scared myself into thinking that someone would try and take it away, or destroy it. I know it seems strange but the mound seemed to be alive, a living thing, like a massive animal—an elephant or a whale—and it depended upon me to safeguard its life. I could not bring myself to leave and, when, towards nightfall, I did eventually walk away, I found myself turning back, time and time again, searching out the pole on its summit, walking backwards, stumbling

over the ground until the sapling was no longer visible and the knoll, itself, was little more than a shadowy form rising up from the ground.

I was almost back at the Hermitage, scrambling across the scree, when I realised that there was a group of people walking just ahead of me. Had I had more time, I would have waited, allowing them to gain some distance but, fearful that my mother would be worried about me, I hurried on, praying that they would allow me to overtake them without comment. I was not so lucky. Just as I was about to nip past, I stumbled and fell to the ground. Immediately the last person in the group turned around and, to my embarrassment, offered his hand. I was surprised by the softness of his skin. His hand was surprisingly small, much narrower than my own, and as he pulled me to my feet I had the sensation of crushing his fingers in my more powerful grasp. It was the man I had noticed earlier, the gentleman I had half-heartedly set out to follow before being side-tracked by my hill. I felt awkward in his presence. His eyes, which showed no signs of unfriendliness, nevertheless appeared to scrutinize me, as if he was weighing me up for the table. A thin man, he stood with his weight over one hip, whereas most of the men of my acquaintance preferred to stand solidly, on two broad feet. His hair, which was combed to one side, fell across his face and as we stood facing each other he raised his slender hand and brushed his hair away, frowning as he did so. From this man, I expected to hear a thin, reedy voice, but that was not the case. Instead his voice was low and quiet and, suddenly smiling, he asked if I was all right. I nodded but sensing he was not finished with me, I stayed put, waiting to see what would happen next.

His friends, I could see, had stopped and were waiting a short distance away. One of the party called out, asking what was going on and the man replied, saying we would only be a moment, and that they should go on ahead as it was getting cold. He turned back to me and asking me once more if I would survive, made way for me, allowing me to walk ahead of him which, once more, gave me the feeling—although I couldn't be sure—that he was watching me, watching me walk.

As I hurried on he made conversation, asking me where I had been, if I had enjoyed myself and then telling me that he had been out all day, sitting gazing at the view while his friends sketched and painted. He asked me if I liked art and when I was unable to answer, he changed the subject, asking if I liked being in the mountains? Hearing me respond in the affirmative, he then took a deep breath and said something wholly unexpected and remarkable: "I live not in myself, but I become Portion of that around me; and to me High mountains are a feeling, but the hum of human cities torture."

I was stopped in my tracks. Two thoughts entered my head simultaneously: What on earth had he said and could he repeat it? I asked him to say it again, slowly, and I drank up every word—until the bit about the cities. I repeated my request and if he was annoyed or surprised at having to repeat the lines, he didn't let on but simply spoke the words slowly, allowing me to fumble through them as I locked them into my brain. It didn't occur to me—not even for a second—that he was not the original source of those words. I had no idea he was quoting Byron. Nor for a minute did I doubt that he was speaking from the heart—albeit a collective heart, one that in some awkward, bumbling way, included my own.

And then we entered the Hermitage and my mother appeared before us. She had been watching for me and before I could stop her, she was at my side, ushering me into the dining room, nagging me about my hat and gloves while the man—the possessor of words—slipped away.

The next afternoon, as soon as my parents went for a lie down, I escaped to 'my hill', Foliage Hill, to watch for avalanches. Once there, I must have lost track of time because before I knew it the sun had eased behind the mountains and shadows seeped across the valley floor. In the growing dusk I discovered a sense of peace, gazing skyward as one by one the stars appeared and hearing far away the distant rumble of ice-fall: blocks falling from the mountain whose face I now knew more completely than any other—Sefton.

Running, I was guided back to the Hermitage by the lights which glowed and dazzled from behind its glass panes, I had not been back long, seated beside my mother, who sat frowning over a puzzle of the *Titanic*, when my father spoke up, informing me of the pleasant hour he had spent in the company of 'the artists'—his description of the group who had followed us up from the Mackenzie. I had just missed them, he said. He went on to say that a new member had joined their group. His name, my father said, was Darroch—and he was the artist responsible for the paintings hanging on the walls of the hotel. Mr. Darroch—Duncan—had his own residence behind the hotel and he spent his days doing odd jobs, guiding and painting. I would have liked to have heard more about this artist, but my father, sensing he had my undivided attention, suddenly leant forward and, in a conspiratorial voice, whispered, 'Do you recall the stocky woman—the one with the dark hair?' I nodded, though truth be told, I hadn't noticed the colour of the stocky woman's hair. 'Well,' continued my father, 'she let slip, over a glass of port, that she is a vegetarian.' I waited, wondering what on earth my father meant, exactly, by 'vegetarian'.



‘I asked her why,’ continued my father, ‘and do you know what she said?’ I shook my head. ‘She said she didn’t like the taste of flesh.’

My father raised his eyebrows and repeated, ‘The taste of flesh!’ and then laughed, a strangely hollow, pained sound. Ridiculous though it was, I could see that my father found the woman’s remark hurtful. It was a personal blow.

‘I asked for her address and told her I’d send some of my best sausages her way—but she said I wasn’t to go to any trouble. There was no point wasting good food.’

I gave my father what I hoped was a sympathetic smile. I have to admit I was becoming more and more curious about these ‘artists’. Despite their plain—even prim—exterior, they were exotic. I scabbled for something with which to compare them with and to my immense satisfaction I settled on an image of a kea: these people were the equivalent of the dull green bird’s scarlet under-wings.

In bed that night, my mind raced over all that had taken place since leaving home. To calm myself down, I began to compose a poem. As before, I started with a word and then attempted to find an appropriate rhyme for it by trawling through the alphabet, one letter at a time. ‘Kea,’ I began and then discovered I could go no further.

I lay awake, the crisp hotel sheets scratching my chin, my mind darting back and forth from one letter to another, sure that I had missed the obvious. After what felt like a life-time, I finally settled on a first line:

‘It must be queer to be a kea...’

I created spaces between the sounds, sliding the words like abacus beads on a piece of wire:

‘It must be que-er to be-a kea ...’

It was a dismal failure but I could do no better. I could see what I wanted to say: the birds, their call ringing through the clear air, contrasting with the crashing of the huge, snow-capped mountains—but I couldn’t link it all together. When the words wouldn’t come, I fell asleep: from frustration or boredom, I’m not sure which overtook me first.

We left the next day and our return to Fairlie was heralded by an absence of blue sky and the presence of dense, clammy smog which cloaked the town. The clear, crisp days of Mount Cook seemed far behind us and the holiday was soon forgotten as I returned to school, my father to work and my mother to her chair at the kitchen table.

From time to time, while out roaming at night, I would recall vague images of Mount Sefton, and Cook or hear again the words spoken to me by ‘the bard’. Whenever

this happened I would stop dead in my tracks, aware of an intense longing within me to recapture and preserve that holiday in all its exquisite, painful detail. On the other hand, I wanted to ban all such images and words for ever.

My days fell into a tired routine. Now a student at High School I continued to plug away at my lessons and homework while the other boys in my class turned their attention towards football and cricket, sports which never held the slightest attraction for me. With a few other boys, I was rounded up one day by a teacher seeking ‘volunteers’ for the school production of *Macbeth*. We drew straws, I recall, to decide who would play Macbeth opposite Lady Macbeth, a role performed with gusto by Mary Belcher. Mary, I remember all too clearly, was a scrawny girl with disproportionately large breasts and prominent nipples—the latter, noticeable through her cotton shift, were impossible to ignore and thoroughly disconcerting for any teenage boy trying to remember lines.

To my immense relief the part of Macbeth went to an older boy named Athol. To his credit, he dealt swiftly and thoroughly with the teasing that followed. I happened to pass him one day as he was standing beneath the framed portrait of former pupil, Jack Lovelock, laying into another boy who had dared to call him a sissy for dressing up in tights and prancing about on stage. I played the porter, my stage-fright being such that I forgot to breathe and could barely get through my lines without fainting.

Saturdays were spent helping my father. Gradually I acquired some of the skills demonstrated to me by him—though I was far from being an expert, or even, for that matter, competent.

I took little satisfaction in my work. Rather than becoming immune to the smell of freshly butchered meat, still-warm blood collected for black puddings, or air filled with the odour of gelatinous bones boiling in a pot, I became increasingly sensitive to the sights and smells of a butcher’s trade. Often I would be forced to cover my mouth with a handkerchief and dash for the door, where I would stand shaking, gulping for air like a fish cast from its bowl.

It was clear to me that I was not cut out for my father’s work, but the thought that I could be anything but a butcher rarely entered his thoughts. He spoke often of my taking over the business and, should I be in the shop when a new customer entered, he lost no time in introducing me as his successor, a ‘butcher in the making’ or, worse, ‘the future butcher of Fairlie.’ He said little about my sudden outbursts, my inability to control my responses to certain aspects of the trade, saying only that it was a matter of time before I settled into the job. Only once did he ever express his true feelings.

On that occasion he had received an order for a pig's head and, being otherwise occupied with pickling, asked me to tackle the job of preparing its brains, ears, cheeks and tongue for the customer. At the time I thought he was testing me but looking back I think he was simply too busy to do the job himself.

There were two butcher's blocks in my father's shop: one towards the back of the shop and a larger, circular block next to the counter. This large, drum-like block was the one I selected for my task. For some reason I thought the head looked neater and was better suited to this block than the other, less public one. Up until that point I had only ever handled half-heads before and my first surprise came when I lifted the head: it was all of fifteen to twenty pounds in weight. Feeling a little apprehensive about how, exactly, I was to approach the skull, I hesitated just as I was about to land my first blow, the result being that my cleaver pierced the animal's thick skin but then bounced off its skull, jarring my arm in the process. My father, who had witnessed my inept display, came across the room and showed me where to aim the blade for my next attempt. 'You need to split it cleanly,' he said, 'not just chip away at it. Come on, lad, put some elbow into it.' I was about to give it another go when he interrupted my concentration, adding, 'Just behind the ears. It will pop apart if you do it right and you'll see the brains. Make sure you don't go too hard at it—you don't want to mash its brains.'

As he spoke, my ears began to make an odd buzzing sound, which grew in volume as I repositioned the head on the block and raised my cleaver. I was on the verge of striking the head when, suddenly, I made eye contact with the pig's lifeless, glassy eyes. The buzzing in my ears increased and I just managed to bring the blade down hard. There was a crack and then, to my horror, the eye lids fluttered and blinked as the animal's brain became visible.

I felt my head go woozy and before I could stop myself, my knees buckled and I slumped down to the floor, knocking the block as I fell, sending the head toppling down after me. I don't believe I quite fainted but, lying on my back, I was aware of a ringing noise in my ears and in front of my eyes I saw bright flashes of light, exploding like bubbles.

My father stood over me, a look of shock and disbelief on his face as he bent stiffly to retrieve the head from the floor. He held it, gently cradling its split skull in his huge hands, as he said, in a voice filled with wonder, 'Well, that's a first.'

He was genuinely amazed, as astonished by what had happened as I was shocked. 'Goodness me, lad' he said, giving me his hand, 'You didn't half give me a fright.'

I couldn't speak. My head felt light, hollow somehow and even though I was back on my feet I was as wobbly as a new-born lamb.

Eventually my father put the head down and then eyes wide, said, 'I don't think we'd better mention this to your mother. Let's not worry her. What do you say?'

I left school in 1951, at the age of sixteen. It wasn't that I was struggling academically but that my father was struggling physically with the demands of his trade. His leg often caused him great pain and although he rarely mentioned it, his face had a tendency to show it whenever he had heavy lifting to do.

I was not forced to leave school and although it was clear that my father wanted me to follow in his footsteps, he took care not to bully me, exactly. For several years my parents had been asking me about school, and my favourite subjects and, in recent months, they had questioned me with regard to my future. What, they wanted to know, were my plans? These were questions I could not answer. I had little idea what I could do with my life. I had hoped that by the time I reached the age of eighteen I would know—but, really, I couldn't say, one way or another, what I wanted to do. Part of the problem was that I had excelled at none of the serious subjects, chemistry, physics, mathematics and the like which might have led me towards a career in engineering or medicine. English and history were my chosen subjects but, apart from teaching and journalism, neither of which held any attraction, I could not see a way of putting either subject to good use.

My form teacher, who was also my English teacher, offered me no clues. He was due to retire at the end of the year and was far more interested in making plans for his future than mine. When I asked what I should do, he simply responded that I was a good all-rounder and that I would no doubt succeed in whatever career I entered. I pressed him for more information as to what that career might be but he brushed me off with the surprising statement, 'Just follow your heart.' My knowledge and experience of the world was so limited that I had little idea of my options. But then, had I known, I might have been paralysed by indecision—or guilt. So, in the end, I concluded that being a butcher was as good a choice as any and, seeing the look of joy and relief on my father's face when I told him of my decision, I felt I had done the right thing.

I quickly learnt to manage my gut reactions to certain aspects of the job. My father and I came up with a compromise solution: he took charge of offal and I did all the heavy work: the lifting of carcasses and such like. Anything else, we shared. It was a system that

suiting us both and, much to our surprise, my mother started to join us in the shop, making Cornish pasties which we sold, one day a week, on Fridays.

During this period my father appeared more content than I had seen him ever before. For years he had been watching my mother, anticipating the shifts in her mood but now he visibly relaxed and dropped his guard. He frequently glanced around the shop and remarked that he was a lucky man. He had always dreamed of running a family business and now, at last, that dream had come true. His words had no effect on my mother. She let them pass without comment, never once reminding him that—as far as she was concerned—we three were the *remains* of a family, nothing more.

As my father appeared reinvigorated by his growing business, I became more and more reserved. Boys I had known since childhood suddenly began to leave Fairlie. I would sometimes catch sight of them standing on the station platform, chatting and smoking as they waited for the train. If they saw me, they would call out good naturedly, ‘Be sure to look me up if you’re ever in Christchurch!’ Some, I knew, planned to travel overseas, working their passage on one of the passenger ships leaving from Auckland. Others, boys older than me, were heading to university. Even Ted—who was two or three years older than me—was leaving town. He had found work with the Canterbury Steam Shipping Company.

And then, just when it seemed that no one else could leave—for they had already gone—stories began to trickle in, news and gossip passed on to my father from various customers, each one detailing how well a boy was doing. ‘I’ve had a letter from Duncan,’ said one woman, ‘He’s in Canada now but he’s not sure for how much longer. He’s thinking of moving on to Alaska.’

‘Alaska!’ my father cried. ‘Who would have thought one of our boys would end up in Alaska.’

If I was in the shop, he’d turn to me and say, ‘Don’t you go getting any ideas. I need you here, with me.’

The customer would smile in my direction. Often, she’d say something along the lines of: ‘You’re lucky to have him, Nathaniel. There’s nothing more important than family.’ And my father would nod and say, ‘You’re right, there.’ A knot would tighten in my stomach and I’d have to step outside, just for a moment, until the customer left.

After dinner I would take once more to the streets, wandering to the outskirts of town where I would stand and gaze across the countryside, watching the lambs graze and leap about in vivid green paddocks. Rather than taking comfort in the scene I would

brood. My eyes would single out one lamb, registering its bleating search for its mother and then watching its long tail waggle as it yanked at the old ewe's teat. I wouldn't know whether to envy it or feel sorry for it. In the end it was all the same—it was only a lamb.

After one such outing I returned home to find my mother looking pale, her face strained—tight with worry. 'It's your Grandma Nola,' said my father. 'She's in hospital.' I looked from my father to my mother, but she was staring at her hands, unable to meet my eye even though I could tell she was listening. 'Your mother,' continued my father, 'may have to go to up to Auckland.' I think my mouth must have fallen open because my father quickly added, 'I know it's almost Christmas but we'll be all right, Boden. In any event, it's only for a short while. We'll manage.'

As the evening progressed I slowly gleaned more information from my father. My grandmother had had a stroke. A neighbour had found her. She'd become concerned when she'd noticed Nola's uncollected milk at the gate. The neighbour knew something must be wrong, after all no one would leave their milk out on a sunny day. She had called my mother's sister, Gwen, and then Gwen had called my mother with news of Nola's admission to hospital. It was touch and go, she said. The doctors were doing all they could but, really, one had to prepare for the worst. The upshot was that she would phone again when there was more news.

And so we sat in the kitchen waiting for the phone to ring. We knew she wouldn't ring until late at night when the rates were cheaper. Even so we couldn't bring ourselves to move in case we missed the call. I was used to quiet, even sombre evenings in our house, nights when we did little, talked infrequently and seemed to merely fill in the hours before bed time, but this evening was unlike even those drawn-out nights. My mother brought out a puzzle and sat hunched, staring at the jigsaw as if she found some strange meaning or consolation in its fractured image. My father, being more conscious than ever of my mother's subdued mood, attempted to make conversation. Including me in his mission, he would suddenly smile, laugh quietly, nod his head and then turning to me, say, 'Tell your mother what Mrs. So-and-so said today.' At the sight of my helpless expression, he would continue, 'You know, tell your mother about the possum...' Why he couldn't tell my mother himself was beyond me, but nevertheless I found myself repeating a story about a possum that had caused a power-cut in Winscombe as a result of climbing onto the wires and being electrocuted. As I finished the story, my father broke in, 'I bet that wouldn't happen in Alaska!' to which my mother's head jerked up and she stared at him blankly. My father, floundering, then passed on the news about Duncan, about his wanderings from

Canada to Alaska and then he looked at me, once more, and said: 'I told Boden not to go getting any ideas. We need him here, don't we love?' My mother attempted to smile but at that moment the phone rang and it was as if time—or our hearts—lurched and we sat looking at one another until my father leapt stiffly to his feet, snagging the tablecloth with his belt or his watch as he did so, sending the jigsaw puzzle tumbling to the ground, pieces scattering everywhere.

My mother and I appeared frozen to our seats, waiting for news. It seems strange now that he didn't pass the phone to my mother but I suppose the strangest thing was that she didn't stand up to take the call in the first place. We watched my father's face, saw him nod, heard him mutter, 'She's a fighter, alright,' and 'Doesn't sound too bad,' and then he said my mother could be there in a day or two, for Christmas, that he would arrange it and his final words, before he rang off, were, 'Chin up.'

He stood behind my mother, his hands on her shoulders as he conveyed the news to us. 'Nola's not so good,' he began. 'She's in no pain,' he hastened to add, 'but she's in a serious condition. Gwen doesn't think she'll ...' His voice broke, and fearing that he might cry, I quickly scrambled down from my chair and began searching for jigsaw pieces, remaining on the floor until long after my father blew his nose and suggested a strong cup of tea.

My mother left the next day. We went with her as far as the station, waiting until the train left before we turned our backs on the last carriage and drove slowly home. My father remained deep in thought throughout the day. I quickly understood that he was imagining my mother's progress, mile by mile, hour by hour. 'She'll be in Timaru, now' he remarked early in the day, and then, later 'She'll be aboard the ferry...' He fell silent and I knew why. My mother had no heart for the sea and we knew that the voyage from Lyttelton to Wellington would fill her with fear. We had listened to the weather forecast and early the next morning my father tuned into the marine forecast, waking me with the news that the crossing would be calm, and that my mother should sleep well. I doubted she would, but I could hear the relief in his voice. He had been worried, cursing himself for not accompanying her, for not 'seeing her right' as he kept saying.

The following day I heard my father mutter various place names, tracing the route between Wellington and Auckland. Familiar towns like Palmerston North followed by places I had never heard before: Mangaweka, Ngaruawahia—words that sounded foreign to me and which my father pronounced slowly with one finger planted firmly on the road-atlas. 'She won't call until she has news of your Grandma Nola,' he said. 'She'll phone



once she's settled in and rested.' And so we waited in a state of suspense, working as usual, cutting meat, wrapping parcels of mince and sausages in paper, making small-talk with customers while all the time our thoughts were elsewhere, with my mother who we hoped—though did not know—had made it safely to her destination.

And then the unimaginable happened. Early the following morning my father woke me, shaking me roughly and urging me to wake up, wake up. Disorientated, I remembered it was Christmas Day and I thought that a call from my mother must have come through but there was something about my father's startled expression which scared me. He barely waited until my feet touched the ground before he pushed me towards the kitchen. The radio was on and as I listened I realised why my father was so upset. There had been a train crash. At a place called Tangiwai.

Time stopped. I can remember standing in the kitchen, my eyes scanning the Christmas cards my mother had arranged on the mantle above the coal range. I fixed on a picture of a red-breasted robin, its spindly feet curled around a sprig of snow-dusted holly, and I shivered, I couldn't stop myself. For months I had seen myself as an adult, a man in employment and yet, faced with the uncertainty of my mother's whereabouts, I became once more a child in need of comfort. I tricked myself into hoping that as long as I didn't ask my father for details about Tangiwai, or about the possibility of my mother being on that particular overnight train, everything would be all right. If I didn't ask, we would be able—somehow—to pass beyond that awful moment and Christmas Day would return. Hymns would replace the news bulletins, messages of goodwill would be broadcast, children might pass our front window, wobbling on brand new bicycles...the sun would shine brightly and we would go to Dudley's for dinner, just as we had arranged the day before. I opened my mouth to speak but my father hushed me, saying, 'Hundreds are feared lost. The bridge collapsed. The country will never recover...' He didn't mention my mother. Perhaps he couldn't bring himself to face the fact that she might be one of those lost or that he would never recover.

'Mother will be all right' I said. 'I mean, she's already in Auckland. You did say 'Auckland' yesterday morning, didn't you? I heard you say it.' I tried to account for the hours she had been away. The day before I had heard my father pronouncing one place name after another but I hadn't truly followed the journey paved by his words. I hadn't paid close enough attention and now I was concerned. If she had caught the overnight train she had originally booked, we should have heard from her by now. She could have called last night. But my father had said something about her waiting until she was settled

in, hadn't he? Surely, in that case, no news was good news? She would phone on Christmas Day. Today, in other words. But, my heart sank, there were perhaps hundreds of people out there waiting for word of their love ones.

And how could no news be good news?

Sensing my growing apprehension, my father instructed me to go to the phone while he hunted out my aunt's number. 'I don't know why I didn't think of this earlier,' he said, his voice wavering with emotion as he passed me the number. As I lifted the receiver I heard a voice snap, 'Line's busy!' and hesitating, I replaced the phone on the hook, looking at my father for further instruction. 'The line's in use,' I said, although my actions had already made the problem clear. 'Who is it?' asked my father. I shrugged, 'Mrs. Liddle, I think.' My father frowned. 'She'll be talking to her daughter. Could be hours.' We hovered in the kitchen for several more minutes, shuffling around but not speaking and then my father marched over to the phone, lifted the receiver and, in a voice I had never heard before, barked, 'Mrs Liddle? This is Nathaniel Black. We have an emergency—can you please clear the line.' I could just make out the sound of a muffled voice at the other end but I was not sure if she was protesting or simply asking for details of the emergency. It seemed to me that she gave up her place on the party line reluctantly but within seconds my father had the operator on the phone. Once more, I could only hear half the conversation but I gathered that it was not going to be easy to put the toll call through. There was a Christmas rush. The best she could do was try and she would call us back when she was successful.

My father looked grim but managed a smile. 'I know Edith, she'll do her best.' And then we sat down at the table, not speaking, but listening as more news slowly filtered through.

Although both my brothers had been lost in the war, the events of this day struck me far more forcibly than the news of my brothers' deaths. The magnitude of the disaster, the fact that it had taken place on Christmas Eve and the images in my mind's eye of the train crashing off the bridge and into a black, torrential river unnerved me. I imagined my mother's complete and utter terror in the seconds between sensing something was wrong and being flung around the carriage. I hoped that she died instantly—I couldn't bear the thought of her drowning. She was so scared of water.

I listened carefully to each bulletin. The radio announcer's controlled and measured voice was at odds with the confused scene he described. When I glanced up I saw that tears had formed in my father's eyes and that he made no move to wipe them

away. And, even though I had thought I was strong, I realised that crying was the right thing to do—and so we sat there, my father and me, and we wept—but we did it privately, our gaze fixed on the table top, not on each other.

After what seemed like an eternity, my father spoke. At first I couldn't make out what he was saying, his voice was so quiet and yet so hoarse. He told me about my mother, about the day they met and how he had had to work hard to win her over. She was so beautiful, he said, she could have had her pick of all the boys. She had chosen him and then he'd had to start the wooing all over again, this time working on her mother—Nola—and her father, Edward. He spoke of my mother's joy when the twins were born. Connie, he said, had wanted a large family—six or eight children, at least. She loved children. She was a magnet when it came to children—all children loved her. And then he told me about the other business—how she had tried for years and years to add to the family. He told me things that I had not heard before, and I am certain that he would not have said what he did had he not been so scared—or certain—of losing my mother that day. He talked about the pregnancies that did not make it beyond the first few months, of the weeks of recuperation that followed each miscarriage and of my mother's strength. She never gave up. He said that he would have thrown in the towel—but not her, she never gave up hope

And one day, he said, everything changed. Without the twins knowing a thing about it, my mother had persuaded my father to 'explore other, less heart-breaking, options' as he put it. They were all at home one morning, eating breakfast, when a telegram arrived. The news it contained struck them like a thunder-bolt, despite all their preparation. A baby was available, the telegram stated. It was one day old and it was a boy. My father looked at me, his eyes fixed on mine.

'It was you.'

We went to Dudley's for Christmas dinner, as we had planned.

My mother was not amongst the dead. She was safe in Auckland at the time of the crash.

We were invited into Dudley's front room and we sat quietly, sipping from glasses of warm lemonade or beer, trying desperately hard not to ruin Christmas Day for the younger members of the family—or Hilda, who had gone to so much trouble roasting the turkey.

From time to time, my father would shake his head and it was all he could do not to repeat, 'Connie could have been on that train.' On the few occasions when the words slipped out, automatically, he looked ashamed. We had a fair idea how many people had lost their lives.

After dinner, Hilda passed me a present. I wasn't expecting one and I felt awkward because I had not even bought her a card—though I could see that my mother had, on the family's behalf. Back then, my mother bought her cards in packs of ten—they all had the same image: a winter street scene, with children outside, throwing snow-balls. The children in the images wore mittens similar to the pair I had worn at Mount Cook. That was the only thing we had in common, those children and me.

As I unwrapped the present my hands began trembling. I couldn't prevent them from shaking and the parcel slipped through my fingers and fell to the floor. Through the torn wrapper I could see a cloth-bound book. When I bent to retrieve it I felt tired, as if the act of lifting the small volume required more strength than I could muster. I had the impression that a hand had reached up through the floor and had grabbed hold of me, dragging me back down.

The cloth-bound book had a blue cover and dark, navy-blue lettering. It was a book of English verse. The dust jacket was missing. When I opened it, I saw Hilda's name written in black ink. Her writing was small, neat—and there was a date: 1932. I wondered how she had come across the book: had it been a gift or had she bought it herself. I had never seen Hilda with a book in her hand. At any other time, I might have asked her—if only to make conversation—but all I said was 'Thank you, Hilda'. She smiled and I turned to Dudley and thanked him too.

Then, I opened the book at random and stood staring at the page.

My father never again raised the subject of my adoption. Everything that could have been said, had been as we sat waiting that Christmas Day for news of my mother. I'm not sure if my mother ever learned of that conversation. I imagine she probably did.

My father could tell me very little. I was born in Christchurch—not, as I had always assumed, Fairlie. My real mother was a schoolgirl. She did not hold me when I was born. I was not hers. During the first moments of my life I belonged to no one. Hearing that, I shared the sharp pain of my mother's humiliation.

My father told me everything he knew. It wasn't much.

In the days that followed, I spent long periods by myself, walking the back-paddocks and streets, remaining outdoors until long after night-fall. The evenings were often warm and I seldom had the streets to myself. As I passed neighbouring houses, I would frequently be greeted by people I knew. They would call out to me and ask if I had had news from my mother. How was she getting on in Auckland? Was my grandmother any better? Some would add, 'I expect you're missing her!' but others would say, 'I bet you and Nathaniel are getting up to all sorts of tricks!' It made no difference to me what they said. Either way I smiled and promised to pass on their regards, their best wishes, next time I spoke to Connie.

It was only when news got around that my grandmother had died and that my mother was only staying on long enough to help sort her belongings and sell the house that the neighbours' behaviour changed. Most evenings my father and I would dine on bacon and egg pies brought around to the house by his regular customers. He invited each visitor to come in but they declined, preferring to linger on the doorstep, exchanging a few words about the weather, my grandmother's advanced years and so on before adding, 'At least it won't be long now before Connie's back.' They might turn to me and add, 'You'll be glad when your mother gets home, won't you?'

Until that summer, I had never noticed how frequently the word 'mother' entered our conversations.

I took to carrying a small mirror around in my pocket. Whenever I was alone, when I was sure no one was looking, I would fetch it out and stare at my reflection. I noticed that I was no longer the spitting image of my father. Whereas, once, I had his eyes, his nose—even his smile—I could no longer take such things for granted. My ginger-coloured hair, which, up until that point, had never held my attention, took on a new meaning. I didn't know anyone with ginger hair.

I found a photograph taken at my christening. I still have it. I am dressed in a long gown and I am propped on my mother's knee, my tiny fist clamped around her finger. She is smiling for the camera and I am staring, pop-eyed at something. I imagine my father is waving a rattle in his hand to catch my attention. I am neither smiling nor crying.

There is another photograph, taken on the same day, of my twin brothers and me. They are dressed in their Sunday best and their hair is sleek with pomade, side parted and combed neatly. They were teenagers when I was born and yet this age difference had never struck me as anything out of the ordinary before. They were always strangers as far as I was concerned. What, I wondered, had they made of me?

Some thoughts attacked my head with a violence I found unbearable, while others crept up behind me, slowly—and were no less painful for that.

I remember the day I was helping Dudley repair the wire on his hen-house when it dawned on me that he must have known all along. He had lived across the road from my parents for more than twenty-five years, he knew my father from school. There had been no outward sign that my mother was expecting another child—and yet, one day, out of the blue, I had appeared. Why hadn't Dudley told me?

I recall the way my heart thudded in my chest as I passed Dudley a roll of chicken wire. A lump tightened in the back of my throat and I realised I had to ask him about my early days. I wanted to hear him tell me the truth. Even though it was a hot day, my hands felt cold and when I opened my mouth to speak I had the sensation that my tongue had frozen to the roof of my mouth. I cleared my throat but I lost my nerve and asked which, of all the hens, was his best layer? He answered without looking at me and I remember wishing the rooster—which had been crowing all morning—would just be quiet for a minute. Even Bruce the dog had stopped barking, tired out from the effort of matching the bird bark-for-crow. Bruce was now slumped in the shadow of the wheelbarrow, too exhausted to so much as raise his head at the sound of each hammer blow against the frame of the cage.

'I've always kept hens,' said Dudley. 'You may well laugh—but they're good company.' He laughed himself and then he turned to face me and the smile slipped from his face.

'What is it?' he said. 'Are you feeling poorly?'

My heart balled up in the back of my throat. The back of my neck prickled and I wiped my hands down the front of my trousers. My fingers were still cold.

'Nathaniel and Connie aren't my real parents.'

I swallowed and my heart wedged in my sternum, a solid lump.

For a fraction of a second Dudley's eyes opened wide with surprise. And then they narrowed and he stood very still, his hammer dangling loosely from his hand as he surveyed a spot on the ground by his feet. He was so still, so quiet, that the emptiness around him caught me off guard and, with tears beginning to pool in my eyes, I was forced to repeat myself. As I reached the word 'real' he stopped me. I couldn't read his expression: his eyes appeared full of compassion and yet his mouth was tight, he was biting his lip. I had the terrible sensation that anything could happen—but I had no idea what.

'That's not how I see it,' he replied slowly.

He shook his head and when he looked at me again, I thought I recognised a look of dismay on his face.

'You mustn't think that,' he murmured.

And then, reaching into his pocket, he brought out a large, crumpled handkerchief and passed it to me. He watched as I dabbed the corner of my eyes but when I went to give it back he said, 'Keep it,' and then turned back to his work.

I decided not to think about who I was anymore.

My mother returned from Auckland: a paler, quieter version of her former self. My father and I met her at the station and my father was so pleased to see her that he hugged her and apologised for not going with her. 'You've been through such an ordeal,' he said and then, later, as we drove towards home, he added, 'We thought we'd lost you.'

The house had been cleaned in preparation for my mother's return. My father had spent the previous evening starching and ironing the sheets for their bed and then, so as not to crumple them, he had slept the night under a blanket on the settee. He wanted everything to be 'just right'. I had done my best to help but whenever I finished a task my father had come along and redone it. Even plumping the cushions became a matter of contention. I placed all four cushions along the length of the couch—their corners pointing skywards, so they looked liked diamonds—but my father had other ideas, rearranging them two at either end of the couch. Not satisfied, he moved them again and then he caught my eye and said, 'What does it matter?' and left the room to attend to dinner. He was nervous. He couldn't stop fidgeting.

In the end I had retreated to the back step, and sat flicking through the book of poetry Hilda had given me and thinking about the second-hand motorbike I had seen for

sale at Ray's yard. I had managed to save almost two thirds of the asking price and Ray had given me his word that he would let me know if anyone else showed any interest in it. Deep down I doubted that anyone else would. I believed the bike was probably overpriced but I was too timid to raise my doubts in front of Ray. Since childhood, when I had been forced to fetch him to help start Dudley's truck, I had been scared of him and, much to my embarrassment, I was still intimidated by him—even though he was both frailer and shorter than me. He hadn't mellowed. His tongue could still lash out and he had little time for people like me: boys who knew nothing about engines.

Entering our house, my mother had looked around and remarked how lovely everything was and then sat down at the table and removed her hat and gloves while my father fussed in the kitchen making a cup of tea. In a quiet voice she asked how I was and hearing my reply—that I was fine—she reached into her handbag and brought out a pale-blue, square envelope made from thick cartridge paper and placed it on the table by her hand. I could see it had my name written across it—and that the writing was hers. I recall that for a full minute I stared at the envelope, reading each word separately: Boden Nathaniel Black. It was my name and yet I felt no connection to it. Perhaps that's why I felt no curiosity about the envelope's contents.

My mother sipped from her tea, and then glancing at the envelope—as if she, too, had only just noticed it—said, 'Your Aunt Gwen and I have sold your grandmother's home.' She hesitated as if she had lost her train of thought and began again. 'All the grand children ...' Her voice trailed away and once more she appeared lost. 'It's a little gift—a share. You've all got equal amounts.' She slid the envelope towards the centre of the table and I reached out and drew it towards me. I didn't open it immediately. I didn't want to appear overly eager, or worse, greedy. But something else held me back. I didn't feel entitled to it. I was deterred by the name.

I might have left the envelope untouched had not my father said, 'Go on, Boden. Have a look.'

From my pocket I took out my pen-knife, slipping it carefully into the envelope and cutting it open. I could see the folded notes inside and my immediate thought was that now I would be able to buy the old Matchless but I didn't take the notes out. I looked at them and then thanked my mother. Despite my father urging me to count the money, I didn't. Instead, I left the envelope on the table and excused myself, ducking through the back door where I hovered, listening as from the kitchen I heard my father ask how much was there to which my mother responded, eighty pounds.



When I returned for dinner, I spotted the envelope propped up on the mantelpiece and, days later, when I still hadn't moved it, I discovered it on top of my chest of drawers, tucked away behind my binoculars. Only then, in the privacy of my room, did I allow myself to finger the notes, counting them once, before returning them somewhat guiltily to their place.

Dudley accompanied me to Ray's when the time came to purchase the motorbike. I believe he had picked up on my nerves. Looking back, I can see that buying that motorbike was a defining moment in my life. More than being old enough to be served in a bar, old enough to be conscripted or to vote, it was that first, violent kickback as I started the engine followed by a wobbly drive down the main street, that symbolised manhood.

As soon as I had gained sufficient experience and confidence with the bike I decided to make a long, overnight journey. It would be the first time I had travelled anywhere by myself and I was both excited and apprehensive about my trip. Knowing that my mother might be concerned, I decided to go to Christchurch. I had never biked further than Geraldine, but I believed that the roads separating Fairlie from the city would be safer than those leading inland. I emphasised this fact to my mother, stressing that I would be travelling for the most part on sealed surfaces. I also promised not to ride at night. After some hesitation she reluctantly agreed.

It was spring, and although the peaks around Fairlie were still laden with snow, there were signs of new growth on the trees and in the paddocks as I sped by. I had prepared for the cold but I found it hard to keep warm and, passing through Geraldine, I bought a newspaper which I stuffed down the front of my jacket for extra insulation. Despite my discomfort I was happy and as I skirted around the mountains towards Mayfield I stopped to take in the view of the foothills and to breathe deeply. It was only when I reached the main highway that a sense of urgency overtook me. I recall crossing the Rakaia bridge and glancing down at the grey, dirty floodwaters of the river swirling below and feeling horrified by the river's power and immensity. There was a threatening quality to the river, related, in no small part, to the quantity of large branches floating and tumbling by. The water moved with such speed that I felt dizzy and had to concentrate with all my might on reaching the bridge's end. Once safe, I pulled over and collected my thoughts before continuing on, the road ahead now straight and smooth, the paddocks falling behind as I passed Dunsandel and caught my first glimpse of the Port Hills before eventually reaching Burnham followed by the outskirts of Christchurch and the endless

suburbs leading into the city centre. It was only as I circumnavigated Hagley Park that it dawned on me that I had no idea what I would do now that I had reached my destination.

I left my bike near the university college and made my way down Worcester Street towards the Cathedral. Standing at the edge of the Square, watching all the goings-on of the big city, I found myself searching the faces of the women passing by. The oldest and youngest women made little impression on me but I was drawn to those whom I estimated were fifteen to twenty years older than myself.

Once, I spotted a woman with my ginger hair colouring and I stood still, following her with my eyes as she approached the place where I was standing. As she drew closer, I noticed that her eyes were bright blue, like mine—but that was all. She must have noticed me staring because she frowned and looked hard in my direction, but failing to recognise me, hurried past, glancing back over her shoulder as she walked away. My gaze lingered on the retreating figure, watching the way she walked, her erect head and very straight back. I kept my eyes on her until she became lost in the crowd and I could see her no more. I had no idea who she was and, in fact, I never saw her again. But, to my surprise, I felt very much alone and I wished I was at home.

I must have made a rather forlorn sight because, every now and then, a stranger would meet my gaze and smile sympathetically in my direction. Yet the faces of all these people were quickly forgotten. By the time I reached Cashel Street, I felt terribly conspicuous and was relieved to duck into Ballantynes department store, where I was able to check my reflection in the men's cloak room mirror before sitting down to a cup of tea in the tearooms. I noticed as I sipped from my cup that I was the only lone male in the establishment and while this did not appear to arouse any feelings of hostility or suspicion on my fellow diners' faces, I chose not to linger over a third cup but hastened outside and headed for Whitcombe and Tombs.

Inside, I stood for a moment, gaining my bearings. I browsed happily for several minutes before a woman's voice interrupted my reading with the question, 'May I help you?' I felt as if I had been caught out and to disguise my guilt I said I would like to buy the book, if that was all right? My remark amused the young shop assistant but, being careful not to offend, she took the volume from me and glanced at its cover, giving me a slightly puzzled look as she read its title aloud: *A Book of New Zealand Verse*. Her voice, I noticed, was soft and yet confident. She looked at me again, and asked, 'Is it for a gift?' She smiled as she spoke and I had the sensation she was teasing me, though I couldn't understand why. I shook my head and took the volume from her. 'It's for me,' I said,

immediately regretting my remark. None of my friends would be caught dead reading poetry and for an instant I worried that my admission might colour the girl's impression of me. I believed she might find me slightly effeminate.

'Do you read much poetry?' she said, while casually flicking through the book. In different circumstances I might have admitted that I liked poetry but had never encountered *New Zealand* poetry before. Despite having read various British poets, and being able to recite some of their work by heart, I could not name a single New Zealand poet, nor would I be able to say what New Zealand poetry was, exactly. In short, I was surprised to discover that a book claiming to be New Zealand verse even existed. With these thoughts lurking in the back of my mind I shifted uneasily but before I had time to respond to her question, she all but demanded, 'Curnow or Glover? What do you think?' Given that I had never heard of either of them, I was about to shake my head in a non-committal sort of way when I noticed that the book in my hands featured the name 'Allen Curnow' on its cover. Taking this to be a good sign, I replied, 'Curnow' in a voice that I hoped she would find both convincing and authoritative. She scrunched up her nose and I wasn't sure what to make of her. She was not much older than me, two or three years at the most, and yet she struck me as so much more precocious than any other girl I had met. 'You don't strike me as the poetry type,' she suddenly said. As the words left her mouth she blushed a deep crimson and, for the first time since arriving in Christchurch, I felt I had the upper hand. Maintaining a dignified silence, I followed her to the counter.

As I paid for the book, she smiled at me and in a less bossy tone than before told me that she sometimes attended a poetry study group. Perhaps I looked confused because she added, 'We have readings and discussions, that sort of thing. You should come along.' Her voice trailed away and her cheeks reddened again. 'I mean,' she stammered, 'Everyone's welcome.' She quickly mumbled the details of the date and venue and then finished, 'My father goes with me. It's not like I just...' She lowered her gaze and I felt sorry for causing her such discomfort. In an attempt to make amends, I thanked her for all her help and for the invitation and said, as casually as I could, that I might see her one day. Even as I uttered the words, I knew I wouldn't see her again. I had already forgotten the name of the venue and I didn't dare ask her to repeat the address. I wonder, now, if she detected the false tone of my voice because when she met my gaze, I noticed that her expression had hardened and she more or less shrugged and walked away to serve another customer without waiting for me to gather my bag and leave.

I returned to Cashel Street, walking slowly in the direction of the Bridge of Remembrance, my thoughts drifting along, focussed one minute on what subject New Zealand poets might write about and the next on trying to recapture the face of the shopgirl I had spoken to. I passed several shops before coming to a standstill in front of a sporting goods store. I stood for several minutes gazing at the window display: a somewhat contrived camping scene complete with tent, sleeping bag, a billy and a camp-fire consisting of sticks arranged around a crumpled sheet of red cellophane. Leaves had been scattered around the ground for added effect and towards the corner was a pair of boots, laces undone, with one boot lying on its side as if it was about to be dragged away by a rat or some other creature. The only thing missing from the scene was a man and, aware that I had nowhere to sleep that night, I half-contemplated offering my services. I didn't of course but, having been reminded of my lack of accommodation, I felt a little apprehensive, wondering where on earth I would go once darkness fell.

As I stood gazing in, my eye was caught by several notices attached to a board beside the shop's entrance. Mostly hand-written and offering various goods for sale, there was one printed leaflet which stood out from the rest. It was an announcement for a slide lecture taking place that night at the Overseas League. 'Mrs. D. Urquhart, member of the first all-woman party to climb Mount Cook will address the audience and speak about her recent capers and successes. Refreshments served. All welcome.' I reread the notice several times before turning back to the street and continuing down the road, pausing once I was on the bridge to look over the side for trout or eels.

I spent the rest of the afternoon wandering around the Botanic Gardens, admiring the daffodil display and then visiting the museum, where I spent an entire hour gazing at the skeleton of a giant Blue Whale. As evening fell, and the light faded, the city appeared to grow in size and I was aware of the smell of car and truck exhausts as well as the constant sound of trams and buses hurtling by, their interiors lit up and crammed to overflowing with passengers. I watched people gather in front of brightly lit cinemas but felt no inclination to join them. Seeing so many people, all talking happily to one another, merely heightened my sense of isolation. I knew no one and had no idea where I would sleep that night.

It was in this anxious state of mind that I found myself outside the entrance to the Overseas League. I am sure, that deep down, somewhere in my sub-conscious, I had planned to attend the event but, nevertheless, I was surprised to join the thin stream of

people entering the rooms, where I chose a chair to one side of the hall, hoping to go unnoticed.

As more and more people filtered in I had the impression that everyone knew one another. Small clusters formed, lean men in tweed jackets talked and laughed or called out as new arrivals sidled in. From where I sat I could hear two men with refined British accents making plans for a trip into the hills. Each time they spoke, wafts of smoke from one of their pipes would envelop me and the smell made me feel as if I had been caught in a Gentleman's Club.

Eventually, after several announcements and a formal introduction, the evening's entertainment got underway. A woman took to the stage and in very modest tones, described her party's ascent of Mount Cook. Having only seen the mountain from a distance, I was amazed that a group of three women would undertake such a challenge without back-up from professional guides or at least one strong man. My own mother, I knew, would no more climb a mountain than she would swim to Australia and yet, standing before me in a plain brown twin-set was a woman who had achieved far more than I would have imagined possible. The adventure of my own trip to Christchurch paled by comparison and I felt a little sheepish for even allowing myself to describe my journey—albeit privately—as an adventure in the first place. The bank-notes stuffed into my jacket pocket, limp and battered as they were, had had a more interesting life than me.

My head full of the woman's lecture, I suddenly became aware of a face in the audience not far from my own, a man who smiled at me and raised his hand in a slight wave, before turning back to face the stage. It took me a moment to recognise him, but it was my school-mate from Fairlie, Athol, whom I knew from our production of *Macbeth*. He was never a close friend but I was nevertheless happy to see him in the audience. From memory, he had always been a rather domineering boy—not a bully but somewhat opinionated and, I'm afraid to say, arrogant.

Question time followed the lecture. One gentleman—the man with the British accent—asked Mrs. Urquhart—Doreen— if had any plans to attempt any other major peaks, Mount Everest, for example? Once the laughter died down, another man in the audience spoke up, saying that very little was known about the effects of high altitude on a lady's body but that the general opinion was that it could be quite detrimental to a woman's health—particularly, he coughed, her reproductive health. A general discussion then followed, becoming quite heated as some members of the audience appeared to take offence at the implications of the last speaker's remark. Mrs. Urquhart did not enter into

the discussion. It seemed that having given her lecture, she was no longer expected to contribute to the wider conversation taking place. Still, I enjoyed her talk immensely and I was impressed by her manner and I made sure to tell her so when I spoke to her briefly at the refreshments table where she stood holding a plate of biscuits for everyone to help themselves.

‘Goodness me, I didn’t expect to see you here.’ At the sound of Athol’s voice I started. Gone was the roughness that I remembered so well and in its place was a confident, if not pompous, posh accent. To the best of my knowledge Athol had only ever lived in Fairlie and, more recently, Christchurch—where he was a student at the University College—and given that his parents had both grown up in Canterbury, I couldn’t make sense of his newly clipped tones. In truth, I felt embarrassed for him.

‘So tell me,’ he continued, ‘what brings you here?’ Before I could reply, he led me towards a group of men not many years older than myself, saying, ‘This is Boden—from Fairlie.’ Introductions made, he asked no further questions of me but turned his attention back to the group and entered into their conversation, swapping tales of recent climbing and tramping trips while I stood awkwardly to one side. From time to time one of the group would glance my way and I would nod or smile, but I had little or no idea where any of the places they mentioned were. At one point, during a lull in the conversation, I brought the subject around to Mrs. Urquhart’s talk and commented on her wonderful adventure. To my surprise, my remark appeared to fall on deaf ears, and an uncomfortable silence followed. Disconcerted, I asked if any of my new acquaintances had climbed Mount Cook, and, if so, what was it like? If anything, the silence deepened and one or two of the men wandered away to refill their cups from the huge pot on the trestle table.

Somewhat abruptly, I thought, Athol changed the topic completely, announcing, ‘Oh, by the way, it’s all on for the work party this summer.’ By listening, I gathered that plans were underfoot to construct an alpine hut high above a glacier on Mount Cook. Most of the building supplies were to be air-dropped but men were needed to prepare the site and build the shelter itself. Athol, it seemed, was on the building committee and he was keen to ‘enlist’ volunteers for the jaunt.

As they talked, I began to form my own visual pictures of the location. I imagined the summit of Mount Cook towering high above a pristine snow slope. A broad glacier, such as those I had seen during my brief holiday to the Hermitage, flowed gently down, its dazzling blue-white surface broken at regular intervals by large, deep-blue crevasses. I

imagined a small rocky outcrop, a patch of tussock or snow grass and a small, perfect shelter standing proud, holding its own against the forces of nature.

Deep down, I felt envious. My own solo trip to Christchurch—my grand adventure—was shabby by comparison with what these men were planning. I felt diminished in their presence and, perhaps to compensate, I thought again about extending my trip, driving through the night and doing a quick tour of the North Island before returning home to take up my butcher's apron once more. I gradually became aware of the fact that several of the men were looking at me and I realised they were waiting for me to respond to some question I had not heard. Noticing my sheepish expression, one of the group, Douglas, said, 'I'm not what you'd call a handy man myself.' I had the feeling this was meant to be a clue, but completely lost, I looked towards Athol who added, 'Oh, Boden here is very handy with a hammer. He spent his youth running around, training our local carpenter, passing him nails, filling his thermos and such-like. There's nothing Boden doesn't know about a four by two.'

Once more, I was reminded of why I had never warmed to Athol. He was older than me and so I'd never had that much to do with him. I had bumped into him from time to time, mostly with Ted, and each time I had been put off by his overbearing nature. 'He's as strong as they come,' continued Athol. He spoke about me in the tones of a man describing a prime cattle beast and for one awkward moment I feared he might prod me in the ribs, to prove his point. 'We could get him to carry all the heavy stuff. He'd be good at that.' The others laughed uncomfortably and, not wishing to make a scene, I joined in. I noticed that Douglas smiled at me and rolled his eyes slightly towards the ceiling. That one small gesture made all the difference. I pushed my uncharitable thoughts regarding Athol to the back of my mind. He was all right in his own way. 'I'll put your name down, then, shall I?' asked Athol. I started. Despite Athol's preamble, I hadn't seen this coming and I was unable to do much more than stammer, 'I'd have to check with my father.'

'Oh, just tell him you're going to be away for a week—or two, at the most. It's over Christmas, anyway. He can talk to me if he needs to know more.'

I was put out by Athol's manner but, at the same time, I was secretly thrilled to have been asked to participate. I wasn't even a mountaineer and yet it suddenly seemed possible that I might do something exciting, something I could not have foreseen. Despite myself, I must have beamed, because Athol's expression suddenly softened and in a quieter voice, he said, 'I'll take care of everything, get you some gear. Don't let us down.' And, just like that, it was settled.

My state of disbelief was so heightened that it didn't occur to me until after I had said good-night to the group and wandered back to my bike that I should have asked if I could spend the night on the couch at Athol's lodgings. I was momentarily annoyed with myself but managed to see the bright side. After all, sleeping beneath the stars would be good practice and I needed to toughen up before the summer.

The sensation I had of the world opening up with the promise of a grand adventure remained strong as I drove down the length of Colombo Street and up through the suburb of Cashmere to the Summit Road, which ran the length of the Port Hills overlooking the city. I pulled off the road and dragged my bag from my bike, walking a short way towards a low rise. I located a rocky outcrop nearby, which I hoped would provide shelter from the breeze and the dew.

From my resting place, I was able to look down on the city and I allowed my eyes to wander over its countless lighted streets, following trails towards the outer suburbs and then the complete blackness beyond. To my right, rising above the ocean, a huge orange moon hung in the still air. It was far larger than any moon I had seen before and I wished there had been some way to capture the image, so that I could present it to my parents, who, like me, had most likely only ever witnessed an inland, milk-silver moon before.

My mind was racing through all that had happened that day. I recalled the way the girl who sold me the book of verse had blushed, the magnificent Blue Whale skeleton and lastly, my meeting with Athol. With so much going through my head, I found it impossible to settle down and, lost for something to do, I reached for my torch and brought out my new book. For a moment or two I simply stared at it, enjoying a slight buzz of excitement as I took in its bright yellow cover, its unadorned title, reading aloud to myself the words, *A Book of New Zealand Verse* simply for the pleasure of their sound. Finally, casting aside its wrapping, I flicked through its brand new pages, taking in its smell and the furriness of its paper before looking at, rather than reading, its lengthy introduction. I recalled the shop assistant's question, 'Curnow or Glover?' and deciding to try my hand at answering her, I turned to Curnow's work, scanning one or two poems impatiently before flicking through the pages to those of the other man, Glover. Despite having been taught the fundamentals of poetry appreciation by various teachers, I felt ambivalent towards both poets' work. On my first, albeit distracted, reading, I was far more aware of what was absent from their poems than what was in them. In place of the colossal monument to Shelley's Ozymandias was Curnow's run-down homestead, located not in an antique land but beneath a row of blue gums. The might of Tennyson's majestic



Eagle, surveying all that was below, had its New Zealand counterpart in a flock of Glover's magpies. Of course, I was comparing poems from one century against those of another, but even so, I was taken aback by the commonplace character of what I read. I turned to 'Sings Harry' but each time I came to the chorus, I couldn't help but visualise a rather simple man from my own town, one who used to wander the streets with an old, flea-bitten dog in tow, as he cursed all the cars on the road—which he believed to have been sent by Satan. It wasn't a fair comparison and I decided that once it was daylight, I would spend more time reading, studying both Curnow and Glover's work—so that I could at least say I had given them a fair go.

Before putting the book down, I flicked through its pages once more, starting from the back and working my way forward. A title caught my eye and, holding my torch between my knees, I slowly scanned the page. The poem was written by a woman, Ursula Bethell. More surprising, however, than the fact that the poet was a woman was the title of the poem itself: 'By Burke's Pass'. That anyone had thought to write a poem about a place I knew so well astounded me. Despite having just read about homesteads and magpies, I felt a special kind of pride to discover that my neck of the woods was worthy of a published poem. Having previously read about all sorts of exotic locations—London, Italy, Xanadu—I can honestly say that none of those places brought me as much pleasure as the words: 'By Burke's Pass.' It was as if Bethell's poem was written either for me, or about me...or by someone like me. That was it: it was written by someone who could have been me. In my eagerness to consume the poem, I could barely follow the words. I wanted them to describe that magnificent view I had first spotted all those years before when, in Dudley's company, I had seen the Mackenzie Basin for the first time. I wanted this poem to say all those things that I was incapable of saying: I hoped that this woman, Ursula Bethell, would put into words my innermost thoughts and feelings. I read the first line, followed by the entire first and second stanza and then I remember putting my torch down and simply looking at the night-shadowed form of the book as I tried to reconcile my image of the Mackenzie Basin with hers. I couldn't do it. Fragments, the occasional phrase, I recognised, but on those first few readings, I found it impossible to grasp the intent or the tone of the work. I felt a surge of panic rise up from a place deep within me. Born from frustration, I wondered how I could not see what the writer was getting at when the place she was writing about was so familiar, such a part of me. It was as if I had been given doctor's notes describing the intricacies of some disease that was manifesting itself

within my own body—but which I could not fully grasp because of the nature of the words chosen.

I re-read each stanza, concentrating purely on the words and phrases and felt annoyed. Why had she written ‘...the corn-stacks aureate’? What did ‘aureate’ even mean? I re-read the line and tried to look at it as if from a distance, as if looking up at the sky and trying to make sense of all the stars. Why had the poet selected ‘aureate’ and not another, more common word? There ought to be a reason why someone had chosen such a word. Perhaps the answer lay in the poem, itself, I thought. I scanned the poem, picking out more and more words, words that seemed not to belong to my Burkes Pass. I read, ‘Soft mien assumes of kindly ministrant,’ and ‘Suspend her folding arras.’ Why those words? I went back to the first line and read it through. The poem’s narrative made sense to me but the tone put me in mind of a sermon. It struck me as religious. ‘Nature, earth’s angel, man’s antagonist...’ What’s more, I couldn’t agree with its sentiment. What reason did the poet have for presenting nature that way? And not just any old nature but a specific location, Burkes Pass—the place that had filled me with joy and made me feel almost giddy with pleasure. Surely, the poet had missed the point?

I looked up from my book and took in my close surroundings. I could see no further than the faint glow of my torch’s beam. All around me were rocks and tussock. My back resting against one boulder, I was aware of the dusty, mossy smell of its lichen which mingled in the night air with a fresher, grassy smell, that of the new spring growth popping up between the clumps of tussock. Not far away, but out of sight, I could make out the sound of an animal grazing. It moved quietly but I could hear the tearing sound made by its teeth as it pulled on the grass. It was a peaceful sound and I found it comforting.

The ground beneath me was cold and hard and when I put my hand down, I was aware of dew forming on the blades of grass. I knew, then, that I might be in for an uncomfortable night but despite that, I was happy. This outcrop was a source of richness and I had none of the poet’s sense of being dominated by the land. I couldn’t agree with her.

In one final effort, I turned back to the poem and read it through, start to finish. Really, I just wanted to prove to myself that she had got it all wrong. But, gradually, little by little, I was drawn into the work. Words which had filled me with annoyance now aroused my curiosity. I noticed a pattern, a rhythm I had overlooked before. There was a rhyme but it was subtle, unlike my own attempts at writing poetry. As I read, I asked

questions: Why did she say that, why did she use that word? And slowly, I began to pick over the words, concentrating on them, sounding them out in my head, hearing them on my lips and then seeing them on the page, wondering why the poem looked the way it did, why the words were arranged that way and not like the words featured on the previous pages. Before long, I was drawn to the writer's craft rather than the poem itself. I felt myself enter into the poem. I relaxed and it opened up before me.

And I knew, at that precise moment, that I wanted to be a poet too.

# **THE HUT BUILDER**

Feeling more tired than I had ever felt in all my life, I rested my weight on my ice axe and stared in disbelief at the sight before me—the entrance to a cave dug into the snow.

I had left the Hermitage hotel in the company of two others: Douglas and a man I had not met before, Len, late the previous afternoon. We followed a route up the Hooker Valley for three hours before stopping at a small tramping hut perched on the edge of the moraine. Now, after a full day of being roped together and slowly negotiating our way over glaciers, we had reached our destination, a location on the western buttress of Mount Cook, where we were to erect the new hut.

Our camp, or rather cave, which Athol and several other members of the building party had created before my arrival, was located in a steep snow bank a short distance from the proposed building site. The location was glorious. Perched on a rocky platform at 8000 feet, the new hut would be surrounded by towering peaks. The names for some—such as Nazomi and Dampier—I had only just learnt, while others—Cook, Footstool, Hicks and Sefton amongst them—were more familiar, having first entered into my consciousness a decade earlier. It was not the view of the mountains, however, which held my attention at that moment, but the snow cave itself which had been built to accommodate our building team throughout the following days and weeks.

Somewhat tentatively, I entered the snow cave and found myself in a short tunnel, a kind of vestibule constructed to accommodate supplies and equipment. Beyond this icy cloak-room the cave opened out in a living area, large enough to sleep eight men on a platform cut into one wall of the shelter. Against the opposite wall, separated from the sleeping platform by a narrow space, was a broad shelf on top of which stoves and kitchen equipment—pots, plates and so forth—had been neatly arranged and stacked. If I hadn't been so dazed by the fact that I was standing underground, in an ice shelter, I might have described the scene before me as 'homely'.

As I stood, glancing about for signs of structural weakness in our dwelling, I noticed—with some surprise—that the snow cave was not as cold as I thought it might be. Though steam was rising off my sweat soaked parka, the air temperature, I guessed, was above freezing, certainly warmer than that in my father's cool-store, my closest point of reference. Just as the temperature took me by surprise, so, too, did the lack of noise inside the cave. Sheltered from the breeze which had been our constant companion throughout

the day, the domed cave interior both absorbed and distorted sound. I am not certain if the others found it so—or whether I was simply reacting to the unfamiliarity of my surroundings—but the voices of my companions struck me as other-worldly, an impression I could not shake off for several days.

My general unease at being inside the snow cave reached its height on my second or third day in camp. A storm blew up, forcing our group to remain inside. This was a disappointing interruption to our work—which, up until this point, had been progressing smoothly. Athol, along with several others, had already managed to finish off work begun the previous season to create a level building site for the new eight-bunk hut. Retaining walls had been erected and the site was ready to take the shelter's foundations. Before leaving Christchurch, Athol had also made final arrangements for an air-drop of building supplies. These materials consisted chiefly of pre-cut timber and iron, bundles of wire, wire-netting, malthoid and nails for the exterior of the building as well as wire and kapok mattresses, pots, pans, several Primuses, fuel and food.

However, a combination of strong wind and low cloud meant that the aeroplane, a Bristol Freighter, couldn't fly. Likewise, we were prevented from working on the building site due to the blizzard-like conditions.

All eight of us were confined to the cave, where we lay in our sleeping bags, reading and dozing, drinking tea and occasionally summoning up the energy to sustain a few minutes idle conversation about the weather and our favourite food. Not having experienced a mountain storm before, I was perturbed when the entrance to our snow cave began to fill in with spindrift, trapping us inside. Not claustrophobic by nature, I was nevertheless apprehensive as I imagined being buried alive. Visualising a slow death by suffocation, I wondered if my body would ever be recovered or if it would simply remain buried under tons of snow, entombed and frozen like that of Captain Scott and his team of heroic explorers.

No one else in the group appeared the slightest bit bothered by what was happening. After an initial cursory glance towards our entrance, and several joking comments about the drawbacks of an outside toilet, no one showed the slightest interest in getting out of their sleeping bag to tackle the blocked tunnel.

Two of the men: a Belgian, Wim, and a hospital porter, Maurice, suddenly took it upon themselves to propose a game of bridge, a suggestion that was eagerly accepted by Athol and his Christchurch acquaintance, Hugh, a toolmaker. They huddled together at

one end of the platform leaving me, Douglas, the printer Len and the older man, Walter, at the other.

While my closest companions read, I couldn't help but hear the animated conversation taking place amongst the bridge players. Their joviality only added to my misery. I began to recall stories about canaries in mine-shafts and was gripped by a rising sense of panic, imagining that if we weren't to suffocate through lack of oxygen we would fall prey to poisonous fumes, resulting from our poorly primed stoves. When, after an hour or so of reading, Douglas glanced up from his book and suggested yet another brew, I could not contain myself, and snapped that we had only just finished the last lot of drinks. I could tell that Douglas was bemused by the tone of my voice—indeed, I did sound somewhat shrill. To make amends I mumbled that we couldn't very well keep on drinking when there was no place to go to empty our bladders. This last remark provoked a fair amount of attention and for one giddy instant I thought someone might suggest clearing the entrance. However, this was not to be. Instead, after a short discussion, an empty water bucket was rechristened, 'The Pee Pot' and, that problem solved, the Primus was once more lit for a fresh pot of tea.

When, shortly afterwards, the kerosene unexpectedly flared up, filling the air with black smoke, Wim gave a low chuckle and began to reminisce about a night he had spent in a back-country hut with three deer-cullers, men he was working with at the time. 'They were all so frightfully uncouth,' he began, in his remarkable English delivered through a thick accent. 'I could not abide their foul ways.' Smiling to himself either from the memory of the trip or from the obvious pleasure he had in selecting words from his eccentric repertoire, he described how, one by one, his companions lying on the top bunks had become drowsy and it had been left him to jump up from his bottom bunk and drag them outside. 'Those unfortunate, disgusting creatures were dying from toxic fumes,' he chortled, 'but I rescued them.' He looked around to make sure we were listening before concluding darkly, 'Imagine how different things might have been had I been asleep.' He roared with laughter and slapped down a card on the cleared space in front of him, wiping the tears from his eyes as he muttered, 'Life is a fragile beast.'

Hearing his story I abandoned all hope of getting out alive.

The only person not to have taken part in the increasingly bizarre conversations of the past half-hour was the older bushman, Walter. Thinking about it, I realised I had not heard him utter more than one or two words the entire time we had been trapped in the cave and I wondered if he was even listening to the banter flying back and forth between

the other men. It was quite likely he had fallen asleep through lack of activity or plain boredom.

I could not place Walter. He appeared to have no connection to the other members of the group and so I had simply assumed that his inclusion in the working party was based on his experience as a builder. I guessed him to be in his late forties or fifties, that is, a good ten to fifteen years older than Maurice or Wim, who I thought were the next oldest in the group. Unlike everyone else, Walter did not originate from Canterbury but lived on the West Coast, somewhere in the vicinity of Franz Josef from what I could gather. I had gleaned, through eavesdropping on various conversations, that he had set out alone from his house, crossing over the mountains at the Copland Pass before dropping down the Hooker Valley to the Hermitage, where he met the others and travelled back with them up the glacier eventually reaching our camp four and a half days after setting out. I understood, too, that his pack contained not only his clothing and sleeping gear but also his tool belt and favourite hammer. ‘I attempted to lift his pack,’ I had heard Wim remark earlier, ‘But, you know, it was completely impossible. Only a God with supernatural strength could lift such a weight. It is beyond the strength of mere mortals.’

I hadn’t really paid much attention to Wim’s comment. I assumed he was exaggerating. To look at, Walter was smallish—no more than five foot eight—and wiry. By comparison Wim was all of six foot three and as strong as an ox. Wim’s insistence that Walter was the strongest man to have walked this earth was outlandish. My reluctance to consider Walter as anything other than a man of normal strength rested on one other smallish thing, an observation I had made with regard to his appearance. Unlike the rest of us, Walter kept the top button of his shirt securely fastened. This gave him a school-boyish appearance. He was not so much prissy as ‘done up’. He didn’t roll up his shirt sleeves when he worked and I never saw him without his sweater, the collar of his shirt being clearly visible above its crew neck. While the rest of us removed most of our clothing before climbing into our sleeping bags, Walter merely took off his trousers and loosened his shirt top button. When questioned about this, he had responded that he felt the cold and then had corrected himself, adding, ‘I mean, I don’t like any cold drafts against my skin.’

In my short time on site, I had discovered that he was, however, fastidiously clean. I had caught sight of him once, crouched down behind a low rocky knoll, scrubbing at his naked body with snow. His manner was shy to the point of being furtive and once, when he glanced up and caught sight of me, he grabbed his long johns with such haste that he lost his balance and stumbled over, falling onto his knees. I had not been spying on him



but, despite that, I felt ashamed of myself for having witnessed his awkward display. The next day, I caught sight of him again, a good way off from camp—presumably on his way to some more remote spot where he could scrub himself down in peace.

I think Walter's cleanliness and, indeed, his tidiness created some kind of barrier between him and the other members of the team. He was not unfriendly but he rarely took part in general conversation. Any remarks he did make were limited to matters relating to the hut. In the evenings, he kept to himself, reading when he wasn't working. I decided he was shy but, more than that, awkward. He struck me as a solitary man.

It transpired that his experience as a hut builder was unquestionable. He had worked on several new shelters in the Mount Cook area over the past several years, helping to build the new Malte Brun hut amongst others. On top of that, he was an experienced bushman and mountaineer and had taken part in a high-altitude mountain rescue of a woman called Ruth Adams in 1948. I knew nothing about the rescue—except for what I'd heard from Athol and the others. According to them, the La Perouse rescue was famous—not least because the injured woman had been taken by stretcher over the mountain and down the Cook River to the West Coast, a feat that could not have been achieved without the relentless hard work and co-operation of a team of strong men. Walter had been one of the first men to meet the group as they began their descent to the Coast and he had stayed with the party, cutting a track through the thick undergrowth as they made their way slowly—over many days—to safety. The rescue sounded remarkable, the stuff of legend, but I couldn't readily accept that Walter's part had been all that substantial. He didn't strike me as a man capable of such an undertaking. I was far more inclined to believe that the great Edmund Hillary, who was also involved in the rescue, had played a far more significant role than the small, buttoned-up man in our group.

Because Walter seemed so introverted, I decided not to trouble him with chat. Nevertheless, I hoped that once he got to know me better, he might come out of his shell. I was curious about him and wanted to hear his version of the La Perouse rescue. It was possible I had underestimated him. Perhaps he had led an adventurous life, after all. Yet, despite my curiosity, I decided to leave him alone.

Athol—who had taken on the role of leader—had different ideas. Without consulting either of us, he decided to pair Walter up with me. He wanted the bushman to take me on as his apprentice, a builder's mate. Walter, himself, made no response to Athol's instruction, but I was pretty worried about the arrangement. My lack of skill in

combination with Walter's reluctance to talk—let alone offer instruction—filled me with concern.

Still, at that moment, my apprehension over being stuck with Walter was nothing compared to my fear of being trapped in a snow cave. No longer scared of appearing foolish, I determined to dig myself out.

I was glad to be doing something to set us free and it was only as I shovelled snow from the blocked entrance that I realised I had nowhere to put the debris. The best option, I decided, was to change tack and burrow my way out, creating a smaller tunnel through which to crawl, Winnie the Pooh style. I gathered from the remarks behind me that this was an acceptable plan and so, on hands and knees, I started work. Snow settled on my back as I wriggled into my narrow tunnel, its drifts easing through the gaps in my clothes, seeping down my neck. It was an uncomfortable feeling, made the more so because the physical exertion of digging was also causing me to sweat. And so it was that I was breathless, hot and chilled—a state that put me in mind of coming down with the flu more than anything else.

My discomfort increased the more I worked. My back ached and to my dismay, once, when I stopped to admire my tunnel it struck me that I had made almost no progress at all. To my annoyance, I heard some of the others take bets on how long it would take me to finish my task. Determined to make one last ditch effort, I went at my tunnel with renewed vigour and after another twenty minutes or so of back breaking work felt a faint breath of air against my face before clambering out into the coldest blast of air I have ever felt in my life.

The wind almost knocked me off balance. Had I not been crouching, holding on to the shovel for support, I imagine I might well have been blown down the hillside, tumbling head over heels, never to be seen again. I retreated back into the cave entrance, noticing as I did that spindrift was already beginning to fill the area I had cleared. As I crouched, gulping in the fresh air which was painfully cold against my lungs, I took in our surroundings.

It was dark but the darkness was cut through by a full moon, the light from which all but flashed as clouds cleared and swept across its beam. Where the moonlight hit the face of the mountain the snow glittered and then just as quickly faded as cloud passed overhead. As my eyes grew accustomed to the dark, I was struck less by the fact that it was night-time and more by the impression that my surroundings were, in fact, bathed in supernatural light. I could see quite clearly the rock buttresses surrounding our camp and,

what's more, by turning my head I could see the level, rock platform we had constructed—even though it was more than one hundred yards from where I crouched. Everything seemed alive. Shadows from the clouds swept the surface of the snow field, each shadow warping and stretching depending on the ground it covered. To my eyes, it appeared as if giant slug-like creatures were passing in front of me—but then the wind would drop briefly or the moon would vanish and the whole scene would transform, becoming murkier, the cloud shadows no more than faint stains. Just as the lack of light and movement settled over this scene, the breeze would pick up once more and the shadows would distort, racing now to catch those ahead of them.

As I watched I kept imagining that I could see something—some object moving in the distance. I couldn't understand what it was. It seemed to be running towards our camp but then it would stop as if it had changed its mind and run away. It disappeared and I had trouble locating it, merely guessing at the direction it might go in. I tried to follow it, pondering over what it could be. Of course, it couldn't be a man. No one would be out in such a storm—and besides, where would a man have come from? Yet, as the thing came once more into sight, I was convinced that the object I was looking at was human. I was about to call out to it when it disappeared altogether. I waited several minutes, anticipating its reappearance but after searching the area where I thought it might be, I gave up and reluctantly admitted to myself that what I had seen was no more than an apparition, a shadow rendered human by the otherworldly light. I thought no more about it, turning my attention back to watching the cloud shadows and the sky which continued its impressive display long after I felt my feet grow numb with cold.

I did not want to return to the snow cave. I felt intoxicated by my surroundings and, taking advantage of a break in the weather, I stepped out of the entrance's shelter, gasping as the full force of the still strong wind caught me. Visibility was good, but I didn't go far as I didn't want to be caught out should the clouds roll in thicker than before, extinguishing the light I now enjoyed.

I felt alone as I clambered over a rocky knoll not far from the snow cave. Using my shovel for support I stood in the lee of the highest boulder, nevertheless feeling the wind buffet me as I watched whirls of spindrift whipping around my boots, minute particles twinkling as they caught the light from the moon. Occasionally, drifts would rise up around me, and I would feel the cold sprinkle of snow against my face, chilling it until my jaw ached from the cold. My ears began to fill with spindrift and I pulled my parka hood tighter around my head. The noise it made flapping and vibrating with each wind

gust was so loud it reminded me of a jackhammer. That was not the only sound, however. I was also aware of a constant roar reverberating around me. As the wind funneled down the slopes, it gained momentum, drawing up snow, sweeping past rocks and boulders, until its force manifested itself into a primal scream—a sound that still causes the hair on the back of my neck to prickle whenever I think back to that night. A crashing, roaring, howling wind. It was hard to believe that the inside of our cave had been so removed from such a cascade of sound.

The sky suddenly cleared completely and looming above me rose the great pyramid shape of Mt Sefton, its summit ridge as clear to me as if it had been broad daylight. It was more than a thousand feet higher than me and yet I could see a gauze-like curtain of spindrift rising up from its sky-line. So great was the force of the wind, its power and frenzy, that I felt, by comparison vulnerable, inconsequential. It was a sobering and—at the same time—liberating moment. Liberating because I felt no desire to compete with my surroundings. In the face of such strength, I was aware of being human. I was no match for the storm, but I could weather it.

I raised my eyes towards the upper ridge line of Mount Sefton once more and for one brief instant I thought of my mother—my mothers. I pictured them, as clearly as if we were posing for a photograph, one either side of me—and me, taller by a head, a fully-grown man standing between them.

Mist filled the valley below, nudging the moraine walls, the rocky outcrops and the smooth, newly dusted snow slopes below us. Above us were high peaks, glistening beneath a clear blue sky. The washed-pink summits of several mountains indicated that the sun had risen and yet, still cast in deep shade, we shivered and stomped our feet as we gathered together, waiting for the aeroplane. Two air-drops had been scheduled for that morning with the second following hard on the heels of the first, weather permitting. The atmosphere was one of anticipation. Since the storm had abated, we had lived in a state of constant anticipation and we were impatient for the air-drop of building materials to take place. Some members of our group, those who were obliged to return to civilisation and their occupations over the next few days, awaited the arrival of the Bristol Freighter more keenly than the rest. Both Hugh and Maurice, who had worked so hard preparing the hut site, and had made it safe from falling rocks, were due to depart in a day or two. Although they said nothing, it was clear they wanted to make a start on the hut proper before being forced to pack their bags. I could see the look of concentration on their faces. They were listening for the first, faint drone of the plane's engines.

As usual Walter stood a little way off. His attention was focussed on the mountain, La Perouse. His detachment was noted by Douglas who remarked, rather cruelly I thought, that Walter was the most solitary, diffident human being he had ever met. 'Not only does he lack charm, but he's devoid of even the most rudimentary social skills,' he continued, knocking his pipe against his trouser leg as he spoke. 'I wonder if he's married... somehow I doubt it.' As he packed his pipe with tobacco, he glanced towards us, as if seeking confirmation. In truth, I was shocked by Douglas's tone of voice. Although reticent, Walter had done nothing to deserve such an attack and the fact remained, that of all of us, he was by far the hardest worker. As soon as the storm passed, he had returned to the rocky ledge on which our building platform was being prepared. He worked steadily, lugging rocks to the building site and finishing off the retaining wall we had started. It was true he didn't join us when we stopped for a break—but that was no reason to criticise him. As men went, he was little different from many of the farmworkers I had encountered during my rounds with my father. My father had often joked, good-naturedly, that the animals we were about to butcher seemed to have a lot more to say for themselves than the men who farmed them. I had grown up in a house of silence and was used to being around people who kept to themselves. Listening to Douglas, however, I couldn't help but wonder

if part of the problem was the fact that, unlike the rest of us, he was British and had spent his childhood in a large city—London—and was more comfortable in crowded, social situations than we were. It was quite possible that he had not rubbed shoulders with men like Walter before.

At times, I have to admit, I found Douglas snobbish and his manner condescending. He came from a wealthy family—his father was a surgeon and his mother the daughter of a diplomat, a Lord somebody-or-rather—and he was studying Classics at university. I felt uneasy in his company. He resented the fact that no one had asked him to be leader of our group. In truth no one had asked Athol to take on that role—he had appointed himself—but Douglas didn't see it like that. As a result of feeling overlooked, he harboured a grudge and was given to small cruelties, the occasional snide comment and less than generous action.

For example, he caught me scribbling down the lines of a poem once and had quipped that there couldn't be too many 'sonnet-writing sausage-makers' where I came from. I had laughed with him at the time—his observation had been made during our first day together—but in retrospect, there was an ugliness lurking behind his comment. By contrast, whenever I heard Wim refer to me as 'The Poet', I knew I was in for little more than some friendly ribbing, no different from the silly banter directed towards Hugh, 'The Card Shark' or Maurice, 'The Tea Lady'. Of all the members of our group, the only men Wim had not nicknamed were Douglas and Walter.

We had been standing around, waiting for the aeroplane for more than half an hour when we finally heard its engines. The sound was distant, muffled by the mountains but within moments the machine appeared above us, circling overhead like a hawk scanning for prey. I was taken aback by its size. I had known we were expecting a Bristol Freighter but seeing the bulk of its gleaming silver body suspended above us, I felt my heart begin to race. I was certain it would not be able to negotiate such a small airspace and that it would hit the mountain side. I heard Len express my thoughts, when he muttered, 'Cripes, I hope these Air Force blokes know what they're doing. I don't see this going well.'

As we watched, the plane completed circling the area and then, to my amazement, began to descend, coming in even lower over the glacier, passing close to the building-site, and aiming for the target area we had identified with our flags.

From an open door, a large drum suddenly appeared and toppled earth-wards, a white parachute billowing above it as it drifted towards us, hitting the slope and rolling

away in the direction of a large crevasse. More drums followed, some landing with a muffled thud in the snow, others rolling a few yards before coming to a standstill. The aeroplane passed above us and from the doorway we saw someone wave and then the plane made a sharp turn, appeared almost to scrape its wings against a rock buttress before returning, its engines roaring as a fresh load of materials appeared at its open door.

I watched horrified as the plane hurtled towards us, its metal body gleaming in the sunlight, as it came close. Everything seemed to be happening so quickly that I was unable to decide what to do. If I ran to recover a load, I risked being struck down by the next falling object. But if I didn't make any attempt to recover the materials as they landed, there was a chance they would roll away—already we had lost one load to a crevasse. Eventually, however, I joined in with the others, doing the best I could to retrieve the parcels as they dropped.

By the third or fourth fly-over, I began to calm down a little, appreciating the rhythm of what was happening. The parachute-attached bundles, floating this way and that, suddenly took on a gentler demeanor, more like snow-flakes than bombs falling about our heads. The aeroplane itself seemed somehow slower, more controlled than I had at first imagined. There was nothing cavalier about the way the pilot handled his craft. The accuracy with which he circled before swooping down to a spot above the target area was a testament to his great skill but, even so, I was glad I was standing on solid ground looking up rather than inside the aircraft looking down.

As the plane lined up for another drop, several lengths of four by two suddenly emerged oar-like from its doorway. Whoever was feeding them out was having trouble. The length of each piece of timber in combination with the air pressure, was preventing them from falling cleanly from the plane and for one chilling moment it looked as if one of the lengths might collide with the Bristol Freighter's tail. I could only imagine what was being said by the men inside the machine. As the aeroplane pulled up, gaining altitude in order to clear the mountain, I saw it suddenly drop, its wings tilting this way and that and though I couldn't hear anyone, I imagined a shout from one of the men beside the door, protesting against the turbulence.

By now my heart was in my mouth as I saw the aeroplane swing back towards us and come in once more. Again, lengths of timber appeared and spewed forth from the gleaming silver hulk and then, on the next circuit, they were followed by sheets of bright orange iron which twisted and spun as they fell towards the ground. My eyes fixed on the aeroplane, I caught sight of an object resembling an axe handle appear, whizzing straight

towards me. Had I not run for my life, I believe I might have been hit—for it was not attached to a parachute.

I was annoyed with myself. Angry that I had more or less panicked and taken flight when, I could see now, I would have been perfectly safe had I just stayed put. I walked across to the place where I had seen the object fall. A perfectly round hole, a little larger in diameter than that of a golf ball, greeted me. Peering into it, however, I could see no sign of any object. I was still gazing stupidly at the hole, transfixed by its perfect symmetry when Athol came running up with a shovel and began to dig at the snow by my feet. ‘I reckon that was a crowbar,’ he said as he destroyed the hole I had been admiring. ‘It must have gone straight in. God knows how deep it is.’ From the tone of his voice and the way he kept stabbing at the snow with the blade of the shovel I could tell that he was on edge, probably more nervous than I was given that he felt responsible for the events taking place.

In the hope of appearing helpful—while secretly wanting to get rid of him—I offered to dig out the crowbar. It was good to have a task on which to focus and I set to, digging with far more enthusiasm than I had managed to muster for collecting up the building supplies, which still continued to fall from the sky. After several minutes of digging, I was alarmed that the crowbar was still nowhere in view. It had free fallen but even so I was amazed at how deeply it had burrowed into the soft snow. Looking up, I noticed that the aeroplane had climbed high above us, and as I watched, it disappeared behind a bluff, silence descending over our surroundings immediately. For the first time all morning I began to relax. The tranquility was short-lived. Barely had the plane vanished than Athol’s voice rang out, urging us to ‘keep up the good work’ and promising a hot cup of tea and a slice of fruit cake at the end of the morning.

I should have joined the others but, having set out to retrieve the crowbar, I felt obliged to continue. From time to time, men would pass by and, taking a break from their strenuous work, would come and stand next to me, watching quietly as the snow flew off my shovel, marvelling that there was still no sign of the tool. On more than one occasion I was asked if I was digging in the right place. I had doubts myself. But, looking down into the pit I had created, I could still make out the outline of a perfectly formed hole disappearing further in to the snow. Despite the absurdity of the task, it was quite good fun.

Perhaps, because I was in a hole, I failed to notice that the wind had sprung up and that clouds were beginning to form around the mountain tops. It was only when the snow I



had cleared away began to blow back onto me that I realised its true force and, clambering out, I caught sight of Len, Maurice and Wim struggling to secure some sheets of corrugated iron to the pile stacked beside the building site. As I watched, a sudden gust took hold of a sheet, catching Maurice on his hand, causing a nasty gash. And then all hell broke loose. A second, untethered sheet of iron began to slide, sled-like, down the slope, gently at first but gaining in speed as it travelled away from us. I was too far away to give chase but I saw Walter head after it. Wallowing through thigh deep snow one minute and then regaining solid, though icy ground the next, he was almost upon the iron when all of a sudden he lost his footing on a patch of ice and slid fifty feet before disappearing over a small ledge and vanishing completely.

Everything happened so quickly, and without warning, that I couldn't make sense of what had taken place. My shovel in my hand, I watched dully as Wim and Len ran past me, calling to Athol and the others to fetch a rope and ice axe and be quick about it.

Although I am far from stupid, I tend to be something of a slow thinker. My reaction time is always well off the pace. At school I envied the boys who were praised for having fast reactions or who were good at sports. Being flat-footed as well as indecisive, I was never one of them. If, during a game of rugby, a ball came flying my way, I would be so unsettled that I would become rooted to the spot, watching it fall towards me, barely able to move out of its way before it narrowly missed my head or outstretched hands. As a very young boy, I was never invited by Ted to join in a game of 'Snap'. I knew my slowness frustrated him. Despite flipping out his cards as slowly as possible on the few occasions when we did play, he would quickly snap up all the cards, leaving me with nothing. More recently, I have been aware of identifying objects only after they have disappeared from view. A rabbit skittering across the road, a trout darting towards a deep, black-coloured pool, or—as was the case now—a man vanishing over a ledge, became fragments of information, slowly reconstructed, piece by piece, in my brain. And yet, physically, I am not a slow man. Once I have a destination in mind, I can move as fast as most people.

I must have arrived at the spot where Walter disappeared only a minute or so after my companions. It was then that I was able to see clearly that it was not a ledge that Walter had fallen over but, more accurately, an edge. A narrow crevasse was in front of me. It was little more than a few feet across and if one had been able to take a good run at it, I imagine it would have been possible—given the angle of the slope—to clear it completely. Had Walter not been sliding out of control, he might have been able to avoid

it altogether. But luck was against him and because of that he had dropped into the crevasse. How far he had fallen I did not yet know.

Together, and somewhat gingerly, the remaining members of our team stood side by side looking down into the hole where Walter had fallen. Apparently, he had been lucky. Wim's sing-song admonishment, 'You want to be more careful where you put your feet!' followed by Len's grumbling, 'We'll have a hell of a job getting you out of there,' confirmed that no real harm had been done. Though the crevasse fell away sharply at first, it was essentially wedge-shaped, its walls coming together fifteen feet below the surface. I could see Walter quite clearly, his upturned face looking up out of the bluish gloom, his eyes dark and his expression like that of a dog chained to a kennel hoping to be let free. A surge of relief went through me. I hadn't had a chance to take stock of what had occurred but I realised, then, that I had been scared, and that I had expected the worst.

In that brief moment of relief, I found myself imagining my mother's strained response to this accident, and indeed, to all that had taken place over the past few days and suddenly I began to giggle. It was nerves, a release of nervous tension. My response was greeted with a stony stare from Douglas and a remark to the effect that if I wasn't going to help I might as well go and attend to Maurice's hand. I could see his point.

I didn't move, however. Maurice, I decided, could take care of himself. Walter's predicament, by contrast, was far more worrying. I had no experience of rescuing a man from a crevasse and although I had nothing to offer by way of expertise, I felt compelled to stay put so that I could assist in the event that we were reduced to hauling him out from the icy well.

While I stood by, awaiting instruction, Athol and Wim were already hard at work setting up a belay from which to anchor a rope lowered down to Walter. I was impressed by how quickly they worked and the skill with which they set up the equipment needed for the rescue. The only other rescue I had participated in had happened many years before when I had helped my father drag a stranded cow from a boggy ditch. Then, as now, I spent more time poised, ready to lend a hand, than assisting in any true sense of the word. Back then, however, I took pride in my moral support whereas now I simply felt surplus to requirements, my major contribution being to stand clear while, at the same time, relaying messages between Athol and Walter, whenever the former was out of range.

It was a chilled, badly shaken man who lay gasping for breath at our feet less than half an hour after the rescue had begun. I had barely had time to take note of Walter's condition before Douglas started on at me, suggesting that now might be a good time to

get a brew on. I was happy to help, at last, but a little put out that I was not involved in the more manly task of helping Walter back to camp. Foolish though it now seems, I felt belittled.

By the time Walter appeared back in the snow cave, his face was grey and he was shivering. He looked like a man on the verge of death but he appeared to rally once he was wrapped up in his sleeping bag, a mug of hot tea in his hands. As he mulled over what had happened, he was dismayed to notice that a hole had been torn in the elbow of his wool jersey. More than the pain from his injuries, he was clearly upset by the damage done to his pullover, and as he drank his tea he muttered to himself, upset that he would have to search out his darning wool and get it mended.

His general behavior led us all to believe that he had not only hurt his shoulder and ribs but had bumped his head. In view of this it was decided that I would remain in the cave to watch over him, in case he took a nasty turn, while the others—including Maurice, whose hand had been dressed with a bandage—went back to stacking materials.

I knew I wasn't being let off entirely. As Athol made to leave the cave, he suggested I take charge of dinner that night. 'Go to town,' he called, to which Wim added, 'a magnificent feast, cordon bleu.' I had no idea what Wim was talking about but I was happy to oblige with a hearty meal, nevertheless.

I was mid-way through chopping onions and dicing carrots when I heard Walter ask if I would mind fetching his sewing kit. 'You'll find it towards the bottom of my pack,' he said, gesturing towards the gear which was arranged in the entrance vestibule. 'If you could just fetch the kit—don't worry about bringing across the whole bag.' At first I wasn't sure whether his request for his sewing kit was a sign that he was improving or, rather, one that he had lost his grip on reality altogether. There was an uncomfortable moment, but to my relief Walter added, 'You never know when you might need to do a spot of repair work.' This remark sounded, to my ears at least, quite sensible. I never carried wool and a darning needle, but I did like to keep a pocket-knife and a length of string handy.

As I rummaged through his pack, my hand came across several objects which felt like books, one of which was soft-backed and smaller than the others, as if it were a diary or a sketch book. I hadn't seen Walter do any writing or drawing, however, so I decided I must be mistaken. Had I been alone, and unobserved, I might have been tempted to pull out his belongings and take a proper look but, knowing Walter was watching me, I continued to wriggle my hand deep into his half-empty pack, stopping when I eventually

felt a tight roll of Hessian –like material, containing, from the feel of it beneath my fingers, small objects like scissors and needles. Retrieving the roll, I heard Walter say, ‘Yes, that’s it,’ and turning to face him I saw him stretch out his hand, gesturing towards me to hurry, as if he was frightened I might think better of it and go through his personal belongings, subjecting them to closer inspection.

Looking back now, I can’t help but wonder how we would have looked to any casual observer. Two men in a snow cave, one bent over a needle and thread, darning, while the other prepared a stew of roughly chopped vegetables and meat. Had our shelter been a warm, wood-lined cabin rather than an icy, subterranean dwelling, we might have cut a somewhat domestic—though effeminate—image. As it was, I suspect we simply looked incongruous.

I stirred the contents of the billy and watched Walter out of the corner of my eye. To my surprise, he was a dab hand with the darning needle. I was taken by how quickly he worked. From the look of it, he had done quite a bit of darning in his time and, knowing that I could barely thread a needle and had never done any mending in my life, I was curious to find out where he had picked up his unusual skill. I was in the process of working out how best to broach the subject, when, from out of the blue, he looked up and caught my eye, answering my unspoken question with, ‘I taught myself.’ He paused, lowered his eyes back to his work and added, quietly, ‘It was a handy skill to have in prison.’

I picture myself now as a young man, barely twenty, a small-town lad hearing this confession and I imagine how my jaw must have dropped. Yet, eager to hide my surprise, I turned away and began stirring the pot with renewed vigour, all the time wondering if what my companion had said was true, and, if it was, what on earth he might say or do next. When, after several seconds, it appeared he had nothing to add, I looked up and aware he was still watching me, mumbled something about my mother being a skilled knitter. This remark made Walter smile, and murmur, ‘That’s something I never managed.’ Rather than feeling relieved to see him smile, I was left even more uneasy, wishing that the others would hurry up and return.

Feeling somewhat desperate, I scraped the stew from the bottom of the billy where it had started to burn, and began to hum very softly, a tune I made up myself, on the spot. Then, thinking that my humming might irritate Walter I stopped, abruptly, and instead began reciting, even more quietly, a few lines of verse I remembered from my volume of New Zealand poetry. When this did nothing to calm me, I allowed my mind to wander and

immediately recalled a conversation that had taken place some months before, between my father and the local policeman from Tekapo. The constable, Derek, had come in to Fairlie on business, popping into my father's butchery on his way home to buy a few chops for dinner. As my father wrapped the meat, he asked the policeman about work, mentioning in passing some story about escaped convicts that was in the news at the time. The constable, I recall, didn't have much to say on that subject, but he did say that his line of work often required him to dress up in civvies and go down to meet the bus from Christchurch. 'It's surprising how many men we pick up,' he said. According to him, criminals frequently tried to 'disappear' into the countryside. He caught sight of me as he spoke and I believe he gave me the once over, as if checking my face against some police file in the back of his mind. 'This your son?' he asked my father, thereby confirming my suspicion. He nodded when my father replied in the affirmative but nevertheless continued to weigh me up. 'Mount Cook,' he suddenly continued. 'That's another place. Men who like to keep a low profile—that's where you'll find them.' My father nodded eagerly, gasping, 'Who would have thought, eh? Who would have thought?' To my annoyance, he also turned to look at me and then, shaking his head in disbelief, added, 'Right in our back-yard. Who would have thought?'

For the next few days, my father repeated the policeman's story whenever he had the chance and, in the evening, while relaxing over the newspaper, he would suddenly draw my attention to some article or item from the court news, wondering aloud how long it would take before so-and-so, the wanted criminal, would find his way down to our neck of the woods. Had not my mother also grown tired of my father's interest in the criminal under-class, as he called these men, and asked him to desist from his nightly crime-watch, I believe he might have got so carried away as to begin prowling the platform at the train station, scanning the faces of the disembarking passengers as if expecting notorious sheep-rustler James Mackenzie and his dog, Friday, to emerge from the past.

It was unsettling that these events, which had taken place several months before, should establish themselves in my mind. Seeking to create a distraction, I attempted to replace the images of 'wanted men' with something more appealing: girls. I latched on to the memory of a teenage girl I had talked to, once, when I saw her leaning against the wall next door to the grocer's, flicking through a magazine while an older woman, her mother, wondered aloud what had become of the girl's father, who had gone to the garage to get a tyre mended. As the mother questioned me about the location of the garage, the girl smirked and then, catching my eye, had raised her eyebrows in such a provocative manner

that I had blushed to the roots of my hair, causing her to snigger and her mother to sigh with exasperation. Having recalled this girl—whose identity I did not know—I found myself reddening once more as I struggled to control my imagination, picturing the two of us alone together in the snow cave—with no one else in sight.

Eventually, after what seemed like hours of internal struggle during which time I also summoned up the unfortunate image of Mary Belcher dressed in one of her Lady Macbeth costumes—a loose-fitting, sheer cotton night-gown—I remembered the books I had felt while searching Walter’s pack and, hoping that I would be on safe ground, raised the subject of reading. I asked him—as casually as I could—if he had a favourite author? At first, he appeared not to hear my question but after some time, he looked up from his mending and responded that it was hard to know where to start, there were so many to choose from. This reply surprised me. Even though I had seen him reading, I had not pictured him as a book-lover. Curious now, I mentioned the books in his bag. Trying to keep my question as open as possible, I enquired if they were favourites, ones he carried with him always—or if they were just something he had picked up somewhere. There was the possibility he might have found some battered volume lying about in one of the huts he had passed on his way up to our camp. I had noticed one or two books myself, cheaply printed Westerns and thrillers mostly, nothing that had tempted me.

Again, he gave the impression of not having heard my question. Ignoring me, he inspected the hole he had been mending, easing the sleeve of his pullover inside out so as to see his work from both sides. When he seemed satisfied with what he had done, he pulled the strand of wool tight in his fingers, snapping it off, before turning his attention to a second, smaller hole, beginning to lay down his stitches once more. After a moment, he looked up at me and squinting—perhaps adjusting his focus from his close-up work to my more distant figure—said, ‘Take a look, if you’re interested.’

The tone in which he spoke was not brusque but it was hardly inviting, all the same. I was feeling extremely inquisitive about his reading matter, but at the same time I was reluctant to be seen as being pushy, or, worse, a nosy-parker. Exercising a great deal of restraint, I didn’t rush immediately to his pack and pull out his books but, rather, began to talk about some of the authors I had read at school. I mentioned my old English teacher, Mr MacDonald and his love of John Donne and then I went on to talk about my life in more general terms.

Before that moment, I had never thought of my life or my home as topics worthy of conversation. I had led an unremarkable life. Growing up in a small town was hardly

the stuff of legend but little by little I warmed to my subject, recounting the story of my childhood, my twin brothers' death and the effect of their loss on my family. I set down my story in a slightly jumbled chronology, beginning with my earliest memories of my mother's devastation and retreat into silence. I mentioned I had spent a few years living with Dudley and his family and that it was from Dudley that I had picked up the few building skills I possessed. I remarked, in passing, on my first trip to the Mackenzie Basin, my childish attempt to capture all that I had experienced in words and then, not long after that, the family holiday at the Hermitage. I even mentioned my encounter with the artists—and the man who had recited, from memory, the words which I had only recently learned were Byron's. At the mention of Byron, I hesitated, unsure of where to go next with my story. I felt a pang of anxiety. Should I raise the subject of my family secret? My discovery of being adopted? Should I outline, in detail, my love of poetry and my decision to be a poet? Or should I keep that information to myself and describe only my butcher's apprenticeship, that I was to follow in my father's footsteps and become a man whose entire life and successes could be summed up in the words painted above a shop window: Nathaniel Black and Son. Quality Butchers.

I have to admit that my life story, far from cheering me, left me despondent. I had never before exposed my life to such close scrutiny and now, finding a silent audience in Walter, I relived the loneliness of my youth. I felt sorry for myself and I wanted nothing so much as to be able to crawl into my warm sleeping bag and pull it tight around me. In this pitiful state, I happened to glance across towards Walter and, to my surprise, realised he was watching me, waiting for me to continue. The last remnants of self-consciousness left me at that point. I had probably already said too much, there was no point withdrawing now. I trusted that whatever I said would go no further than the walls of our shelter and so, with a certain sense of resignation—even obligation—I continued my story, recounting my journey to Christchurch where I had discovered the writing of poets who wrote about the places I knew, Burkes Pass and the like. It was my hope, my intention, that one day I would devote myself to writing poems about...And here I cut myself short. I really had made a fool of myself. Quickly, I shut off the Primus and mumbled something about needing to check on the rest of the group and call them in for dinner. I scurried outside, leaving Walter, I imagined, to finish off his darning while quietly laughing to himself.

I was still feeling foolish and angry with Walter for allowing me to rabbit on about myself when I awoke the following morning. My mood became even blacker, when, during breakfast I discovered that in the course of the previous day, the rest of my team had decided to leave our camp and travel down to the village at Mount Cook in order to arrange a new schedule for the remaining air-drop and to carry back the sheets of glass needed for the hut's windows. Maurice and Hugh, who were leaving our group, would return to Christchurch but the rest of the men hoped to return to our camp in two days, weather permitting.

I wasn't sure what offended me the most: the fact that Athol and the others had made such comprehensive plans without informing me or that they had decided that I should remain behind to keep an eye on Walter while he rested and recovered from his injuries. To be fair, no one had any reason to guess the real cause of my ill-temper—which I blamed on Walter. Even so, my pride took a severe battering because of their group decision. Unacknowledged though it was, they didn't need me to accompany them back to the village. I was a barely competent tramper, lacking experience in the mountains, and they had concluded I would be better suited to staying home in the kitchen, as it were, while they—the real men—tackled the hard work.

My response to this situation was, I am sad to say, childish. I retreated into myself, listening without comment as Athol made a list of the materials which had been lost or damaged during the first air-drop, items which he hoped would be re-supplied during the second. After several minutes, Douglas glanced my way and mentioned, quite casually, the missing crowbar. Now I believe his remark was innocent, with no malice intended, but I took it as a personal insult. Muttering darkly about a replacement not being necessary, I grabbed the shovel and stomped off across the snow towards the hole I had worked on the day before.

I became so absorbed in my digging that I didn't notice Athol and Douglas standing over me, waiting to say goodbye. It wasn't until I heard Douglas call, 'Hullo, can you hear me down there?' that I looked up.

'Boden,' said Athol, 'Can you think of anything you need?' He coughed and then seemed to correct himself, adding, 'Anything *crucial*?' I shrugged, keeping to myself all thoughts of new reading material. I caught Douglas's eye and thought that he was looking



particularly smug before noticing that he held a notebook and pencil in his hand and was poised, like a secretary, to add to the list of essentials.

‘Some more sheets of paper for your poems?’

I ignored Douglas’s remark—though I really would have liked more paper—responding in a curt voice, ‘I’ll have this crowbar out in a minute—so you can scratch that off your list, Douglas.’

Douglas laughed. In retrospect, I believe he meant no real offence, but that is not the conclusion I reached back then. I felt a sudden desire to wipe the smirks off my companions’ faces. I wanted to show them that I was not the only one in the group who was uninformed. Recalling my conversation with Walter the previous day, I hissed, ‘Did you know Walter’s a criminal?’ I immediately regretted my remark and wished I could take it back, but it was too late.

‘What did you say?’

I retreated, mumbling, ‘Nothing.’

The damage had been done, of course

‘Wouldn’t surprise me at all.’ Douglas said, eyeing me suspiciously. ‘I had a bad feeling about him...’ His voice trailed away and for one brief moment I believed that was the end of the matter.

‘He actually told you he was a criminal? He used those words?’ said Athol. ‘What did he do?’

I shrugged. I had no idea. He had admitted to being in jail—that was all I knew.

‘It’s probably nothing,’ I said, hoping to end the discussion.

Douglas shook his head and turning to Athol asked, ‘What do you think?’ I saw Athol shake his head and then he gave me a stern look, which left me in no doubt that I would be held responsible if anything went wrong.

I might have tried to sort things out once and for all, but at that moment Wim called across, shouting that everyone was waiting. Seeing he had our attention, he added, ‘Would you like me to crack the whip?’

Once they had gone, I felt even more annoyed with myself. There had been no need to repeat the information I had concerning Walter. Anyone who had witnessed him quietly darning the holes in his jersey, as I had, would have seen he was not a dangerous man. I was aware of betraying his trust and, feeling ashamed, I wandered away from my digging pit to sit by myself while I planned what to do next.

I was still sitting on my rock a good twenty minutes later when I saw Walter appear from the cave like some animal emerging from its burrow after a long winter's hibernation. He didn't see me at first. He must have assumed I was still down my hole, going after the lost crowbar. I watched as he took a few steps away from the snow cave entrance and then he hesitated, wrapping his arms around his body as if in pain. I began to get up, intending to offer to support him but because I hadn't worked out what to tell him about my conversation with Douglas and Athol I hung back, waiting to see where he would go. Gingerly, he walked across to the area where our latrine was sited and disappeared from view, his body obscured by a large boulder. A few minutes later he reappeared and glancing my way, caught sight of me and stopped. To my surprise, he half-raised his hand in a wave of greeting and taking this as a form of encouragement, I got down from my perch and went to meet him.

The contrast between us as we stood side by side could not have been more apparent. I had not shaved since arriving at camp and the lower portion of my face was now covered in coarse ginger-blond stubble. I would not have known my beard was so ginger if Wim hadn't drawn my attention to the fact over breakfast. Looking at me while he ate, he tilted his head sideways and appraised me before saying that the hair on my chin was the colour of a tiger's skin whereas the hair on my head was paler. He had paused as he contemplated my unwashed, scraggly mane and then said that it looked like the fur on a ginger tom.

'But there's almost no difference between those two reds,' mumbled Maurice, glancing up from his porridge and giving me the once over. What followed was a lengthy debate concerning the various shades of ginger-red as they related to animals, ranging from the orange-red of an orangutan to the paler colouring of a dingo.

Maurice had just got around to mentioning guinea pigs, when Athol quite suddenly called a stop to the animal naming business and raised the subject of windows. Slower than the others to make the mental leap from one topic to the other, I busied myself pouring a second cup of tea while Athol asked for ideas about how to carry the sheets of glass back up the valley to our camp. To my irritation, no one paid Athol any attention. Another animal—an ocelot—was named. This started off another round of creatures whose skins, feathers or scales bore some slight resemblance to my hair or beard colour. In the midst of all this naming, Wim suddenly recollected a story from his childhood in Belgium, a tale concerning windows, no less. I was glad of the distraction. It took the focus off me at last.

The story, delivered in Wim's usual theatrical style, made me laugh. As a child of six or seven, he had been playing with his best friend when he heard a rumour that the Germans were about to take over their village. Between the two of them, they decided the Nazis would want the school for their headquarters. This made perfect sense as the school was one of the few buildings big enough to house troops. So, that night, they hatched a plan to break all the school windows. Knowing the glass could not be replaced—and that winter was approaching—they intended to make the Nazis as uncomfortable as possible. Wim's laughter as he continued should have alerted me to the fact that there would have to be a twist to his tale, but I was unable to think that far ahead. 'You can guess those Germans were not to be trusted—they went to the next town, one with a grand town hall. I was thrashed by the headmaster and, on top of that, I was made to sit all winter by the window, freezing to death ...'

A few minutes after delivering his story, he explained that as a result of sitting in a drafty classroom he had never been able grow a beard as an adult. This statement baffled me but I was never to become any the wiser, for it was a topic that held little interest for Wim and he didn't refer back to it, or expand on it, in all the time we were together.

Now that Wim and the others were gone, I was far more conscious of my own scraggly beard than before. I noticed that my face itched and when I scratched my chin I was aware of uneven tufts protruding at all angles. The whiskers above my top lip also caused discomfort. They had a tendency to freeze onto my lips, causing a second's pain whenever I inadvertently opened my mouth to speak.

Walter, however, was clean shaven. From the slight redness of his skin, I imagined he had shaved in cold water but the impression he made, as he stood next to me, surveying the hut site, was one of a man dressed and ready for church. Not only was his top button securely fastened, but a thin woollen tie was also visible, knotted at his chin and tucked away neatly into his skillfully repaired pullover. I was so taken by how he looked that despite getting off my rock to meet him, I almost forgot to ask how he felt. When I did, finally, get around to inquiring after his health, he frowned and said he'd live but then changed the subject, suggesting that we take advantage of the calm weather and get cracking on the hut.

I don't believe we spoke more than fifty words the entire morning and yet I had the impression that Walter was far more relaxed in my company than before. Once or twice he smiled as he worked and every now and again he would catch me looking at him and raise

his eyebrow in acknowledgement—as if some private joke had passed between us. Perhaps he was feeling pleased to be free of Athol’s scrutiny and bossy instructions.

To my immense surprise—and relief—I had picked up more building skills from working with Dudley than I had allowed myself credit for. I felt quite at ease with what we were doing and was pleased to notice that Walter was also satisfied with our progress. While I was all for beginning on the framework, he calmly drew my attention to the time, suggesting we stop for a break and a bite to eat. I hadn’t noticed until then, but the day’s work had taken its toll on him. He appeared to be in pain. His face was pale and he moved stiffly, panting with each step. He had taken on too much and I believed I was partly to blame. In my enthusiasm to do something useful, I had forgotten all about Walter’s physical condition and so, somewhat guiltily, I now followed him back to the cave to make tea and reheat some of last night’s stew. I intended to feed him up, as it were.

In the course of the morning, the sky had begun to clear slightly, and through the patches in the mist, we could see the tops of several peaks, La Perouse and Nazomi amongst them. We were sitting outside the snow cave, eating and drinking quietly, mulling over the events of the day, when Walter cleared his throat and appeared to be about to speak. Catching my eye, however, he changed his mind and went back to eating, spooning the remaining mouthfuls of stew into his mouth before beginning to wipe his plate with a piece of bread, working methodically until the dish was as clean as if it had been washed in hot water. Then, leaning back, his eyes sheltered by his hand, he suddenly asked if I had ever come across the writing of a fellow named Harry Scott. The name meant nothing to me but I told him so reluctantly, fearing that my admission would mark the end of a conversation barely begun.

Far from stopping, however, Walter continued to speak, telling me that he had come across this Scott character during the war. I hadn’t heard Walter talk about his involvement in the war and was curious to hear more about the part he had played. Because he was such a circumspect character I decided to ask him straight out where he had been stationed—it was the only way I could be confident of prompting an answer. There was an awkward silence and then he made a kind of gurgling noise, a pained laugh, and responded that one of the places he had been ‘stationed’ was Mount Eden jail. I had no response to this and so stirred my tea, even though it had no sugar in it. Walter pretended not to notice and continued, saying he had come across Scott—who, he said was not only a writer but an academic and a mountaineer, too—while in detention and that it was through him that he had been introduced to literature. Scott, it seemed had been

something of an informal librarian, recommending and handing out books to his fellow inmates. ‘So, he was in Mount Eden, too?’ I asked. Walter shook his head, ‘No. I bumped into Harry before that. I really only spent a short time in his company—a few weeks, that was all. There was another fellow, too. A theatre man from Dunedin. Rodney Kennedy. He used to direct us in plays and such like.’ Walter broke off from his story and looked off into the distance. Clearing his throat, he murmured, ‘I was sent up to the Manawatu. Whitanui. That’s where I met them.’ He exhaled slowly and then standing up said, ‘It was Harry who gave me one of the books you felt in my pack. And yes, it is one of the few things I treasure.’

Up until this point I had tried to limit the number of questions I asked. I had the impression that my role was to listen—and I hadn’t wanted to interrupt Walter, or voice any of the ideas whirring through my brain for fear that he would retreat back into his own world. I was in a difficult position. I desperately wanted to know why he had been in jail but, at the same time, I didn’t want to force him to say anything he wasn’t prepared to offer voluntarily.

I watched as he carried our plates back to our shelter, mulling over what he had said. Something about his story didn’t make sense to me. The more time I spent in Walter’s company, the more certain I was that he was no criminal. He was quiet and reserved. I believed he was made that the way. He wasn’t trying to be secretive. I had the feeling that, more than anything, he was just sad. He reminded me of my mother. I was puzzled by the descriptions of his fellow inmates. True, I knew almost nothing about the criminal class but I was reasonably certain that theatre directors, academics and book lovers were not the main culprits. I was also baffled by the name he had given to the prison where he had met his bookish friends. I had never heard of Whitanui. Unlike Mount Eden, which was often referred to in newspaper reports, I had not come across the name. But, then, I thought to myself, how many prisons could I name? The answer to that was only one or two—so that didn’t prove anything.

It was late in the afternoon when we went back to the building site. We worked at a slower pace than we had previously, due, in part, to Walter’s physical condition. He hadn’t complained but it was clear his chest and ribs were causing him pain. Every now and again, he would stop working and lean with his head down, panting slightly before straightening up and taking up where he had left off. I was concerned about him. He didn’t look well but whenever I broached the subject of stopping for the night, he would shake his head and respond, ‘Might as well give it a bit longer—while the wind is down.’

As much as I was concerned for his well-being, I was also impressed by his strength and his resolve. I recalled the way I had first doubted Wim when he had described Walter as the strongest man to walk the earth. Now I was inclined to believe him. Once he fully recovered from his fall, Walter would run circles around us. Of that I was certain.

I look back on that afternoon as being one of the most satisfying and peaceful—even one of the happiest—of my life. While we barely spoke more than a few words, I felt at one with my companion. The act of building, of supporting a length of wood while the other hammered, was communication enough. As we worked, I felt rested and, truth be told, I hoped that the other members of the working party would stay away, allowing Walter and me to get on and finish the job ourselves. I was guilty of wanting to claim the hut for myself, just as, many years before, I had wanted to protect Foliage Hill from outsiders and keep it to myself. I wonder, now, if Walter felt the same way. If he did, he never admitted to it. Given what I now know, I suspect he no longer allowed himself to have such expectations—he was far less greedy and selfish than anyone I have met since.

As the sun began to sink behind the mountains, the sky opened up and the clouds that had pressed down on us during the day disappeared. Below us, in the valley, shadows lengthened, transforming the grey-reddish scree slope into blue-black gloom. I watched the light fade and then, from far away I caught sight of a bright flash of light and keeping my eyes on it, I was able to work out that it was coming from the village—that the last of the sun was reflecting off the large window—or perhaps the roof—of the Hermitage. In less than two minutes the light disappeared, and turning to Walter, I was about to suggest we call it a day when I saw him crouch down, his attention fixed on something he had spotted amongst the rocks. I walked across to where he was and there, growing out of a crack in a large boulder, was a small spindly plant of a type I did not recognise. Even in the half-light, I could see its dark, fleshy leaves and the white, round-shaped petals of its flowers. I glanced across to Walter and caught the words ‘It’s some kind of parahebe.’ He touched the plant with his finger-tip. ‘Not many plants grow at this altitude. It’s a miracle anything can survive, really.’ Neither of us spoke again. After several minutes of quiet contemplation, we stood up and together walked back to our cave.

I had hoped that the feeling of camaraderie—intimacy— I had felt the day before while working alongside Walter would continue, and that we might pick up where we had left off. However, all my attempts to make conversation as we ate our breakfast the following morning amounted to nothing. He appeared pre-occupied, lost in thought. In desperation, I raised the subject of the hut, asking what he had in mind. To this, he responded ‘framework.’ I nodded and mentioned, somewhat dejectedly, that the weather was holding up and that with luck we should get in a full day. Walter’s reply was no more than a curt, ‘We’ll see about that.’

I knew, then, that there was no point in continuing to hope for conversation. I didn’t know why he was so withdrawn but, rather than ask, I decided to leave him in peace. I pulled on my parka and scrambled outside, walking the short distance to the building site, whistling loudly in the hope of showing Walter that it made no difference to me, one way or the other, whether he joined me or not.

I didn’t wait. I was able to pick up my work from where I had left off and by the time Walter arrived on the scene, tugging at his tie, I was fully occupied in searching out the section of framework I needed in order to continue. I was glad Walter showed no desire to join me. He preferred to concentrate on another section of the hut. Though the distance between us was less than twenty feet, it felt like a crevasse had opened up between us and I was damned if I would be the first to attempt a crossing. I had tried to be friendly over breakfast and, as far as I was concerned, it was up to Walter to come to me. It was frustrating when, after only twenty minutes, I realised that I needed his help to hold a length of timber while I nailed it into place. I decided not to ask him, intending that he would see me struggle and come across and offer his assistance. When he failed to notice my plight, I struggled on, but unable to support the length of wood with one hand and the hammer in the other, I soon found myself cursing loudly, defeated by the complexity of the job. Not only had I failed, but I had managed to give my thumb a fair old whack in the process and I stood shaking my hand, eyeing Walter angrily as I tried not to show how much it hurt.

Despite myself, it was almost with a sense of triumph that I suddenly announced, ‘The weather is clearing. I expect the others will return today.’ I didn’t want them to return but I intended my words to provoke the same disappointment in Walter. He didn’t reply. Frustrated, I added, ‘We should probably prepare a big meal. They’ll be exhausted

by the time they arrive—especially if they’ve carried up a sheet of tin to replace the one you lost down the mountain.’ My last remark left me feeling ashamed. Walter’s lack of interest had forced me into a corner but, nevertheless, I should not have gone so far—especially as my remark appeared to hurt only myself.

I prayed that Athol and the others would not come back. The very thought of their rowdy party returning to my peaceful camp was distressing. I didn’t want the quietness of my surroundings to be shattered by the sound of voices, or laughter. In the space of a day, I had retreated from the group and I was aware of wanting to guard my space, to keep the others at bay. They—my companions of a few days before—no longer belonged here. I could not understand why Walter did not appear to feel the same way.

We worked all morning, stopping to drink from a billy of snow-melt and refuelling on a handful of scroggin some time towards eleven. By one-thirty, I was hungry and worn out. My eyes stung from the glare and my thumb was throbbing painfully. I needed a break.

My mood had lifted slightly over the course of the morning. Hard work was good for me, it was satisfying to see the framework go up and know I was building something that would last for years to come. Earlier, I had made a silent peace with Walter, edging closer to him as I worked until I was standing by his side, passing him lengths of timber, holding them in place as he hammered, working around him as I made a start on the roof framework. At one point, I caught Walter frowning at a section of framework he had just fastened into place and coming up to him, I heard him mutter about the quality of the wood. He was dissatisfied with the number of knots in one of the four by twos and before I could stop him, he had dismantled the offending section, and cobbled together a replacement from some lengths of timber meant for the roof. Looking over what he had done, he suddenly smiled and turning to me, asked if I was ready for a break, adding that he could certainly do with a bite to eat.

As we had done the day before, we sat outside eating quietly, not speaking a great deal. One thing I can say is that we had a good supply of food, the air-drop having included several parcels of fresh meat, vegetables and bread. On that day, I believe, we had bacon sandwich. We were almost done when high above us a gull flew by. I was so surprised by the sight of it that I immediately pointed it out to Walter who had, of course, already seen it for himself. The gull paid no attention to us but flew down the valley, disappearing from sight within minutes. I remember I said something along the lines of, ‘A long way from home.’ I saw Walter smile and after a short while he replied, ‘They told



me, when I was a young lad, that my mother and younger sister had been carried off by angels.’ He took a bite from his sandwich and faced me, mumbling, ‘Funny what grown-ups will tell you.’ I wanted to jump in and say ‘Yes, you’re right!’ but before I could speak Walter continued, ‘It was the flu. They died during the outbreak. I was a wee chap. My father sent me off to live with my grandparents in a place called Diamond Harbour on Banks Peninsula. My grandparents were, by my standards, ancient—on top of which I barely knew them. They were very strict and there were times when I would find myself sent to the coal shed, for some misdemeanor or other. Through the open door, I would watch out for a flock of pigeons—homing pigeons—which their owner let out to be exercised twice a day. One Saturday, I set out to locate the pigeons’ home and in that way, I was introduced to a family—a bit like your Dudley’s family—who were to take me on, as it were.’

Walter broke off and I feared he might return to work without finishing his story. Quickly, I refilled his mug with tea from the billy and asked him to go on, saying by way of encouragement that I had always liked pigeons. This was not true. I had never given pigeons any thought but I was certain Walter’s reminiscence would help me to learn more about him. As far as I was concerned, Walter was the human equivalent of one of my mother’s jigsaw puzzles—and I was eager to get my hands on as many pieces as possible in order to complete a picture of the man.

‘The father, Samuel, was a funny old chap. He was mad about pigeons: breeding them, racing them. The day I met him, he told me a story about going down to the wharves at Lyttelton to meet Captain Scott—Scott of the Antarctic—in order to persuade him to take a pigeon with him to the South Pole. He was a mad old bugger, all right. He even made a down jacket for the bird, from pigeon feathers. He was mortified when Scott declined to take the bird. He couldn’t understand it and held a grudge against the explorer for the rest of his life. However, one of the crew members agreed to take the bird, promising to release it on the day the first ice-berg was spotted.’

Walter sighed and shook his head, laughing quietly to himself before adding, ‘The bird was never seen again.’ He took a sip from his tea and suggested we should make a start but I wanted to sit a bit longer. I sensed the real story had not yet begun and I wanted to draw it out. ‘Samuel had a daughter, a girl around my own age. She explained to me that she had been named after the pigeons. I thought she was joking, of course but then she said, ‘Win some, lose some.’

I was completely baffled by this last remark but waited, hoping that Walter would explain. ‘Her name was Winsome. Winsome Moore,’ Walter continued. ‘Goodness, Samuel was a funny one...Winsome Moore. The poor girl. She was a toughie, though, a wild one. The kiddies all called her ‘Whinny’ and made neighing noises behind her back. She didn’t care...’ Walter stood up and began to carry his mug back to the cave. ‘She was as crazy as her old man ... ’

I was disappointed that this appeared to be as much information as I could hope for. Nothing in what Walter said provided me with the missing pieces of the puzzle I wanted to solve. I wondered if the subject of homing pigeons was leading somewhere, was somehow related to the time he had spent in jail. For the life of me, I couldn’t understand how the two things, pigeons and jail, could be related. Then, I tried to imagine how Winsome or Samuel might fit in. I followed Walter back to the snow cave, thinking all the while which lead I should follow. I settled on the pigeons, asking if Walter kept birds himself. To my surprise he began to recount a story about the homing pigeons which had been kept at the Hermitage, back in the old days and then, before I was sure I had fully understood that story, he started on another, telling me that he had a few pigeons, once, but after the war he had settled on bees. While in detention, he had met a man, Rex Hillary, who taught him the fundamentals of bee-keeping. Rex, he went on, had managed to persuade the supervisor to let him keep bees at the camp. ‘It was the best honey I ever tasted.’ He ran his hands over his face and tilted his head, rather like a bird, and added, ‘They kept Rex locked away for four years.’ Something about the tone of Walter’s voice—or perhaps the strangeness of the story he told—made me laugh. I couldn’t help myself but, meeting Walter’s eye, I quickly fell silent. It was very clear that he found nothing funny in what he had just said.

‘I was moved around a lot, from one prison camp to another—a real tour of the North Island.’ Walter broke off, and glanced around. I could see he was ready to get back to work. ‘I met a lot of chaps but apart from the other Methodists, I never got to know them very well. Harry Scott kept in touch...and Merv Browne became a good friend.’ He caught my eye, and held it, saying, ‘I was with Merv in Mount Eden. We went on hunger strike together.’ His voice came to a halt and he made for the exit of the cave, walking over to the hut-site, where he hesitated, waiting for me to follow so we could begin work once more.

I didn’t get any more out of him that afternoon. When we talked, we spoke about the hut we were building, the growing number of tourists visiting places like Mount Cook,

how much the place had changed in recent years, and we talked about Athol and Douglas and whether or not they would return before night fall. On this last matter, Walter thought it unlikely we would see them. Over the course of the afternoon, the wind had swung around to the north-west and was blowing harder than it had over the past two days. ‘They won’t bother returning while the weather’s like this,’ Walter told me, ‘Once this wind blows up, we’ll be forced back into the cave for a day or two.’

I wasn’t so sure. Like Walter, I had noticed the flying-saucer shaped clouds forming overhead but as the sky had been clearing, rather than clouding over, I believed the worst of the weather was behind us. Towards dinner time, however, the wind picked up and spots of rain began to fall. I was just finishing up, rearranging a few heavy boulders on top of some sheets of roofing iron, when some remark Walter had made earlier struck me with new force. It was to do with him having been a Methodist. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I had a vague memory concerning one of the teachers who taught at my old school, a youngish man, and, like Walter, a Methodist. I must have been very young—in fact, I believe I was only six or seven when there had been some scandal concerning this particular teacher. I could not recall all the details of that event but I remember something that took place almost a year to the day after my brothers had been killed. My mother and I had passed this teacher on the street and to my amazement she had accused him—out of the blue, as far as I was concerned—of being ‘yellow.’ I had had no idea what she was talking about. The teacher looked no more yellow than the next man. But, before I could satisfy myself completely on that matter, I was yanked by the hand and looking up at my mother, I asked what the matter was. ‘Nothing. Nothing at all,’ she snapped, pulling me away. The incident was over so quickly that, despite being bewildered by my mother’s remark and her expression, I forgot about it almost immediately.

The teacher left town shortly afterwards. I had no idea why and was not interested, in any case. I do recall my mother saying something to the effect that the School Board had done the right thing, that men like that shouldn’t be allowed to poison the minds of children. I also had a faint memory of my father responding that war solved nothing, that men weren’t put on this earth to kill one another—but my mother would have none of it.

Walter was right about the weather. By the time we settled down for dinner, a storm was raging outside. Every now and then, a fine puff of snow would spray through the cave entrance and I think it was Walter who made the comment that the appearance of the

spindrift put him in mind of a dragon. It was as if there was a large beast lurking outside our cave, snorting steam through the opening. Dragon or no dragon, the frequency of the spindrift diminished as the evening wore on and the snow cave entrance, as before, began to fill in.

I was very unhappy about the storm. Having made good progress on the hut, I wanted nothing more than to finish it as quickly as possible. I wanted to get it finished before the others returned from the village. I imagined a scene in which Walter and I were lounging in front of the completed shelter, enjoying a cup of tea as the others staggered into camp. To be perfectly honest, I wanted to see the look of amazement on Athol and Douglas's faces and hear their grudging appreciation of all we had accomplished. That was my dream, but there was little chance of it coming true. My only consolation was that we were alone, at least. The weather would prevent the others from returning and the cave, without them, felt spacious and comfortable—albeit slightly more chilly.

I was imagining what it would be like to remain cut off from the world for an extended period of time. I tried to think of all the things I would miss but I was having a hard time of it. I thought that as long as I had books, paper and ink and something to look at, a beautiful view, I would probably be all right. I had nothing against other people, but I was happy in my solitude. Having reached my conclusion, I had to concede that such isolation would have to be taken on a voluntary basis. I wasn't sure I could cope with having it imposed on me. That would entail a great loss of freedom, even if the end result, the fact of being alone, was much of a muchness.

Walter, of course, could have offered a useful perspective on my meandering day-dreams but I could see he was busy with thoughts of his own and so did not interrupt him. He had spoken little since our return but, having spent more time in his company, I was growing used to his silence. I knew, now, that Walter would speak when he had something to say and that there was no point in trying to force the matter. I was just congratulating myself on being such an accommodating cave-mate when Walter happened to glance my way and his mouth twitching slightly, said, 'You don't see many ginger haired people these days.' I must have stiffened, bracing myself for what must surely follow—more comparisons to bird feathers, fur or, perhaps, soft furnishings. It was a disappointing moment. 'Before our marriage, my wife-to-be, Elspeth, shared lodgings with two women: one was called June and the other, a ginger-haired woman with very fair eyelashes like yours, was named Rita.' He fell silent and I have to admit that my first thought was that it was odd he had noticed my eyelashes, let alone commented on them. Still, I was pleased

to have got off so lightly with regard to my hair colour. He hadn't compared it to straw or a clump of bracken, for example. I would have liked to have more indication of where Walter was going with his story about Elspeth, his wife, or her friends June and Rita, however.

'I didn't know it then but Rita would later become a good friend. I couldn't have coped without her.' To my annoyance, he stopped again and sat for several seconds rubbing his hand across his chin, lost in thought. When he spoke again, his story seemed a long way away from where it had begun. 'Elspeth was a timid girl when I met her. Her father, George, was very domineering, very vocal—a violent man—who was feared by both Elspeth and her mother. He had fought in the war and, upon his return, he took to the bottle. His home was the RSA—or so it seemed. He didn't take to me, naturally enough. I had my own way of thinking on certain matters and I was pretty obstinate back then. Fortunately for me, I wasn't introduced to him until a good nine months after I had started seeing Elspeth—by which time we were very much in love. Elspeth's father lived in Blenheim, you see, and I had met Elspeth in Nelson.' He laughed at some private memory. 'As I said, Elspeth was lodging in a boarding house when we met. I knew one of her friends, June, through the Methodist Bible Class and although Elspeth was not religious at the time we used to bump into each other every now and then. June made sure we kept bumping into each other.'

I was beginning to drift off. I had hoped that Walter's story might pick up a bit of pace but he appeared content to ramble on about life in Nelson, even going so far as to mention by name several fellow members of his Bible Class—people I had never heard of, unsurprisingly—before returning to the three girls: Elspeth, June and the ginger-haired Rita. I gave up hope of Elspeth being in any way interesting. I created an image of her in my mind. She was timid and dowdy, with mousey coloured hair and she was bookish, too. I could also picture her friend, June: blonde, bossy, and destined to become a nurse and life-long member of the church. Even Rita barely aroused my interest. No doubt she went on to sell frocks and gloves at some department store. For a brief moment, an image of her holding up a sheer stocking slipped into my mind but, feeling myself redden, I quickly locked the image away and asked Walter to continue.

'After we married we moved south to Rangiora. We wanted to put a bit of distance between Elspeth's father and me. He was very much against our marriage. I think he had intended Elspeth to remain unmarried so that she could take care of him in his old-age.'

Feeling drowsy, I suddenly offered to make a fresh pot of tea. I needed something to do, something to keep me awake. As I pumped the Primus, I wondered if it would be rude of me to try and change the subject, or hurry Walter along, somehow. I had never read Robinson Crusoe but I seriously doubted that it would have become the classic it was had Crusoe spent half his time banging on to Friday about his wife and her friends back home. Just as I was plucking up my courage to try and nudge Walter along, he suddenly changed subject, asking if I had come across the New Zealand writer Charles Brasch.

My ears pricked up. Of course I knew that name. He was one of the poets included in the poetry collection I had bought in Christchurch. Now one of my favourite books, I had brought it with me and after passing Walter his mug of tea, I rummaged through my belongings and lifted it out, opening the volume at the page featuring Brasch's 'The Silent Land.' In my best reading voice, I began 'The mountains are empty. No hermits have hallowed the caves...' Given our present living situation, I couldn't help but laugh and couldn't continue with my reading. Trying to stifle my laughter, I scanned through the poem to the line '...the Oreads will haunt the fields near the snowline...' and began to laugh once more. When I had first read the poem I had had to look up the word oread in the dictionary. I knew now that it related to mythology, that it referred to nymphs who were believed to reside in the mountains. Naturally, this image—as it related to Walter and me—very nearly reduced me to tears. It was in this silly, desensitised condition that I joked, 'Was Brasch another of your cell-mates? Along with the bee-keeper, the drama-teacher and the librarian? It must have been quite a gathering...' Catching sight of Walter's expression, the words faded.

I lowered my eyes and concentrated on the page in front of me, reading the poem, before silently passing the book across to Walter. He took it from me with a frown and ran his hand over the page, his lips moving slightly as he read the poem to himself. I didn't expect my companion to say anything. Having outlined a little of his life story and introduced the subject of Brasch, I imagined he would retreat back into his own, private world, leaving me to figure out for myself where his story might have gone had I not so rudely interrupted him. My complete lack of sensitivity could not have gone unnoticed and I was ashamed of myself. To make matters worse, my untouched tea was lukewarm and, even worse, none of the skim milk powder I had added had dissolved. Clots of dry milk filled my mouth with every sip and the texture transported me back to my childhood, when, in summer, our school milk was always warm and lumpy, blocking the straws through which we sucked.

I owed my friend an apology but I was also feeling put-out. Yes, I had teased Walter about his cell-mates but I had meant no harm by my remarks. Wim might have made the same remarks in a similar situation. And anyway, it was only because our living conditions struck me as incongruous in relation to Brasch's poem, that I laughed so long and so heartily. I was making excuses for myself but I honestly believed that had I been at home, settled down in my room, worn out after a long day's work in the shop, I would have seen Brasch's work through entirely different eyes. I would have appreciated his skill and his imagery. I had never exactly warmed to his work, but I sensed that beyond all the references to Oreads, unicorns, hermits and the like, there was an anchor—an everyday, common voice—expressed through his verse. It was as though he wished to place himself somewhere, within the landscape or, perhaps, more accurately, within this southern landscape. At times, too, he seemed to feel pummelled by his surroundings., He, as much as anyone, needed to find peace. Mine was no great analysis but, given my young age and lack of formal education, it was the best I could do.

'I met Brasch through the drama-teacher,' said Walter, stressing the words 'drama-teacher' for my benefit as he handed the book back to me. 'I was visiting Rod Kennedy not long after I got out, when Brasch turned up.' I kept quiet, fearing that if I opened my mouth, I would put my foot back into it. 'Shortly after the war Brasch started up a journal—a literary journal. From time to time, he sends me a copy.' He paused, cleared his throat and added, 'Harry—the librarian as you call him—has also sent a few copies. He's had a few pieces published in it.'

I shook my head. I hadn't heard of any literary journal. I wasn't even sure I knew what went into a literary journal. I was aware of pulling a face, one that indicated I found Walter's information interesting but not so startling that I felt a need to ask more. In that vein, I flicked absently through the book of verse and reaching the acknowledgement page I read the word, *Landfall*, which I guessed was the name of the journal mentioned by Walter.

The strangest fact of all was that Walter, of all people, should know some of its contributors—and that he had met two of them in jail. It seemed rather odd, to put it mildly. 'I am sure, 'Walter said, 'that if you ever felt so inclined, you could show Brasch some of your work. Even if he doesn't accept it, he would probably offer you some good advice.'

My work, I felt, wasn't at a stage where I should consider showing it to a real poet or editor. It had been embarrassing enough when Wim had caught sight of me jotting a

few words into my exercise book and had persuaded me to read my poems aloud to the others in our working party. Even now, I could recall the glances exchanged between Douglas and Athol as I read my best poem, 'The Road to Tekapo'. Walter, I remembered, had not been present at the time. He must have been outside, getting a breath of fresh air. Still, I felt flattered by his suggestion that I submit my work. It was the first time in my life that any one had given me any real encouragement.

'Should I tell Brasch that you told me to write in?' I asked, barely able to conceal my glee. 'Would it help if I mentioned your name?'

Walter slowly turned away, back to the cave entrance, quietly watching the drifts of snow build up. A moment later, he turned back to me, and smiling ever so slightly said, 'I can't say—I have no experience in these matters. It's really up to you.'



The storm grew in strength. The following morning I decided to apply myself to my poetry and complete a few verses I had begun during the past week or so. In light of what Walter had said, I thought it might be a good idea to get five or six poems up to scratch. Any editor worth his salt would be able to assess my talent from such a decent sized bundle. I decided to concentrate on a series of lyric poems I had been working on. These poems were held together by a common thread: the Mackenzie Basin. I was aware that many of Brasch's poems dealt with the landscape of the South Island and I felt that I might have more chance of gaining his attention if I submitted poems that were similar in subject to his own.

After several long minutes of concentration during which time I achieved little besides moving a few words around the page before crossing them out, permanently, I looked up from my exercise book and feeling defeated, decided to return to the subject of Brasch himself and so, coughing first to make sure Walter was listening, I raised my voice, saying, 'The thing I don't like about Brasch is that he always seems unsure of himself, unsettled somehow. Just when you think he's going to write about mountains, he switches to the sea. You can't help feeling that something—or someone—is pushing him around, this way and that.'

Walter looked at me and calmly replied that he had no idea which poem I was talking about. He then added that he had gone on several tramping trips with Brasch and that in his experience Brasch was a keen observer of his surroundings. He took a great deal of pleasure in the outdoors. He was the type of man, Walter said, who could sleep rough.

I wanted to keep the flow of conversation going and so hastily flicked through my book of New Zealand verse trying to find a poem to support my earlier statement. Impatient, I scanned the pages again but couldn't find the passage I remembered from my previous reading. Even so, I retained a memory of the words, sea, bush and mountain, all in the one poem. Nothing, however, truly fitted that criterion and so, somewhat grumpily, I added that Brasch took a bit of getting used to. His work didn't jump off the page.

In hindsight, I think Walter knew far more than he was letting on where Brasch was concerned. If I had been in his position, I would not have managed to remain so quiet. I would have wanted to display my knowledge. But, he allowed me to babble on for some time about Brasch's shortcomings before finally stopping me with a rather odd question:

‘Have you ever climbed a mountain?’ I shook my head, though I clarified my statement by observing that I felt that I was in the mountains now, if that counted. My reply didn’t satisfy Walter, for he repeated, ‘But you’ve never stood on top of a mountain?’

‘No,’ I replied, shaking my head. I was in the process of adding that I had every intention of climbing one or two mountains while I was here—which, in itself, was a lie—when Walter interrupted, ‘Well, you should.’

I could see that the discussion about poetry I had hoped for was going nowhere. Frustrated, I said, ‘Do you think climbing a mountain is going to make it easier for me to understand Brasch’s poetry? Is that it?’

Walter shrugged and I could have shaken him. In that frame of mind, I barely stopped myself from making a snide remark, suggesting I should probably go outside into the storm and sleep with the hills ‘like a lover’—another reference to Brasch’s work. Instead, I bit my tongue and went back to my work—flitting now between my own poetry, Brasch’s and that of a poet I truly admired, James K Baxter.

Once I had had my fill of poetry and mountains, I put all my books down and began to think about food, about what I would like to eat if offered the choice of any meal. Settling on roast beef with Yorkshire pudding, thick, dark gravy and roast spuds and peas, I then began to wonder what my parents were up to. I imagined my mother would still be working away on one of her jigsaw puzzles and that my father would be somewhere in his shop, experimenting with the seasonings in his sausages or perhaps tinkering with my motorbike, fine tuning the engine in anticipation of my return.

My parents seemed a long way away. I began to feel homesick. I missed them but I also missed certain things that had never before made much of an impression on me. I discovered, to my surprise that I was attached to the everyday, domestic world. Chores that had irritated me—the deliveries I had been required to make, for example to the local hotel, the maternity hospital and some of my father’s elderly customers—touched me now, reminding me of so many things that were absent from this snow-bound life. I remembered being given a paper bag containing newly dug potatoes by old Bob Green. I recalled that I had barely stopped long enough to thank to him and had rather ungraciously mentioned that we had a vegetable garden of our own, that we weren’t short of spuds. As I had continued making deliveries, the temperature inside the van had increased and the smell of freshly dug potatoes and warm earth had filled the cab, transporting me back to the time I had first been entrusted with the job of fetching vegetables from my father’s patch.

Still thinking of Fairlie, I recalled, how only a week before coming to Mount Cook, I had wandered across the road to Dudley's house and bumped into his daughter, Geraldine, who was reading a book while lounging in the back garden. Dressed in a one-piece swimming costume, her face shaded by the brim of an enormous straw hat, she had called out to me, asking if I had heard the latest news, that her brother Ted had got engaged, that he was going to marry his 'frumpy librarian' at last. As I spluttered my surprise and my congratulations, it dawned on me that I had never been out with a girl. Despite being very nearly twenty, I hadn't given any thought to finding a match and yet here was Ted, only a few years older than myself, ready to tie the knot. I was relieved when Geraldine piped up, 'I wouldn't think of getting married until I'm at least twenty three. I want to see the world before I settle down.' I must have nodded rather more enthusiastically than I imagined, because she laughed and said, 'You'll never get married, though. You're not the sort. I can tell.' Her comment didn't really make much of an impression on me. I was used to hearing her speak her mind and by that stage I had come to regard her as little more than an annoying little sister. Still, I found her frankness attractive. It made me feel close to her, as though everything was out in the open—where it should be. She had spark—a trait which was not common amongst the other girls and women I knew.

I was surprised by the rawness of my emotion as I began to dwell on these inconsequential events from my past. I am certain that had I been outside working, building the hut, none of these memories would have preyed on my mind. But, being once more snowed in, with little to distract me, these thoughts—and others like them—conspired against me, increasing my loneliness and the distance between me and the people I knew well.

Cut off from my familiar world, I began to think once more about isolation and solitude. Whereas before, I had allowed myself to believe that living alone wouldn't be so bad, provided I had books and such, I now felt in great need of human company. It wasn't enough for me to simply share a cave with another human being. I wanted conversation, words to warm me up.

In this melancholic frame of mind, I toyed with the idea of encouraging Walter to talk about himself. I hadn't found the subject of his domestic life to be very interesting, but, because I missed my own family, I decided it might be a welcome distraction to hear him talk about his. More than that, I was curious to learn something about his time in jail. Like other lads of my age, boys who had grown up in the sheltered community of Fairlie, I

had mythologised the sheep rustler Mackenzie, and I have to admit to being slightly dazzled by Walter's past. I wanted to find out more about his crime—or crimes—which I suspected might have something to do with his brutish father-in-law. It was a tricky subject to raise, however. I skirted around the topic before finally leading him back to the matter of his timid wife, Elspeth.

To my utter amazement, Walter was not only prepared to talk but appeared grateful for the opportunity to do so. It was almost as if he had been waiting for permission to finish his story.

'Just before the start of the war,' he began, 'we were living in Rangiora—not far from Christchurch.'

I nodded. I knew where Rangiora was without him needing to spell it out. I hadn't been there but I had seen the place on the map. Another small farming town, I thought to myself. I could imagine it quite easily. The fact that I had a pretty reasonable mental picture didn't prevent Walter from describing, brick by brick, his house and the street on which it was located. He mentioned the oak trees in the garden, the paddocks which bordered his section and even the view from his back step of the foothills, which in winter were covered with snow and in summer were obscured by the dust blowing up from the plains during a strong nor'wester. It could be my own house, I said, and I meant it. My own quiet street, my own quiet life.

Changing tack, Walter described his working day. He told me that he had trained to be an electrician. After moving to Rangiora he had set up on his own. Most of his customers, however, contacted him via the local electrical goods shop—where Elspeth worked part-time. The manager was a good, honest man. He was reaching retirement age and Elspeth and I hoped to buy the business from him eventually. We were happy, back then. Elspeth, who had always been somewhat shy came into her own during those first few years. She really flourished. Customers liked her.'

I was pleased for Elspeth. My own experience in the butcher's shop meant I was only too aware of how difficult certain people could be. There had been a few awkward occasions when I had been bailed up by some woman intent on having a go at me over the quality of our meat. There will always be people who expect fillet at blade steak prices.

Walter continued. 'In the evenings I attended Bible Class meetings alone or went for walks with Elspeth around the block. Very rarely, we went to the cinema. I wasn't that keen on the pictures. Like a lot of people I saw *All Quiet on the Western Front* back in the early thirties. That film made a big impression on me but most films didn't. Few were

worth the price of admission. They were silly. I felt restless sitting down for too long. I didn't like the smell of cigarette smoke, and the cinemas used to reek. Going to the pictures made me feel as if I was being slowly gassed. Elspeth liked them, though. I'd take her into Christchurch for a matinee. We'd start with a film and then go to Fails Café for dinner. She liked that.' He paused, asked me if I had ever seen *All Quiet on the Western Front* but when I replied that I hadn't, he said I was far too young. It was before my time.

Switching topics, he told me that he had kept a few pigeons. He had never been serious about competing, however. The birds had reminded him of Samuel and his daughter Winsome and the days he had spent as a child in Diamond Harbour. I nodded, silently organising his life into marriage, work, church and pigeons. It wasn't nearly as exciting as I'd hoped. I wondered if he would get around to the crime part any time soon. That's what I was secretly hoping for.

To my dismay he said, 'With the start of the war, business slowed down...' His voice trailed away and I wondered if he had noticed my bored expression because, suddenly, he cleared his throat and said, 'Thing didn't become truly difficult until I was sent away.'

I swallowed hard. This was more like it. Speaking quietly in an attempt to conceal my excitement, I mentioned 'You haven't said what you did.' I didn't want to give the impression of being too eager. It would be fair to say that I had had a fairly conservative upbringing, and like most people in my town, I saw myself as being firmly on the side of the law. Not only did I respect the law but I respected authority, too. That much had been drilled into me during cadet training at school. And, despite my soft spot for the sheep rustler, James Mackenzie, I believed that people who stepped outside the law should be punished.

Walter contemplated my face for a few seconds. I could see he was weighing up his words, that he was considering where to start—but, more than that, he was trying to gauge the effect his words might have. Only then did it occur to me that far from being some distant character whose 'crime' made an interesting distraction from an otherwise eventless day, Walter was very much flesh and blood, a friend of sorts—and a man who was about to take a huge risk in revealing himself to me. He was looking at me, wondering not only if I understood what he was about to do but also if he could trust me. At that point, I realised the enormity of what was about to take place and I very nearly asked him not to go on. I wasn't sure I wanted to know.

‘I was a conscientious objector. When I was called up, I wrote back saying I wouldn’t report as directed, nor would I agree to undergo a medical examination. I also made the decision not to go before an Appeal Board. As far as I was concerned, no one had a right to judge the sincerity of my conscience.’

At this Walter paused and held my eye as if checking for a response. I don’t know what he expected but I was so shocked I couldn’t think of anything to say. After a moment’s silence, he returned to his story, continuing, ‘As a military defaulter I was given an indefinite sentence and was sent away for the duration of the war. That was late 1941. I wasn’t released until May 1946.’

His voice was flat. He had spoken with little emotion, slowly stating the facts as if to a reporter taking notes. However, he must have noticed the look of confusion on my face because he suddenly frowned and in a voice that seemed to belong to that of a kindly teacher dealing with a stupid pupil, added, ‘I could not kill another human being, nor could I support the war in any way. No dispute can ever be solved through acts of violence. That’s what I believed then—and it’s what I still believe.’

To describe my emotions as confused is accurate. I think that up until that point I had spent more time idly speculating—or fantasising about his crime—than thinking about it, in real terms. What caused my confusion now was that I had been exposed to the truth. A retreat into fantasy was no longer possible. I wished that I had not been so impulsive, so lacking in foresight, that I hadn’t been able to envisage the consequences of my discovery.

I wanted to leave the snow cave to find a quiet place by myself. I needed to think. I couldn’t get away, however. Here I was, stuck in a cave with a man who had sat back and allowed my brothers—and others like them—to go to the other side of the world to fight and die in a war against fascism, while doing nothing himself. Walter had spent four years in safety! He might have suffered the discomfort of being locked up but he nevertheless knew that at the end of the war he would still be alive. His war years had been years of certainty and when the war ended he had returned to his old life and continued on, none the worse for wear. Those were the facts as I interpreted them. What freedom had he lost? What was his indefinite sentence when compared to the suffering of my mother, a woman who fourteen years on was still mourning the loss of her two sons?

I took a deep breath. The quietness inside the snow cave was oppressive. I could hear the quickness of my breathing, I had visual proof of it every time I exhaled. Beside me, drops of melted ice plunked into a billy next to my sleeping bag. I watched as each

drip formed, a small nipple of water, which lengthened and stretched before falling, splashing into the water already collected. I counted the seconds between the drops. I waited for the next drip to appear, counting, watching.

I couldn't bring myself to look at Walter.

My brothers. A precise image of them came into my head. They were sitting at the kitchen table, watching me blow out candles on a cake. It must have been shortly before they left for war. My last birthday spent in their company. That's right—they sang 'Happy Birthday' to me and Ralph told me I was a bit of a scallywag but not too bad for a wee chap. My father *and* mother laughed. 'Don't tease him,' my mother said, tugging at a strand of hair which had fallen out of place, she'd been laughing so hard. 'It's all right,' said Edward, before turning to me and adding, 'You can take a bit of fun, can't you?' We sat together—the whole family—me at the head of the table, my brothers either side. Did I ever see them again, after that?

Walter had heard me speak about them, my brothers. He already knew about the sinking of the *Neptune* without me telling him, it was a well known story. He recalled the details. He even mentioned the minefield and the fact that only one of the seven hundred and sixty three men onboard, survived. He could recall the number of dead! And yet, while others fought to protect us, while men like my brothers died, he had done nothing.

It took all my willpower not to lash out at him. I clasped my hands firmly between my knees, palm to palm, clamping them together. I started to rock slowly, swaying back and forth, my lips working away at the sour taste of betrayal in my mouth. Still, I could not meet Walter's eye. I wished with all my heart that he had been a bank robber or a sheep rustler. At least I could try to understand those crimes.

I didn't even notice, at first, that he had started talking again. To tell the truth I didn't care what he did, I was too busy with my own thoughts. There was nothing he could have said that would have made any difference to me but it annoyed me, all the same, that there was no note of apology in his voice. He wasn't asking for forgiveness. I thought he had a real nerve, all right.

He spoke slowly, as if expecting me to call a halt to his story. It was tempting to do just that but I didn't ask him to stop. My own thoughts had started whirring through my head once more. I continued to half-listen to Walter while, elsewhere in my brain, my thoughts were fixed, squarely on my mother's grief, my father's pain, Walter's betrayal of my friendship. I recalled the acorns I used to collect for my brothers. The row of trees planted for the men lost in the war. And, in the midst of all that, was Walter. His smiling

face fixed in my brain as I imagined him kitted out in costume, taking part in some theatrical comedy production directed by his prison-mate, Rodney Kennedy. I saw him deep in discussion with the other man, Harry Scott, talking about books, and their various philosophies, the sacrifices they had made—their lost years. And finally, I pictured Walter standing outside, beneath a clear blue sky, collecting honey from his friend Rex Hillary's hives and I imagined the air filled with the peaceful drone of hundreds of bees, as they swarmed harmlessly around his hat.

Walter took up his story from where he left off. He dealt with his sentence, the conditions of his imprisonment very briefly before returning to the subject of his wife. As he began to describe the reaction of the Rangiora community towards her—once it became widely-known that he was a conscientious objector—I had a vision of her, the timid Elspeth, and I thought to myself: I expect she had a hard time of it. I didn't feel sorry for her, I was simply stating what I guessed to be true. I wanted her to struggle, to face the humiliation of being married to a ... I couldn't say 'coward'. I longed to call Walter a coward, to spell out the wrong he had done me, and my family. But I couldn't. Even in my anger, I stopped short of using that word.

Perhaps, if I hadn't worked alongside Walter and held him in such high regard, I might not have felt obliged to hear him out. In other circumstances, I would have felt duty bound to ask him to stop talking. My loyalty to my mother would have necessitated such a request. As it was, I felt guilty of betraying her. I was a grudging audience.

'Elspeth knew I was a member of the Methodist Bible Class when she first met me through June. She had heard me talk about Ormond Burton and, although she wasn't a Methodist she accompanied June and me, and some others on a trip to Wellington where we heard Burton speak. He was a powerful orator, very charismatic. I never became a member of the Christian Pacifist Society but hearing him and Barrington speak had a profound effect on me. Burton described his experiences of the First World War and his words cemented my already strong belief that war was wrong.'

I still hadn't looked at Walter but he must have sensed that my attention was drifting. At that time I knew very little about the preacher, Burton. It wasn't until years later, during the anti-Vietnam war protests, when his name cropped up again that it meant anything to me, personally. I heard him speaking then and although, like many, I opposed the war, I dismissed him as a religious crank.

All of a sudden he appeared reluctant to continue with his story. I waited impatiently. I was torn by a desire to cut him short, to express my contempt and yet, at the



same time I was more and more curious about his past. I did want to hear what happened next but only so that I could confront him, and tell him in no uncertain terms that his actions were misguided. No one had wanted to go to war, but everyone agreed it was necessary, that Hitler had to be stopped. Everyone knew that. I was very sure of myself on that count. What's more, I couldn't see Walter's war-time experience without relating it directly back to the breakdown of my own family. Walter and my family were inextricably linked.

My voice cold—or so I hoped—I directed him to go on. I was surprised to hear him laugh. The sound unsettled me. It had never occurred to me that it was Walter—and not me—who commanded our conversation. I believed him to be so squarely in the wrong that I had expected him to apologise for his actions during the war. But he had no intention of defending himself. And, if anyone was going to be tested, it was me—not him. He knew the strength of his conviction whereas I had never looked deeply into my soul or been forced to account for the sincerity of my beliefs. I was self-righteous, however. And, although he was stubborn, no one could accuse Walter of being self-righteous.

By now it was late morning. If Walter was tired from talking he showed no signs of it. During our brief stand-off, he had found a candle stub and was working the wax between his fingers, creating figures which he sculpted with the small blade of his pen-knife. Each time he completed a figure, he held it up for inspection before squashing it into a ball and starting over. The whole time he made his small models, he ignored me. It was as if I had ceased to exist. Eventually, unable to contain myself, I snapped, 'Is that something else you learnt in jail?'

Walter glanced up. 'Yes,' he said and passed the figure to me. Perfect in detail, it was a mountaineer, complete with rope, haversack and ice axe. Despite myself, I remarked that it was very good but made sure to hand it back, quickly. To my dismay, Walter squashed the figure flat and began working straightaway on a replacement, observing as he worked that beeswax was his preferred material. It was more malleable than candle wax and smelt nicer. Not to be outdone, I replied that as a child I had spent hours in my father's butcher's shop carving figures out of dripping. This was an out and out lie but it gave me the upper hand and the confidence I needed to steer the topic back to Walter. I asked him to tell me more about his time in jail.

And so, for the next hour, he spoke without a break. He had already described the conditions he had encountered: the small huts, the high barbed-wire enclosures, the

‘screws’ who patrolled the camps, and the superintendents who ruled the camps, but now he provided more detail. He described the various inmates, telling me about the Jehovah’s Witnesses he had met, saying that he had found their literal interpretation of the Bible very hard to take. He frowned as he recalled work parties where the Jehovah’s Witnesses had driven everyone mad trying to convert the ‘Hoons’—the non-religious inmates—and the others. He went on to describe the rest of the inmates: the loners who appeared to have neither religious nor political leanings but were simply anti-war, the intellectuals—men like Harry Scott—who thought deeply and read widely and who took part in discussions covering a great many topics: nationalism, peace, war ... isolation. The communists who were torn between their individual pacifist leanings and their desire to destroy fascism. These men saw war as benefiting the ruling classes at the expense of the workers, the cannon fodder. And then he spoke of his own group, the Methodists, who had spent so much time studying the Bible, who could not conceive of war as being a Christian—or a just—means to ending conflict. He spoke of the human cost of war, the need for men to find a peaceful means of dealing with their differences, the absolute necessity for men, like him, to stand up for what they believed in.

As he spoke, Walter’s voice became charged with conviction. I could see that he meant every word he said, that he was absolutely sincere. But, even though much of what he said made sense, I could not stop myself from returning to two facts. My brothers had died fighting for freedom and peace had been obtained as a result of war. War had been successful. When I said as much to Walter he looked at me for a good minute and then in a voice that was once more controlled but quiet, he replied, ‘It’s said that fifty-five million people—perhaps even more—died as a result of the war. *Fifty-five million...*’

I didn’t want to hear any more.

Suddenly, being inside the snow cave made me feel sick, trapped. I felt as if I had been buried alive. Without saying a word to Walter, I went to the entrance and, as I had done once before, I began to dig. The relief I felt was immediate. I attacked the snow which had built up in the storm, driving my shovel into it, working in a frenzy to clear a small tunnel to the outside. I couldn’t bear to spend another minute breathing in the stale air. I honestly felt as if time was running out, that if I didn’t escape the cave, I might suffocate.

I have no idea how Walter spent his time while I dug. Whether he sat and watched or made wax figurines or read, I have no idea. I wanted to get away from him. That was

the main thing. I don't know how long it took but, as before, I was suddenly aware of a slight cool breath against my face and then I was through.

The wind, though strong, did not immediately push me off my feet. My exit from the cave must have coincided with a slight lull because for a minute or so I remember thinking, This isn't so bad. Then all of a sudden a gust hit me square in the face, blasting me with fine, icy particles that froze my cheeks and stung my eyes, making it difficult for me to see. As I raised my hand to wipe the snow away, I was struck again, and this time I was shunted backwards as though I was a small child playing in the waves, at the edge of the surf. Spindrift swirling around me, my frustration and rage increased and I felt a terrible urge to return to the snow cave and block the escape route I had made. The thought that I would be left in the storm didn't occur to me, I simply wanted to prevent Walter from following me outside. I could not bear the thought of standing next to him, shoulder to shoulder, feeling his body close to mine. I didn't want him anywhere near me. I didn't want to be tainted. If I hadn't had to lean on my shovel for support, I might have succumbed to my desire to fill in the hole and trap him inside. I'm not sure. I hope not.

The snow which filled the air was so thick that it cut out the light. It was still early in the afternoon but I felt as if I was looking at the world through cheesecloth. I had no sense of distance but, more than that, I had no sense of depth. It was as though I had been drawn upon a sheet of white paper. I found it difficult to balance. Not because the wind was pushing and tugging at me, but because every time I made a step I had the distinct impression of falling off the edge of the page. I've experienced a similar feeling when descending stairs in a darkened house. It was as though I had anticipated the last step only to discover that I'd already reached the floor.

I took a few hesitant steps and discovered the ground was not where I expected it to be. I hadn't been able to discern a slight rise and I fell forward, lunging out with my shovel as if it was a cane, or a crutch. I actually felt dizzy, as though suffering from vertigo, and I had to stand still. But even standing still didn't fix my problem, not entirely. The ground continued to move, snow whipped across its surface, obscuring my boots, my legs, my torso. I experienced a phantom movement—it was as if I was still walking even though I was simply rocking on the spot. The sensation scared me. I was afraid of disappearing entirely.

I don't know what real mountaineers do when they find themselves in such a situation, but what I did next strikes me now as being both bizarre and banal. I had a pee. I had been storing it up for hours and my need to urinate was suddenly urgent. As I fumbled

with my trouser fastenings, my body shunted one way and the other by the wind, I had to command my bladder to hold on—so sure was I that I would wet myself. The sense of release upon finally urinating was terrific but what was even more incredible was the way my urine, a golden yellow colour and carried in all directions by the wind, appeared to disappear into the void. That yellow stream, spraying away from me—as well as splashing on to my trousers—was the only thing that gave any definition, any dimension, to my flattened world.

When I faced the wind, I felt unbalanced. The problem was exacerbated by the noise, a thrumming in my ears. There was no pattern, no rhythm, to the sound made by the wind blowing against my hood. As someone who had always been attracted to unusual words, unfamiliar sounds—an interest which dated back to my childhood when I had first encountered that impossible to spell word: onomatopoeia—I allowed myself to stand still for a moment, unravelling the noise. Gunfire. The word stuck in my throat and I retreated back to the cave entrance where I hunkered down, out of the wind, trying to decide what to do next.

I didn't want to go back inside. I hoped that if I stayed out a little longer, Walter might have the good grace to fall asleep. I was so keen to avoid him that I lingered in the cave entrance, shivering uncontrollably, cursing my bad luck. If only I had left with the others! I could have been sitting in front of a fire at the Hermitage, instead of crouching outside in the cold. I would have stayed outside longer but as it was, I had to go in. I braced myself, and crawled back through the tunnel, hoping still to find Walter asleep.

He heard me stumble in, of course, and looked up. He watched silently as I walked towards him. I stopped in front of the sleeping platform and stood shivering, wondering what to do. I hadn't realised quite how cold I was but now that I was inside, out of the wind, my teeth began to chatter and despite a few attempts to clench my jaw shut, I couldn't stop. My only thought, then, was to get warm. Spotting a half-full billy of tea, I asked if I could have some. Walter nodded, saying, 'It should still be warm, I just made it.' I thanked him, but made no attempt to start a conversation.

For several minutes I held the mug between my hands, absorbing its warmth through my palms, feeling myself grow calmer as the hot liquid warmed me. I paid little attention when Walter left the cave and was on to my second cup by the time he returned, brushing snow from his jumper, his hair standing upright from the crown of his head. Glancing at him as he climbed stiffly back into his sleeping bag, I noticed how tired he looked. In the space of one day, he had aged. His face, lined and haggard, was that of an

old man. I didn't care about his health but I asked if he was all right. He nodded. Despite myself I felt relieved.

Now, of course, I understand that speaking about his past was painful for him. It's easy to see that that was the case. I didn't know that then—at least not straightaway. I didn't speak to him again but climbed into my sleeping bag and, even though it was too early for bed, I pulled the cord tight around my head and lay there, in the half-light, not daring to move as I tried, desperately, to fall asleep.

Instead of sleep, my brain went over all that Walter had told me earlier. It did this systematically and although I tried to direct my thoughts elsewhere they returned to the subject of his story. Every time a particularly vivid image entered my mind, my eyes opened and my eyelashes made a swoosh against the cloth of my sleeping bag. I had taken in far more of what he had told me than I had initially thought. I must have been paying closer attention to his arguments than I allowed, because they re-entered my brain easily, in their entirety, and each time I tried to dismiss them with arguments of my own, they interjected, taking up from where he had left off, patiently arguing their case.

Angered by this inner dialogue and wanting to put a stop to it, I loosened my sleeping bag and sat up. I could see, through the corner of my eye, that Walter was reading. He showed no sign of being aware of me. Annoyed at being ignored, I suddenly announced that I was hungry. My words sounded like a challenge but Walter simply nodded and continued with his book. Put out, I got up and lit the stove.

I was in the process of frying some bacon when I heard him speak. He said that he hadn't finished telling me about his wife and that, if it was all right by me, could he continue?

I knew that whatever he had to say would make no difference to me and so, without looking up from my cooking, I gave a shrug, and mumbled, 'Up to you. I don't care.'

It was all the encouragement he needed.

I knew from what Walter had already said that he had trained as an electrician and had worked in tandem with the owner of the electrical goods shop where Elspeth was employed. I could understand that it had been a good arrangement and I didn't think I needed to hear much more about it. But Walter had his own way of telling things and, as I didn't particularly care to eat my meal in silence, I allowed him to continue.

'One morning before breakfast, two policemen arrived at our front door.' Walter began, pausing to check I was listening.

'I knew one of the constables through Bible Class. We attended meetings together but now, leading me by the arm to a waiting vehicle, he couldn't meet my eye. I heard him say, 'Sorry about this, Walter.' To put him at his ease, I said, 'It's a lousy job, all right.' When he heard my remark, the second policeman laughed, and said, 'At least I can go home to my wife at the end of the day.' It was a cruel remark and I felt its sting. It really hit me then, that I wouldn't be coming back. I wouldn't be able to see Elspeth or my home for a long time.

I was sent straight away to the North Island. Others in my position were sent up to Balmoral, near Hanmer, but not me. I was sent north. As soon as I found out what was going on I wrote to Elspeth, telling her not to worry but in my heart I felt sick. There was little chance of her being able to visit me—not with so much distance, and the sea between us. She had no money to spare and with petrol rationing it was impossible to travel far. In any case, she would never have managed such a trip on her own, not in her condition.'

I didn't know what Walter meant by this last remark but I didn't have to wait long for the explanation. 'We were expecting a child. Elspeth wasn't showing when I was arrested so no one knew. In fact, I'd only just found out about it myself. It wasn't a good time to be starting a family but there wasn't much we could do about it. I wish we'd had more time, though. If only I'd been able to arrange something for her, somewhere for her to go...'

He stopped abruptly. Several seconds must have slipped by and then, looking past me, he continued, 'The owner of the electrical goods shop kept her on but the situation was hardly ideal. Customers who had been happy enough to be served by Elspeth in the past would now make a show of asking for Mehrstens, the owner. I heard about this in the letters she wrote. She put a brave face on it but it was impossible not to see what was happening. "Mr. and Mrs. Marsh came in today looking for a fridge," she wrote. "Another

customer followed them in, a few steps behind. It was a man wanting a heater. I apologised to him, explaining that I would deal with Mr. and Mrs. Marsh first, but before I got the words all the way out, Mrs. Marsh piped up, telling me not to bother, that she wouldn't dream of letting herself be served by the likes of me, that she would wait for Mr. Mehrtens himself to become free...I hate to say this Walter," the letter continued, "but this is becoming an all too frequent occurrence these days and I fear Mr. Mehrtens may have to let me go, before he loses all his customers."

Walter hesitated and fell silent. While he had been speaking, I'd managed to finish my food and put the billy on for a cup of tea. I recall I kept my gaze fixed firmly on the blue flames. As I watched, I found myself brooding, *That's not right. It wasn't her fault.*

I passed a mug of tea across to Walter who took it from me silently and sat drinking, lost in thought. After a minute more, he said, 'Elspeth decided the best thing to do was resign. She would have had to leave in any case, because of the baby, but she thought that it would be better to go now, while she was still on friendly terms with Mr. Mehrtens. He was sad to see her go. He had liked us and he felt sorry for Elspeth. Had business been better he might have persuaded her to stay but he needed the customers. He couldn't afford to lose them.'

I must have nodded or shown some sign of understanding the situation because I caught sight of Walter surveying me and felt guilty. Mentally at least, he was lumping me in with those customers—the ones who had judged Elspeth because her husband happened to be a conchie. I didn't see myself that way and I wanted to defend my character against Walter's unspoken disapproval but I didn't have the courage to do so. I sat quietly, sipping from my mug, waiting for him to continue.

'It was hard to find out what was going on. Letters between Elspeth and me were censored and it was difficult—even in the best of times—to keep up with news from the outside world. To make matters worse, neither one of us wanted to write anything that might cause the other to worry. Even so, it would have been impossible for me to get out a letter which described camp life in accurate detail. I could only hint at the futility of the work we were doing, clearing scrub and planting trees. I was stuck in the middle of the North Island, smack bang in pumice country. Nothing grew except manuka and fern. No sooner was a plot of land cleared than the bush returned. Pines didn't stand much chance. The rabbits got the young saplings before they ever got established. Despite all our efforts, working the land was a complete waste of time. That was the worst thing—wasting day after day doing a job that would amount to nothing.' He frowned and then added, 'There

were two things that really got to us: the absolute futility of the work and the injustice of being handed an indeterminate sentence. Those two things got to us more than anything else. It was very hard to stay positive.’

Walter fell silent once more and I feared that he might have had enough talking for one day. By contrast, I wanted to hear more about Elspeth. I wanted to find out how her story ended.

With a little prompting, Walter took up the tale again. Elspeth was now visibly pregnant and no one wanted to hire her. She was forced to rent out the house and then she returned to Blenheim, to her father. ‘By this stage,’ Walter said, ‘Elspeth’s mother had been dead a year or two and Elspeth’s father, George, had been living on his own. From what Elspeth said, in one of her letters, the house needed dusting. It made me shudder to think of her stuck out there but whenever I wrote to her, begging her to move away, she replied that things weren’t so bad, that she could survive.’ Walter exhaled slowly and catching my eye asked if there was any more tea in the billy. As I refilled his cup, he went on. ‘I knew she wasn’t telling the whole truth. She was seven or eight months pregnant and had no way of supporting herself. The rent from our house, combined with what little savings we had, barely covered the mortgage and, with time, we would lose the house to the bank. She had no option but to stay put. She was trapped and there was nothing I could do to help. I felt completely helpless. I tried to make contact with the church in Blenheim but that didn’t amount to much. Whenever anyone went around to the house, George would send them packing. He had it in for any member of the Bible Class movement, largely because they were opposed to war, but he felt an equally strong repulsion for any pacifist organisation: the Quakers, the Peace Pledge Union—even the communists—they were all shirkers in his eyes. As for me, he said that if he ever crossed paths with me again, he would have me up against a wall as soon as look at me. He told anyone who would listen that his daughter had married a coward. As far as he was concerned I’d be better off dead, but, failing that, I ought to spend the rest of the war and then another seven years on top of that locked away. He wasn’t alone in thinking that. Half the RSA blokes felt the same way about us.

Knowing how much he hated me, I had a fair idea of how he would be treating Elspeth. On the few occasions when I had been to his house, I had taken issue with him over his habit of addressing Elspeth in the third person, as ‘the ninny.’ He took a great deal of pleasure in putting her down, and his enjoyment was made all the greater if any of his mates happened to be in the house, sharing a drink. I remember the time one of his



friends had stood up to fetch a beer and George had signaled him to sit, saying, ‘You stay there, the ninny will get it...’ It was a poisonous atmosphere and, locked away, I spent a great deal of my time feeling anxious about my wife, praying that she would find the strength to leave.

In the end I became so worried for the well-being of Elspeth that I applied for compassionate leave. I explained that my wife was expecting a child and that I had to help her find somewhere to live. Despite putting my case forward as best I could, I was laughed down. Why, they wanted to know, should they let me go home to look after my wife and child when I had refused to do anything to “protect” the wives and children of all the other men in the country?

Walter looked up, his eyes blazing at the memory of that discussion. I could see how keenly the events of that episode weighed on him. His expression conveyed a mixture of rage and helplessness, and then, thrown in on top of that, most startling of all, was an air of guilt. Walter had referred earlier to losing his faith and I wondered if the event he had just described was the turning point for him. It seemed to me that if he hadn’t lost his faith in God at that point, he must have at least lost his faith in man. I felt sorry for him and was about to suggest he take a break from his story when I heard him mumble, ‘It’s good to talk about these things.’ His remark caught me by surprise. It didn’t strike me that the conversation was doing him much good. He looked worn out from the effort of speaking. If anything, I would have said he was coming down with some kind of illness, so grey was his face. He must have noticed my look of concern because he added, ‘You can only keep things bottled up so long.’ Though I was still angry with Walter, I could appreciate the truth in that remark. I recalled all the times I had tried not to think about my real mother and I had a fair idea of what it was like to keep thoughts pushed to the back of your head. It ached.

‘For reasons I could never fully understand, the camp supervisor had taken an immediate dislike to me. He wasn’t keen on any of us—seeing as we were regarded as cowards and stirrers—but he tended to single me out, make an example of me, whenever there was trouble brewing. He did offer to make a deal, however. He implied that if I gave up all my pacifist nonsense and agreed to join up, he would see to it that I could have ten days leave in order to sort out my wife before reporting back to duty. That,’ said Walter, ‘was the only time I ever saw him smile in my presence.’

He paused and rearranged a small bundle of clothing behind his back, making himself more comfortable. ‘I decided to go on strike. I couldn’t see any way around the

situation so I refused to do any work, or to co-operate in any way. The screws didn't like that kind of trouble, there was always a chance it would get out of hand—especially if others took up the call and joined in. I was naïve, but I thought I might be able to frighten the screws into reconsidering my application. Instead I found myself bundled up into the back of a truck and ferried from Strathmore to Hautu. Once there, I was sent down to the Dummy where I remained locked up in solitary for a month. That was the worst time. I couldn't get any letters out and none of Elspeth's letters were allowed through.

'I had been there almost three weeks when one of the screws brought me a message. That morning Elspeth had fallen ill and had been taken to hospital. Details were very sketchy at the time but, in retrospect, I understand she had gone into early labour and then, later in hospital, begun to bleed heavily. It was her father who had called the doctor and then the supervisor at Strathmore who passed on the message to the superintendent at Hautu. I knew straight away that the situation must be serious so I asked to be allowed out. Again, I was denied leave. This time, in response to my request, the supervisor asked if I was a doctor. When I said no he asked how I planned to help my wife. Did I possess healing powers, for example? I could see there was no point continuing, that I stood no more chance with this supervisor than I had with the last one, but nevertheless I had to keep trying, hoping to wear him down. The next morning, just before six, I was shaken awake by one of the screws and told to get up. As I crossed the compound in the pre-dawn gloom, he turned to me and smirked, muttering out of the corner of his mouth, 'Looks like you'll be going home, after all.' When I heard those words my first response was one of tremendous relief. I thought, at last I can go and take care of my wife, get her proper medical treatment—find her a new home. I was overjoyed! Even if it was to be only for one or two days—that was all I needed.

As I was ushered into the supervisor's hut, I saw him get up from behind his desk and walk towards me. He greeted me by name. He had never used my name before. Not Mr. Field. Before that morning, it had always been Shorty! or, on good days, Field! When he came towards me, his face grave and said, Mr. Field... I guessed instantly what had happened.

I was allowed four days to organise my wife's funeral. It took all of two days just to get down to Blenheim. When I arrived, I went straight to the hospital and was taken into the matron's office, offered a seat, and told to wait. When she came in she didn't acknowledge me. She was all of a bustle, very busy, distracted. She gave me a quick glance and then marched across to her desk, rustled through some papers, sighed with

exasperation and then picked up the note left by the nurse who had ushered me in. Only then did she look at me, her features suddenly gentle as she shook her head sadly from side to side. She offered her condolences and murmured one or two more sympathetic remarks and then asked, quietly, what I intended to do with the baby? It was as if the chair had been kicked out from beneath me. I gasped, asking ‘What baby?’ The matron looked startled and then embarrassed. She said, ‘Your daughter.’

Listening to Walter, I think I must have gasped too, because he glanced up and explained that his wife had died in childbirth. By some miracle the baby had been saved. She was very small, and not very well. He was warned she might not survive. She was all right where she was—at the moment—but something would have to be done with her, when she was stronger. She needed a home.

‘It was too much for me to think about,’ said Walter. ‘I had less than two days of leave left. No one at the camp had mentioned the child. I had a funeral to arrange. But, worse than any of that, I couldn’t get it out of my mind that if only I had made a deal with the supervisor at Strathmore, I could have saved my wife.’

‘But you weren’t to know that at the time. You were...’ Surprised to hear myself defend him, I stopped talking and stared uncomfortably at the wall opposite.

Walter shook his head. It would take more than my feeble outburst to convince him otherwise. Very briefly he told me that his daughter, Rose, was taken in by Elspeth’s friend, the red-haired Rita. Rita was married by that time, had two boys of her own and lived in Nelson. She was happy to care for Rose; she had always wanted a girl. I heard the way Walter stumbled over the story, almost sobbing when he described having to say goodbye to his baby at the hospital, before returning to camp. Despite myself, I couldn’t help but think that the whole world had been against him. He’d gone back to Hautu and had gone on hunger strike. He had no intention of dying, he said, but he felt sick with grief and anger and wanted to draw public attention to what was going on in the camps. ‘They thought they could get rid of us, keep us hidden from view’ he muttered. For his troubles he was sent up to Mount Eden and spent the rest of his sentence in jail. He continued his hunger strike for 43 days. Others, striking for different reasons, lasted longer, he said. ‘In the end it became a personal battle where I was concerned,’ said Walter. ‘It was personal.’

Rose was four years old by the time he was released, in 1946. She had been told that he was her father and yet she couldn’t help but regard him as a stranger and with suspicion. He didn’t want to drag her away from her new family—the only family she knew. ‘I visit once a year now and she still calls me, “Uncle Walter.”’

It had grown dark inside the cave, the glow from the candle I had lit flickering dully against the snow cave's wall. While Walter had been speaking he'd picked up a piece of wax, modelling it in his fingers. He held it up now, for me to see but from where I sat all I could make out was a small human shape, its features lost in shadow.

# THE POET

The editor of *Landfall*, Charles Brasch, sent a brief but polite note rejecting all my poems. He did say that one—a poem entitled *The Hut Builder*—showed potential. If I was prepared to work on it he would be happy to look at it again but in the meantime he wished me well. He enclosed the latest issue of *Landfall* with his letter and suggested I might like to take out a subscription. Once again, before signing off, he thanked me for my submission.

Up until that stage in my life—it must have been around 1957—few letters came my way. Even at Christmas mail was delivered in envelopes marked ‘The Black Family.’ For me to take delivery of a thick, manila envelope, therefore, was cause for comment. I think my mother may have called my father inside from the back of the shop to take part in the opening ceremony. Indeed, I clearly remember both my parents standing over me as I read the brief note, before reaching my hand into the envelope to retrieve my unwanted poems and the journal itself.

I wasn’t sure, at first, if my father’s exclamation of disbelief was directed towards the sender of the letter, Brasch—for rejecting my work—or at me, for submitting a poem in the first place. I have an image of him standing beside me, rubbing his hands against his apron as he muttered, ‘Goodness me,’ over and over again until, exasperated, I asked him to stop. Even then he managed one more ‘Goodness me,’ before glancing across to my mother and saying, ‘What do you make of it? Our son, a *potential* poet. Goodness me.’

Had I not felt such overwhelming disappointment I might have found it within myself to laugh. Instead, I lowered my eyes and read the first lines of Brasch’s letter again, hoping this time that I would find some unqualified remark of encouragement, one that didn’t propose a great deal more effort with no promise of success. Far from helping me, my father’s unconditional pride weighed me down. My secret was out, and I knew I would not be allowed to rest until my potential had been fulfilled and one of my poems published. Closing my eyes, I could picture the poem, cut from its page in the journal and mounted on the wall beside the image of me standing atop the Middle Peak of Mount Cook.

Finally, a week after receiving my first rejection letter, and after a great deal of prompting, I reluctantly opened up the folder in which all my poems were kept and allowed my father to take a look. He stood transfixed, his expression a mixture of puzzlement and wonder as he decided whether or not to touch the loose sheets, marvelling

at the sheer volume of words I had written and musing aloud why I hadn't sent all my poems to Brasch. With so many poems at my finger-tips, why had I restricted myself to only six? My mumbled response that six seemed like a good number failed to satisfy him. 'If a customer doesn't know how many sausages they want,' he said, 'I don't tell them they can only buy six. Where's the sense in that?'

I shrugged. He had lost me. 'Edmund Hillary... your chum...' he began again. 'How would he have ever managed to reach the top of Everest if he'd been too scared to put one foot in front of the other.' Fearing my father might go on, I nodded. He was right, in a strange sort of way. 'Now,' said my father, 'you go and make a start on that carcass while I wash my hands and have a look at these.'

I did what he asked but I felt uncomfortable. Some of the poems in the folder were unworked, little more than thoughts roughly sketched onto the page. Others were of a very personal nature. They hinted at the unease I had felt throughout my childhood, my troubled relationship with my parents, the complexity of my emotions—that type of thing. If my father found them he might be hurt to discover all the things I had kept so deeply hidden, buried within myself as I tried, successfully I thought, to lead a normal life, one he could understand.

Often during that day, I would hear a sound behind me and glance up expecting to see my parents march in, their confused and dejected expressions silently accusing me of betrayal or worse, cruelty. It was my father's response, far more than my mother's, which I feared. My mother, I imagined, was beyond hurt. Throughout much of our life together she had remained so locked in by grief that I didn't think she had enough of an emotional core left to take on further hurt or disappointment. She was past caring. My father, by contrast, had done everything in his power to both support my mother and present a brave face to the world. I recognised in him a much more fragile nature than that of my mother. He would be devastated by some of the things I had put down on paper. He wouldn't have seen them coming.

I recall I was trimming fat when my father came into the shop, a piece of paper gripped between his fingers. My hands began to tremble slightly as I watched him come towards me. I searched his face for some indication of what might happen next but, to my immense relief, I saw that he had picked up a poem written in ink. Only a few of my pieces were done in ink. Most—and, indeed all, of my 'personal poems'—were scribbled in pencil. I suspect, now, that my father had skipped through those pencil poems, believing they didn't look finished. As a butcher who had always taken great pride in

doing a job properly. He had often taken me to task over the presentation of our products. ‘There’s an art in all of this,’ he would say, prodding at a tray of cutlets. ‘You haven’t trimmed these properly.’ I would nod, annoyed that I would have to re-do what I thought was perfectly acceptable work. At these times my father always watched over me, telling anyone who happened to come into the shop that I still had a lot to learn. If we were alone, he would try and make me understand my mistake. Using an example of two women walking down the street, he would tell me that one woman’s skirt had come unstitched at the hem and was hanging unevenly whereas the other woman had a perfectly ironed, neatly hemmed skirt. Which, he asked, was the more attractive? Once, in an impatient mood, I replied that I’d like to see their faces before I made up my mind. ‘It’s not about faces!’ barked my father, frustrated by my remark. ‘It’s about presentation. No one cares about faces...as long as the woman is smiling.’ I think on that particular day I was sent outside to hunt down some sprigs of parsley or rosemary. ‘When presentation isn’t up to scratch, resort to camouflage,’ sighed my father.

I eyed my father as he took up a position near the chopping block, the poem held tightly in his fingers. I could see that the ink had smudged in one or two places, presumably as a result of coming into contact with his damp fingers. Despite being a fervent hand-washer, he wasn’t much good when it came to drying his hands. I used to think that he believed that having damp hands proved they had been washed. Dry hands could be hiding any number of sins. Whatever the reason, I was sorry that the ink had smudged. The poem was a finished, corrected copy and now I’d have to go to the trouble of making another. None of that mattered to my father, however. In a voice that was remarkably steady and full of gravitas, he began to read aloud from the page in front of him, not pausing until he reached the end and looked up, his expression thoughtful.

I did not tell him that the poem, from which he had been reading, was actually two pages in length and that he had happened to retrieve only the first page. There were many times throughout my life when I failed to take my father seriously, but this was not one of them. ‘You know, Boden,’ he said, placing the sheet of paper on the chopping block and prodding it with his finger, ‘I think you have real talent.’

It’s difficult, even now, to describe the effect his words had on me. Never had I heard—from either of my parents—even a hint that I might be something outside their normal field of vision. It wasn’t a question of being either loved or unloved, but, rather, of being seen—or invisible. I think that for much of my life I had been so thoroughly absorbed into my parents’ life that they hadn’t given a second thought about who I was.



There were times, however, when I thought they must have wondered about me. Surely, my retreat to Dudley's house, my night-time wanderings—even my more recent trip up Mount Cook—must have given them pause for thought? I don't believe it ever did. I don't think they ever gave me a second thought. Why would they? I was their son.

I picked up the still-untitled poem and read through it, trying to construct the missing stanzas from memory as I came to its end. As I read, my father repeated that I had real talent and for a minute I felt a slight disappointment, imagining how much better it would have been if Brasch had flattered me by saying I showed talent and my father had spoken of my potential. Still, I read the poem through once more and had to admit that even as a half-poem it wasn't too bad. In fact, the shorter version—without the climax, and long denouement of the second page—was better than the first. It was strange that I hadn't taken more notice of it when I'd made my selection for *Landfall*. I must have gone off it, favouring one my more recent works.

The poem chosen by my father, which would eventually go by the name 'Three Days at Least,' had been written shortly after that summer at Mount Cook. I had never mentioned Walter to my father and so he couldn't have known that the poem was about him. The poem was, for want of a better word, an elegy.

The storm, which we had been sitting out had cleared shortly after midnight and we had awoken shortly before six to the muffled sound of a voice calling from outside. Groggy from sleep, it had taken me a few seconds to remember where I was. For some reason I thought I was back at home, lying in my own bed and I reached out automatically for the light on my bedside table before realising I was still in the cave.

As I looked around, I saw Walter take up the snow-shovel and begin digging, clearing the entrance for the new arrival. Instead of going to help him, I drew up my knees and sat huddled inside the warmth of my sleeping bag, wondering what I should say to him, whether I should acknowledge our conversation from the night before or simply let it lie. After some minutes—during which time my thoughts swung uncomfortably between a review of all Walter had said and recollections of my own family's experience of war—I decided on the latter course of action and so, taking over from him, I continued to dig, while he got the Primus going.

I had been digging only a short while when my shovel struck another and I caught sight of Len's face staring down at me. A second later, he edged his hand towards me, saying 'Dr Livingstone, I presume?' I saw him smile and then he urged us to get a shift on

as the plane with our second air-drop was due at any moment and we had to be outside, ready and waiting.

It was one of those occasions when everything begins in a mad rush and then, suddenly, nothing happens. We struggled outside to prepare the target area for the incoming aeroplane—a Dakota this time—and then sat for over an hour waiting for it to appear. During our wait, Douglas filled us in on the details of the past few days. Though only at the Hermitage for a short time, Athol and Douglas had succeeded in rescheduling the second air-drop. Then Hugh and Maurice headed back to civilisation while Athol, Douglas, Len and Wim started back for our camp. Weighed down by heavy loads, which included several window panes, their progress up the valley had been slow. They had managed to plough on through much of the bad weather but had decided to break their journey at Gardiner Hut. They were in radio contact with the village and had managed to confirm the air-drop for this morning during a forecast break in the weather.

I listened in silence, trying to keep my thoughts focussed on what Douglas was saying. I found the speed with which he talked and the sheer amount of information he wished to convey overpowering. I didn't see the necessity for so much noise. I was still trying to come to terms with Walter's story. To find myself outside once more, in the fresh air, surrounded by high mountains and a near-cloudless sky, while being subjected to a detailed description of Douglas's short trip away, was difficult, to say the least. I just wanted to be left alone, in peace.

I noticed, too, that as Douglas spoke, he occasionally tilted his head slightly, jerking it in the direction of Walter and I saw that he was trying to say something through the corner of his mouth. I played dumb. This annoyed him. It made me feel better, however.

Later, as we were clearing the dropped bundles from the snowfield, he took me by the elbow and, bringing me close, asked what I had discovered about 'the criminal'? 'Nothing,' I said.

Douglas didn't seem terribly bothered. 'I called the police down at Tekapo,' he muttered, his eyes latched onto Walter's back, watching him struggle with a parachute that refused to deflate. 'He's not wanted for anything.'

I showed no reaction.

'Reckon he was just having you on,' Douglas continued, patting me on the back. 'Probably just...' He broke off as Walter passed within earshot and then he patted me on

the back once more and dashed away, calling back over his shoulder, ‘Don’t suppose you ever recovered that crowbar?’ Of course, he knew that I hadn’t.

It took a long time to complete ‘Three Days at Least’, the poem that took seed in my head, that day. In fact, I don’t think I was ever completely satisfied with it. But it marked a major change in the way I wrote. It was that poem, more than any other, that made me slow down and consider, word by word, sound by sound, how I might create an atmosphere, or tone, encapsulating my state of mind. I wasn’t so much trying to say something outright as explore something within me and give it form.

The final title of the poem—which I did not settle on until after it had been accepted for publication—was given to me by the mountain guide Harry Ayres. His arrival at our camp, in the company of his climbing partner Edmund Hillary, was so unexpected that even as I shook hands with the two men I could not believe they were really there. All day Walter and I had been working in near-silence. I had done my best to keep out of his way but we were together, inside the hut, when from outside we heard a man’s voice calling, ‘Got those bunks ready yet, Walter!’ Stepping outside, we joined Athol and the others, and waited while the new arrivals put down their packs and pushed up their snow goggles. As Hillary’s face was revealed, I think Douglas actually gasped. If he didn’t gasp then, he most certainly did as Hillary stepped towards Walter and shook him by the hand, saying, ‘Good to see you again. How are you?’ Harry stood back a little and seemed far more interested in the hut than in any of us, although he, too, shook Walter warmly by the hand and asked how he was. It was up to Walter to introduce the rest of us to our visitors. To my immense embarrassment, I was so flustered that I performed a slight bow as I took Hillary’s hand.

From Ayres we learnt that the two men had just climbed a mountain in the region, Mount Magellan. They had a bit of time up their sleeves and so had decided to come and see what was going on up our way—and maybe take a look at Cook.

As Hillary and Harry chatted to Walter, I listened, noticing the easy way Walter asked after various members of Hillary’s family and, in particular, his brother, Rex. Only after he asked about Rex’s bees did I make the connection between the ‘Hillary’ Walter had mentioned previously and the man standing in front of me. I didn’t say anything out loud but I can remember the dramatic impact that knowledge had on me. I couldn’t help thinking that this man, Edmund Hillary—a man who represented everything that was good about our country, a hero, admired by everyone—had a brother who had been imprisoned

for refusing to take part in the war. I found it difficult to link these two brothers: the hero and the shirker. I was disturbed that a connection existed but I was equally disconcerted by the thoughts that forced their way into my head.

Not long before, I had registered for compulsory military training knowing it was something all men my age did. I did not have any strong feelings, one way or the other, about whether or not it was the right thing to do. As it was, I failed the medical examination on account of some minor problem. Rather than feeling relief, I was troubled by this result and was slightly ashamed, as though having flat feet somehow made me less of a man. Had I not been excluded, however, I am quite certain that the whole procedure would have had little lasting effect on me, or my view of the world. If my number had been called up in the ballot, I expect I would have viewed military service as a slight inconvenience—or maybe even an adventure. Now, however, the memory of that episode made me so uncomfortable that I was actually relieved when Athol ordered me to go and put on a brew.

I don't think I spoke more than ten words for the rest of the afternoon. When Hillary took up a hammer and began to work alongside me, I had a sudden bout of nerves, a kind of stage fright such as I had experienced years before when playing the part of the porter in *Macbeth*. Unable to string together more than a few words myself, I eavesdropped on his conversation with Walter but tended to sidle away whenever the discussion touched on Hillary's family and Rex, in particular.

I was far more comfortable around Harry. He worked hard but said little and I was glad to be working alongside him, hearing small snippets of information relating to his recent climbs, and his life in general. I was taken by his modesty and, also, by his thoughtfulness. More than Hillary, Harry belonged in the mountains. I put this to Harry himself, many years later, when we were better acquainted. He was living in Christchurch; employed as the gardener at Mona Vale. I was not overly surprised when he avoided my question and instead drew my attention to a clump of deep-blue irises growing at the edge of the river. Even so, I knew he had a measure of his qualities and achievements and although he was never a man to indulge in self-promotion, I had the sense that his past was important to him. Moreover, I couldn't help but think, later, when he committed suicide by drowning, that I shouldn't be so shocked. I was shocked, though. We all were.

Unknown to me at the time, it was at Walter's suggestion that Harry invited me to climb Mount Cook. I am certain, now, that I owe him my thanks. Harry, himself, would have preferred to take Walter. Both Harry and Hillary had climbed with him before: first

during the rescue of Ruth Adams from La Perouse, and then later, early in the fifties, on a number of routes in the area. But Walter was not feeling well. Seeing him work, I had all but forgotten about his fall into the crevasse but towards evening it was clear, once again, that he was in pain. He carried himself stiffly, one arm held against his chest as he walked around the building site, nodding with satisfaction at the almost completed hut.

As I prepared supper, frying up a huge feed of sausages which had been sent up to the Hermitage by my father and then carried in by Wim, I noticed that Walter sat by himself, quietly dozing as Athol and Douglas questioned Hillary at length about his trip up Everest. From time to time, I glanced across to Walter but if he saw me, he showed no sign of it. I was almost ready to serve the meal, when I heard Walter ask Harry to step outside for a moment, as he had something he wanted to discuss. As Harry followed Walter out, I saw Douglas frown. He had not said anything but it was clear he was put out by Hillary and Harry' friendship with Walter. Earlier in the day, I had heard him complain that Walter had made no effort to befriend anyone from our own group but that the moment Hillary and Harry appeared he had gone all-out to be sociable. 'He obviously thinks he's better than us,' Douglas muttered as he had stood scowling at a painted sign reading, 'No Dogs Allowed' which Wim had nailed to the door of the new hut an hour before. Before I could reply, I heard him add, 'And you're not much better, to tell the truth. Fooling yourself into believing that a butcher can be a poet.' As he spoke he tried to ease up one corner of the thin metal sign—hoping, I suspect, to rip it from the door. 'Do you honestly think,' he continued, glowering at the entrance, 'that just anyone can write poetry? I mean, what life experiences do you have to draw on—at least, ones that might be of interest to the rest of us? To my way of thinking, it's a bit like expecting a secretary to write a decent novel.' He brushed his hand over the painted sign, rubbed at the lettering with his gloved fingers and then shook his head in annoyance before stomping away.

Because I had been on the receiving end of Douglas's sharp tongue, it gave me a cold satisfaction that both Hillary and Harry had spent more time talking to Walter than the rest of us. Douglas, as far as I was concerned, could go to hell.

Harry and Walter returned just as I was dishing up the dinner. I was still eating when Harry spoke up and asked me if it was true that I had never climbed a mountain? The remark caught me offguard and I immediately glanced across to Walter, wondering what he had been saying behind my back. I knew that I was the only one amongst our group who was not a mountaineer but even so I was loathe to give the impression that I had climbed nothing at all. Earlier, I had noticed how frequently Athol had mentioned the

peaks he had climbed, even going so far as to draw Harry and Hillary into a discussion on snow conditions, various routes and ascent times. To my astonishment, he had dared to bring the discussion around to Hillary and Harry's recent ascent of Mount Magellan and remarked that he had been thinking of giving it a go. He had just been waiting for the right time and the right team. He almost made it sound as if Hillary and Harry had been unsporting and had stolen the mountain from him.

My only 'peak,' as such, was Foliage Hill—the knob which had taken me approximately ten minutes to climb. There was nothing for it but to come clean in the most dignified way I could. After a moment's awkward silence, I mentioned my early discovery of the Mackenzie Basin. I'm not sure what I hoped to achieve by describing one of the flattest pieces of land in the area but no sooner were the words out of my mouth than Harry cleared his throat and, glancing across at Hillary, invited me to join them the next day on a climb of Cook.

Can a heart simultaneously leap and sink? Even now I am not sure how I felt when Harry's invitation to climb Cook was put to me. Was my first reaction, 'I am going mountaineering with Edmund Hillary; I can't believe it?' Or did I think, 'There's no way I can refuse—my father would never understand.' There's a chance I thought, 'Why me?' I hope, looking back, that I felt thrilled. I would like to believe that my heart was thumping with excitement. I would like to think that I had no reservations and that I leapt at the chance to climb with Harry and Hillary—that the possibility that I might not make it to the top never even entered my mind. I hope I did not simply conclude that I had no choice—I had to go.

It was dark when we left the camp. Light from our torches created a fragmented path, which we followed, one behind the other. Hillary put Harry at the front, with me taking up a spot in the middle, between the two men. I was groggy from lack of sleep, not being used to getting out of bed in the early hours of the morning or leaving for work before dawn. As I stepped carefully into the shallow prints left by Harry's boots, I dipped in and out of the conversation which was playing between my two companions, the words bouncing back and forth above my head. I almost had the impression that they had forgotten about me. In quiet tones, I heard Harry mumble something about the perfect conditions. It was the second or third time he had mentioned the weather and the snow. The first time had been shortly after our alarm had gone off and he had slipped out of the cave to look. Part of me had hoped the report would not be good, and that I would be allowed to slip back into sleep. I was just stretching out my legs, enjoying the warmth of

my sleeping bag, when Harry returned, delivering his verdict in dry tones, saying, ‘Winds from the East; three days at least.’

The rhyme stayed with me as I laced my boots, strapped on a pair of crampons and shouldered my pack and now, as I walked behind Harry, the words created a restful background sound, helping me along, one steady step at a time. *Winds from the East. Three days at least.* The words still in my head, I took in enough of Harry’s conversation with Hillary to realise that he had climbed Cook less than a month before, that this was his second trip up the mountain that year and that he expected the climb to be straightforward, although he didn’t go so far as to use those exact words. His authority gave me confidence. I began to believe that I really was in the company of the ‘greatest climber of our age’, as I had heard Wim refer to him the day before. I began to relax, enjoying the waltz-like three-step—my ice axe, right foot, left foot—as we sidled across the snow slope.

I had never walked in crampons before and I was impressed by the difference they made on the ice. Apart from occasionally miscalculating the increased length of my boot and tripping over my toes, each step felt solid by comparison to the step-slip of boots alone. The sound made by the sharp points slicing through the frozen surface was pleasing, a sound which brought to mind the pleasure of biting into a new season’s apple. Even the snow itself, its texture and colour, became apple-like in my mind and I spent a happy twenty minutes or so imagining myself as some tiny creature, an ant traversing up a peeled Granny Smith, arriving at the summit to find a single, tree-like stem, under which to sit and rest.

In this dreamy state, it took me a while to notice that the conversation had progressed and that Hillary was now asking Harry about an accident that had taken place on Cook the day before Harry’s most recent ascent. I had not been paying enough attention to catch the names of the men involved but it was clear that there had been three of them and that they had met their death somewhere on the mountain. From what I could gather, Harry had been resting on the summit when he had heard voices calling, back and forth, sometimes loud, sometimes muffled, far below him. It was not until he returned to the hut and made radio contact with the Hermitage later that evening that he learned about the accident and was able to understand that the voices belonged to members of the search party. Listening, I was surprised by how easily the words, ‘met his death’ edged into my thoughts, knocking my homely apple image from its branch. Firmly lodged in my head, the phrase now began to niggle away at me. In my mind, I saw myself slip and imagined

the speed I would travel, first sliding and then tumbling over the snow, bouncing like a tyre rolling down a slope, before hitting a rock and soaring up into the sky, before falling, landing with a thud, bleeding and broken at the bottom. *Met his death, Granny Smith, Three days at least. Winds from the East.* Words jumbled in my brain, keeping pace with me, as I fixed my eyes on Harry's boots, snatching up each of his snow-prints the moment they became free.

We had not yet gone far and I decided I could suggest turning back if I spoke up soon. It would be easy to feign an illness—a stomach bug—and retreat to safety. I was certain my climbing companions would not miss me, they would most likely be happy to be rid of the burden. I was on the verge of raising my voice, when, from behind me, I heard Hillary ask, 'How's it going there? Enjoying yourself?' It was the perfect opportunity to bring up the subject of my upset stomach, my sore shoulder or whatever other ailment was available to me. Instead, I answered, 'I'm fine. It's not as hard as I thought.'

I heard Hillary respond that things would 'liven up a little' once we got further up and I heard myself reply with a confident, 'Fine. Great.'

With the ice shelf above us the terrain steepened and Harry began to cut steps into the snow using the adze of his ice axe. At times the axe dislodged sizeable blocks of snow, creating a complete step with one blow, but more often than not, the surface splintered, sending fragments of ice flying into the sky, showering us in frozen dust. As I stood still, waiting to step forward, I kept my eyes on the shadowy bulk of Harry's back, its darkness creating the impression of a deep hole, while around it, halo like, shards of ice glistened in the torchlight and sparkled, diamond gold.

As Harry worked, I began to feel the cold of inactivity. It was shivery, standing still while he cut his steps or placed an anchor for a belay and I bounced gently on my feet, trying to get the circulation going. The straps from my crampons were pulled tight across my feet and I could feel my toes beginning to grow numb—not enough to warrant loosening the straps but enough to make me put more effort into wiggling my toes, scrunching them up inside my heavy wool socks. As I attempted to keep warm, Harry grumbled about being too hot. Steam formed around his neck like a collar and, from where I stood, he appeared somewhat ghost-like, an apparition worthy of Coleridge's *Ancient Mariner*. Every now and then Hillary would urge Harry on, jokingly instructing him to make a good show of it, to which Harry would retort with some remark about the day's pay not being high enough to warrant so much work. The banter was good-natured and for



a short while it took my mind off the steepness of the slope we were standing on. I imagined Walter back at work on the hut, fixing the last of the cables to the shelter, ensuring that it would not blow away in the first major storm. Around us, the air was still, and I noticed that even though I had been working quite comfortably at eight thousand feet over the past few weeks, I was short of breath and panting.

‘It will start getting a bit lighter soon.’ As he spoke, Harry paused, and gestured with his axe towards the sky which, though an inky-blue and starlit, was seeped through with a paler, greenish tinge towards the east. For a moment I simply took pleasure in looking at the sky, counting out the stars and recalling something my father had said about the night skies above Egypt during the war. He had occasionally talked about the beauty of the desert night. Despite the cold, the sky had wrapped itself around the men and made them feel enclosed, protected. The stars, he said, were the brightest he had ever seen and had filled him with a sense of wonder. But, he added, it was not until he was returning home and had looked up one night to see the Southern Cross high above the ocean, that he had felt at peace. ‘That was my home-coming,’ he told me. ‘The sight of the Southern Cross.’

The climbing was steeper now. As we climbed higher, the snow became harder broken up by large areas of hard-ice. My crampons which up to this point had cut into the surface, began to skitter every now and again in an alarming manner, forcing me to concentrate more fully on how I placed my feet. Once, upon stepping forward, my foot slipped from under me and I fell to my knees, my hands gripping my ice axe in fear as I attempted to regain my footing. The fact that I was tied on to a rope did little to alleviate my anxiety. Harry was unimpressed by my performance. ‘You don’t go on your knees unless you’re praying,’ he scolded, adding, ‘And there’s no point praying—that won’t help you.’ He was half-joking but I made a concentrated effort to be even more careful. Part of my worry stemmed from the knowledge that if I slipped I might knock Hillary off his feet. For the most part he was not directly below me, but I could imagine the headlines should anything happen. ‘Bumbling Butcher sends Himalayan Hero Hurling.’ That—and the shame I would cause my father—was enough to scare me half to death. I don’t know about going down on my knees but I do have a vague memory of praying.

It was only when Harry drew my attention to the sunrise that I was able to put an end to the headlines which circulated through my brain and take stock of my surroundings. By this stage we had reached Porter’s Col, and were shortly to begin following an icy

ridge towards the Middle Peak of Cook. We had been travelling for over four hours and, at Hillary's suggestion, we stopped for a short break.

Sitting in a scoop in the lee of the ridge we sipped from our bottles, quietly taking in the view. Straight across the valley, La Perouse rose up in front of us, a flattened dome, like an old-fashioned beehive. In the clear, morning air, scale and distance were distorted, and the features of the mountain appeared simultaneously monumental and detailed, as if magnified under a lens. At times, I wasn't sure if I was looking at a real mountain or simply a table-top-sized model of one. Beside me, Hillary and Harry began to talk quietly and after a moment longer, I was aware of the faint smell of tobacco, as smoke from Harry's cigarette puffed over my head.

The first rays of sun touched the peaks and ridges and the sky was suddenly drenched in salmon pink. As far as the eye could see, the tops were bathed in warm, skin tones whereas below, on the snow slopes and cliff faces beneath us, everything was slate-black. It was as if two separate worlds existed: our world of light and at our feet, a world of shadow and mystery. How can I explain the effect of climbing up out of darkness and into the light had on me. It was a feeling that filled me with the joy of life. I was glad I was not alone. My companions, although speaking little and giving no outward sign of being moved by their surroundings, must nevertheless have had a similar reaction. I couldn't believe that anyone—not even a man who had climbed the highest mountain in the world—could ever grow blasé about being in the mountains.

Given my excitement, I was restless to be off and stood up before the others, willing them to hurry. My childish attempt came to nothing. Harry sat peacefully, ignoring my shuffling, as he drew on his cigarette, inhaling deeply and then blowing out a steady stream of blue smoke. Hillary picked raisins from a small bag of scroggin, pushing to one side any monkey-nuts and remarking, absentmindedly, that he wished he could get a cup of tea.

Eventually, Harry's cigarette stub flicked to one side, we recommenced our journey, following the ridgeline which, in places, was steep and icy. As I trailed behind Harry, grateful for the rope between us, I thought of nothing so much as putting one foot in front of the other, climbing one step at a time. I was aware of the cool breeze against my face, the glare of the ice, the sound of my breath, but my mind was remarkably clear of thought. If anything, I was in a kind of trance and when, once, Harry paused to rearrange the straps of his pack, I practically bumped into him. I was vaguely startled when I looked up. The act of climbing had disconnected me so completely from my surroundings that I

could barely believe how high we had come. The sensation of height was completed when, once, I glanced over my shoulder and was amazed to see the Low Peak of Cook beneath us. Mount Sefton, the massive, heavy-set sentinel I had sat looking up at from my seat on Foliage Hill, now appeared at eye level, but no less of a mountain because of that.

As we continued upwards, towards the Middle Peak, I began to experience problems with my crampons. The fault did not lie in my crampons as such, but rather, in my lack of skill in using them. The ridge was increasingly steep and icy in places and on several occasions I had to kick my boot into the ice, taking my weight on the front points of my crampons. This development unnerved me. It was one thing to have one's feet planted squarely on the ground but to be clawing one's way up a steep mountain was terrifying. I became so tense that the peacefulness of the previous few hours left me and I found myself talking aloud, telling myself to concentrate, to remain calm, to pay attention. Although belayed on a real rope by Harry, the words I intoned to myself became the safety rope onto which I clung, hoping not to fall.

And then, suddenly, we were standing on the summit of the Middle Peak.

I heard Harry joke, 'You can look now,' and it was true, I could. But there was so much to see. There was just so much to see. I did a complete turn, trying to take in everything at once and then I was shaking hands with Harry and Hillary, pumping their arms up and down, burbling my thanks as they surveyed me in bemused silence. 'Look at it!' I gushed, making a sweeping motion with my outstretched hand. 'Who would have thought? You can see for miles.' I turned around in a full circle, adding, 'It's like looking at a map.' It truly seemed as if the whole country was laid out below me, that I had risen above the land and was hovering in a place which might as well have been called, 'Above and Beyond.'

Afraid of missing something, some important landmark, I scanned the valleys, settling on the glaciers of the Tasman and the Hooker and following them down, marking each transition—from green-white ice, to moraine, to blue-grey river. In time, even the river became a shimmering lake and then, far away, beyond the yellow-brown plains, my eyes searched out a paler blue haze—the east coast—and the sea itself. The Pacific Ocean. I turned away, lowered my eyes to the snow at my feet and then faced south-west, and there, close by, below the dark, bush-clad hills was the Tasman Sea, a long ribbon of surf defining the coast.

Despite—or, perhaps, because of—my great height, I was conscious of standing on a ribbon of land defined, either side, by a limitless ocean. I was so small by comparison—

a speck poised on a marginal strip of land. And apart from my fellow climbers and a few companions back at the hut, no one in the world knew where I was. The fact that I could see so much—and could even make out, roughly, where my house should be—while being invisible to anyone looking my way, was both thrilling and frightening. Except in the minds of a few people, I really didn't exist.

A pale puff of smoke floated past me and I breathed deeply, filling my lungs with tobacco, a smell I found reassuringly human. I could hear Harry and Hillary talking quietly together behind me but I didn't join in. I stood with my arms folded across my chest and after a short while, I was barely conscious of thinking at all. An immense calm enveloped me. Everything that had happened in my life, everything that might be important in the future ceased to matter. I looked down, towards the hut far below and I thought I could make out the figures of my companions, black dots against the white snow. For several minutes I watched them and then I raised my eyes to the high, sun-sparkling peaks and deep within my heart I felt a great surge of gratitude. To be standing on this mountain, on this narrow strip of land, was my good fortune. And if I couldn't preserve this day, I could at least honour it. Quietly, I gave thanks.

‘Three Days at Least’ was the first of my poems to be published in *Landfall*. Even now, more than forty-five years since its first publication, I continue to make excuses for it. It doesn’t matter that it was to become one of the most famous poems in recent New Zealand literature, that every fifth former throughout the 1970s and ’80s was required to study it, and dissect it line by line for School Certificate English. It doesn’t even matter that in a recent anthology of *Best New Zealand Poems*, selected by an editorial board of ‘notable’ New Zealand writers, it was named as being the third most widely read poem after Glover’s ‘The Magpies’, Tuwhare’s ‘Rain,’ just beating Baxter’s ‘High Country Weather’. Now, when I glance at ‘Three Days at Least’, my attention is drawn to the title and I am struck once more by disappointment. I should have drummed up something better.

If I stand back a little, however, I can credit the poem with bringing me to the attention of my future partner, Stella.

Our introduction took place during a very sad period in my life. It was around 1989 and my father had recently died leaving me alone for the first time in my life. I found it very hard to adjust to his absence. It seems an odd thing for a grown man to say but my father was—and, I think, always had been, my very best friend. Though neither of us were anything other than ordinary people, our friendship was special. We asked nothing of each other and yet, somehow, we not only fulfilled but exceeded each other’s emotional needs. Ridiculous as it sounds, we became each other’s loyal companion. We were each other’s dog.

In many regards it was not so much the things he said that I mourned but the sound of his voice. It was not the memory of the things he *did* that I tried to retain so much as a sense of his physical presence, the way he stood or walked, or simply moved around me whenever we shared a space at home or at work. I missed the slight weight of his body against mine as he shuffled past me when I held the shop door open for him in the morning. I missed the touch of our skin as, for one brief moment, I brushed his hand when I took his hat from him and hung it on the hook in the corner of the shop where he sat each day, watching me work. I missed the sound of his spoon, tinkering against his mug as he stirred his sugar into his tea each day at ten and I missed the soft grunts he made in his sleep, whenever he dozed in his chair after lunch.

He used to call out my name whenever I failed to respond to the sound of a customer entering the premises. ‘Boden! Are you there?’ At times he sounded anxious but

occasionally I would come in from the back and catch him gesturing towards the photo of me standing on Mount Cook which was still hanging behind the counter. ‘That’s my son, up there with that famous climber—you know the one? What’s his name? The man who climbed Mount Everest.’ He would always glance up at me and smile and then his face might cloud over and I always had the impression he was trying to recall the old game he used to play, the one where he convinced the customers to try ‘Ed’s bangers.’ It made me sad that he couldn’t remember, although it never seemed to bother him.

After he died, I thought that if I installed a radio, removed his chair and took down the hook for his hat, I would adapt more quickly to his absence. I reasoned that if I didn’t see the objects that reminded me of him, I wouldn’t miss him so much. It was a tactic that had helped us through my mother’s death more than twenty years before. But the butcher’s shop, itself, reminded me of my father. Every knife, cleaver, chopping block and meat tray reminded me of my father. The freezing air of the coolstore made me think of him. The smell of the meat, the warmth of its flesh, the crack of its bones, the stickiness of its blood, all conspired to bring him back to me. Even though I had been working in the shop for most of my life and was as skilled as he was, I found myself now, more than ever before, needing his advice. I longed for his approval, to hear him murmur, ‘You’ll make a fine butcher yet.’

I wanted to preserve things that had been touched or used by him. For weeks I could not bring myself to sharpen his favourite knife. Each time I set out to hone it, my eyes would linger on the marks on its blade, put there by him, and I could not continue. When, out of frustration at my own sentimentality, I did finally decide to sharpen it, I felt such abject loss and guilt, that I could not use it again. I ended up oiling it, wrapping it in a piece of felt and placing it in the dresser drawer.

One evening, several months after my father’s death, I found myself crying, unable to stop. What had set me off was so absurd, so inconsequential that despite my grief I felt humiliated—almost ashamed. I had been wiping out the vanity unit in the bathroom when I had come across my father’s electric razor. Without thinking I had flicked it open and seeing that it needed cleaning, had blown the shavings into the sink. For one stunned minute I looked at what I had done and then, unconsciously at first, I pinched up a small amount of his dust-like bristles and held them in my palm, willing them *back to life*. Even as I cried out for my father’s face to materialise, I knew that what I was doing would have made him uncomfortable, sick in his heart, had he been around to witness my performance. Despite the grief he had felt over the loss of my older brothers, Nathaniel

had always managed to retain his self-control and dignity. He had forgiven my mother her inability to do the same but had never been comfortable with her disengagement from life. I think it was only because he loved her, and because she was a woman and a mother, that he was able to continue supporting her. It would have upset him, however, to think that although I was a man, I was like her. That would amount to failure.

So, fearful that I was about to make a mockery of all the things my father had taught me and scared for my future, I decided that my only option was to write myself out of my current predicament. There was, of course, another, less worthy reason for this decision.

For years I had felt very uneasy about my supposed standing as a New Zealand poet. Despite having a small collection to my name as well as several pieces published in journals, anthologies and the like, I had never truly felt entitled to call myself a poet. Whenever I looked in the mirror I saw a butcher. And, with my father's death, it suddenly dawned on me that everyone else regarded me as a butcher, too. My acceptance into the small mid-Canterbury community had depended upon me being a butcher first, a poet second. I had hidden behind my 'ordinariness', the unquestionable acceptability of my profession, and had never once stepped beyond the safety of the counter to assert my difference. Simply put, I had not been true to myself.

Deep down I had always been aware of my cowardice. If I have one true regret it is that I am inclined to give in to fear. I had learned that about myself the moment I turned to descend from the Middle Peak of Mount Cook all those years ago. I remember very clearly my first few steps down from the peak. Where on the way up I had been facing into the mountain, suddenly I was stepping out into thin air. There was nothing in front of me 'to latch on to'. I recall that I used that very phrase to describe my fear when Harry asked how I was bearing up. He had me belayed on a rope so even if I had slipped I couldn't have fallen more than a few feet but despite that I could feel my heart thump and my hands and feet grow cold. Harry, I remember, gave me a sympathetic look and offered some reassuring remark, something which implied that it wouldn't be good for his reputation if I died—and then he had instructed me to take it slowly, one step at a time, adding that I could stop once I reached ten. And that was how he got me down the mountain: ten steps at a time. He never took his eyes off me. In the end I don't know which gave me a greater sense of security: the rope or the fact that he was watching, every step of the way. If he ever lost patience he didn't show it.

When we reached gentler ground, Harry—and to a lesser extent Hillary—appeared to take real pleasure in my relief. I was euphoric. Nothing could have enticed me back up the mountain but I was beside myself with joy. It was a feeling I was to experience again, but many years later, as love. I believe that had I not been so terrified, so assailed by fear, I would never have known what it was to truly appreciate life.

As we neared the hut I caught sight of Walter and although my immediate instinct was to wave or call out, I didn't. I watched him work, lugging some lengths of timber towards a stack of wood which had been piled on the snow, and I had to contain the urge to run across and tell him about the climb and the view from the summit. Instead, I continued walking towards the cave, accepting congratulations from Wim and the others as I took off my pack and loosened my laces.

I understood later that night, when we stood around a large bonfire, warming ourselves before its flames, that it was perfectly acceptable to admit my fear when descending the mountain. But I doubt that that would have been the case had I not reached the summit, first. I realised, then, that for most men fear could be forgiven in the face of success, but never failure. People needed heroes. Yet as the evening wore on I became melancholic. I wasn't sure if *I* believed in heroes. I wasn't even sure if I approved of them or, for that matter, society's collective need for them. But maybe I didn't reach that conclusion back then. I could just be imagining that that was what I was thinking. Perhaps it took many more years for me to articulate the feelings of that night. It could be that I was simply tired. Maybe it was enough to stand still and watch the flames. My body ached when I tilted my head back, and I anticipated how high the flickering, sparking, tendrils of fire would travel, as I searched the jet-black, still night above in the hope that something—or someone—was out there, watching me.



Far below, at the Hermitage, our fire had been spotted by the guests of the hotel. By chance, my future partner was amongst those who stood in front of the great hotel, waiting her turn to use the telescope which her father, an astronomer, always carried with him. Stella was—is—many years younger than me. She was the product of her father's first marriage, her mother having died when she was young. By the time Stella's father remarried and started his second family, Stella had already left home. She felt happier alone, she said, being independent, not having to rely on anyone.

When I suggested—somewhat hopefully, romantically—that it was possible that at the precise moment when I was standing by the fire, praying that someone out there was looking my way, she was. It's possible she saw us through the telescope. Stella just laughed. True, she took the telescope from her father but unimpressed by the faint glow of the fire, the far-light that everyone was so excitedly talking about, she turned the lens towards the shadowy summit of Mount Sefton, making a solemn promise that one day she would return and climb it.

That vow struck me as extraordinary. I had never heard of any child making such a pledge, to commit to such an undertaking. 'I couldn't travel to the stars,' responded Stella by way of explanation, 'but I grew up believing that the further away I was from my father, the greater my chance of being seen.'

Was it that, I wondered, or some childish belief that her mother might be up there, somewhere, in heaven, perhaps, looking down?

'No,' said Stella. 'My mother wouldn't have liked that. I was led to believe that she was a pragmatist—like me.'

I imagined Stella alone with her father at the Hermitage and my heart lurched. She didn't understand why.

'Do you know what I remember most about that night—the night of the fire?' she asked. I shook my head. 'There were two things,' she said. 'The first was that I had bare feet, I could feel the damp grass—which was warm—beneath my toes. The second thing,' she continued, laughing, 'is that I had a premonition that there would be another fire, a bigger fire, one that would light up the night sky. I imagined that the people who watched would not be able to talk, except in whispers and that afterwards there would be an immense, complete silence—as if a ship had gone down leaving no survivors.'

I was taken aback when she described the scene to me. I knew, by then, that only two years after her premonition the Hermitage had, in fact, burnt to the ground. I had seen images of the building in the newspaper and for some time afterwards I had wondered what had become of all the paintings and the brass telescope.

‘Tell me about this Walter of yours,’ said Stella, changing the subject.

For some reason I didn’t feel like answering right away.

After all these years, I still find it difficult to talk about Walter, without feeling a great deal of regret. I believe that Stella is, as she says, too much of a pragmatist—or, perhaps, a realist—to understand my reluctance. Time and time again, I have been impressed by her forthrightness and her ability to get to the point. My partner is not lacking in tact but she can be direct, blunt. I believe that it was her spirit of independence and her ability to get straight to the point which caught my attention when I first met her.

She contacted me out of the blue one day, phoning me at the butchery, explaining that she had been commissioned to write a short history of Fairlie and that she wanted to talk to me about my life and poetry. She didn’t give me an opportunity to consider her request but simply continued that she had a number of questions for me, and that if I was free she would call around that evening. She knew where I lived—the manager at the motel where she was staying had told her. After a moment’s pause, she said, ‘Strange, eh?’ I hadn’t kept pace with her train of thought so took a moment to understand the cause of her puzzlement, by which time she was already saying, ‘The manager doesn’t know you personally and yet he can tell me where the poet lives. That’s pretty weird, isn’t it?’ I was about to respond that it had been much worse in the old days, when everybody had a party-line but she had moved on again, saying, ‘I suppose that’s the price of fame.’

She was joking, of course. I knew she was pulling my leg but I was vaguely flattered by the remark. I had never considered myself famous—particularly when compared to those from the region who had made an impact nationally, such as the Wigley family who had built up the Mount Cook Tourist Company, or Jack Lovelock, whose status as an ‘old boy’ at my former school was still referred to in community newsletters. To be honest, I suspected that in Fairlie, at least, my father’s reputation as a butcher far exceeded my own as a writer. In fact I was sure that was the case. Customers over the age of sixty still consoled me on the loss of my father, speaking of him in such warm tones that I was truly touched. ‘He was a good man,’ some of them said. ‘They don’t make men like him anymore. He was a real gentleman.’ Why his death had made

such an impact perplexed me. Up until that point I had not considered the possibility that the women of my farming community could be susceptible to sentimentality. I imagined they were far too down to earth for such an emotion. And yet, time and time again, I was proven wrong. It was as though his passing brought an entire era to its close—in our small town, at least.

I made mention of this observation during that first evening with Stella. The business of the interview completed, we had started to chat about more general matters, when, during a lull in the conversation I raised the subject of my father's death and the local response to it. To my surprise she looked at me as if I was mad and then put it to me, rather bluntly, that I was the one who was guilty of sentimentality. I was so taken aback that I was unable to respond. 'Do you really expect Fairlie to remain unchanged?' she asked. Annoyed by her tone, I answered coldly, 'No, of course not. That's not what I'm saying. What I am saying,' I continued, 'is that I would like it to remain...' and here I faltered. Stella, of course, noticed my hesitation and said, 'Stuck in the past. Be honest, that's what you really want, isn't it?' She laughed and I shrugged. Her manner irritated me but I thought it would be impolite to contradict her. I had no desire to fight but even less to be stuck in the past. She had misunderstood completely. I was thinking about the future. I wanted to feel that my life, like my father's, had real purpose. I wanted to be like him, to live comfortably with myself and feel proud of my home.

Stella made a strange bitter laugh and then shocked me by saying, 'Do you honestly believe that in thirty years' time this land of yours—the Mackenzie Basin—will bear even the slightest resemblance to the places you depict in your poems? Your grandchildren will get summer jobs picking grapes from vines planted across the basin. You wait.'

'Grandchildren?' I spluttered.

'Children, grandchildren. What does it matter? It's going to vanish, anyway.'

Never in my life had I heard anyone speak with such vehemence. But at that time, I still hadn't heard about Stella's family home, which had been built on the banks of the Clutha by her great-great grandfather and which had provided shelter for her great-grandparents, her grandparents and her mother. The property was about to be taken away as a result of the Clutha Dam project. In only a few years, the house would be underwater, drowned, at the bottom of Lake Dunstan. Nothing would remain.

'I didn't even hear about the dam until it was too late,' she explained, once she had calmed down. 'I spent most of the '80s abroad, working. My father was dead and the

house was in my stepmother's name.' Her mouth twisted and she looked down at her hands, which rested on the table beside the tape recorder. 'I guess she had no option.' She glanced up, caught my eye, and muttered, 'That bastard, Muldoon.'

Stella's language shocked me. 'Bastard' wasn't a word I expected to hear from the mouth of an educated woman. Disconcerted, I wondered aloud why her father hadn't left the house to her, given that it had belonged to her mother and not to his side of the family—not that it mattered now, in view of the outcome. At that, Stella sighed and explained that her father had never felt very strongly about houses. He had grown up in England and his street had been bombed during the war. His own house had been destroyed. 'He used to talk about how devastated his mother was and I had the impression he made the decision never to become attached to any place. I suppose, once my mother died, he became even more convinced of the importance of being self-reliant, of counting on no one, of never looking back. He was never very happy.'

'Is that why you're a historian?' I asked. 'Because you wanted to assert yourself, to show you were different from him?'

Stella shrugged. 'Could be. Not sure.' She looked thoughtful and added, 'It might explain why he was an astronomer, though.'

It seemed natural that we should continue talking about our families. Both of us had touched on our fathers, after all. But when Stella asked if I was married, I felt awkward. Earlier, she'd assumed that I had children—grandchildren, even—and I didn't know how to account for my single status. I didn't want to give the impression that I had *never* had a girlfriend but, at the same time, I thought it would be slightly vulgar to allude to any of my previous—failed—romances. Even the term 'romance' seemed misplaced. None of my relationships had been particularly romantic. In recent years, the women who had been introduced to me were all of a type: decent, intelligent but most of all, lonely. Without exception they wanted companionship, a soul-mate, and for some reason I desired something else. I never articulated my feelings, because they embarrassed me, but I didn't want to settle for someone who reminded me of my mother. Where women were concerned, I wanted to feel a spark, a frisson of excitement. Unfortunately, I realised that no woman who was capable of provoking such a thrill would be interested in me—a middle-aged man living at home with his aged father.

I didn't tell Stella any of this. Instead, I turned the tables on her and asked if she lived alone?

'Yes,' she replied, and then hesitated, mumbling, 'No.'

Aware of my puzzled look, she added, 'I'm moving in with my boyfriend.' She paused, as though surprised by what she said. 'We've been going out for a few years and he wants ...' Her voice trailed off, and for the first time that evening, she looked uneasy, unsure of herself. 'He asked me to move in.' The last sentence was spoken quickly, and I saw Stella glance away, avoiding my eye. She sighed, 'I'd better be off. He's back at the motel waiting.'

She gathered her notes together and then fumbled with the tape-recorder, removing the cassette and placing it in its protective case. She caught my eye and blushed. 'It will be all right,' she mumbled. I couldn't say whether she was referring to the interview or her relationship.

I was relieved when she finally scuttled off, leaving me in peace. Much as I enjoyed her company, I felt unsettled by our conversation. I was worried about the impression I had created. Replaying snatches of the interview, and later discussion, through my mind, I began to fret that I had not established the right tone, and that I might have appeared slightly ridiculous, lacking in gravitas. On top of all that, I found it difficult to reconcile Stella's cropped blonde hair, her tattooed wrist and her threadbare, slogan T-shirt with my own stereotypical picture of what a historian should look like. When I mentioned this to her during a phone call a day or so later, she gave a mocking laugh—as if she had heard it all before—and suggested she could wear a tweed skirt at our next meeting. She must have thought she'd got the better of me but when I asked why there had to be a 'next meeting' she fell silent. Despite her obvious discomfort, and my own sense that I was undermining the potential for a happy, professional, relationship, I pressed on. What more did she need to know?

'Nothing,' she fired back. 'I was just being friendly.'

The line went dead and for one startling moment I felt a stab of remorse. 'You idiot,' I muttered to myself. 'Idiot!'

I didn't hear from Stella again for almost a year. I was so caught up in my own work, trying to cobble together a new collection of poems, that I didn't notice her absence at first. Once or twice, I might have wondered how her work was progressing and I probably hoped she had written a flattering profile of me—but really, I didn't dwell on our introduction, or her. I imagined she would be ensconced in Christchurch, living with her partner and that I would probably hear from her one day, before the book went to the printers.

My own hopes of getting a book together were fast failing. I had been sitting on a series of poems for a collection with the working title *Kindred Spirits*. I wasn't entirely happy with the title but it seemed to bind together a fair number of the poems which lay about, in various stages of completeness, on my desk. Originally conceived as sonnets, I had recently made the decision to abandon that form, and, as a result, I felt tired, envisaging how much reworking lay ahead of me. My only satisfaction came from the belief that I had laid the foundation of a strong collection, that the poems sat well together, on the page. Six poems, however, refused to co-operate. The first of these should have been straightforward: it was a poem about Sam Marsden who, for thirty years, owned Mount Cook Cordials. Stella had mentioned his name in passing during my interview, and I had found myself remembering the multi-coloured van he used to drive around in. I recalled, too, sitting on the back step of Dudley's house, watching a wasp buzz around an almost empty bottle of raspberry which Geraldine had left out overnight. I had never seen a wasp before and I remember calling Dudley and Auntie Hilda out to look. For several minutes we all stood watching, wondering amongst ourselves where the insect had come from and then Dudley and Hilda had gone back inside and it wasn't for another day or so that Dudley had been able to report that it was a German wasp.

I was at my table one evening, staring blankly at my Sam Marsden poem when there was a tap at my kitchen window and, moments later, Geraldine appeared at my door. Since her divorce and her return to Fairlie several years before, she had become an occasional visitor, popping over to say hello, never staying long as she had so much to do now that she was running a Bed & Breakfast from her home. Without ever putting it into words, she had always made it clear that I was never to expect anything from her in a romantic capacity. She had somehow managed to convey this message even more strongly since the death of my father. I think she was afraid I might look to her as a convenient replacement for him and she was having none of it. However, she was one of my oldest friends, and, provided I never stepped over the mark—which, to tell the truth I had never wanted to do—she allowed herself the freedom to call by whenever she was in the mood for company—my company.

On this particular evening she brought something for me to look at. Sitting down with me, she pulled a small notebook from her jacket pocket and placed it on the table before me. I recognised the cover of the book immediately. It was her mother, Hilda's notebook—the one I had last seen more than fifty years before when I had been asked to copy my first poem into it.

It was strange to see that poem again but stranger still to see my own child's hand. How carefully I had tried to keep my lines straight on the book's plain white page—I had made the occasional slip and placed a capital letter in the middle of a word. I noticed, too, the rather formal way I had written my name at the bottom of the poem— 'by Boden Black' penned in capital letters and then, below that I had scrawled my signature and the word, 'poet'. Looking at the page it was easy to get the impression that it was not the poem that was important but my signature and that one, defining word, *poet*.

'I didn't even know you wrote poetry back then,' said Geraldine after she had read through the poem, aloud, for my benefit. 'You hid it well—but I guess you had to.'

I was surprised by her remark and wondered what she meant.

'Well, the boys in your class would have given you hell if they'd seen you writing poetry,' she explained.

I nodded but I thought she was wrong. I had no memory of ever being bullied at school and I think it would be reasonable to say that few boys ever showed the slightest bit of interest in me. I was no good at sport, I was slow and flat-footed, and for some reason that fact alone rendered me invisible to my class mates. During my teenage years I was occasionally asked to help with some piece of homework but even then I was never picked on. The idea that boys of my kind spent their childhood frightened and alone never rang true with me—but perhaps I was simply lucky.

Oddly, when I finally saw Stella again, during the evening of her Fairlie book-launch, she made a similar remark, asking if I had been bullied or singled out as a 'poofter'. I found the question offensive. It implied that I couldn't stand up for myself and, what's more, it suggested that country boys were, by their very nature, thuggish oafs who liked nothing better than to lash out at anyone who showed signs of being brainy or arty.

I could tell, even as I defended the boys at my school, that Stella didn't believe me. I tried to explain that all the families knew one another, that the mothers of my class mates all bought their meat from my father—that there was no room in the town for bullies to operate. They would have been found out.

She laughed and replied, 'You were probably just lucky. I bet there's some old boy out there who remembers getting the shit kicked out of him.'

I must have flinched at the sound of the word 'shit' because Stella grimaced and quickly changed the subject. 'You didn't introduce me to your friend,' she said, raising her index finger and pointing behind me. I glanced in the direction of her gesture, and replied, 'Oh, that's just Geraldine, my neighbour.' I was taken aback by the sound of my voice, it

was almost dismissive. Stella nodded and at that moment it occurred to me that she was alone. ‘Your partner couldn’t make it tonight?’

For a moment she looked confused and then her lip curled and she shook her head, ‘Ex-partner’.

A sensation like a flutter went through me and, despite myself, I smiled. Neither of us spoke. The silence deepened, became awkward and then we both talked at once: ‘I like the book cover I’m not very easy to live with apparently.’

We laughed uneasily.

‘Yes,’ said Stella after a few seconds. ‘The cover’s okay. Better than I thought it would be, given the miniscule budget.’

I nodded but I wasn’t paying close attention.

‘You don’t strike me as being the difficult type...’

At that the conversation ground to a halt and we parted—or, rather, retreated—me to talk with the school principal, while Stella, I noticed, singled out Geraldine, much to my discomfort.

Stella and I have never shared a house but we consider ourselves partners nevertheless. There are aspects of my life that fascinate her. With little memory of her own mother to comfort her, she is captivated by the fact that, on paper at least, I had two mothers. The lives of both my ‘mothers’ have been subjected to hours of speculation but it is the woman I have always regarded as my ‘real’ mother, Connie, who arouses most interest. I can tell, now that I know her well, when Stella is thinking about her. Her expression becomes thoughtful and she often begins picking her cuticles, or the skin around her thumb, a habit she is conscious of but persists with, nevertheless.

The questions Stella asks me are ones I have often wondered about myself but have never been able to answer. ‘Do you think Connie would have been better off if she’d lived in a bigger town, one with more distractions? Did she ever seek help—I mean did she ever get any medical help—for being depressed? Did she ever get over her grief?’ The question I dread hearing is this one: ‘Was she ever happy?’

I believe there were times when she was happy, if only for a day or a week, or a month or two. She was happy when I turned fifteen and we went out, as a family, for a celebration dinner at the local hotel. I know she was happy because I remember her telling me so. I also recall her remarking, as she unfolded a starched white napkin and placed it across her lap, that ‘it was good to get out and celebrate.’ When she said that, she



smiled—a wistful look—and I recall, too, that my father replied that we ought to go out more often. He actually said, ‘I can afford it, after all. We could even go on another holiday together.’ And my mother had nodded, saying, ‘I’m lucky to have you,’ and then she turned to me and added, ‘You too. I’m lucky to have you—especially you.’

I savoured that remark. I never doubted that she meant it just as I never questioned the genuine nature of her grief. She didn’t cling to her sorrow like a crutch. She just couldn’t help herself. It was as if she had been born sad and life just made things worse.

In the early days, when I was still getting used to Stella, I answered all her questions and then, when I grew tired of talking, I’d ask a few of my own. ‘What was it like climbing Mount Sefton?’ To my disappointment, she told me that she never climbed the mountain. She had been a child when she’d made the promise to climb it and she couldn’t be held to such a crazy idea. When she caught sight of my face, she laughed, ‘Oh come on. You don’t think I would actually go up a mountain, do you? I’m a historian, for God’s sake.’

‘I’m sure a lot of historians are mountaineers.’

‘Name one,’ she said.

‘Did you ever climb another mountain?’ she asked later that same night, when it became clear that, for the first time since making my acquaintance, she had no intention of going back to her motel. ‘No,’ I shook my head.

‘Did you keep in touch with any of the others?’ she asked.

‘Not really,’ I said, remembering the years following the climb. ‘I bumped into Harry Ayres once in a while and I used to ask him about Walter.’

‘What happened to him? Walter, I mean?’

I hesitated before answering, but by then it was too late. Stella already knew the story of my summer spent in the snow cave while building the hut, so I told her ‘He died.’

‘You don’t have to tell me about it, if you don’t want to.’

I nodded but I already knew I had no choice.

The night of the bonfire was so calm, so clear that I decided to sleep outside, under the stars. To my surprise, Walter joined me. The others, keen to christen the hut, hauled their mattresses into the new shelter and carried on with their party. From where I lay, I could hear their voices and their laughter and I saw the light through the window of the hut, sometimes bright, at other times dim, depending on the number of candles burning, or the length of their flames.

Walter, not far from my side, was silent. Nevertheless, I was sure he was awake. For almost an hour I lay still, thinking about the mountain I had climbed, the view from the top, and even though I wanted to share my experience of the climb with him, I couldn't. It was as if I didn't know *how* to speak to him anymore. Although I guessed I had him to thank for getting me on the day's climb, I had no way of breaking through the silence. Now I knew he was a conscientious objector, everything had changed between us.

Half awake, I kept my eyes focussed on the mountain tops and listened as every now and again some small sound—a rock fall, or some indeterminate creak of ice—broke the silence of the night. As I lay there, not really dozing but barely conscious all the same, my thoughts kept wandering back to Walter. I had the feeling that once we left the camp in the morning, I might not see him again. I doubted he was the kind of man who would go to much trouble to keep in touch. I didn't imagine he would seek me out. For some reason, this knowledge made me lonely.

Only four of us departed the following morning. Hillary and Harry led the way with Walter and me following behind. The rest of the group remained at the hut. To look at them, you would have thought that they were hung over but apparently they had decided to remain where they were so that they might carry out a spot of climbing before returning to Christchurch.

I was sorry to leave the camp, but, at the same time I was glad to be going home. I was tired and it was enough for me to be able to follow my companions' footsteps in the snow, grateful to be in the company of skilled route-finders, men who knew where they were going and what they were about.

After many hours of walking, we finally arrived at Hooker Hut. With less than three hours of our tramp remaining, the general consensus was that we should continue on to the village at Mount Cook. I was happy to go along with this plan, imagining a hot meal and a bath at the Hermitage.

I knew that the Hooker Hut marked the spot where Walter and Harry would leave us. They planned to return, via the Copland Pass, to the West Coast and, despite the lateness of the day, they planned to keep going, fearing the weather might close in and prevent their crossing should they overnight at Hooker Hut. Knowing they were in a hurry, I became flustered and barely managed to mumble my thanks to Harry. When it came time to shake Walter's hand, I hesitated. To make matters worse, he unexpectedly passed me a small book of verse, saying he thought I should have it. I wasn't sure what to do with it but opened it, anyway, at its title page, and saw an inscription, 'To Walter, with

kind regards, Harry Scott.’ Underneath, in pencil, Walter had added, ‘To Boden, Poet and Friend—Walter.’ I flinched and quickly closed the book, trapping the words inside.

Even then, I had a real sense that he was offering me one of his most valued possessions and I was torn by a desire to keep the book while, at the same time, not wanting to accept it *from him*. Part of me disapproved of the gift, as if it was being offered as a bribe in exchange for my friendship. I didn’t think I should let Walter off that easily.

I might have handed it back, too, had not Hillary somehow managed at that very moment to get between me and Walter, shaking the latter’s hand while calling out to Harry to ‘give some more thought to the Antarctic problem.’ And then, all three men turned, and started walking.

Like a lone sheep that doesn’t know which way to go once the flock has been divided, I dithered and then hurried after Hillary, the book clutched in my hand. I didn’t have time to stop and put it in my pack, nor did I try easing it into one of the large pockets in my parka. I held on to it, gripping it tightly, feeling the edges of its narrow spine dig into my palm. I carried it for three hours, all the time thinking, Poet *and friend*.

I never returned Walter’s book. I had it with me the day I learned of his death—and that of his old friend, Harry Scott—in separate accidents in February 1960.

All I know about Harry Scott’s death is that he was killed while climbing Mount Cook. His companion, a man by the name of Jim Glasgow, died with him. Walter knew both men. He had climbed alongside Jim during the rescue of Ruth Adams from La Perouse and, of course, he knew Harry Scott from their time together in detention. Details were a little scratchy but it seemed that Walter was at Franz Josef when he heard news of his friends’ accident. Wanting to assist in locating their bodies, he set out from home, intending to cross the Copland Pass and meet up with Harry Ayres and the other members of the search party. He never made it. A day or two later his body was found near the snowline above Hooker Hut. He showed no signs of having fallen or being injured. Neither did it appear that he had died from exposure.

As I had been telling this story I watched Stella, noticing when her mind strayed, when she became restless but now, seeing her sit up, I was certain I had her full attention.

‘Had he got lost, do you think?’

I shook my head, No.

‘You make it sound like he just dropped down dead...’ Stella continued. She saw my expression and hesitated. ‘Is that what happened?’

‘Yes.’

We sat quietly but I could see that Stella was not satisfied. I anticipated her next question and told her that the cause of death was most likely related to his having a faulty heart. I couldn’t recall the exact name of the condition, but it was connected to some childhood illness—rheumatic fever most likely. It was a miracle, apparently, that he managed to live as long as he had.

I felt the silence between us deepen and I knew that when Stella spoke she would raise the one question I have often asked myself—and never been able to answer.

‘Do you think he knew? About his heart, I mean.’

I shrugged.

‘But if he knew about it, he would have known that he would fail the medical exam for the army. He wouldn’t have been sent to detention. He might still have a wife and daughter.’

I don’t know.

I will never know.

It was the mid-1990s, around the time that mountaineer Rob Hall died on Mount Everest, when it suddenly hit me that I was growing old. I can remember, quite clearly, what led me to this discovery. It had nothing to do with the state of my health, or the fact that during one of her weekend visits, Stella had rather cruelly remarked on my difficulty in maintaining an erection. I felt young—or, at least, no older than I had felt twenty years before. What brought me face to face with my advancing years was a gift Stella presented to me one day, for no apparent reason. It was a computer and printer—her desktop, to be precise. She had noticed that I always wrote by hand—on scraps of paper, on pages torn from old exercise books and, when I remembered, in a notebook which I had bought, at great expense, for the sole purpose of composing poetry, although I rarely did as I was loathe to fill its beautiful, cream-coloured, blank pages with my scrawling script. Stella had therefore decided to introduce me to modern technology. It helped that she had also just bought a laptop and so no longer needed her old PC.

For what seemed an eternity I sat at the table, Stella by my side, while she explained the mechanics of creating a new folder, a file, saving and backing up onto a disc. She used words I had never heard before in relationship to writing: toolbars, icons, scroll-bars, clicks and double-clicks and then, just when I thought my head would explode, she did something so alarming I felt my blood run cold. One second we were looking at the screen, my latest poem before us, when the next second the third stanza vanished to reappear a moment later, tacked on to the bottom of the first. As if that wasn't bad enough, Stella then duplicated the first part of the poem, saying, 'There you go. Just remember those key strokes I showed you: Control A, Control X, Control C, and Control V.' Patting me reassuringly on the shoulder, she added, 'Let's see you get it back the way it was.'

She stood up and left the room and I sat there, staring at the screen and then slowly, letter by letter, I back-spaced my way through the duplicated section and was just about halfway through rewriting the third stanza in its correct position when everything became so jumbled in my brain that I froze.

I looked around for Stella but she was nowhere to be seen and so, in a fit of temper, I closed the window, tapping 'no' in response to the question about saving changes because I could no longer recall her instructions—and, moreover, I no longer cared. After a minute or so, during which time I sat scowling at the screen, Stella

reappeared and without saying a word reopened the file I had just closed. To my astonishment, the poem flashed up in its original format. I was so mystified that I barely registered her voice, when she said, ‘See, I told you it wouldn’t take long to get the hang of it.’

I gaped from the screen to Stella and then slumped back in my chair, stupidly running my hands through my hair. ‘My brain,’ I moaned, ‘I’m too old for this.’

Even though I eventually managed to come to terms with my computer, the first few lessons left me feeling vulnerable and dull. A nagging thought lodged in my brain. What if I really was getting old? Should I start thinking about my future? Make some plans?

For months at a time I was able to push these questions to the back of my head but every so often, usually in the evening, when I was alone, they would resurface and pester me, demanding attention.

Despite my best intentions, eighteen months passed before I finally placed advertisements in three South Island newspapers, seeking a part-time assistant to help in the shop. I expected the advertisement would attract applicants from an older age group, from semi-retired butchers, for example, who wanted to retire to the country and spend more time fishing or gardening. Instead, I received only one reply—and that from a twenty-six-year-old named Benjamin ‘Beano’ Wax. This Benjamin—or rather, Beano—had only been resident in New Zealand for nine months. He was British and his accent, when I spoke to him on the phone, placed him from the North—Coronation Street was my guess.

He arrived for his interview the following week, knocking on the shop door a little before eight in the morning. His hair stood up from his head in an uneven bristle and his shirt and trousers appeared to have been tugged on over a pair of pajamas but he had the most angelic smile I had ever seen and his manner was so polite, so charming that I was disarmed completely and invited him in.

We stood chatting by the counter for a minute or two and then, to my surprise, he caught sight of the faded photograph of me on Mount Cook and asked, ‘Where’s that, then?’

‘Mount Cook,’ I responded, watching him carefully.

Beano cocked his head, ‘That you?’

I nodded.

‘Impressive, that is.’ He turned from the photo to me and grinned. ‘You look a bit like a mountaineer.’

Flattered, I took down the photo and passed it to him. I could barely keep myself from smirking as I imagined his response at discovering the name of my climbing companion.

‘What route did you take?’

Flustered, I replied the only way I could. ‘The easiest.’

Beano laughed, ‘Nice one.’

He placed the photograph carefully on the counter and looked about. ‘You always worked alone?’

I shook my head, ‘No, this was my father’s shop.’ As I spoke I picked up the photograph once more and appeared to study it. Casually, I put it back on the counter but with the image turned towards Beano. I even tapped the glass, my finger pointing towards Hillary’s head.

‘It’s nice,’ Beano said, ‘Old-fashioned. Better than any of the places I’ve worked before.’

Although he had handed me a curriculum vitae, he gave me a quick run-down of his career. ‘I’ve got good references,’ he added. ‘I like working.’

I asked why he wanted to work in Fairlie. It was hardly the centre of the world.

He laughed at that and explained that he liked the outdoors. He had come to New Zealand for the climbing—not mountain climbing, he hastened to add, though he wanted to try his hand at that, too—but rock-climbing. There were a few decent crags in the area—Mount Horrible, in particular—and one of his mates had told him there were good routes on Mount Misery and Cloudy Peak—mountains whose names I had not heard before, nor felt any desire to explore despite Beano’s insistence that they were all local and that I should check them out.

‘It’ll be perfect, this,’ he said, smiling broadly, as he walked around, running his hands over the blocks, picking up one or two knives, testing their blades against his finger.

‘Your mate looks a bit knackered, there,’ he suddenly said, glancing at the photo, as he came back around the counter.

‘How can you tell? He’s wearing goggles.’ I replied, exasperated.

He took the photograph once more in his hands and made a low tutting noise. ‘You can see it in the way he’s standing. I expect it’s the altitude—What is it? Twelve thousand

feet?’ He shook his head gently and then carefully placed the photograph back on its hook, asking, ‘Well, what do you think?’

I gave him a fortnight’s trial but I could tell, straight away, that he knew his trade. He was surprisingly light on his feet and he often hummed while he worked but most of all, he smiled. Even when he complained—about the cold, which he seemed to be particularly sensitive to, or the state of his ramshackle accommodation—he managed to sound little more than bemused. He laughed when I eventually told him who the other man in the photograph was.

He also liked my poetry.

I had been working on my collection, *Kindred Spirits* for so long that I began to think of it as both a burden and a joke. I didn’t have the energy to transfer any of the completed—or near completed—hand written poems to my computer and so they remained in a folder on the top of the cabinet next to my bed. From time to time, I glanced at one or other of the poems and sighed from frustration. Very occasionally I rediscovered a poem which sent a small shock through my body as I scanned it. Whenever that happened I took the poem into work and read it aloud to Beano, watching his expression for an indication of its merit. I learnt, after a while, that whenever he cocked his head to the left he would respond positively but that if he looked straight ahead, his mouth fixed in a smile, he was less enthusiastic. He always listened carefully, waiting until he was sure I had finished before passing judgment. ‘You should send that in,’ he’d say if I had written something he liked. Once or twice, he’d go further and add, ‘That’s the bollocks, that is.’ Initially, his use of ‘bollocks’ confused me. Depending on whether or not the definite article was used, it could be either a compliment or a criticism. To my relief, however, he never described any of my poems as straight out ‘bollocks’.

Beano’s enthusiasm for my poetry began to rub off on me. He looked forward to the ‘weekly reading’ as he called it and, in order to keep up with demand, I began to spend more time at my computer creating new work. These poems gave me the sense that I was working and achieving something but I was equally aware of the fact that none of these recent pieces belonged in my *Kindred Spirits* collection. I knew that I had to stop spending so much time on this new work and get *Kindred Spirits* completed once and for all.

It was late one afternoon, the day after the 1998 General Election, when I was immersed for the hundredth time in rearranging *Kindred Spirits* into some semblance of order, when the phone rang. Irritated and relieved by the interruption, I picked up the receiver, anticipating either Geraldine or Stella’s voice—they were the only people who



regularly phoned me. Hearing a woman's voice I didn't at first register that it wasn't either of my friends and answered, grumpily, 'Yes, what do you want?' My tone must have thrown the caller off because there was a long pause and then, from out of that silence, a quiet voice asked, 'Is that Boden Black?'

'Yes.'

There was another long pause and then softly, haltingly, I heard the woman say, 'I'm sorry, you might not understand anything I'm about to say—but I think you're my brother.'

I did something that I have only ever seen actors on television do. I lowered the receiver from my ear and hovered, looking at it. My first thought was not one of disbelief but confusion. I hadn't thought about my birth mother for a while.

'You are Boden Black, aren't you?'

I could hear the woman's voice in the distance and I was aware that she was speaking very hesitantly, as if, like me, she had no idea what to say next.

Perhaps, in a similar situation, other people might have asked for the woman's name, or for some proof of familial connection. But none of these things came to my mind. I was so taken aback by the woman's presence in my kitchen that I found myself telling her that it wasn't a good time to call and that I would appreciate it if she could phone back after dinner—in a few hours' time.

It was only after she hung up that I realised exactly what I had done. I had no doubt she was my sister and I had put her off. I didn't know her number and if she didn't phone me back, I would never find out who I was.

I have little recollection of how I passed the three hours between her first and second call. I have a vague memory of replacing the phone on the charger and then lifting it up from its cradle, once or twice, to check that I had not left it in 'talk' mode. I think I walked around the house, pausing at the entrance to my parents' room—which was now mine—and made a note of how little it had changed since their death. The curtains, the wall-paper, the bed, the furniture—it all dated back to the 1970s. On the wall above the dresser was a framed portrait of a woman, an image that had originally been painted by Renoir but was, in this case, a 5000-piece jigsaw puzzle, glued and mounted. As I looked at the lady's face, I felt strangely light-headed and I retreated back to the kitchen where I sat down, puzzling over one word the woman had used: 'brother'. Not 'half-brother' but *brother*.

‘It’s Kim Morton again,’ said the woman when I answered the phone a few hours later. ‘I’m sorry if I called at a bad time before.’

In the hours since I had last heard her voice, I hadn’t managed to come up with a plan of what to say. All the questions I might have asked remained out of reach. I was willing to listen, however.

Kim Morton was married. She lived in Wellington with her husband, a landscape architect, and their two teenage children. ‘Morton’ was her married name. Her family name—my name—was Butler.

‘Boden Butler.’ I rolled the words around in my mouth, trying them for size.

‘I used to hear my mother wonder aloud about you. She called you Winslow. It was her favourite name and it was what she would have christened you. It’s Old English and means something like “from the hill of the friend.”

I responded that it was an unusual name and Kim laughed, saying that Boden wasn’t exactly common. She then explained that her mother had been a scholar, a linguist and that she loved words. She was the type of person who could spend hours poring over a thesaurus, searching out the perfect word. She...

I must have made some kind of sound, one loud enough for Kim to hear, because she suddenly fell silent.

‘What was her name?’ I eventually asked. I had the feeling Kim had mentioned it several times already but, for some reason, I hadn’t taken it in.

‘Lily.’

‘And she’s dead,’ I stated. From the way Kim had spoken, I was certain she was.

‘Yes. They’re both dead: Lily and Matthew.’ She paused and then added, ‘My father—*our father*—was called Matthew.’

For an instant I thought I had misheard but I know, now, that the problem was not one of hearing but understanding. I didn’t understand.

From the hesitancy in her voice, I realised that Kim had found our conversation daunting, if not painful. I heard her ask me if I wanted to know more about my parents? She asked if I had heard enough for one night, if I wanted a break or if I wanted to go on? It seemed to me that we might as well carry on. We had gone so far, there was no point stopping now.

‘Are you sure?’ asked Kim. ‘I can always phone back in the morning—or you could call me.’

It's funny but I'd never given much thought to my father—my birth father. I had never wondered what he might have looked like, or who he was. He had never seemed that important—or real. Never for an instant did I think I would learn his name. Matthew.

'My mother was born in Milton,' said Kim. Once again she hesitated, corrected herself and then said, 'Our mother was born in Milton but moved to Christchurch when she was around five. Her father was a bank manager and her mother looked after the house. They were good people but quite conservative. They attended church every Sunday and it was through church that mum's parents met Matthew's parents. Mum must have been about nine or ten when she first met Matthew. The two families were very close and when mum reached the age of fourteen she apparently announced to Matthew, who was older than her, that she intended to fall in love with him.'

I must have coughed because Kim paused and asked if I was all right. I have to admit that I found her story a little implausible. I couldn't imagine any girl of fourteen, brought up in a strict family, doing what Lily was said to have done. Rather than interrupt Kim, however, I decided to let her continue. I would save my reservations for later.

'Lily was very strong willed. These days she would probably be labelled a "difficult" child but I don't think she intended to cause trouble. She was very bright and I think she probably found her family life very restrictive. She told me once that she had known as a child that she didn't want to be like her mother. She wanted something more from life—though she didn't know what. Anyway...'

Kim sighed, 'Lily and Matthew did fall in love and then Lily got pregnant. Matthew loved Lily but he was a young man, a student. He was the only child of a greengrocer but had won several scholarships and so there was a huge amount of pressure on him to finish his degree and rise up in the world, become a professional. His mother was certainly pushing him in that direction.'

'So there was no question of them getting married?'

'None at all. They were both considered too young and besides they were both extremely ambitious. I gather that it became very difficult.'

'You mean the shame? The gossip?'

I heard a kind of mumble and when Kim spoke again I could tell she was feeling very uncomfortable.

'Adoption was the only option,' she said, her voice wavering. 'The other thing—and again, I hate to say this—your grandparents made a promise to your mother that she could go to university if...'

'...if she got rid of me.'

How could I be understanding, let alone forgiving, of such a situation? My future had been bartered against that of my mother's. I didn't want to hear any more. I felt disgusted. The fact that all this had taken place in the 1930s failed to move me. At that moment all I could see was that I had been discarded.

'When the time came she was sent away to have the baby. I mean, to have you. Once she returned she began to see Matthew again and just before the war they decided to get married. Not long after that, Dad heard he had been accepted at Oxford and so they moved to England. I was born a year later.'

'And Lily?'

'She put her studies on hold for a few years but eventually completed a doctorate in Old English.'

I believe that Kim had tried to select her words carefully, that she hadn't intended to wound me with my family history but whether intentional or not she managed to do just that. 'My parents made friends with some interesting people,' Kim continued, in an attempt to change the subject. 'Scholars and writers, mostly—some quite famous. There were quite a few New Zealanders among them.'

I felt too sick in my stomach to ask for names.

There was little point in being angry, much less to despair. The events described by Kim had happened long ago and I kept telling myself that her family history had nothing to do with me. There was no place for me in it. Even so I was glad of the unspoken pact between us: that neither one of us would ever speculate, aloud, on how things might have been.

For my own sake, I had to maintain my distance.

I determined to finish *Kindred Spirits*. To my relief Beano offered to take over the shop—for as long as I needed—and so I retreated to my house, sitting alone at the kitchen table, intent on getting the collection to a publishable state. This time I discovered that my desire to prove myself once and for all as a poet was now tinged with a hint of revenge. Childish though it was, I wanted to show ‘them’—my other family—that I had made it on my own terms, far away from the privileged world of Oxford. There was, I admit, something cold-blooded about my approach

Stella noticed the change in me when she next visited and warned me against becoming bitter. Her advice was not well received. I snapped at her, telling her in no uncertain terms that I was not bitter. How could I be? All my life I had been shown nothing but love and support. My father had been immensely proud of me. To be bitter in those circumstances would amount to an act of betrayal.

She remained unconvinced.

‘Well, I was just thinking that if you’d grown up in a bookish household like your sister...if your parents were...’

I cut her off. ‘You mean Matthew and Lily? Not my parents.’

I could see that Stella was beginning to wish she’d remained silent but, because she was the kind of person who could never walk away from an argument, she continued, ‘I simply think that growing up in a more intellectually stimulating household might have had some benefits...not least,’ she rushed, anticipating another interruption, ‘...not least...they may have had connections to other writers or publishers and...’ she hurried on, ‘by the sounds of it, they most certainly did have connections.’ She paused, glanced at me and added, ‘You’ve always implied that Nathaniel and Connie didn’t share your love of words...’

Did she expect me to deny that claim? I couldn’t. Nevertheless, I wouldn’t hear a word against my parents. ‘I had a hell of a lot of freedom,’ I countered. ‘I wasn’t stifled in

any way. I reckon that growing up in Fairlie was probably better for me than being in Oxford. I didn't have to deal with the weight of all that stuff.'

'What stuff?'

I sighed, 'You know...Colonialism. The British class system. That sense of entitlement.'

I heard Stella make a sharp tutting sound and I could see her shake her head in frustration. For a second I had the impression she was going to carry on with her argument, and make some remark concerning my small-town upbringing but she didn't. She left me in peace.

The peace was short-lived. It wasn't Stella who disturbed it, however, but Kim. Having found me at last, she was keen to see me. I suggested we meet in the neutral territory of Christchurch—a convenient halfway point between Fairlie and Wellington.

I was taken aback by how emotional I felt when I first caught sight of the tall, fiftyish woman who raised her hand hesitantly as I approached the reception area of the YMCA hotel. Minutes before meeting her I had been nervous, but I was hardly anxious or teary.

In the months leading up to this event I had heard the entire story, more or less, of Lily and Matthew's life. I had learnt of Kim's slow but determined attempt to track me down following the death of her father. She had even hired the services of a private detective. I had no idea how one went about finding a lost relative and I was surprised at how much she had uncovered about me in the process. I suppose I was being somewhat defensive, or arrogant, when I imagined I already knew everything I needed to know about Lily and Matthew, and that the proposed meeting with Kim was more for her benefit than mine.

In fact, nothing prepared me for the first time I laid eyes on my sister.

I managed to return her wave but then I became rooted to the spot, unable to take a step forward towards her. She had ginger-blond hair. Her skin was freckled. I had seen photos of her—and she mine—but they were nothing compared with the flesh-and-blood woman walking towards me. My heart lurched and in that instant I recognised myself in her face. It was as if I had been handed a mirror. She even carried herself like me. As she walked across the room, I knew, deep in my heart, that she was family.

Her eyes brimming with tears, Kim shook my hand and then her bottom lip quivered as she placed her arms around me and hugged me, repeating my name over and over again until my shoulders began to tremble and I clung on to her—for dear life.

How long we remained like that I'm not sure. When we finally took a step back, we both laughed self-consciously and I made some remark about her flight, saying that I hoped it hadn't been too rough, but all the time I spoke I couldn't take my eyes from her. I just wanted to look at her. It was as if I needed to reassure myself that she was real.

'You look like Mum,' said Kim. 'You have the same colouring, the same mouth.' She kept her gaze fixed on me as she spoke and when she mentioned my mouth, I felt my lips begin to tremble again and was relieved when she put her arms around me once more, and said, 'It's okay. We'll be all right.'

My voice was muffled. 'I don't even know why I'm crying—I should be happy.'

And then I gave into my tears again, oblivious to everything except the warmth of our embrace and the trembling in my legs which would not stop.

Eventually, Kim took charge and led me across the road to a café in the Arts Centre. I was no longer crying but I felt shaky and was happy to follow.

'I hope tea's all right,' she said, returning with a tray of food and drinks. 'I got a cheese scone and a blueberry muffin,' she added, setting the plates out on the table. She smiled in my direction and then sat down opposite me, cutting each bun in half and placing one piece of each on both plates before passing me one, as I imagined she did when out with her husband.

I took a bite from the scone but found it hard to chew.

'Feeling better?' Kim asked.

I was embarrassed. 'I didn't expect it to hit me so hard. I thought I'd handle it better.'

Kim told me that she had spent most of the night before awake, crying. 'The people in the next room must have wondered what on earth was going on.'

'So you're one step ahead of me,' I said.

I felt stupid about my earlier outburst.

'Well,' said Kim, 'Let's not worry about it. We're here now—that's what matters.'

We spent the day together but after an initial flurry of conversation, during which time Kim repeated nearly everything that had been said on the phone, we became quiet. It was my fault. I was still feeling uneasy and vulnerable, and was afraid of the intimacy Kim sought. As a result I became circumspect. Questions which she put to me I deflected or responded to in a polite but noncommittal manner. I felt pushed into a corner, the focus of too much attention. In reality Kim was just doing what anyone else would have done in her situation. She was trying to get to know me better, to make up for lost time. As it was,

I told her little about my childhood. I barely mentioned Stella and when Kim tried to engage me in a discussion on writing—revealing in the process that her parents had been friends with Dan Davin in Oxford—I became tight-lipped, unable to give her even the slightest bit of encouragement.

I didn't fully understand why I was so reluctant to open up to Kim but, if pushed, I would have to admit to feeling scared. I didn't want to be in a situation where I was forced to reveal too much, too quickly. I needed more time to get used to her, to establish where I fitted in. I was greatly relieved when she finally caught her taxi back to the airport and left me alone. The relief was short-lived. I was sad that I had not been able to give more of myself to Kim and feeling full of remorse I quickly arranged for a large bunch of flowers to be sent to her house. Attached to the bouquet was a brief note thanking her. Why I couldn't welcome her into my life, I'm not sure. But I couldn't. I suspect that I was too shocked or grief-stricken. At least, that's how Stella interpreted my response.

In the weeks that followed that meeting, Kim and I talked together, often. However, I made excuses not to attend her family Christmas celebration and later, after a few more months had passed, we became increasingly distant. Her effort to keep the relationship going was matched by apathy and resistance from me. I sent her a card on her birthday but that was all.

At the same time that I posted the birthday card, I sent my collection, *Kindred Spirits* to one of the university presses and was thrilled when it was accepted and published. It was my hope that this new collection would, at last, banish my only successful poem, 'Three Days at Least,' to the past, allowing me to move forward, to deliver work that I was more or less proud of.

In the first instance the positive reception to the collection was flattering. The book was heralded as a 'long-awaited' collection, one which showcased a writer 'at the height of his powers.' In reviews several of the poems were described as 'dazzling', 'tender and elegiac', and 'tough and uncompromising.'

Beano's response was even more gratifying. He took the copy I gave him and held it in his hands, saying, 'Ta very much. I'll treasure that.' Then, somewhat gingerly, he opened it to the title page, smiling, 'Look at that—you've even signed it.' He read the handwritten dedication aloud and when I pointed out that I had also mentioned him in the acknowledgements, he pretended to frown, complaining, 'I'll have to buy another copy to send to my mum, now. She'll be so chuffed.'



He looked up and grinned, ‘She’ll put you in her bedroom—alongside all her other poets.’

When he saw my puzzled look, he explained, ‘She reads a lot of poetry.’

He glanced back at the book and continued, ‘She even took a few evening classes a while back—after my dad ran off. She’s a bit of a hopeless romantic, my mum. I can just see her squeezing you in between Auden and ...’ He shrugged, and then laughed, ‘Leonard Cohen.’

Business was brisk at the butchery. Women who had long ago taken their custom to the supermarket now returned to the shop, congratulating me on the success of my book which they had seen on display in the café gift shop and the library. Speculation concerning the subjects of the poems became widespread. A woman I had barely spoken to since school claimed that one of the poems—the one which, incidentally, had been singled out and published in the *Listener*—was about her. She recognised herself as the girl dressed in nothing but a light cotton shift, standing on stage, washing blood from her hands while ‘in the wings, two soldiers stood transfixed...’

I didn’t mind being at the receiving end of so much attention—even though Beano teased me about it, constantly—but I wished my father had been around. His pleasure would have been genuine, whereas mine was tainted by the uneasy feeling that nothing had really changed. I was still a butcher, a local resident—someone who had been around for ever, but a bit of a ‘strange-one’.

I was pleased when Stella invited me to join her for the first three days of a trip she was making around the South Island as part of a research project concerning the history of aerated water and lemonade. She’d touched on the subject whilst writing her history of Fairlie but now she was embarking on a journey which would take her through Temuka and Waimate and down to Dunedin before heading back up the West Coast where she hoped to make contact with some old-timer who knew the story behind the Digger Kiwi brand.

I was reluctant to ask Beano to cover for me but I decided I could spare a few days away from work. I was reminded of just how much I enjoyed Stella’s company. She was one of only a few people I had ever met who became more interesting the more I got to know them. I hadn’t fully appreciated just how knowledgeable she was. My admiration for her grew as it became clear that she was perfectly at ease with herself, that everything she needed by way of acknowledgement or attention, came from within. When I asked what it was she liked about me, she joked, ‘Well, you don’t talk much and you travel light.’ She

paused and then, realising that I was still waiting for some token or other, ‘Plus you’ve just written a love poem for me—I have to stick with you. I don’t have any choice.’

The ‘love poem’ was hardly that. I’d scrawled it onto a paper serviette while waiting for a pie to be heated at the Savoy Tearooms in Waimate. The poem was little more than doggerel, a silly rhyme and it occurred to me, after Stella drew attention to it, that perhaps she had been disappointed, that she really would have liked to been the object of a proper love poem. I hadn’t thought of her as a romantic—I thought she was far too modern and independent—but I began to think that I might have hurt her feelings by appearing to take our friendship too lightly. It slowly dawned on me that all the fuss over Kim and my book might have made Stella feel left out. There was the slightest chance that she might have wanted to feel linked to me. For the first time since meeting Stella, I found myself worrying that she might leave me.

When we parted at the bus stop in Dunedin, I became quite gloomy and even though the day itself was sunny and calm I began to fret that I had really blown things with Stella. It was a feeling that remained with me throughout the day, becoming more intense as, arriving home late that evening, I passed the closed shop and let myself in to my eerily quiet, empty house.

Only rarely have I received an envelope in the mail which has caused me to stop, mid-way down my garden path, to open it. In most cases I shuffle through what little post I get before discarding it—often unopened—into the wood basket beside the fireplace. I very much doubt that I have ever missed anything of importance. Most envelopes give away their contents: a discount offer from the local hardware store or restaurant, a form letter from a real estate agent and once a year a thick envelope containing Christmas cards from an association of foot and mouth painters. I'm not sure how the latter organisation managed to locate me but I suspect the cards that my mother filled out so long ago may also have come from the same organisation. Certainly the images with their snow-covered winter landscapes, bare trees and red robins looked very familiar.

The envelope which stopped me in my tracks one morning in 2002 aroused my interest because of its large size and good quality, white paper. It was entirely free of logos and featured only my name and address and that of a return post office box number. Tearing it open I discovered a letter commissioning me to write a poem for a museum which was to be opened at Mount Cook in the winter of 2003, marking fifty years since the establishment of the national park. Attached was a contract and a folded brochure, a portfolio containing colour images of Mount Cook as well as artist impressions of the centre, along with a section headed 'mission statement', which encapsulated, in rather ambiguous and lacklustre terms, the 'vision' behind the tourist centre.

The contract was extremely detailed. The only thing missing was why they had approached me in the first place. Reading through the letter for the second time, I got the feeling that it could have been a form letter which had undergone minor tweaks in order to make it appear relevant to the current situation. Referring to me initially as 'one of this nation's leading creative talents' it went on to say, 'We would be delighted if you would join with us to celebrate...' Tacked on to the end of the paragraph, as though finally admitting the purpose of the invitation, was a proposal asking me to 'compose a poem highlighting the very essence of Aoraki/Mount Cook in terms of its natural and human heritage.'

It was hardly inspiring stuff and my immediate response was one of mild irritation. Despite having read the letter, I had no idea why I had been singled out for the task. I imagined that several names had been put forward and that someone who retained some faint recollection of 'Three Days at Least' or had read a recent review of *Kindred Spirits*

decided I might be worth a try. I suppose the fact that I lived in Fairlie—and so was a local—also worked in my favour. In my mind’s eye I could see a group of marketing and promotional types sitting around an oval table in some office suite in Wellington, listlessly ticking off items from a ‘to do’ list, working their way through the dignitaries until they came, eventually, to the performers and, last of all, the poet.

When Stella visited again, I told her about the commission. I planned to turn it down and expected her to agree with me. We were sitting in the back garden and as I grumbled away she sat quietly, sipping from a glass of wine. When she was sure I had reached the end of my long list of complaints, she turned to face me and narrowing her eyes, said ‘I honestly don’t understand what your problem is,’ she said.

‘It seems like a lot of trouble, that’s all,’ I countered.

Stella rolled her eyes.

‘And what else are you going to do? It’s not as if you’ve had any better offers recently.’

I shrugged. Stella, I knew, rarely turned down work. There had been times when she had been less than enthusiastic about certain projects but, as she so often said, they all paid the bills. My objection to being forced to ‘write on demand’ failed to gain sympathy. Stella shook her head and called me pathetic.

In the end it wasn’t Stella who forced my hand to take the commission but Kim. For a long time she had been dropping hints that she would like to bring her husband and family down to visit. Her plan was to undertake a kind of South Island road trip, something she had wanted to do for as long as she could remember. She indicated that she would like to come and stay with me in order to experience, first hand, all the places I had described in my poems. My ability to summon up the countryside was so real, so complete, that she could not only visualise the locations but *smell* them, too. I wasn’t entirely sure what she meant but the prospect of having her around was not one I embraced. I couldn’t turn her away cold-heartedly. Even I balked at such ruthlessness. Cynical though it was, I put myself at her mercy, and asked her to put off her trip on account of my recent acceptance of a major commission, one which would take up all my free time. In order to give the impression that I was as disappointed as her, I added that it would be wonderful if she could come down for the opening of the Centre itself, in 2003.

Stella wasn’t impressed. She was irritated by the fuss I had made over the commission but, most of all, by my off-hand treatment of Kim. A kind of stand-off followed which left me feeling downcast and on edge. It reminded me of the unhappy—

but thankfully short-lived—period that had followed our aerated-water tour of the south, when I had penned that ridiculous love poem. I was worried that now, like then, I might have upset Stella.

I decided it wouldn't hurt to close the shop for a week and give Beano time off to go rock-climbing. For weeks he had been wanting to go to Golden Bay, to try out some routes on a cliff near Takaka. I also arranged to rent a small cottage at Lake Ohau from one of my regular customers. She had offered the holiday house to me several times before, but only now did I take up the offer. I wanted to spend time with Stella. I hoped that a few days alone, in the hills, would be enough to bring us together. I feared it was my last chance.

Working beside Stella at Ohau was a bitter-sweet experience. I had only ever worked with men before and I was surprised at how different it was to labour away in the presence of a woman. True, the nature of our work, being sedentary, was entirely different from what I had experienced before, but it was just that sensation of 'stillness' which impressed me more than anything. Even when Stella asked—as my father or Dudley had asked many times in the past—'How is it going?' I was taken aback by how different it sounded. Stella, I understood, was asking how *I* was doing, whereas my father, despite watching over me, had really been asking how *my work* was going.

I was working hard on my poem but there were times when I simply could not bear to sit still any longer. Whenever I grew restless I would stand and walk to the window and gaze out at the lake, taking in the view of the massive, limpet-shaped Ben Ohau across the water. It was not so much the mountain as the bulldozer track leading towards its summit that held my attention. The road, a long straight line scored into the hillside, was so at odds with the rounded skylines and eroded gullies that I couldn't help but view it as an incision made by a calculating surgeon. To see a natural landmark cut up and deformed had a depressing effect on me and the feeling was exaggerated when, going outside for fresh air, I was confronted by even more signs of human intervention. Our modest bach was surrounded on all sides by building sites, half-finished holiday homes and a new subdivision. The sound of polythene flapping in the wind carried across to me and gave our location a desolate air.

Returning to the cottage, I invariably gave in to the desire to open a bottle of wine. With a glass in my hand, I was able to refocus my attention on my work, finding solace in the laying down of words on a page, sounding them out, and immersing myself in a search

for perfection—a journey that could go on forever and bring me no nearer to my destination than when I had started.

I realised that writing poetry had protected me from loneliness. But I realised, too, that there was a vast difference between loneliness and emptiness and that although poetry had shielded me against the former, only Stella was capable of safeguarding me from the latter. I tried to articulate my feelings to Stella but she misunderstood. She eyed me suspiciously, as though fearful I was about to do something rash—like propose or ask her to move in. After a short while she remarked it might be a good idea if I got a dog. Sensing my objection, she added, ‘You could feed it on scraps and bones. It wouldn’t cost you anything in food bills.’

I went back to my work, but my thoughts were taken up with Stella. I couldn’t decide if her independence masked a vulnerability or, rather, an out and out toughness. It seemed to me that there was a good chance she would harden as she grew older. What struck me now as ‘spirit’ might one day manifest itself as dissatisfaction or resentment. I had already had the occasional glimpse into Stella’s mind, and had been taken aback by what I saw.

Only the previous day I had been lost in work when Stella sighed loudly and exclaimed, ‘I am so sick of all this stuff!’ She gestured impatiently towards the papers in front of her.

I was thinking about a response, but she hadn’t finished. ‘It’s all so ordinary.’ She drew out the word ‘ordinary’ into four syllables. ‘I get so tired of writing about people who do sweet f-all with their lives...’

I was completely taken aback. I opened my mouth to say something but she cut me short. ‘All I ever do is small-town stuff.’

‘But I thought that was the point of history these days? You want to examine the lives of ordinary people, don’t you?’

‘Yes, of course—but just once in a while I’d like to do something “big”.’

I knew part of Stella’s frustration resulted from the fact that she had been unsuccessful in getting funding to write a biography of a former New Zealand diplomat, a woman named Jean McKenzie who had worked in Paris during the 1940s and ’50s. Stella was profoundly interested in McKenzie and had been bitterly disappointed by her failure to gain support for her project. Still, I was surprised by the level of her anger and her apparent dismissal of the people and lives she researched. I was a little put out, too, by the fact that I might be lumped in with rest of the small-town nobodies she complained about.

Up until that point I had always believed she not only liked me but respected me. Perhaps she did—but I couldn't count on it.

As it was, it didn't really matter. Two months after her outburst—and the very day I sent off my commissioned Mount Cook poem—Stella left the country, heading to Canada and England to undertake research for a New Zealand period film about the life of that most famous of small-town boys, Ernest Rutherford.

Left at home, I began to worry that she might not come back. Feeling particularly anxious one day, I asked Beano if he thought I was old and dull. As usual he smiled and then shrugged and replied, 'If you're worried about it, why don't you come rock-climbing with me this weekend? We could go to Mount Horrible. That would shake you up a bit.' I toyed with the idea of accepting his invitation even though I wasn't sure how it related to the question I had asked. I decided against it in the end. I imagined myself becoming stuck halfway up a rock face, unable to continue climbing and too scared to get down. I decided the wisest thing to do was stay at home. At least I would be safe. Besides, I didn't want to embarrass Beano in front of his friends. That hardly seemed fair after all he had done for me.

Not long afterwards I was walking around my neighbourhood late one evening, when I was overtaken by an acute sense of boredom. Few of the places I had loved as a child existed any more. The fields where I had collected mushrooms were gone, as were the open spaces where I had stood looking out towards the Two Thumb Range. I had the impression that as the town had grown in size it had diminished in spirit. The more I became aware of the changes, the more claustrophobic I felt. At this late stage in life, I suddenly discovered something that the town's restless teenagers had known for generations. Just like them, I risked being trapped. I needed to get out and broaden my horizons. Moving away was in my genes, after all.

A day or so later, I determined to make a break with my home town. I contacted a real estate agent to discuss selling my home and then, the following week went to Timaru and traded in my old van for a campervan. That afternoon, I experienced the joy I had felt so many years before when I took possession of my old Matchless motorbike and rode through Fairlie for the first time.

I suspect that I was attempting to recapture that earlier sense of freedom and spontaneity when I pulled up in front of Geraldine's house and offered to take her for a ride in my new toy. It was foolish of me to think that she would leap at the chance to accompany me but I was pleased when she grudgingly reached for her jacket and followed

me out to the van. She climbed into the passenger seat and glanced around at the bed and fixtures in the back. She lost no time in asking if I was having a mid-life crisis. When I responded that I didn't think so, she replied that it was just as well because buying a campervan was something German tourists and old people did. There was an association of campervan pensioners, she went on, who travelled the country in convoy. They had special places where they could park, safe in the knowledge that they were part of a group, a kind of mobile rest home. From the defiant tone of her voice I could guess that she was having business worries, that trade at her Bed & Breakfast was slow and that she blamed campervans for the downturn. It was not in her nature to admit to such concerns, however. Like Stella, she had a tendency to become belligerent whenever she was anxious. I was her oldest friend and it was not unusual for her to vent her frustrations on me. As we drove out of town, I braced myself for what might follow. I didn't have long to wait.

'It's amazing that you found love so late in life.' I glanced across at Geraldine but read nothing in her expression.

'I don't know if it's love,' I replied cautiously.

'You'd better not tell Stella that,' snapped Geraldine. 'She'd be mortified.'

Suddenly I had the uneasy feeling I was about to be drawn into a conversation I didn't want to have. In a feeble attempt to stave off the inevitable I switched on the CD player, hoping to distract her with Bach's cantatas.

'You know she loves you, don't you?' There was a note of accusation in Geraldine's voice. I wasn't sure if she was testing me or merely adding to my confusion.

'You did know?' she added.

Again the prickly tone of voice. From the corner of my eye I thought I saw a smirk on her face, one which broadened as she hurried on. 'I asked her the last time she was here. I thought if I left it to you to tell me what was going on I'd be...' She hesitated, scrutinised my face for signs of surprise. 'I told her you felt the same.'

'What?'

'Well, you do, don't you?'

What was Geraldine going on about? Again, I had only just caught up. Did I love Stella? I couldn't think of any reason why I shouldn't love her, if that amounted to the same thing.

Geraldine had left me far behind. Seemingly oblivious of the features of my new van or the scenery through the window, she went on, 'You know you'd never sell your house at the price the agent suggested? It's way too high.'



‘What did Stella really say?’ I felt like a schoolboy, scrabbling for scraps of information from a group of cunning girls.

‘If you ask me,’ said Geraldine, ‘you’ve got no intention to sell up. You want to believe that you’re ready to move—but deep down you’re resisting change. You’ll never leave, not you. Your heart’s not in it.’

Even though Geraldine was right, and I had already reached the private—but nevertheless humiliating—decision to reconsider putting my home on the market, there was no point responding. Geraldine was playing with me. Everything she said, I realised, was for her benefit, her own satisfaction. It had little to do with me. I was merely a convenient audience.

I closed my ears to her voice and focussed on the view. As the road levelled at the top of Burkes Pass I turned down a gravel road to the left, intending to follow Grays River south until I reached the turn-off to the Mackenzie Pass. Within a few minutes we entered a world that was so brightly coloured that it looked as if it belonged to an animated cartoon. All around us, for as far as the eye could see, were clumps of lupins growing in shades of dusty pink and violet, blue and purple. Against the background of tussock and dark earth, the flowers were so intense as to vibrate. Even Geraldine, who I knew had not yet finished with me, broke off from her monologue long enough to glance around, asking me to pull over so she could take a photo on her cellphone and send it to her brother, Ted, who had recently moved to Singapore.

I was happy to oblige and as Geraldine loitered at the side of the road taking pictures I wandered a short distance away and sat down, taking in the scenery and thinking over what she had said about Stella. As much as I felt put out by Geraldine’s interference in my private affairs, I couldn’t help but feel thrilled and flattered by what she had revealed. I would never have assumed that Stella loved me. I had hoped that she liked me—and I was fairly certain that she did, most of the time anyway—but to discover, even from Geraldine’s mouth, that I was the object of Stella’s love was thrilling. I knew, then, that I also loved her. For some reason I had been unable to tell her. I wondered if I had been waiting for her to mention it first but I didn’t think so. I am not so egotistical as to demand someone’s love before offering my own. Rather, I believed that both Stella and I suffered from shyness, a lack of confidence, where emotions were concerned. It was as if we didn’t feel entitled to express ourselves emotionally. Though I couldn’t be sure that that was the reason for Stella’s reticence, I had good reason to believe that I was stunted where women were concerned. I had rarely managed to feel at ease around members of

the opposite sex. I seemed to swing between a state of watchfulness and extreme guardedness. Simply by virtue of knowing me for such a long time, Geraldine was probably one of the few people in the world who had seen me as myself, that is, as a man who had nothing much to say for himself but who was, nevertheless, occasionally driven to communicate that ‘nothing’ in words. I found myself feeling quite sentimental and when Geraldine wandered over I made a space and invited her to sit down.

After a few minutes, during which time I made small-talk about the van and my new-found sense of freedom—which, to me, felt like power—I fell into a state of reverie, my thoughts drifting across random episodes from my childhood, most of which were related not so much to people but places I loved. One of these episodes was connected to the scene in front of us. I had probably told Geraldine about my trip to the Mackenzie with her father and brother many times before, but being under the influence of the wide-open landscape once again and succumbing to the warmth of the day, I wanted to invite Geraldine to share my happy state. I started to relate the story once more, dwelling on my gratitude towards her father, Dudley, a man who was in many ways more of a father figure than an uncle. I had barely started, however, when Geraldine interrupted saying, ‘Don’t start on that again. I’m sick of hearing about it.’

Surprised, I fell silent only to hear Geraldine continue, ‘I could never understand why you were always at our house when you were a kid. You were always in the way, hanging around. We had to make room for you.’ She broke off long enough to smile at me—as if to show there were no hard feelings—but then went on, ‘I hated the way my parents welcomed you as part of the family, as if you were some special child that needed heaps of attention. You were such a needy kid...’ She held my gaze and again smiled, as if what she said had nothing to do with who she was now, and even less to do with me. She spoke without bitterness and gave the impression of reporting some distant piece of news. For my own part, I was far less comfortable with the information I was hearing for the first time. The image of that golden-toned house, the smiling faces of its inhabitants, the real sense of family and well-being I had enjoyed as a child, fragmented before my eyes and in its place was a picture of a sour-faced child—Geraldine—and her all but silent sister Frith eyeing me with barely concealed resentment as I followed Dudley from the house, setting out on a new day’s adventure.

‘It was because of you that I left home when I did and married that man.’

She was referring to her former husband, Greg, a sullen bully of a man, very similar in nature to his father, Ray, the mechanic who had put the fear of God into me as a

child. Greg was a little younger than me and yet my memories of him—relating back to our school days—were of a boy who was so sure of his strength that he thought nothing of taking on boys twice his age, even though he often came off second-best. I had never understood what Geraldine saw in him. Her wedding had taken place in a registry office and I hadn't been invited. I knew, however, that Dudley was not keen on the match. In the photos taken after the brief ceremony, he is gazing into the middle distance, a tight-lipped smile on his face while Hilda, at his side, appears to have her eyes closed, as if in prayer. I may be exaggerating but the marriage, eventful though it was, was not happy. Ten years after taking up residence in Wollongong, Geraldine returned alone. The benefits of being married to a successful businessman, with the added perks of worldwide travel meant little, it seemed, when compared to the relief of gaining freedom from a tense and uncommunicative—though never physically violent—husband.

'I only married him because he was nothing like you and therefore nothing like the man my parents would have had me marry. I wanted my parents to notice me for a change.' She laughed and again I found her manner unnerving. 'Do you remember how when we were kids I used to make up all those foreign languages and give myself different names—like Margaret, or Penelope, and H  l  ne?' She grimaced, adding as an afterthought, 'I mean, for God's sake, "Geraldine"!'. She spat the name out, continuing, 'Do you have any idea what it is like to share your name with the neighbouring town?'

I nodded uncertainly. I had only a vague recollection of Geraldine's exotic names and, to my shame, had never considered that her name could cause so much distress.

'Well,' she went on, 'I tried out all those other names because I didn't want to belong to my own family. I thought you were all really boring so I used to pretend I was adopted—like I was some foreign princess, or someone whose parents had been killed in the war.'

She paused and looked at me, her eyes steady. 'I bet you didn't even know that, did you?'

No, I didn't, but I had the uneasy feeling that Geraldine hadn't yet reached the real point of her tirade. Despite the beautiful day, I felt cold.

'When I found out that you were adopted I felt sick.' She picked at a blade of grass near her feet, frowning, 'You even had to steal that from me, didn't you? No wonder I hated you.'

I half expected her to lunge at me but instead she shook her head, and pulling at another piece of grass, smiled in my direction and added, calmly, 'It's nice here.'

It was all I could do to nod and when, a minute later, she asked if I would one day write a poem for her, I nodded again and, as if nothing had happened between us, asked what sort of poem she'd like.

'Don't know. Anything, I guess.' She looked around and said, 'maybe something to remind me of this day. She burst out laughing and, startled, I found myself joining in, laughing and chortling until my raw nerves diminished. Out of sheer affection for my good friend, I touched her on the arm and apologised until she told me to 'bugger off' and stop being soft. For a moment she held my gaze, and then said that all that was in the past, that she didn't mean half of it, and that I was all right, really—but I'd better write her a poem, and it better be good—bloody good. Or else.

It took an entire evening to track down Stella's whereabouts in England. Every time I got through to the hotel where I thought she would be, I discovered that she had already moved on. Luckily she had left a trail of forwarding addresses and as I made my way through them I recalled something she had told me, a snippet which related to her father but which now seemed equally suited to me. As a child, she had always believed that she stood a better chance of catching his attention if she kept her distance from him. When I realised she was applying a similar tactic with me I felt a pang of sadness, as if I had let her down.

It was difficult to know whether or not she was pleased to hear from me. On the surface she appeared irritated but after a few minutes of mild bickering, I noticed the tone of her voice soften and when I finally managed to make her understand that I had phoned for no other reason than to hear the sound of her voice there was a long silence on the end of the line, followed by a chuckle. 'You're not missing me, are you?' she asked.

'Yes,' I freely admitted, 'Quite a lot.'

In view of what Geraldine had told me, I half expected Stella to reply in kind. When she didn't, I was disappointed and despite myself prompted her, asking outright if she missed me too?

'I've been so busy,' she replied, 'I really haven't had much time to think about it.'

I waited, embarrassed by my need for a kinder answer.

'I suppose...,' she said, her voice trailing off.

I let the matter drop and began to fill her in with my news, mentioning both my recent outing with Geraldine and the fact that the event manager for the opening ceremony of the Aoraki Museum had been in touch, telling me that my poem had been enthusiastically received by the organising committee and that the opening of the centre would take place in June, on the shortest day of the year. They wanted me to read the poem. This last detail alarmed me. I had got it into my head that someone else—a politician, a local dignitary or an actor—would read the piece. Public speaking was not my thing and as I voiced my concerns to Stella I was aware of my heart pounding, so nerve wracking was the thought of having to stand before a crowd and read something I had written.

‘I hope you’ll come with me?’ I asked, wondering at the same time if there might be some way of getting Stella to do the reading for me. ‘I know it’s probably not your thing—but it’s a weekend away and if the weather is clear...’

‘I assumed I was invited,’ she said. ‘But if you’ve changed your ...’ She broke off and I heard a distant sound, a woman’s voice followed by a man’s, and then a slamming door.

‘...mind,’ continued Stella, sounding as distracted as I felt.

It took a moment for me to gather my thoughts. ‘No, I really want you to come.’

Instead of responding, Stella remained quiet, as though her attention was elsewhere. Again, I could make out the sound of voices in the distance and a moment later Stella spoke, ‘Hang on a minute. There’s something going on outside my room, in the corridor.’

The receiver was placed down—on a side-table, I guessed. A moment later I heard raised voices. A man shouted, ‘Oi, why don’t you just mind your own business and piss off.’

Unable to see what was going on, I grew more and more concerned, wondering what was happening. Seconds later, I heard Stella’s voice, shouting, ‘Stop it!’ and then I heard nothing until the man’s voice yelled, ‘I’ll fucking kill you, you slut.’ There was a scream and then silence. I found myself calling down the phone, ‘Stella! Stella! Is everything all right?’ The silence lengthened and I became even more anxious, wondering what on earth I could do from where I was.

I paced around the kitchen, feeling increasingly helpless as the minutes passed. ‘Stella!’ I yelled as loudly as I could. ‘What’s going on?’ Occasionally I thought I heard the sound of muffled voices, but I couldn’t tell what was being said. An image of Stella slumped in the corridor, surrounded by a pool of blood, entered my head and my heart began to pound. ‘Somebody do something,’ I pleaded, and then, as if by miracle, she came back to the phone, her voice strangely flat as she said, ‘Sorry about that.’

I almost cried with relief, ‘Are you all right? Have you been hurt? I was going to call the police.’

I heard a sharp intake of breath and then Stella said, ‘It’s okay. Security is taking care of it.’

‘But what’s going on?’ I insisted. Even though I knew Stella was safe, I couldn’t rid the image of her blood-soaked body from my mind. I wanted to see her—to see that she was unhurt.

‘I don’t know. Some kind of domestic. They were both so drunk, it was hard to tell.’ She gave a hollow laugh. ‘Jesus, I’ll be glad to get out of here. This country is fucking mad.’

Listening to Stella’s description of the fight made me appreciate just how much I cared about her. I asked if she had had any other frightening episodes but she assured me that everything was fine. There was no need to worry.

‘I could always fly over,’ I offered. ‘I could look after you.’

She laughed but I was being deadly serious. I wanted to look after her.

‘Tell you what,’ she finally said, ‘Why don’t you come up to Christchurch and meet me off the plane when I get back.’

‘Yes, I’ll be there.’

Stella laughed again, and asked what had got into me. Was I really that worried about her?

When I responded, Yes, her voice softened and she said, ‘Really?’

I didn’t want to let her go. I asked, as casually as I could, if she recalled having had any odd—or significant—conversations with Geraldine.

‘Odd?’ asked Stella. ‘They’re always odd.’ She hesitated, adding, ‘Could you be a bit more specific?’

I was about to respond that it didn’t matter but, stealing myself, said, ‘Well, maybe not odd, exactly. But did you ever talk to her about me?’

I was aware of the silence on the other end of the line. I had the feeling that whatever I had said had struck some kind of a chord with Stella, and that she was weighing up the situation carefully before replying.

‘What’s Geraldine told you?’ she eventually answered. ‘Has she said something?’

It was my turn to become cautious. Unwilling to admit that I had heard, via Geraldine, that Stella loved me, I stammered, ‘Nothing.’

To my surprise, Stella wouldn’t let it drop. There was almost something of a note of relief in her voice—as if grateful for the opportunity to broach an awkward subject. ‘Well, she asked me if I thought you were any good as a poet. She wanted to know if I thought you were a one-hit wonder or someone to be taken seriously.’

This wasn’t the response I had been expecting. Nevertheless I couldn’t prevent my next question, ‘What did you say?’

I waited, not knowing what I would do if Stella replied that, as far as she was concerned, I was a one-hit wonder.

‘Wouldn’t you like to know!’ she laughed.

The plain fact was that I did want to know. Recently, I’d been feeling out of step with my times. I saw myself as belonging to an older generation of poets, people who maintained a sense of tradition, rather than the newer generation whose work I had discovered in recent anthologies. In particular, I recalled feeling taken aback by the confidence and style of the young Auckland poets. I found their voices challenging. I wanted to believe, that my work—unadorned and plain though it is—was capable of bearing witness to some fundamental truth. In order to write, I had to believe my work still held its value.

‘Do you think I’m any good?’

‘You’re not bad.’

I wanted more.

‘Three Days at Least...’ began Stella.

I stiffened, anticipating what might follow.

‘...is a great poem. It’s a classic. And *Kindred Spirits* was good too. Didn’t some reviewer describe it as elegiac and powerful?’

I didn’t interrupt but allowed her to continue.

‘But, I think your Mount Cook poem is even better—from what I’ve seen of it. It’s very moving, very honest....vulnerable.’

I felt a huge wave of gratitude. If there had ever been a time when I should have given voice to my feelings—or indeed my love—for Stella, it was then. I should have grabbed hold of that moment but I was too slow and that intimate moment passed. All that was unsaid remained unsaid.

Stella stifled a yawn. ‘I’m tired. Talk soon, eh?’

The unspoken hung between us and then there was a click as Stella placed the phone on its receiver. I could have kicked myself.

I never found out if the conversation in which Stella confessed her love for me actually took place. All I had was Geraldine’s word for it. However, knowing that Stella thought I was a good poet amounted to the same thing. And my decision to dedicate my Mount Cook poem to her was my way of letting her know that I felt the same way about her. So, although it might have been simpler to say ‘I love you,’ neither of us did. But it was all right. We understood each other.



One evening, about a month before I was due at the opening of the Aoraki Museum, I was telephoned by Kim midway through dinner. For weeks I'd been feeling guilty about not phoning and so even though I wanted to finish my meal I let her talk. I wondered if I had forgotten her birthday but I didn't think I should say anything. I hoped, however, that she hadn't rung because her birthday was today. That would be very awkward.

It turned out that it was *my* birthday. Had I known, I might have done something to celebrate. It was embarrassing to admit that all I had planned was to finish my dinner and then read a book. I hadn't even opened a bottle of wine. In fact there was no wine in the house.

I mentioned that Stella was in Christchurch and not due down until the weekend, and, from the tone of her voice, I could tell Kim was concerned I might be lonely. She hinted I should go across the road to Geraldine's but given how cold it was outside—and that Geraldine had paying guests—I decided to stay put.

In order to draw the attention away from my birthday, I told Kim about the forthcoming ceremony, forgetting that I had once suggested she join me for the opening. The words were barely out of my mouth before she was reaching for her diary, marking down the dates. Who was going to be there? The Prime Minister? Anyone famous? Hayley Westenra? Could anyone come? She spoke so rapidly that I had trouble keeping pace with her thoughts and so it took me a while to realise that her attention was now focussed on the cost of coming down. I heard her ask which would be cheaper, flying into Christchurch and hiring a car—or flying direct to Mount Cook. She sighed. Both, she thought, would be pretty expensive. I was about to suggest that she not bother, that I wouldn't be offended if she couldn't make it, when she happened to add that she wouldn't miss it for the world, she was so proud of me. She hesitated, weighed up her words, and then continued, 'Our parents...' she paused, started again. 'Matthew and Lily would have been so pleased knowing you had grown up to be a poet. Nothing would have made them prouder.'

She talked on, telling me—as she had before—that her parents had always loved poetry, that their shelves at home had been filled with the works of all the great English writers. 'I always felt that I failed them,' said Kim, her voice wobbling slightly as she spoke. 'I was good with my hands. I was practical...I could make things but I wasn't much good when it came to putting things into words.' She hesitated and added, 'I wasn't

much of a trophy.’ As the word ‘trophy’ settled into my brain, I felt a tide of outrage rise up from within me. In that moment I saw Kim’s childhood unfold before me. I pictured her standing before her parents, her expectation of parental love and attention diminishing as time and time again she failed to attain the standards set by her mother and father, the scholars, the dazzling young things. It hadn’t occurred to me until then that Kim’s childhood had been lonely and that her desire to know me fulfilled some deep longing within her, a longing to be part of a family. And yet everything she had said and done up to this point—her initial search for me, all her attempts to keep in touch, to include me in her life—so clearly indicated that that was what she had always wanted. Truly, she had wanted a blood-brother, a link to her past, and someone who accepted her for who she was. With a sinking heart, I realised she had wanted my love and acceptance.

It seemed to me that I had not been guilty of ignoring her so much as dismissing her. I hadn’t understood how much I mattered to her. Such an idea had never crossed my mind.

‘I guess it’s going to cost several hundred dollars.’ She sounded anxious. ‘That’s a lot for one weekend.’ Nothing in the tone of her voice suggested she was asking for help.

‘We’ll go halves,’ I said. There was a faint sound, a kind of an ‘oh’ from the other end of the phone. I hoped she would accept. I wanted her to come.

To persuade her I began to tell her how beautiful the hills would be at this time of year. When the snow is low, when it’s right down on the plains, it’s the most beautiful sight in all of New Zealand. The ground twinkles, I said, laughing at how outlandish such a statement must sound to someone who had never seen the place for themselves. As I pictured the scene for myself, I became increasingly enthusiastic. I was like a kid again, describing the dazzling mountains, the turquoise waters of Tekapo and Pukaki, and the sky that was so intensely blue—simultaneously pale and deep—that to stand beneath it, looking up, made you feel dizzy. ‘It’s true,’ I said. ‘You wait. I’ll take you to my favourite place...then you’ll see.’

I didn’t really care how crazy I sounded, just so long as she agreed to come down. That was all I wanted. I was about to tell her more when she interrupted, saying, ‘For a minute you reminded me of Charles Brasch—the way you were talking about the mountains. He loved all that stuff.’

Stunned, I fell silent.

‘I told you, didn’t I, about how he used to write to my parents when we lived in England. I think he made stuff up in an attempt to lure them back to New Zealand—not that it ever worked.’

I listened, my eyes fixed on my dinner plate, focussing on the mound of food which had barely been touched.

‘When I first came to New Zealand,’ continued Kim, ‘I did a little tour of the country and called by Charles’s house in Dunedin. My parents had given me some books to pass on to him, poetry mostly, by obscure Russian and Eastern Europeans, writers I had never heard of. It was stuff that had been translated by some colleague of my father’s...’ Her voice faded, as if she had lost her train of thought.

‘Oh that’s right...’ she continued, ‘Brasch. I went on a walk with him —on Flagstaff, I think—and he spent the whole time pointing out plants and telling me about some valley near Queenstown called the Hollyford where he’d been tramping with a friend. I had a nice time.’

‘I never met him,’ I said.

I waited a moment and added, ‘You never mentioned him before...I would have remembered.’

I heard Kim mumble a faint ‘oh’ and then the silence between us lengthened and became awkward.

Less than a week later a large courier envelope was delivered to my door. Inside was a mixed bundle consisting of white envelopes and pale blue aerogrammes held together with a tied rubber band. A yellow post-it note was stuck to the top envelope. ‘I thought you would like to read these. See you soon, Kim’. The contrast between Kim’s scrawl and the neat, almost spidery, upright handwriting on each of the twenty or so letters was what first caught my attention. All of the letters were addressed to Prof. M. Butler and turning one aerogramme over I gazed at the sender’s name: C. Brasch.

For several minutes I simply held the letters in my hand. I wasn’t sure if I did this out of respect for the letter itself: as if it was something sacred, a kind of museum object requiring special handling or whether it was because the content of each letter was personal, meant for another person—not me. The thought that I was prying took hold in my mind and, despite my curiosity, I could not bring myself to read them.

Every letter had been opened—by Matthew—using either a paper-knife or some other fine blade. As I held the first envelope—a rectangle of cream-coloured cartridge

paper—I imagined him sitting in his study, seated behind a leather-topped desk, or, perhaps, reclining in an armchair by an open fire. In my mind’s eye I watched as he turned each letter, weighing its paper in his fingers before opening it, slowly and carefully. I wondered if he looked forward to this correspondence. Did he reply to Brasch straight away? Or did he allow the contents of each letter to settle in his brain? I wondered if he passed the letters to Lily or did he keep them for himself? Up to this point, I had given Matthew far less thought than I had Lily—but now, I saw him opposite me and, even before reading what Brasch had written, I longed to read my birth father’s replies. I wished I had been included in the conversation.

Never having met Brasch myself but having received several notes from him—usually attached to some poem of mine that had been rejected—I expected these letters, which I finally began to read in no particular order, to have a purpose, to be *about* something rather than the affectionately worded pieces they were. It was clear, straight away, that Brasch was fond of my father. He mentioned, for example, that the spring bulbs which were just coming up in his Dunedin garden reminded him of an afternoon he had spent in my father’s company, when, after a long walk, they had rested on a river bank near Oxford. There were patches of anemones poking up through the long grass and the ground was damp. Nevertheless, they had sat and talked long into the cool of the evening, neither one of them wanting to be the first to stand up, and leave.

In another letter, posted from London, he referred to a twilight stroll they had made together through the streets of the local neighbourhood. ‘I’m sure Lily would not have been impressed when she discovered you had not been to the library ...’ Brasch wrote. He went on to say, ‘I hope to see you back in London before I leave but I understand how difficult it must be, what with your teaching and family commitments. Maybe I could visit for the day before I depart for New Zealand. There isn’t much time left.’

The next letter I picked up, a pale blue aerogramme, was postmarked Dunedin. It appeared to have been written as a quick reply to some topic raised by Matthew in a previous note. ‘By all means send the piece,’ Brasch wrote, ‘but I’m afraid that you’ll miss the deadline unless you hurry.’ He went on to mention several other names, contributors I suspect, who were to be included in the forthcoming issue. I gathered he was referring to *Landfall*. Amongst the list of names the one that caught my attention was Harry Scott. Brasch, I noticed, spent more time talking about Scott’s contribution than anyone else’s. ‘As I may have said before,’ wrote Brasch, ‘he reminds me of you—though

not in looks. He is a mountaineer, but not of the British variety.’ I am unclear whether this last statement was intended as a slight jibe towards Matthew, who, by this time was probably more at home in an English landscape than a New Zealand one or if it simply displayed Brasch’s admiration for Scott, or even his own love of the hills. I couldn’t say.

The last letter I read caught my attention for an entirely different reason. In it Brasch described his own work, the difficulties he was having with an as yet unnamed poem. He complained that he could not fully trust his judgment, that he needed to let the poem sit for several weeks and then come back to it, then maybe he would know if it was truly finished. He went on to say that he admired Matthew’s ability to be ‘objective—even ruthlessly so’ where his own work was concerned. ‘I wish I was more like you,’ he observed, ‘able to submit a work as soon as it is written. I could never be that certain...’

It was strange for me to encounter this note of uncertainty in Brasch’s voice. I had always regarded him as highly skilled. It hadn’t occurred to me that he might be plagued by self-doubt. I was interested, too, by the high regard in which he held Matthew. In several letters Brasch not only sought Matthew’s opinion of a writer or a book but went on to say, ‘If anyone can make sense of it, you can.’ He referred to my father as a scholar, a title Brasch clearly did not feel entitled to take for himself. His respect for Matthew was clear and despite all the years I had tried to keep these ‘other’ parents, Matthew and Lily, locked in the back room of my mind, I found that I was upset, envious of the relationship between these two men. My ‘other’ father and Brasch. By rights I should have been included.

# BODEN BLACK

Stella and Kim were with me as I sat on Foliage Hill, taking in the scene of the earthworks below.

I knew without Stella telling me that I couldn't expect things to remain unchanged. Things did change, whether or not we wanted them to. As Stella put it, it was yet another example of people 'fucking things up'—in this case turning an area of golden tussock, scraggly fern and matagouri into a huge shingle pit, a car park for campervans. I knew she was right but the more she spoke, the greater the gulf between the two of us. For her to take my personal loss—the destruction of a place that had formed an essential part of my life—and turn it into a rage against 'fucking idiots' made me aware of how different we were. Where I sought stillness, Stella wanted to find the people responsible and give them hell. 'They just don't give a shit anymore,' she continued. 'It's exactly the same as when they built the Clyde dam and flooded our old home—they're bastards.'

If I could have made Stella be quiet I would have. I willed her to stop talking but she was working herself into a fury. She told me I should boycott the museum. I should tell them to stick New Zealand poetry up their arses...she would have a go at the prime minister, the minister of conservation, the lot of them. 'It's not good enough,' she ranted. 'They're ruining this place. They're all the bloody same...there will be nothing left soon. Bloody tourists taking over the country—and we let them do it!'

On the other side of me sat Kim. It was clear she had been too stunned to speak but she suddenly caught my eye and asked, 'What's happened?'

I was able to provide a kind of 'before and after' description of the area below us: before there had been a large open area of ground between the hill on which we sat and the larger White Horse Hill across the flats. 'That was a campground,' I said pointing towards the foot of White Horse Hill. 'A few old huts, a rough gravel road and then over there,' I said pointing a little towards the right-hand end of the hill, 'is the site of the first hotel—it was flooded around 1913, I think. And that's Mount Sefton,' I continued, indicating the mountain directly in front of us, '...and the Hooker Valley...see? Over there, where that long line of people is walking...and the Hooker River. And up there,' I said, pointing in the direction of a cloud-covered peak, 'is Mount Cook.' I hesitated. 'So, it's not all changed. The mountains are still there.'

'But the parking area and the toilet block?' asked Kim. 'You didn't know about them?'

I shook my head.

‘I haven’t been here before so I don’t know what it was like,’ she continued. ‘But the parking area is off to one side. I mean,’ she spoke hesitantly, unsure of how her words would be received, ‘it’s tucked behind the hill so you can’t even see it when you’re standing in front of the Hermitage, can you? All this area still looks pristine when you look out from the hotel window.’ She made a sweeping motion with her hand, indicating the scrub-covered land between us and White Horse Hill.

‘It’s only when you’re down here, by the camping area...’ Kim’s voice ground to a stand-still.

I heard Stella snort and mutter something about the dishonesty of keeping things pretty for the paying hotel guests while ruining it for the locals. My thoughts turned briefly to Beano, who I knew would be arriving with his girlfriend sometime after dark. I imagined him pitching his tent on a patch of rocky ground and, knowing he was only coming up to hear me read my poem I felt guilty. I also had the sickening thought that I could have offered him the use of *my* campervan.

Stella was still muttering and although I was also angry about the destruction I wanted to deal with those feelings later. For now, I just wanted to—what? Come to terms with the change in the landscape? Adjust to it? Until I had caught sight of the new car park it hadn’t occurred to me that the memories of my youth—the very core of me—were so dependent on one small parcel of land remaining unchanged. It was as though, instead of being able to see my face reflected in a mirror, I had been handed a piece of plain glass. There was nothing in front of me which brought ‘me’ to mind. I wasn’t out there anymore. It was an entirely different world, one from which I was absent.

The poem, which I was to read at a dawn ceremony had been—in part—about this place. I hadn’t constructed the poem anticipating or knowing that the area itself would be gone. I had intended to say, ‘Look! This place is so special I want to share it with you...It’s precious, a gift!’ Now the place was ruined. And it had only been a little over a year since my last visit—how could this have happened? And how could I explain my sense of loss? I had never shared this place with anyone—it had been my secret, my life...no one else knew how important it was. Only Walter had had some real idea.

Throughout the rest of the day I was aware of sounding like a tour guide for Kim’s benefit. ‘I stayed here with my parents when I was a kid,’ I said, pointing towards the main entrance of the Hermitage. ‘Not this exact hotel, though,’ I continued, explaining that the Hermitage I had visited had been destroyed by fire in the late 1950s. ‘We went for



a walk over there,' I added, pointing in the general direction of Governor's Bush. 'There used to be lots of keas back then...' My thoughts drifted back to the sound I had heard, the cry of the kea and how I had tried to find a rhyme for it. 'It must be queer to be a kea.' I heard my father's voice intoning, 'clowns of the sky' and I remembered the man with the long elegant fingers who had quoted Byron.

We stepped back to allow a group of Japanese tourists to pass us on their way into the hotel. After a few minutes we followed, joining the queue at reception, waiting for our turn to check in. As I gave my name the receptionist smiled and, to my surprise, murmured the first line of 'Three Days at Least'. She apologised that that was all she could remember. She had studied the poem at school and had got 76 per cent for School Certificate English, her highest mark ever. That was in 1979, she said. I looked more closely at her face—she appeared younger—and then thanked her for the 'welcome pack' she handed me. I listened as she explained that I was expected to attend a quick meeting later that evening, in the Sebastopol Suite. She'd be there in the morning—she was looking forward to it. One of the downsides of working in a place like this, she said, was the lack of culture.

Over afternoon tea, hours after our late-morning walk up Foliage Hill, I began to feel angry. I glanced across at Stella and had to bite my tongue, and stop myself from blaming her for making me accept the commission in the first place. I prodded my knife at the scone on my plate, and complained that it was stale. Immediately Kim offered to swap hers with mine, saying 'I quite like stale scones.' I also heard Stella hiss at me, beneath her breath, saying 'Pull your horns in.'

The problem, I wanted to say, is that I don't want to have to face reality—meaning the area around Foliage Hill—at the moment. I wanted to explain to Kim that that the image of the earthworks, and the car park, were smothering the piece I was expected to read. I was rapidly losing my confidence and I no longer believed in my poem anymore. And, without me to believe in it, the poem carried no weight, it no longer rang true. It was just words.

'My father, began Kim, 'found it hard to be around us when he was working on a translation. He'd lock himself away in his study.'

I pictured Matthew in his study, one of Brasch's letters on the desk in front of him.

'Lily used to accuse him of being Victorian. She hated it...She hated the fact that she was left looking after me when all she wanted was to escape to a study of her own. She was like you. She wanted to be left in peace.'

Kim hadn't really understood what I was trying to say but I felt sorry for her. Her childhood sounded so much worse than my own. 'It's really good that you could come down this weekend,' I said, taking a bite from my scone. Kim was watching me. I smiled and nodded, 'It's okay,' I said. 'Not as bad as I first thought.'

I left Stella sleeping and, without turning on the light, struggled into my clothes, winding my way along several long corridors and down four flights of stairs until I reached the main entrance of the hotel. As I passed through the foyer I caught sight of a young uniformed Japanese man, a receptionist I hadn't seen before. He was bent over a copy of Harry Potter but hearing me pass he glanced up and concealed the book. He bowed his head slightly, murmuring 'Good Evening.' I had the feeling he was relieved that I was not going to take him away from his book. He resumed reading the moment I left the building.

I guessed that the temperature was below freezing. Already the wind-screens of the cars in the hotel car park were obscured by a thick film of ice. The grass beneath my shoes made a crunching sound as I headed towards a patch of ground illuminated by an orange-coloured street lamp. Below this light a sign had been newly erected. Small off-cuts of wood still lay on the ground and two piles of upturned earth, one either side of the posts supporting the sign, were lightly covered with frost. The sign pointed towards the new Aoraki Museum, approximately fifteen minutes by foot along a newly constructed nature walk.

As I stepped onto the boardwalk my foot skidded and I fell heavily onto my hip, cutting my palm on the jagged edge of some chicken wire as I tried to break my fall. It seemed a bad omen. I suddenly wondered if I could ignore the opening, the speeches and all the fuss and simply go away somewhere by myself. I suspected that no one would miss me. The idea appealed to me but I lacked the courage to carry it through. Besides I was a grown man and such behaviour—which might have been permissible or even 'cool' in a man forty years my junior—lacked dignity.

I entered a section of scrubby bush and the air around me suddenly became warmer, less abrasive against my lungs. Complete darkness settled around me and it was easy to imagine that I was not alone, that someone or something was watching me, following me from a distance just as Dudley's old dog, Bruce, had done all those years before as I made my nightly walks around Fairlie. To prevent myself from falling off the side of the walkway, I half shuffled, half pushed my feet ahead of me, taking the path one slow step at a time. Then, emerging from the dense bush and into the occasional clearing, I found that my eyes were so well adjusted to the dark that I was able to progress quite rapidly, taking four or five steps without hesitation. Despite the freezing temperature the smell of the ground filled my senses—a damp, muggy, earthy smell, one of fern, moss and

tussock. Once, losing my balance, I reached out and caught hold of a small sapling, most likely a turpentine bush and when I raised my hand to my face some minutes later the smell of its bark was contained in the palm of my hand and I inhaled deeply.

I had already been walking more than quarter of an hour when I finally saw a light, a short way off, almost directly ahead of me. For a minute I imagined myself as the big, bad wolf of various children's fairy-tales, some creature of the night lured out from the forest by the glowing lamp in a woodcutter's hut. It was surprising how quickly I had changed roles, going from the person being watched to the ominous presence myself. Perhaps I was simply flattering myself. I doubt that anyone else in the world had ever seen me as such.

At the edge of the bush I stopped and looked towards the glass-walled museum. Inside, two people moved about. One appeared to be a man in his mid-thirties, the other a young woman called Caro, whom I had met earlier, during the meeting up at the hotel. She had been brought in to design and set up the exhibition and had left the meeting early, apologising that she still had some finishing off to do before the opening. Caro's hair was long, almost to her waist and dread-locked. She had tied it off her face with a scarf but, even so, when she stooped down to move some kind of CD player, a ghetto blaster, her hair fell forward, obscuring her face and upper body, giving her the appearance of a tall, macramé sculpture.

The man was painting a free-standing wall. As he swept his paint roller over its surface, he moved his entire body in rhythm with some music I could not hear. Despite this, his energy, his face looked drawn, as if he had been putting in too many hours.

As I watched, Caro suddenly walked towards the window facing me and slid back the door. In that moment I caught the sound of the man's voice and then her clearer voice, replying, 'I'm pretty sure there's another tin by the hut, I'll get it.' As she stepped out of the door, she turned to face the painter and although I couldn't hear what she said, it made him laugh and when she turned back towards me, I could see that she was smiling, that she looked happy, as if she didn't have a care in the world.

Around the museum was a wide deck and as she passed the spot where her friend might have been able to see her without turning his head, she tapped on the glass and blew him a kiss. He gave her a sign, the thumbs up, and she pressed her face close to the window and called, 'Just one more hour and then it's you and me, baby, promise!' She laughed loudly, raised her hands high above her head and wiggled her hips in a kind of dance. I could see the young man's mouth move, in response, and I guessed he was saying

something along the lines of, ‘Yeah, yeah.’ But he was smiling, his eyes following the girl as she walked away.

I trailed after Caro, following her around the museum building, pausing when she disappeared up a narrow track leading into the bush. A moment later I saw a light go on and then a few minutes after that she reappeared, carrying a tin of paint. She passed by and I heard the sliding door of the museum open and, with it, a sudden burst of music, followed by a deeper quiet as the door once more closed.

Earlier, during the meeting to discuss the opening ceremony, I had turned down the opportunity to familiarise myself with the museum building when it had been offered to me. A number of people associated with the ceremony were going down to look at the centre but I hadn’t wanted to be part of a group tour and so had made an excuse not to join them. No one had minded.

Alone now, I reached the track Caro had taken a few minutes before. A piece of timber, another sign, lay propped up against a tree to one side, its supporting posts nearby on the ground. In the gloom I couldn’t make out what the sign said but it hardly mattered as I had already started up the track. I hesitated a short distance later when I reached a fork, one path leading to a small, lighted shed—where Caro had found the paint. The second, wider track continued on, leading up a gentle slope in the direction of what I could just make out was a bank or hummock of some kind.

Within minutes I was standing on an area of raised ground, surrounded by tussock and low scrub. In front of me, defined by the dull glow of a single outdoor, garden-type light, was a hut. I remained motionless for several moments as my eyes took in all that was visible: its narrow door, the small, square-paned window on one long wall, and the corrugated iron roof which had been folded, cardboard-like, over the top of the hut’s walls. In part because I believed I must be mistaken, that some trick of the light was making me see things, I looked about me before taking a cautious step forward. The grass, heavily frosted in the clearing, crunched beneath my feet and the ground itself was much firmer than that on the forest floor. When, with my third or fourth step, my shoe broke a twig, I jumped and spun around, certain that someone was behind me, shadowing my every move.

A large frozen puddle, the size of a pond, separated me from the door to the building and, sprouting out of the centre of the puddle was a sign reading, ‘This historic mountain hut, known to mountaineers as “The Far-light”, was originally built in 1955. It

was replaced in 2001.’ Beneath these words was the logo of a major company and the words ‘Proud sponsors of the Aoraki Museum.’

Although the sign confirmed that it was my hut, I raised my eyes to the building and began, once more, the slow process of mentally reconstructing it, piece by piece. As I edged around the puddle a bright security light suddenly clicked on and I froze, mid-step, waiting for someone to appear and ask what I was doing. No one did, and after a minute I continued, going right up to the door and cupping my hand over its square pane to look inside. From within I could make out the shadowy outline of the long bench which filled the entire length of one wall. Along the walls were the double-tiered bunks, the top bunk so close to the ceiling that it was virtually impossible for anyone to sit up.

The window pane was cold against my face. When I breathed its surface grew cloudy with condensation. I stepped back and ran my hand over the door, feeling its paint, brittle and dry, break away under my fingers. As my eyes came to rest on the faded sign reading, ‘No Dogs Allowed,’ I felt a lump in my throat and I swallowed hard, recalling Wim’s satisfaction and Douglas’s displeasure when the former had nailed the sign to the door, joking ‘That should keep the scoundrels away!’

I remembered the day Athol and the others had headed down the valley, leaving Walter and me alone at the camp, where we found ourselves trapped by a storm— the quiet days we spent talking and, in my case, writing, my thoughts challenged by ideas of injustice and yet awakened to the beauty of the world.

I recalled the feeling of release upon returning to the task of hut-building, how good it had felt to be outdoors, the newly cut timber and wood shavings so fragrant in that sterile world of snow and rock. I remembered that the only sound was that made by our hammers. Whenever we paused the quiet was so intense, and the air so still, that I tended to look around in wonder.

I traced my hands over the walls of the hut, expecting to see the lead-head nails we had used, but of course those original lead-heads were gone, replaced with new ones when the hut was dismantled and moved to its new site far below the glaciers it had once surveyed.

The original brass door knob was also gone, replaced at some point by a large handle. It wasn’t surprising. The round knob had been so difficult to grip and turn. I wondered how long it had been until someone had finally grown so fed up with the old knob that they had sent in the replacement. I imagined the old brass one being discarded, not thrown out, but left behind on the narrow window ledge or adapted, during a long

storm, perhaps, into a candle-holder or even, sometime later, being carried out by some mountaineer who had thought, 'I could use that at home.'

I pulled down on the handle and to my surprise the door opened, engulfing me in a smell of kerosene, smoke and the fug of old kapok mattresses and sacking. The interior was just as I remembered it: strips of painted tongue-and-groove lined the walls. In the half light it was possible to see that the ceiling above the galvanised bench was discoloured, grimy with soot whereas above the opposite wall it was still pale, clean. The beds were the same narrow, wire meshed bunks we had constructed and for a second I remembered the first time the hut was slept in: while Walter and I chose to sleep outside, under the clear sky, our companions had crammed into the small dwelling and laughed and talked late into the night.

I was about to take a step into the hut when my legs hit something hard and I jerked forward, only just stopping myself from falling by grabbing hold of the door-frame. In the dim light I hadn't noticed that a thigh-high sheet of thick Perspex had been fastened across the entrance, stopping visitors from going further. From the corner of my eye, I could see another sign fastened to a stand, which I guessed requested visitors to remain outside so as not to damage the heritage building. Something like that, anyway.

I could have stepped across the barrier, but there was no need.

Instead, I closed the door and walked back towards the hotel. It was well after midnight and the moon was up, filtering through the trees, lighting my way.

In the morning I would return and read my poem.

## NOTE ON SOURCES

Various books and journals provided an introduction to the topic of mountaineering at Mount Cook during the period 1935-60. The *New Zealand Alpine Journal* and *The Canterbury Mountaineer* (the journal of the Canterbury Mountaineering Club) were particularly helpful. Michael Mahoney's *Harry Ayres: Mountain Guide* is a useful biography of Harry Ayres while Edmund Hillary's *Nothing Venture, Nothing Win* and Norman Hardie's *On My Own Two Feet: the Life of a Mountaineer* provide further information on climbing during the 1950s. Nan Bowie's *Mick Bowie: The Hermitage Years* offered descriptions of the Mount Cook guiding community during the 1950s while Harry Wigley's *Ski-Plane Adventure* describes the tourist industry at Mount Cook, including the introduction of ski-planes to the area. Jonathan Scott's *Harry's Absence: Looking for My Father on the Mountain* provides information about his father, mountaineer Harry Scott. The references to Fairlie and the Foliage Hill area of Mount Cook are based on my own experiences.

Books providing first-person narratives about the treatment of conscientious objectors during World War Two include Walter Lawry's *We Said No to War*, Ian Hamilton's *Till Human Voices Wake Us* and Will Foote's *Bread and Water: the Escape and Ordeal of Two New Zealand World War 2 Conscientious Objectors*. Paul Millar's *Spark to a Waiting Fuse* features correspondence between conscientious objector Noel Ginn and poet James K. Baxter during the period 1942-46. For a detailed overview concerning the detainment and treatment of conscientious objectors, David Grant's *Out in the Cold* is particularly helpful.

For help with the New Zealand literary scene of the 1950s-60s I read *Landfall* and Charles Brasch's *Indirections: A Memoir* as well as various poetry collections containing the work of New Zealand poets who wrote about the Mackenzie Basin and the Southern Alps such as James K. Baxter, Ursula Bethell, Charles Brasch, Denis Glover and (more recently) Brian Turner. I was also interested in reading the *New Zealand Alpine Journal* and the writing of Dan Davin and John Mulgan simply because I was attracted to the style of writing and was looking for a way to establish tone and the voice of the New Zealand male during the post-war period.



The poems mentioned in the novel are:  
Mary Ursula Bethell, 'By Burke's Pass'.  
Lord Byron, *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*.  
Charles Brasch, 'The Silent Land'.

Thanks to Alan Roddick for permission to use Brasch's work.  
Poems by Bethell and Brasch are from *A Book of New Zealand Verse* chosen by Allen Curnow.

The 'Far-light' hut does not exist. However, it closely resembles the old Empress Hut which was built in the early 1950s and located at 8000 feet on the Empress Glacier, Mount Cook. Anyone travelling to Mount Cook village can see this hut—in its preserved state—outside the DOC visitor centre. They can also see the car park which has taken the place of the tussock at the foot of Foliage Hill.

*Boden Black* was written under supervision and published as *The Hut Builder* by Penguin (NZ) in 2010. The published version was edited by Rachel Scott and is slightly different from my edited version which is offered in this thesis.

**WITH AXE AND PEN IN THE NEW ZEALAND ALPS: Differences Between Overseas and New Zealand Written Accounts of Climbing Mount Cook 1882-1920 and the Emergence of a New Zealand Voice in Mountaineering Literature.**

## INTRODUCTION

From the 1880s British climbers in search of first ascents ventured beyond Europe to the mountain ranges of India, Canada and New Zealand. Mountaineering, offered one way of establishing and extending ‘the limits of British imperial authority’ (Hansen 386). Of the various regions within the Empire the Himalayas held the greatest attraction—as it was here that climbers could test themselves on the tallest mountains. New Zealand could not tempt mountaineers with high summits but the Southern Alps provided an opportunity for mountaineers to make first ascents on peaks that presented ‘serious difficulties of a mountaineering character’ (Green 6-7).

*With Axe and Pen* highlights a chapter in Mount Cook mountaineering history which focusses on ‘firsts’: the first attempt on the mountain by Irish cleric William Spotswood Green in 1882, the first ascent in 1894 by South Island locals Tom Fyfe, George Graham and Jack Clarke, the first traverse of the High Peak led by guides Peter Graham and Tom Fyfe with Malcolm Ross and Samuel Turner in 1906, the first Grand Traverse in 1913 led by Mount Cook guides Peter Graham and Darby Thomson with client Freda du Faur, and the first solo ascent by British-born New Zealand resident Samuel Turner in 1919. In mountaineering terms there are many other ‘firsts’ worthy of consideration: the first ascent via the Linda Glacier, the first winter ascent, the first ascent via a face (rather than a ridge) and so on, but to undertake a study of all these firsts would require far more words than are permitted in this short thesis.

In *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* author Mary Louise Pratt coins the term ‘contact zone’ to define spaces of ‘imperial encounters’ (8). Mount Cook is the site of one such ‘contact zone’, a place where, in the early years of mountaineering at least, British culture encountered New Zealand nature. However, this is a somewhat reductionist viewpoint. It implies that the place encountered by the first mountaineers was empty: both in terms of location and as a historical-cultural site. In fact both the potential for and the settlement of the area surrounding Mount Cook had been established by the time Green stepped onto the scene. Land had been cleared to make way for farming and shepherds ‘had probably’ encountered the terminal face of the Tasman Glacier prior to the geological survey of the Tasman and Hooker valleys

undertaken by Provincial geologist Julius von Haast in 1862 (McClymont 109). Von Haast's survey identified a lack of mineral resources (notably gold) in the region—thus ruling out one area of possible exploitation—while his naming of landmarks (after members of the British and European scientific community) signals the impact of the dominant 'metropolitan' culture over the barely explored mountain-wilderness. Ten years before Green's attempt on Mount Cook, in late January 1873, Governor Bowen visited and camped in the Hooker Valley and spent several days taking in the scenery and making short excursions onto the Hooker and Tasman Glaciers. Ensuring his comfort throughout the visit was the runholder of Birch Hill Station—the Sicilian Nicolo Radove. While Bowen was undoubtedly captivated by the scenic beauty of the area, envisaging the potential for tourism opportunities, he also planted the seed of conquest, offering assistance to members of the British Alpine Club in an attempt to attract them to climb Mount Cook (Green 71).

By the 1880s, then, the Mount Cook region had become a site of interaction and 'co-presence' between the dominant 'metropolitan' culture and those people on its peripheral edge (Pratt 8). It was not an 'empty' or unknown landscape either in terms of actual contact (visits to the area) or in texts. Von Haast had published *Geology of the Provinces of Canterbury and Westland* (1879), an account detailing his exploration which was illustrated with photographs taken by the surveyor, Edward Sealy. Newspapers had published accounts of Governor Bowen's journey as well as that of Christchurch visitors Leonard and Joanna Harper, also in 1873.

Yet, despite the fact that Mount Cook had been sighted and named (by both Maori and Pakeha), the glacial areas at its base partly explored and surveyed, suitable land cleared for grazing and colonised, and scenic areas identified and visited by curious 'tourists', the first texts to be produced by visiting mountaineers are firmly situated within the genre of discovery and exploration.

The 'contact' perspective and the process of transculturation outlined by Mary Louise Pratt (7-8), which will figure in my own approach to the study of the texts written by mountaineers at Mount Cook, 'emphasizes how subjects get constituted in and by their relations to each other' (8). I would like to extend the parameters of Pratt's discourse to include a discussion of how subjects get constituted in and by their relations to Mount Cook—the physical mountain. Only by doing this can the thesis fully acknowledge the

realities of mountaineering activity and the boundaries on experience set by the mountain, and address the complex motivations and rewards that underline summit attempts, the relationship between the imperial ‘metropolitan’ culture and mountaineering, the connection between mountaineering and place, and answer the questions of who mountaineers are and who they wrote for.

Up to this point I have used the term ‘mountaineer’ rather than ‘traveller’ when describing the people who attempted to reach the summit of Mount Cook. We can see, for instance, that Green’s party included all the necessities and trappings of British mountaineering culture: specialised mountaineering equipment (ice axes, ropes and hob-nail boots), an experienced Swiss guide, topographical information, cameras and notebooks. The specialised nature of the climbing equipment—and certainly the inclusion in the party of the Swiss guide—indicates very clearly the difference between Green’s party and that of a party made up of explorers, scientists or tourists. It also marks a clear difference between traditional British ‘guided’ climbing and New Zealand self-taught, ‘amateur’ climbing. Green may have ‘wished to see the colony’ (Green 1) but his motivation for travelling was to climb a mountain. Travel (though essential in getting him *to* the mountain) is incidental in relation to the main purpose of his journey: mountain climbing. Though inter-related activities, the distinction between mountaineering and travel is very important because it influences the way texts were created and knowledge disseminated: the distinction helps us to understand who created the texts, who they were created for and how they were received. In order to evaluate the meaning of a text and its relationship to other texts we need to acknowledge its mountaineering identity and this becomes very clear later in this thesis when we start comparing the writing by overseas mountaineers with that of New Zealand locals. In *Country of Writing* Lydia Wevers notes that travel writing ‘addresses itself to an audience elsewhere, often one the traveller expects to rejoin, and is written by someone not intending to stay’ (5). I am not suggesting that Wevers is asserting a ‘definition’ but if we accept her distinction as a helpful guide to New Zealand travel writing several problems arise when attempting to ‘fit’ mountaineering writing (which tends to be very specific to one location) within the broad genre of travel writing (which tends to offer multiple views and responses to multiple locations—as in the case of a ‘tour’ of the country). Mountaineering writing is the reflection of a skill-based, dangerous, goal-driven activity. The mountains offer a site where people can ‘test themselves in the

wilderness in a way the frontier, now closed, had once done' (Pawson 147) and, as a genre, mountaineering literature places a strong emphasis on anticipation, success and failure rather than on anticipation, satisfaction and disappointment which is more commonly found in travel accounts.

Mountaineering narratives place much of their emphasis on encounters with nature—that is the conditions found on the mountain and created by the weather—rather than on encounters with people. This is particularly true of mountaineering narratives set in New Zealand—principally because once the mountaineers left the valley there were no people *to encounter*. The accuracy of the mountaineer's observations, the sense of engagement between the mountaineer and the natural environment—the emphasis on interaction rather than domination—the restricted use of anthropomorphism and the mountaineer's curiosity suggests that one could approach mountaineering writing as nature writing. For example, the writing of Gilbert White—who, like William Spotswood Green was a clergyman and naturalist—and John Muir (founder of the Sierra Club), provide 'a meeting place for wild life and human feeling' (Mabey xvii) which is just as relevant to early mountaineering literature as precedents sampled from travel writing.

If, as Wevers suggests, travel writing is 'written by someone not intending to stay' (5), a further problem arises when we are dealing with the texts generated not by short-term visitors but by local mountaineers—that is the guides living and working at Mount Cook, mountaineers who were 'intending to stay'. Using the media of local newspapers, these mountaineers address an audience 'here' and, rather than leaving the country, they remain in New Zealand and complete multiple ascents of Mount Cook and the surrounding peaks. The fact that they continue climbing in New Zealand, dominate New Zealand mountaineering culture, and do not actively seek validation from an overseas audience for their occasional writing undermines the imperial tendency 'to see European culture emanating out to the colonial periphery from a self-generating centre' (Pratt 88). Imperial constructs of domination and possession and the vision to 'claim, tame and redefine the meaning of landscape in specifically English terms' (Byrnes 54) are subverted as mountaineering in New Zealand becomes increasingly 'homegrown' and reconfigured as a sporting leisure activity. Mountaineering—like other sports in New Zealand—becomes a 'marker of national identity' (Palenski 244).

Rather than attempting to slot mountaineering writing into the travel writing folder, it is preferable to acknowledge that differences between the two genres exist while accepting that many of the tropes and motifs embedded in travel writing frequently appear in mountaineering literature. Thus, we will be able to discuss the language of discovery, the legacy of Romanticism, the arrival scene and the panoptic or panoramic view, the sublime and picturesque, aestheticising adjectives, ‘anti-conquest’ (Pratt 9) and perceptions of place but the point of reference will be mountaineering rather than travel.

Major shifts took place at Mount Cook following the construction of the first Hermitage hotel in 1884 and the introduction of a coach service, the building of alpine-accommodation (such as the Ball hut in 1891 and Malte Brun hut in 1898), the transference of the management of the hotel to the Government in 1895 and the subsequent employment of professional guides, the creation of the Department of Tourist and Health Resorts in 1901 and the implementation of a regular motor service to the Hermitage in 1907. Visitors who wished to mountaineer could hire an experienced guide to lead them up a mountain. The old tropes of discovery and exploration become increasingly difficult to accommodate as mountaineering established itself within an economic (capitalist) framework. The interaction and economic exchange between client and guide is an important one: each is dependent on the other—the client relies on the guide’s experience and skill to lead him/her up the mountain and the guide needs clients to guarantee employment.

Guiding dominated mountaineering at Mount Cook during the first two decades of the twentieth century (Langton 24) but in the 1920s, a ‘New Zealand form’ of independent, guideless climbing ‘comparatively independent of imperial models (Langton 183) began to establish itself as tramping clubs were created bringing with them an increase in travel to mountain regions beyond those identified—and colonised—as tourist areas.

## THE NEW ZEALAND VOICE

*With Axe and Pen* examines the way in which mountaineers who reached the summit of Mount Cook recorded their experience in *published* texts: books, journals and newspaper articles. Writing about mountaineering allowed mountaineers to articulate their response to nature and the environment, and to frame their experience within the context of cultural space.

This thesis proposes that there are differences in overseas and New Zealand written accounts of climbing Mount Cook and that by examining these differences we can identify the emergence of a New Zealand voice *in mountaineering literature*. As this thesis proceeds we will examine the language applied to alpine landscape and identify the various responses to that landscape but at this point it would be helpful to give some indication of what I mean by a New Zealand ‘voice’ as it relates to mountaineering-writing.

In the introduction to *Maoriland: New Zealand Literature 1872-1914* authors Jane Stafford and Mark Williams state that ‘Maoriland constituted the first generation of cultural nationalism in New Zealand’ (14). Stafford and Williams also claim that the Maoriland of late colonial and early Dominion period ‘came to register the first literary evidence of a national consciousness’ (Stafford 11). While the authors of *Maoriland* detect the beginnings of cultural nationalism they do not go so far as to suggest the emergence of a New Zealand identity. In fact, the writing of *Maoriland* straddles two worlds, it ‘partakes of nineteenth-century romanticism and, at times, anticipates twentieth-century modernism (11).’ In essence, *Maoriland* provides a rhetorical shift—the point where ‘language snaps’ (Hallock 43)—and the challenge presented by such ‘snaps’ is to open up the literary canon in order to shed light on works ‘outside the accepted reading lists’ so that the process of inquiry does not become merely cyclical, maintaining a strong grip on what is familiar in order to reaffirm what is already known (Hallock 43).

New Zealand mountaineering writing is one genre that stands to be exposed as part of the ‘literary evidence of a national consciousness’. This does not mean that New Zealand mountaineering writing has to be regarded in opposition—as an ‘other’—to



British mountaineering writing but, rather, as a response to the dominant discourse. New Zealand mountaineering writing opens up the possibility of ‘reply’. In *Imperial Eyes*, Pratt uses the term ‘autoethnography’ (9) to describe texts created by colonised subjects as a means of representing themselves that ‘engage with the colonizers terms’ (Pratt 9). Because the history and archive of mountaineering literature is so firmly fixed in British imperial culture, it is to be expected that New Zealand mountaineering literature will initially pay homage to the dominant literature and reiterate the tropes and devices found in Victorian mountaineering texts. However, as New Zealand mountaineering develops its own culture, we will see more evidence of a colonial identity—or voice. It is anticipated that this voice will be strongest when the mountaineer-writer is local born, not part of the cultural elite (through education, class, or association with Alpine Clubs) and the implied audience is local and ‘here’ rather than in Britain.

In common with other forms of colonial literature—such as the travel narrative, novel and short story—New Zealand mountaineering writing expresses a strong connection to place. It asserts this connection as a result of the mountaineer’s first-hand experience of mountaineering. Writers of mountaineering texts are not imagining what it is like to climb a mountain and stand on its summit but are transforming the experience into an imaginative narrative—something that is worth reading. In this thesis I will argue that there is a difference in the way New Zealand and British mountaineers described their encounter with Mount Cook and that the New Zealand mountaineers stripped away Romantic embellishments to uncover a more realistic and authentic response to nature.

An example of this stripped back style can be seen in L. J. Kennaway’s *Crusts, A Settlers Fare Due South* which was published in 1874. Describing a camp in the South Island high country in June, he writes

At noon, C. & self, in different directions, out to sheep which are driving before the wind and rain. Self back first, — first rigged the blanket, and collected scrub to try and make a fire by C’s return, — succeeded, — and had a pot of weak tea each, with some bread & cold fat, eating it standing in the wet by the fire, till the rain put it out (66).

This first-person account of the miserable conditions—where even the tropes of civilisation (a warm bed, a fire and hot meal) are rejected—rings true because the writer is clearly part of the action and the tone of the piece recalls ‘New Zealand’s characteristic discourse—no nonsense, laconic, droll and self-deprecatory’ (Robinson 74).

Although written in the 1870s, the laconic, no nonsense voice found in Kennaway’s writing anticipates accounts written by New Zealand mountaineers. But it is not simply ‘voice’ that distinguishes New Zealand mountaineering writing but the writer’s attitude towards the landscape itself. In a fragment relating to the Fox Glacier in 1894, Westland explorer Charles Douglas takes a swipe at the exaggerated claims of adventure narratives and mocks the reactions to the landscape found in ‘Globe trotter literature’:

What earthly interest is there in mentioning that Jones fell down a cravesse and got up again minus a tin of soup & his ice axe, or that Smith would have been killed, had he been where an avalanche had fallen. Had Jones gone down & never come up again, then I would note the date & record particulars with pleasure. His appearance at the terminus some half a century later would be of great value in determining the exact rate of flow & number of bumps a foreign body would get travelling down a glacier. Why shouldn’t cliffs tower & peaks stand erect? Do people expect them to lie flat? Avalanches are like wild pigs—not dangerous unless you foolishly get in their road. An ice cave is blue, what other colour could it be? If I ever find a glacier brick red, then the Universe will know it (qtd. in Pascoe, 190).

In this extract we can identify a cultural difference between the New Zealand masculine outdoors-man and the British masculine sentimental traveller. When Douglas asks: ‘Why shouldn’t cliffs tower & peaks stand erect? Do people expect them to lie flat?’ he is questioning the tendency of visiting mountaineers to embellish and add layers of meaning to what is simply in front of them. In using aestheticised language and Romantic tropes, overseas writers reinvent the ‘real’ landscape—Douglas’ familiar environment—as something ‘other’. Douglas feels at home in the mountain environment—it is not an exotic location. Mountain activity (such as avalanches) are nothing out of the ordinary. To mention that ice caves are ‘blue’ is not only stating the

obvious but is pretentious, too. In his own writing, Douglas appears uncomfortable in articulating responses to beautiful scenery. In a piece of writing taken from his Waiatoto-Copland notebook (known as the “Soliloquy Letter” - 1903) he states:

In New Zealand there is a sameness in the scenery, notwithstanding all our blowing about the Britain of the South, to which it doesn't bear the slightest resemblance except being an Island. One valley is very much like another, so with everything else, lakes, Mountains, trees, plains & spurs; if you see one you can have a very good idea what like all the others are [sic] (qtd. in Pascoe 294).

Douglas appears critical of writing that is not authentic—that is, writing that does not provide a true representation of the New Zealand landscape. In his “Soliloquy Letter” he claims to ‘hate writing’ (Pascoe 294) stating, all the same, that he was ‘too independent to write just to please people’ (Pascoe 294). Douglas’ hatred of writing appears to be linked to what he regards as dishonesty in Government reports (Pascoe 294) but his reticence and reluctance to participate in ‘self glorification’ (Pascoe 190) is a trait that finds a match in the writing of New Zealand mountaineers Fyfe, Graham and Clarke.

If we jump ahead to the 1953 we can see an example of how fully formed the New Zealand voice has become since it first appeared in the late nineteenth century. In the most famous phrase in New Zealand mountaineering history, Everest mountaineer Edmund Hillary greeted his fellow New Zealander George Lowe with the words: ‘Well, we knocked the bastard off!’ (Hillary 162). Despite the fact that Hillary was a member of a British mountaineering team—the ninth British attempt on Everest—his ‘voice’, which is laconic and rich in the vernacular, speaks to a New Zealand (pakeha) audience, an audience with which he clearly identifies. The extent of Hillary’s link to national identity is reinforced every day through his image on the five dollar note. This piece of ‘banal nationalism’ (Billig 93) is significant not just for the depiction of Hillary but for the mountain shown beside him. Though Hillary is most famous for his Everest ascent, it is an image of Mount Cook which appears beside him—a fact that suggests the role the mountain itself plays in a New Zealand national identity.

Bill Pearson, writing in *Fretful Sleepers*, suggests that ‘the hardest thing’ in New Zealand’s development towards an ‘independent literature’ has been ‘the recognition of reality’ (137). This thesis will submit that the New Zealand mountaineers who climbed Mount Cook from the mid-1890s had the clarity of vision to communicate the experience of mountaineering in a realistic manner, without over-reliance on the tropes of the post-Romantic movement. I will also argue that the New Zealand mountaineers identified with their New Zealand audience – that they did not seek validation for their mountaineering or their writing from the metropolitan centre and that in terms of mountaineering literature it will be shown—as Pearson himself suggested—that it is ‘out of this time that the first signs of an assured and distinctive note in New Zealand writing emerged’ (138).

## METHODOLOGY

This thesis surveys selected texts describing the ascent of Mount Cook during the years 1882-1920; it identifies differences between the writing of overseas and New Zealand mountaineers and submits that a distinctive New Zealand mountaineering voice emerged during this period. Because the length of this thesis is limited to 40 000 words only published first-person narratives have been examined.

There are two central reasons why I chose to undertake a close-reading of texts. The first of these relates to the critical component of this thesis and is outlined in the following two paragraphs. The second responds to the need to create a connection between the critical and creative components of this Creative Writing thesis and is outlined on the next page.

The method of close reading allows me to ascertain how mountaineers experienced the mountain environment of Mount Cook, how they ‘read’ the landscape—that is, they interpreted it through text. The decision to undertake a close reading of first-person Mount Cook mountaineering narratives was partly necessary because, to the best of my knowledge, no academic research examining first-person narratives of early ascents of Mount Cook has been undertaken at this time. In fact, very little research relating specifically to mountaineering at Mount Cook (or elsewhere in New Zealand) exists—the subject of mountaineering generally having been omitted from broader research on travel or sport writing of the late-colonial period.

Close reading of overseas and New Zealand mountaineering-writing makes it possible to examine texts in relation to each other as well as within the broader context of the mountaineering/travel genre. It is important to locate the ways in which mountaineering texts relate to a wider cultural context—that is, we need to consider what function mountaineering literature performs, specifically how does mountaineering literature contribute to (or subvert) the imperial project. In considering this relationship we need to be mindful that we do not focus exclusively on ‘the connections between writing and dominance, rather than writing and cultural transmission’ (Ballantyne 9).

The second reason why I focussed on close reading was because I needed to establish a connection between the critical and creative components of this Creative Writing thesis. In *Boden Black* I sought to describe an ascent of Mount Cook and create a believable account of a summit experience. In other words, I wished to capture the voice of a New Zealand mountaineer. By studying a number of texts—beginning in the late colonial period and continuing through to the 1950s and beyond—I was able to identify moments where mountaineers ‘and their environment mingle’ (Abbott 77). Thus, I was not only searching for ‘descriptions’ of landscape but signs of ‘interaction’, the sense, as Mick Abbott describes it, of ‘being landscape’ (77).

This thesis offers a chronological examination of mountaineering texts roughly divided into three timeframes: the pioneering period prior to the first ascent of Mount Cook, the 1894-95 season which saw the first ascent of Mount Cook by both a New Zealand and an overseas party, and the period from 1905-1920 which saw mountaineering on Mount Cook recommence after a ten year lull and which includes the rise of tourism at Mount Cook and the domination of mountaineering by New Zealand guides.

The pioneering period offers insight into the appearance of the sentimental hero (Pratt 73), a figure who ‘both challenges and complements the emergent authority of objectivist science’ (Pratt 73). The first overseas mountaineers to travel to Mount Cook discovered a strange and foreign New Zealand landscape and then attempted to respond to the new environment with writing that was reliant on post-Romantic aesthetic judgments. In this respect, they sought to assimilate the wild, unordered nature of New Zealand within the frame of imperial culture. However, as these mountaineers moved further away from civilisation and up onto the mountain they were faced with an increasingly dangerous reality, one in which success would be defined by reaching the summit and surviving, while failure would be measured by the disappointment of not reaching the journey’s goal and possible death. Brought face to face with the seriousness of their situation, the earliest overseas mountaineers found it difficult to maintain any sense of association between the landscape of home and the place they now found themselves in. Their experience could no longer be accurately communicated using familiar tropes and the embellished vocabulary of Victorian mountaineering literature. The inability to describe the environment ‘using forms of writing then familiar to readers and authors’ (Fender 59)—or ‘literal inexpressibility’

(Lawson-Peebles 118)—is, I submit, more pronounced in the writing of overseas mountaineers than it is in the writing of New Zealand mountaineers.

New Zealand mountaineers were familiar with the conditions found in the Southern Alps and were consequently able to create realistic texts describing their experiences. Rather than feeling dislocated and disorientated by nature, the New Zealand mountaineers were unfazed by the lack of civilisation encountered at Mount Cook. Their writing suggests that the lack of alpine accommodation, tracks and established routes was accepted as normal rather than unrecognisable and ‘other’. The second period—with its emphasis on working-class, local mountaineers—provides insight into the relationship between mountaineering and sport, suggesting that mountaineering was a goal-driven, masculine activity in which determined climbers found satisfaction in reaching the summit. These same mountaineers did not seek validation of their ascents through metropolitan institutions (such as the Alpine Club), nor did they provide written ‘evidence’ of all their ascents and in this respect they differed from many of their Victorian predecessors. Differences between British and New Zealand mountaineering practice make it possible to reconsider New Zealand mountaineering as something more than a footnote to British mountaineering. The emphasis on guide-less climbing, for example, owes little to British mountaineering traditions and, as such, suggests a distinctive, alternative New Zealand mountaineering culture.

The third period offers insight in the growing acceptance of mountaineering as a leisure activity and commercial enterprise. This period is marked by the formation of the guide-client relationship in New Zealand and the growing professionalism of the mountaineering industry in this country. Furthermore, New Zealand working-class mountaineers employed as professional guides acted as intermediaries, essentially bridging the gap between Euro-centric culture and New Zealand nature. While these New Zealand guides chose not to write extensively about their mountaineering experiences on Mount Cook, it should be noted that what they *said* during a mountaineering trip had the potential to impact on their clients’ writing. For example, if a guide was to warn a client to move quickly or carefully because of the threat of avalanches, rock falls or crevasses, we could anticipate that that client might communicate a heightened sense of danger—or possibly adventure—through their own interpretation of events. In *The Conquest of Mount Cook* Freda du Faur describes

crossing a steep, frozen snow-slope with guides Peter Graham and Darby Thomson during the second ascent of Mount Sefton (and its first traverse):

Thomson, being a notably quick step-cutter, was put in the lead. He cut steps for the full length of his rope, we taking shelter meanwhile beneath a projecting rock. Then when the rope was all played out, Graham said to me, "Run for it," and off I went, picking up the slack of the rope as I ran, and glancing apprehensively above me at the great icicles swaying in the gale, ready to dodge if I saw one coming. Reaching Thomson's place of shelter, or exposure as the case might be, I would remain there while he went on, and Graham ran the gauntlet in his turn (230).

Although he did not write this piece, it is Graham's 'Run for it' which sets the tone of nervous excitement in this passage. Du Faur responds to Graham's words by creating a scene in which the mountaineers enact a dangerous game with nature—a kind of dodgeball. Had Graham simply said, 'take care' or 'don't stop until you get to the other side' the atmosphere and drama created in this passage could have been completely different. Thus, although this is a sample of Freda du Faur's writing, we should not discount the influence of guides' instructions or remarks when it comes to published texts.

For each text we will look at the process of transmission from the point of conception, through production to reception. We need to ask who wrote the mountaineering texts. Were the authors primarily mountaineers who wrote or writers who mountaineered? What was the background of each mountaineer-writer in terms of gender, education and class? Were they members of the mountaineering establishment—the British Alpine Club or the New Zealand Alpine Club, for example—or were they situated outside these institutions. How did they fund their mountaineering trips? Were they members of a scientific, exploratory or government assisted expedition or was mountaineering a leisure or sporting activity fitted into the summer season?

As well as looking at the meaning of texts and their relationship to other texts, we need to consider how meaning was transferred from the mountaineering-writer to the reader. Thus, we will acknowledge the dissemination and influence of each text, the conditions



of its production, distribution and reception. We need to identify the implied reader and the role played by the audience. We should also keep in mind the various kinds of publication available to mountaineer-writers—whether provided by local newspapers, mountaineering or scientific journals, or British publishing houses.

For this critical thesis my research began with readings of British and New Zealand mountaineering literature from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1920s. While mountaineering forms part of the culture of many European countries (such as Austria, Germany, France and Italy), North and South America, I focussed on the writing of British mountaineers as most relevant to the establishment and early development of a mountaineering culture in this country.

Research examining mountaineering history during the period 1850-1920 has tended to focus on Britain and the advance of British mountaineering through the Alps, Canada and the Himalayan ranges (Allec; Chesher; Mazzolini; MacLachlan; Vause). In part these texts consider the impact of imperialism through a discussion of the binary relationship between Britain and its colonies rather than offering a cross-colonial framework—one where mountaineering in the ‘settler’ colonies of Canada and New Zealand could be compared, for example. Had there been more space in this thesis it would have been valuable to examine and compare local, home-grown mountaineering-writing from New Zealand and Canada before comparing both to the writing of British mountaineers. Such comparisons might have revealed the presence of a distinct Canadian voice in mountaineering-literature. This, in turn, could suggest that the metropolitan domination of mountaineering-writing was declining while, at the same time, the peripheral voice was strengthening.

It would also have been useful to research the writing of mountaineers who travelled to both New Zealand and Canada—men such as Irishman William Spotswood Green and Austro-Canadian Conrad Kain. Given that these men published lengthy descriptions of their New Zealand and Canadian mountaineering experiences, it should be possible to identify how and when they relied on conventional tropes to describe landscape. It should also be possible to see if their portrayal of the Canadian mountains differed a great deal from their accounts of the Southern Alps—or whether the language of ‘place’ was the same for both.

Though Australia had stronger historical and cultural links to New Zealand than Canada the absence of high peaks and the lack of a home-grown alpine culture (prior to the introduction of ski-clubs) hinder meaningful comparisons between the two countries in terms of mountaineering-writing.

An excellent overview of New Zealand mountaineering history (Langton) provides background information on mountaineering up to 1953 with specific information on the establishment of the New Zealand Alpine Club and the impact of professional guiding on mountain climbing at Mount Cook. For an overview of the historical significance of British mountaineering prior to 1914, I consulted Peter Holger Hansen's "British Mountaineering 1850-1914." This thesis includes a chapter on alpinism and imperialism but makes only passing mention of Mount Cook. Research on women mountaineers in New Zealand during the Victorian period (Davidson; Lynch; McCormack Ross) has offered information on the role of gender in mountaineering culture. A recent study of Otago mountaineer and war correspondent Malcolm Ross (Oosterman) has presented biographical information relevant to this study and a thesis examining the voice of German-speaking explorers and geologists, including Julius von Haast and Robert von Lendenfeld, provides background information concerning journeys to the Tasman Glacier region from the mid-1860s through to the 1880s (Harrison). Lee Davidson's thesis examines the construction of meaning and self through New Zealand mountaineering narratives but her work is confined to the present-day.

Although texts examining British mountaineering culture do focus on the imperialistic drive, there has been a tendency to examine and relate mountaineering texts to one another in order to suggest a well-defined mountaineering genre or historical movement rather than extending the framework to include texts relating to exploration and travel. While I believe that mountaineering writing is a genre to itself and that mountaineering is very different from travel (for the reasons outlined earlier in the introduction) it has been instructive to spread the net a little wider to consider the writing of academics working in the field of travel writing. The main benefit of acknowledging travel theory in this study is that it provides a degree of scholarship pertaining to the aestheticised language of the post-Romantic period with its tropes of the sublime, picturesque and pastoral, the language of anticipation and discovery, conquest and anti-conquest, while

offering a broader cultural context for the study of mountaineering. Thus, mountaineering texts can be seen in relationship to each other and in relationship to the broader imperial project.

*With Axe and Pen* focusses on the language of mountaineer-writers. Features such as sentence structure, epigraphs and quotations, adjectives and metaphors, direct and indirect speech, and cliché will be identified and examined within the context of post-Romanticism. Wherever possible, this thesis will concentrate on extracts relating to the actual experience of standing on the summit of Mount Cook. By isolating the summit experience, it is possible to create common ground between the various mountaineering accounts. Regardless of the route taken to the top, each mountaineer shared the experience of standing on the summit and describing the view (provided the weather was clear) and, as a result, comparisons between their writing can be made.

Also informing this study is my own knowledge of climbing with axe and rope. I haven't climbed Mount Cook but I have made a number of alpine ascents. I have undertaken glacier travel, snow and ice climbing. One of the claims I make in this thesis is that the emerging New Zealand mountaineering voice is characterised by a tendency towards understatement—particularly when the mountaineer is presented with dangerous situations and conditions. Arguably, my mountaineering background in New Zealand and knowledge of mountaineering techniques and terminology has provided me with the tools to recognise examples of understatement. Having said that, however, it needs to be acknowledged that the Mount Cook environment of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (particularly in terms of the amount of snow, the low snow-line and the extent of the glaciers) is very different to that of today and so caution needs to be taken when discussing the mountain from a twenty-first century viewpoint.

## BACKGROUND

Today Aoraki/Mount Cook stands at 12,316 ft. (3754m). Yet one hundred and thirty years ago, when the first mountaineers stepped onto its summit ridge, it was fractionally taller and reached 12,349 ft. Regardless of its height, it was such an impressive sight that Samuel Butler, who looked towards the mountain from a peak in the Two Thumbs Range in 1860, remarked:

Suddenly, as my eyes got on a level with the top, so that I could see over, I was struck almost breathless by the wonderful mountain that burst on my sight. The effect was startling. It rose towering in a massy parallelogram, disclosed from top to bottom in the cloudless sky, far above all the others (65).

Butler was so taken by the wonderful sight that he continued:

No one can mistake it. If a person says he *thinks* he has seen Mount Cook, you may be quite sure that he has not seen it. The moment it comes into sight the exclamation is, ‘That is Mount Cook!’—not ‘That *must* be Mount Cook!’(66)

Butler’s interest went beyond that of awed spectator however. Comparing Mount Cook to Mont Blanc, he was the first to identify its potential for mountaineering, reporting that here was ‘a glorious field for the members of the Alpine Club’ (66) and that ‘he who first scales it will be crowned with undying laurels’ (66). Having advanced the idea that members of the recently formed British Alpine Club could find new fields for adventure at Mount Cook, he then voiced the opinion that ‘for my part, though it is hazardous to say this of any mountain, I do not think any human being will ever reach its top’ (66). Thirty-four years later the summit of Mount Cook was reached by three Canterbury locals.

Mount Cook is situated in the Southern Alps of New Zealand and consists of three peaks: the High Peak, Middle Peak and Low Peak. It is flanked on the west by the Hooker Glacier and on the east by the Tasman Glacier. The official name of the mountain—Aoraki/Mount Cook—dates back to the Ngāi Tahu settlement of 1998.

In the texts examined in this thesis, however, Aoraki/Mount Cook appears as ‘Mount Cook’ or ‘Aorangi’. Mountaineer and author, George Mannering, who published the first New Zealand account of mountaineering at Mount Cook under the title *With Axe and Rope in the New Zealand Alps* in 1891, offered this information regarding the name Aorangi:

The Maori name of Mount Cook is ‘Aorangi,’ or, more properly, ‘Ao-Rangi.’ The commonly accepted meaning of the term is ‘Sky-piercer,’ but as the Maori language admits of many varieties of translation, each version hovering about the region of true meaning, it is only natural that authorities should differ as to the correct construing of the word.

One good Maori scholar, whose reputation as such is almost pre-eminent, gives the poetical translation of ‘Light of Day’—a singularly beautiful one, for it is the first peak to catch the morning light and the last to show the glow of evening.

Another very well-known Maori scholar, the Rev. J. W. Stack, assures me that the most reasonable interpretation that can be put on the word ‘Ao-Rangi’ is ‘Scud Peak;’ and this is a singularly apt one, for the prevailing nor’-west winds always cause condensation and the gathering of cloud-banners about the higher parts of the mountain. ‘Heaven-piercer’ and ‘Cloud-piercer’ are also often used, but are to a certain extent fancy names (14).

For the purposes of this thesis, I will refer to the mountain by the name most commonly used by the mountaineer-writers of the period under consideration: Mount Cook.

Maps (Brodrick) indicate that a number of mountains and glacial locations in the Mount Cook region have undergone name—and physical—changes since the period covered in this thesis. When referring to these peaks and glacial areas both past and current names will be used to avoid confusion. Heights and distances in this thesis will be given in feet and miles in accordance with the usage of the time.

## EARLY ASCENTS

From the time of Fyfe, Graham, and Clarke's first ascent of Mount Cook in 1894 to Samuel Turner's solo ascent in 1919, the summit of the mountain was reached twenty-three times.

Milestones from this period include the first successful ascent of Mount Cook via the difficult North ridge (from the Hooker Valley) in 1894, the establishment of Zurbriggen's ridge (from the Tasman Valley) by Italian Mattias Zurbriggen, in 1895. Following Zurbriggen's visit, Mount Cook was not climbed again until 1905. Earle's Route (named after the British mountaineer Laurence Earle) and the West ridge—both from the Hooker Valley—were established in 1909 and 1913 respectively.

The summit of Mount Cook was finally reached via the Linda Glacier (from the Tasman Valley) by A. C. Chambers and H. F. Wright climbing with guides Jack Clarke and Jim Murphy on the 25<sup>th</sup> February, 1912. This route is significant because it was the first identified on the mountain and had seen numerous attempts made on it by Green, Kaufmann and Boss in 1882 and Mannering, Dixon, Ross and Fyfe throughout the early 1890s. Two days after the first ascent of the Linda Glacier route (the tenth ascent of the mountain), eighteen-year-old West Coast guide George Bannister (climbing with Samuel Turner and guide Darby Thomson) became the first Maori to reach the summit of the mountain.

The first woman to climb Mount Cook was Australian Freda du Faur in 1910. Three years later, in 1913, she returned to the mountain and took part in the first Grand Traverse (from the Hooker Valley to the Tasman Valley) with guides Peter Graham and Darby Thomson. Following the Grand Traverse, no new routes were made on the mountain for twenty five years, until 1938 when Dan Byrant and Lud Mahan completed the difficult East Ridge.

## FRAMEWORK

### **a. Principal Texts: Prior to the First Ascent of Mount Cook in 1894**

Two books from this period have been included in this study. The first of these is William Spotswood Green's *The High Alps of New Zealand*, published in 1883. Green had travelled to New Zealand from Ireland and although he did not gain the summit of Mount Cook, his writing provides the first full-length account of any Mount Cook ascent. This book not only influenced the climbers who followed in his footsteps but also opened the way for mountaineering writing based on Mount Cook.

While Green's *The High Alps of New Zealand* offers the first full-length account of a climbing expedition to Mount Cook, the first such book to be written by a New Zealander was George Edward Mannering's *With Axe and Rope in the New Zealand Alps* published in 1891. Mannering—like Green—failed to reach the summit of the mountain. Despite this, it is useful to include his work in this study for the following reasons: first, at the time of its publication, Mannering had climbed higher than any other mountaineer on Mount Cook and second, his book provides a good example of the style of writing initially adopted by New Zealand mountaineers at Mount Cook.

### **b. Principal Texts: From First Ascent to 1920**

On Christmas Day 1894, New Zealanders Tom Fyfe, George Graham and Jack Clarke reached the summit of Mount Cook. None of these mountaineers published books detailing their climbing experience but two of them—Tom Fyfe and George Graham—wrote accounts of their climb for the *Otago Daily Times*. Both these articles, which were published in the weeks following the successful ascent, will be examined.

The first overseas climber to reach the summit of Mount Cook was Italian-Swiss guide Mattias Zurbriggen. He made his ascent in March 1895. Zurbriggen had travelled to the area in the role of guide to British mountaineer Edward FitzGerald. Originally the purpose of the journey had been for FitzGerald to make the first ascent of Mount Cook

but shortly after arriving in the country he discovered the mountain had been climbed. In response he set aside plans to climb Mount Cook and made first ascents of Mount Sealy, Mount Silberhorn, Mount Tasman, Mount Sefton and Mount Haidinger. Both FitzGerald and Zurbriggen wrote books detailing their season at Mount Cook. Zurbriggen's *From the Alps to the Andes* was published in 1899 and FitzGerald's *Climbs in the New Zealand Alps* appeared in 1896.

New Zealand journalist Malcolm Ross made several attempts on Mount Cook in the company of George Mannering and Tom Fyfe in the 1890s before reaching its summit with Samuel Turner and guides Tom Fyfe and Peter Graham in 1906. This was the fourth ascent of the mountain and his book *A Climber in New Zealand* was published in 1914. It provides an account of the first traverse of the High Peak from east to west.

British mountaineer Samuel Turner made his first ascent of Mount Cook in 1906—in the company of New Zealanders Tom Fyfe, Peter Graham and Malcolm Ross. His solo ascent took place in March, 1919. In total he made five ascents of the mountain and wrote two books outlining his exploits. The first of these, *My Climbing Adventures in Four Continents* was published in 1911 and his second, *The Conquest of the New Zealand Alps* appeared in 1922.

Australian Freda du Faur was the first woman to reach the summit of Mount Cook, in 1910. In 1913 she completed the first Grand Traverse of the mountain—from west to east. Her account of the seasons spent at Mount Cook, *The Conquest of Mount Cook*, was published in 1915.



**a. William Spotswood Green**

By 1865—the end of the Golden Age—British mountaineering in the Alps was well-established. First ascents of Mont Blanc, the Matterhorn, Monte Rosa and the Eiger had been made and British amateur climbers had claimed thirty-one of the thirty-nine major peaks climbed during the 1854-65 period (Lunn 46). The Alpine Club, established in 1857, institutionalised the ‘amateur’ sport of mountaineering, and recruited its members from the well-educated, affluent middle-class. These were men (as women were excluded from the club) who were highly literate, who were readers and often writers, too.

In a seminal analysis of Victorian mountaineers and mountaineering literature “Mountain Prophets” (first published in the *Alpine Journal* in 1943) poet and mountaineer Geoffrey Winthrop Young described the pioneering ‘chroniclers’ of the Victorian age as ‘leaders of thought’ (Young 126) who ‘wrote only for those who, like themselves, had already discovered that they liked mountains’ (Young 127). Young is speaking here only of the first mountaineer-writers and adds that the ‘prophets’ who followed the ‘chroniclers’—men such as John Tyndall and Leslie Stephen—‘gave the message to the world’ (Young 127) and yet he raises a very important point about audience. One of the marked features of mountaineering literature is its awareness of a mountaineering audience. And not only a general mountaineering audience but often—and notably with regard to early Mount Cook texts—an audience of mountaineers intent on following in the author’s footsteps. Writers such as Green, Mannering and Fyfe—the ‘chroniclers’ of early attempts on Mount Cook—knew that in the absence of clear maps and detailed photographs showing route markings, their descriptions would form the basis of knowledge for other mountaineers hoping to climb the mountain. In addition to references to equipment, food, topography, snow conditions and routes made throughout the body of *The High Alps of New Zealand*, Green also included two appendices: one describing the ‘first principles of mountain climbing’ (340) and the other specifically titled ‘For Mountaineers’ (348). In this regard, these texts serve not only as interesting accounts of various ascents but also as practical guides for subsequent attempts. The texts had to perform a useful function and New Zealand

mountaineers were quick to identify factual inaccuracies while becoming increasingly sensitive to perceived slurs on the New Zealand climbing community (Hansen 420-421). In the years following Green's attempt on Cook, overseas writers such as FitzGerald, Turner and du Faur found their work held up to increasing scrutiny by the local mountaineering elite. The arguments played out in the public domain indicate how quickly New Zealanders had claimed the Southern Alps and asserted their approval (or disapproval) of representations of themselves and New Zealand mountaineering activity. The process of talking back (Pratt 7) was communicated via the pages of the *British Alpine Journal*, the *New Zealand Alpine Journal* and through books—such as those written by A. P. Harper and Malcolm Ross. Knowledge relating to New Zealand mountaineering at Mount Cook was not, therefore, monopolised by the dominant culture—rather a process of transculturation existed. Colonial New Zealanders were able to represent themselves to the metropolitan audience through the established forms of mountaineering literature.

In “Mountain Prophets” Young also makes the point that mountaineers tended to display their personal preferences in their approach to writing. Thus, texts tended to fall into categories of science, nature study or sport ‘according to the author’s scientific or humanistic bias’ (Young 129). Young then goes on to say that even great mountaineers could not ‘free’ themselves from ‘contemporary convention, when it came to publication’ (Young 129) and that it would have been difficult for any writer ‘to disturb the accepted holiday narrative or the creditable glacier controversy with a version of the emotions not authorised by the age, and that before the critical contemporary audience of climbing bishops, logicians and dons’ (Young 129).

What mountaineers felt about mountaineering (that is, the emotional response) and what mountaineers wrote about mountaineering, Young argues (based on his own conversations and friendships with members of the Alpine Club) were often two very different things. Victorian convention—in relation to the writing of mountaineers—made it difficult for all except the most singular of mountaineers (men such as Edward Whymper) to ‘represent his true self in his book’ (Young 133). Thus, by the 1880s, mountaineering texts were not, in general, marked by ‘robust realism’ (Young 135) or a ‘modernist’ tone (Young 135). Identifying the period as an ‘ebb tide’ Young claims that

‘Alpine writing ran out upon shallows of repetition, old jokes and comfortable clichés’ (Young 138)

No wonder we grew uneasy, and a doubt began to grow whether the Victorian repressions familiar in our youth might not also have deprived the mountain message, when transmitted by our prophets, of some of its lifegiving and enduring quality, so that it was already languishing into the pretty Swiss ritual, and threatening to end as the dry bones of acrobatics (Young 138).

Young’s essay focusses on the writing of British climbers and it is possible to establish a link between the ‘ebb tide’ of mountaineering-writing and the twilight of Romanticism. But the period also marks an important shift in mountaineering itself. Up until the 1880s British mountaineering had been centred in the Alps—to the point that ‘the Alps *were* mountaineering’ (Young 139). But, towards the close of the century climbing became increasingly connected to technology. As climbing within the British Isles developed, the conventional language of mountaineering became somewhat anachronistic and there was a shift towards describing mountaineering activity in terms of craft. As part of this trend away from Romantic cliché, mountaineering guides began to appear—books which placed greatest emphasis on equipment, technique, routes but which were also free of the ‘last-century emotional repressionism’ (Young 142). Mountaineers such as Whymper and Martin Conway were instrumental in breathing life into mountaineering writing because of their break with Victorian convention. The writing by mountaineers such as Whymper, Conway and Mummery attracted a broad audience and the men became as famous for their writing as their mountaineering. However, it could be argued that the primary audience for mountaineering-writing remained within the readership of mountaineering anthologies and journals such as *Peaks, Passes and Glaciers* (which was first published in 1859 and then again, in a two-volume second series in 1862) and the *Alpine Journal* (first published in 1863). Mountaineer-writers such as Green are difficult to place in terms of a forward-looking mountaineering-writing movement. 1882—the year of Green’s visit to New Zealand—marked the end of the Silver Age of climbing. The ascent of the Dent du Géant, made in 1882, heralded the introduction of ‘artificial’ climbing using pitons and fixed ropes and the beginning of the Iron Age of mountaineering (Thompson 60). Mountaineering, in practice, had entered a modern age but, as the language suggests, the ‘purity’ of

mountaineering—from gold, to silver to iron—has diminished. Yet Thompson claims the ‘prevailing mountaineering ethos was a rejection of modernity and a celebration of the primitive, the mysterious and the unknown’ (Thompson 60). If we take both Young and Thomson at their word it is possible to conclude that the period of the late nineteenth century was somewhat of a jumble in terms of mountaineering literature, that it was a period of flux, and that how a mountaineer wrote or described his/her experiences would depend largely on who the mountaineer was (in terms of class, education, fame or gender) and who he/she was writing for. Presumably, an audience made up of the general public would be less interested in reading about technical developments and route descriptions than in stories about distant locations and adventure.

Irishman William Spotswood Green wrote the first full-length account describing a season’s mountaineering at Mount Cook. Green, who was born in 1847, was educated at Trinity College in Dublin and ordained as a priest in 1873. At the time of publication of *The High Alps of New Zealand* he was a member of the British Alpine Club. During the period from the mid-1880s his work collecting deep-sea specimens for the Royal Irish Academy led him to leave the church and take up a position as Inspector of Fisheries. By 1890, when his second book *Among the Selkirk Glaciers* (which detailed his survey work in the mountains of British Columbia) was published, he was a Fellow of the Royal Geographical Society. Of all the mountaineer-writers in this study, Green most closely fits the model of Pratt’s sentimental hero—that is, a ‘self-effacing producer of information’ (Pratt 77) and ‘non-interventionist European presence’ (Pratt 77). These travellers, explorers and scientists observed, gathered information and transmitted knowledge via texts published back ‘home’ in Europe. ‘Anti-conquest’ is the term used by Pratt when referring to ‘the strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony’ (9). The main protagonist of ‘anti-conquest’ is the European male and Pratt claims that such travellers ‘passively look out and possess’ the landscape (Pratt 9).

This thesis will demonstrate that Green’s literary responses to the landscape of Mount Cook reflect those of the sentimental traveller—in the way that he filtered the New Zealand landscape through the language of Romanticism, making frequent comparisons between the Southern Alps and the ‘known’ landscapes of the Alps, and transmitted his

knowledge through a book published in Britain, for example—but it does need to be taken into account that Green came from Ireland which was a British colony, that his trip to New Zealand was self-funded rather than supported by the Alpine Club or the Royal Geographical Society, and that his ‘scientific’ work was chiefly in the form of observation rather than data collection. Most importantly of all, Green’s journey to Mount Cook took place more than a decade after the surrounding glacier areas had been explored and the pastoral land cleared and settled.

*The High Alps of New Zealand* is a first-person narrative and chronicles the events leading up to Green’s arrival at the mountain, the setting up of camp, various attempts on the summit, the return to camp and the departure from the area. Woven into this narrative are tales of hardship and misadventure: the outbreak of small-pox on Green’s ship, swagging up the Tasman Valley, alpine storms, and Green’s unplanned night-out sheltering on a narrow ledge part-way down Mount Cook. Observations concerning the topography of the region and the flora and fauna, as well as details relating to mountaineering itself are part and parcel of Green’s account. As well as providing a colourful narrative, Green offers moments of reflection. He attempts to analyse the ‘charm of Alpine travel’—that is, mountaineering—and ponders the beauty of the mountain landscape (218).

The basic structure and narrative of this book is conventional in terms of Victorian mountaineering literature. The perceived ‘spirit’ of mountaineering remains grounded in Romanticism despite the fact that the growth of empire meant that the mountains ‘that had once been regarded as the last bastion of the sublime were more and more seen as having succumbed to the imagined sense of Britain’s imperial power’ (Colley 52).

Green’s writing is marked by a tone of curiosity and throughout his text the mountains are a place where he can both exert his imagination and experience the challenge of attempting a first ascent. The writing in *The High Alps* is very visual. By drawing on metaphors Green not only directs the reader to see the actual (or realistic) mountain scene but to share in his emotional response, too. Thus, metaphor is used to create atmosphere. For example, when describing the early morning of his first attempt on Mount Cook Green not only conjures up an impression of the new day but also creates a

strong sense of anticipation and tension —a feeling often experienced by mountaineers before starting out on a serious climb. He writes:

...we were astir at 5 A.M., and as we sat amongst the boulders discussing our breakfast, the sun just touched the peaks of Mount de la Bêche with his rosy beams. The glacier still lay in cold grey gloom, the music of its streams hushed, and the bed of the brook, which chattered over the boulders near our camp every afternoon, quite dry, awaiting the warm sunshine to rouse its springs from their icy sleep. A pair of keas, attracted probably by our encampment, sailed about the crags uttering wild screams. The shrill whistle of a woodhen answering its mate came from the scrub on the mountain-side. Daylight was quickly creeping down the mountains, and, as we wished to be out of the warm valley before the sun rose, we shouldered our packs, consisting of rugs for a bivouac and provisions for three days, and filed out of camp at six o'clock (205-206).

In this passage Green is creating a detailed *mis en scène*, one so richly imagined that the reader, like the author, becomes a participant in the early morning preparations. Rather than creating a verbal 'painting'—one which requires a static viewpoint from which the scene is passively observed by both artist and viewer—the similarities to theatre prompts a more active response. Thus, rather than being an invitation to look Green presents the reader with an invitation to participate. Landscape and events are perceived through shifts in time and so the 'action' slowly builds and quickens, culminating in the moment when the 'actors' finally leave the stage. The construction of atmosphere and tension is crucial to Green's description of his small party eating breakfast in the dawn gloom while dwarfed by towering peaks. Green alerts us to the 'rosy beams' of the first sun and in doing so draws upon a familiar Homeric epithet: the rosy-fingered Dawn which can be found throughout the *Odyssey*. Whether intentional or not, the echo of the language of the *Odyssey* also heightens the sense of anticipation—so that the actual scene (that of the mountaineers getting ready to climb) is immersed in the theatrical world.

This is precisely the kind of embellished writing that New Zealand explorer Charles Douglas mocked in his criticism of 'globe trotter' literature and it shows the extent to which Green's writing relies on the tropes of Romanticism. Green sees the Mount Cook

landscape through the eyes of the metropolitan traveller—he relays his message using the embedded responses of the world he has left behind. It is also the aestheticised language familiar to the educated ‘audience of climbing bishops, logicians and dons’ back in Europe (Young 129).

And yet, the use of such embedded responses heightens a sense of dislocation between Green as ‘Mount Cook mountaineer’ and Green as ‘chronicler’ of events. The reference to the ‘cold grey gloom’ of the glacier, for example, gives rise to a sense of unease which was probably real (as he was about to head off into unknown territory) but which appears on the page as cliché. There is further dislocation between the silent streams, the ‘hushed’ ‘music’ and the brooks which should, but don’t, ‘chatter’. ‘Chattering brooks’ are an easily identifiable pastoral image, they form part of a tamed landscape. Their absence creates a degree of ‘strangeness’ adding to the sense of distance between Green who is at Mount Cook and his readers who are safe back ‘home’.

Green directs our gaze upwards to the ‘craggs’ and the keas who fly high above ‘uttering wild screams’. At least Green can *see* the keas. The only other sign of life, the ‘woodhen’—or weka—is invisible from view, hidden somewhere in the ‘scrub on the mountain-side’. Once again this description has an other-worldly, ‘strange’ quality which casts the Southern Alps landscape as exotic rather than familiar. There is no sense of ‘belonging’ to the landscape and no imagery to suggest domination, either. There is no homely shelter, no flowing water and even the daylight is described as ‘creeping’. The emphasis is on a world frozen in slumber, a primal land waiting to be awakened. This extract gives expression to the language of discovery, it lays the groundwork for some kind of human intervention to take place which, like the ‘sunshine’ will ‘rouse’ the ‘springs from their icy sleep’. It is from this still sleeping world that Green and his men will set out, carrying rugs and ‘provisions for three days’ and it is this piece of writing which clearly identifies Green as a sentimental traveller standing on the cultural frontier.

Clearly, passages like the one above are not addressed to mountaineers wishing to follow in Green’s footsteps. This is not the language of a practical guide-book. Rather, it is the aestheticised, adjective-laden language of the sublime and the question that needs to be asked is ‘why is the language of the sublime still relevant?’ If

mountaineering writing is part of the imperial project, and the focus of the imperial project is ‘conquest and control’, (Colley 221) then why does the sublime still have such traction? One answer is presented by Ann Colley in *Victorians in the Mountains: Sinking the Sublime* when she discusses mountaineering in the Himalayan ranges. Colley believes that in ‘reality’ mountaineers ‘were frequently overwhelmed by the sheer sublimity of their surroundings’ (221), that these individuals were ‘guided by an aesthetic sensibility’ (221) to the landscape and that ‘contrary to what most might believe, the imperial imperative did not necessarily negate or replace the sublime tradition’ (222). In fact, ‘the sublime not only legitimized but also added glory and force to the authority’ of the imperial effort (222). Colley then goes on to offer a counter-view, one that presents an alternative to Pratt’s ‘monarch-of-all-I-survey’ scene. Whereas Pratt identifies the ‘monarch-of-all-I-survey’ (201-02) scene to suggest that mountaineers (or explorers and travellers) scan the scenery and visually possess the landscape—or dominate it—Colley suggests that the ‘aesthetic dimension’ detracted from a sense of domination and ‘paradoxically stood side by side as a humbling moment in which the very force and immense scale of the surroundings put these invaders in their place. They were, consequently, never really part of a “Master-of-all-I-survey” scene’ because the sublime reminded climbers of their own ‘littleness’ and there ‘was no way to possess such a landscape’ (222).

New Zealand mountaineering historian Graham Langton asserts that mountaineering was ‘a significant part of European appropriation of a new land’(27) and that ‘the concept of ‘conquest’ of mountains always existed’ (27) but ‘more as a public attitude than in the minds of individual climbers’(27). As he sees it:

Achievement of a summit is not quite the same as conquest of a mountain, or of Nature, though public expression would often hold it to be so. Climbers were not immune to feelings of conquest but their perception of their achievement and of the mountains usually went much further. Involved were a complexity of motivations, satisfactions and emotions, and a sense of belonging. The non-climbing public could not fully comprehend all this, whereas the idea of achievement as conquest was easily understood and applauded (27).



The language of the sublime seems relevant precisely because it communicates the *experience* of mountaineering in ways that theory, or textural analysis, do not. That is, the language of the sublime locates the observer *within* the landscape rather than favouring the objective, all-encompassing gaze of the monarch-of-all-I-survey genre. On a final (prosaic) note it is important to keep in mind that the weather encountered on the summit of Mount Cook also had a major influence on mountaineers' promontory descriptions. In poor weather, when visibility was restricted to a few metres, mountaineers might only walk on and off the summit—suggesting that reaching the summit was more akin to reaching a goal (a sporting or personal triumph) than claiming a conquest. Even in fine weather the need to get off the mountain before dark meant that mountaineers did not rest for much more than an hour. In order to convey a sense of 'conquest' mountaineers needed to be able to describe the view from the summit as any description from a point lower down on the mountain was likely to indicate failure to reach the top or retreat in the face of nature's dominant power.

Green relies on familiar—sometimes clichéd—aestheticised tropes to describe New Zealand 'nature' in a style familiar to his educated audience. Epigraphs and quotations enable him to elevate what he sees by filtering it through the language of such great writers as Byron (1, 26, 177, 221), Coleridge (162), Shakespeare (294), Tennyson (104), and Wordsworth (124). For example, to open the chapter describing his second attempt on the mountain Green calls on Byron to create a scene of sublime grandeur:

The palaces of Nature, whose vast walls  
Have pinnacled in clouds their snowy scalps,  
And throned Eternity in icy halls  
Of cold sublimity, where forms and falls  
The avalanche—the thunderbolt of snow!  
All that expands the spirit, yet appals,  
Gather around the[se] summits, as to show  
How Earth may pierce to Heaven, yet leave vain man below (221).

This extract, from Canto the Third of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, summons up a world that both 'expands the spirit' and 'appals'. The mountains 'pierce to Heaven' whereas

‘vain man’ remains ‘below’. Clearly this image would remind the reader of Green’s description of his camp in the dark valley given earlier in the book (205-06).

The epigraph quoted above conjures up a majestic, sublime mountain world. The ‘palaces of nature’ refer to the Alps—a region made familiar through the writing of Byron himself, Coleridge, Shelley and Ruskin as well as through the paintings of artists like Turner. The Alps were civilised, frequented by tourists as well as mountaineers. By contrast the Mount Cook region—in the 1880s— was far removed from the world of the British cultural tourist.

In terms of Victorian mountaineering literature, Green’s use of a mountain-themed epigraph is conventional. His reliance on convention might be explained by the fact that he was a first time author, not particularly ‘famous’ (if we allow that the kind of fame enjoyed by Edward Whymper carries with it a degree of literary independence) and that his perceived audience was the class of men to be found in the British Alpine Club. Yet, although Green’s writing is conventional in its references to the Romantic poets, it is also slightly awkward when he attempts to link the sublime to the banal. In the lines beneath the epigraph, Green prefaces the chapter with the following:

Second attempt.—Glorious weather.—Long rock climb (221).

And immediately below that brief description, he marks the date as if it were a journal entry: ‘Feb.27’ (221).

The ‘palaces of Nature’ with their ‘snowy scalps’ and ability to ‘pierce to Heaven’ are therefore brought down to earth, becoming the stage for a ‘long rock climb’ in ‘glorious weather’ towards the end of February. Byron’s words seem excessively grand given the banality of Green’s activity. However, as you continue to read through the chapter, the link between the epigraph and Green’s own experience are clearer. Tension builds as Green ascends the mountain and, at one point, observes a rock avalanche:

A crash rang through the air, and looking towards the gully, we saw it enveloped in a cloud of brown dust from which fragments of rock flew to long distances. The crash became a roar like thunder, the whole mountain shook, rock after rock

flew downwards, splintering themselves into a thousand atoms and starting fresh masses. Downwards, downwards continued the smoke and din till it died away far below, leaving us to congratulate ourselves that we were not under it, but making us more anxious concerning the small falls of stones which were continually occurring across our own track (224).

Here, then, Green relies on his personal experience to draw attention to the grandeur and power of the mountain. Byron's 'thunderbolt of snow' becomes, in Green's humbler version, 'a roar like thunder'. But Green goes further than Byron in impressing upon the reader the force of the avalanche. Whereas Byron's avalanche 'forms and falls', Green places great emphasis on motion through the repetition of 'downwards, downwards'. He does not break up the repetition through extending the clause between repeated words, nor does he use a simple 'down, down' to create the image of the avalanche. His choice of 'downwards' is far weightier and more ominous—it carries momentum. The avalanche destroys everything in its path and any attempt to fight back would be futile given its power to obliterate.

Contrast is a tool used by Green to heighten the threat of the mountain avalanche in relationship to the powerless human observer. When the rock avalanche stops, Green's party 'congratulate' themselves for not being under it (and here we are reminded of Douglas's remarks concerning the way mountaineers exaggerate the danger of avalanches), but, at the same time, Green feels 'more anxious' about the small rock falls that continue to shower down.

Green's account of the avalanche is both real—he was in an unfamiliar setting facing a dangerous situation—but also literary. British mountaineering texts are full of similar dangerous encounters and the reporting of such events are clichéd. But they are not fanciful and the description of the avalanche is one way in which mountaineers were able to express their vulnerability in the mountains without sacrificing any of their masculinity. Similarly, readers of Green's text can appreciate the danger Green was facing but are able to identify the way Green overcame—rather than succumbed to—fear.

Here and elsewhere Green's personal observations are detailed. He was curious about his surroundings and his responses range from wonder and delight on the one hand to deep anxiety on the other. One of the best examples of his distinctive way of seeing comes across in a description of another avalanche, this time off Mount Tasman. Green made this observation during his descent from his final (almost successful) attempt on Mount Cook:

One grand fall took place from the Mount Tasman cliffs not far from us. A large piece of glacier cracked off with a loud report and slid, like a great ship being launched, amidst a quantity of smaller pieces, to the edge of the precipice; then toppled over, coming down on the glacier below with a deafening crash. Just as some great roller from the ocean thundering upon the rocks shoots upwards in clouds of snow-white spray, so the ice-dust spouted upwards like the sea foam, and from its midst great pieces flew to long distances, and, falling, furrowed up the snow on the surface of the glacier (263).

Green was a skilled artist and it is clear that his response to the avalanche is visual. He uses simile—the large block of ice is like a ship, the smaller fragments like sea-spray—but what he is essentially doing is recreating (or replaying) the scene. The block of ice which slid 'like a great ship being launched' is clearly massive. The use of 'great' adds bulk and power to the image. The ice/ship is so large that it is unstoppable and has the power to destroy anything in its path. Tension is created through the detailed description of the movement of the ice. First it 'cracked off', then it 'slid' to the 'edge of the precipice' and then it 'toppled over' before 'coming down on the glacier below'. This slow-motion quality has been carefully constructed by Green. He places a semi-colon after the word 'precipice' and in doing so succeeds in creating a pause, his language mirroring the arrested movement of the ice itself. The ice, which initially appears to have been viewed from above, as if moving away from the spectator (as a ship being launched would appear to a person standing on land) then comes 'down on the glacier below' with a 'deafening crash'. With the words 'coming down' (rather than 'falling down'), the view point appears to shift so that we are now watching the ice come towards us. There is a kind of giddy delight mixed with horror in witnessing the scene.

Essentially the extract above is divided into two halves. First, the ice is likened to the launching of a 'great ship'. Then once the falling-block has reached the glacier it is transformed from a ship to the sea. It is compared to a 'great roller from the ocean thundering upon the rocks' while 'ice-dust spouted upwards like the sea foam'. 'Great pieces flew to long distances' before the whole scene is returned to reality so that it concludes on the glacier itself where the ice 'furrowed up the snow'. The use of simile and metaphor alone do not account for this vivid description. While the ship and sea images are interesting, it is the shifting viewpoint and the sense of movement which really bring the scene to life.

Green continues to describe the motion of the avalanche in the final sentence of the paragraph which follows on immediately from the extract quoted above.

The first crash gave place to a continuous rumble, and then, out from beneath the cloud of dust, the great, broken-up mass of the avalanche came on towards us with apparent slowness, though, from the way in which the ice-blocks danced and seethed on its surface, it was evident that distance alone made its motion seem slow; nearly half a mile was traversed ere its energy was wholly expended (263).

The focus is now fully on the avalanche itself. Green is describing a force of nature. Initially he uses sound—the 'crash' and the 'rumble'—to introduce the presence of the avalanche. The ice then appears from 'beneath the cloud of dust' and it 'came on towards us with apparent slowness'. This is a dramatic moment. The avalanche is threatening because it is initially obscured and can only be heard. Then, once sighted, it is described as 'great', a 'broken-up mass' which advances on the human spectators. The words 'crash' and 'great' resonate because they have been used earlier in the paragraph. The repetition holds the paragraph together structurally but it also re-introduces a specific sound—as in an orchestral movement—and a specific weight and mass which is 'great'. So there is an accumulation of power which renders the scene in three-dimensions rather than two. In other words, it's theatrical.

The 'great, broken-up mass of the avalanche came on towards us with apparent slowness' creates unease because the slowness is only 'apparent'. In fact, the ice on the

surface of the avalanche ‘danced and seethed’ and it took nearly ‘half a mile ere its energy was wholly expended’. The avalanche looks slow but it isn’t. ‘Distance’ makes ‘its motion seem slow’. Appearance and reality, slowness and speed, are all offered as contrasts in order to create a menacing image. The word ‘seethed’ has several meanings here. It is suggestive of a turbulent sea, a hectic throng and a malevolent nature. There is something diabolical about ice-blocks that ‘danced and seethed’ and an avalanche that only appears to travel slowly. It takes ‘nearly half a mile ere its [the avalanche’s] energy was wholly expended’. ‘Ere’ is archaic and a nice cadence is created when it is followed by the alliterating words ‘energy’ and ‘expended’.

Green’s avalanche is powerful and destructive. But it is also self-destructive. By the end of the paragraph its ‘energy’ was ‘wholly expended’. We can trace this destruction through the placement of ‘great’ throughout the paragraph. ‘Great’ is repeated four times but, it seems to me, that this repetition is the result of clever rather than sloppy writing. ‘Great’ weaves through the account, from ‘great ship’ to ‘great roller’ to ‘great pieces’ to ‘great, broken-up mass’. Each time ‘great’ is used a transformation takes place. The avalanche diminishes in size or power and it loses form and definition. It could very well end up as ‘atoms’. The disintegration of solid mass to atoms is one of the recurring tropes of mountaineering literature. For example, ‘atoms’ recurs throughout Edward Whymper’s *Scrambles Amongst the Alps* in order to convey the dynamism of a seemingly ancient (and permanent) landscape:

...while, everywhere, there are ceaseless sounds of action, telling that the causes are still in operation which have been at work since the world began; reducing the mighty mass to atoms, and effecting its degradation (75).

In amplifying the references to the ‘great’ ‘ship’ and ‘roller’, and ice ‘pieces’ and ‘mass’, Green echoes an epic or Homeric simile. This description refers to an incident taking place after his final attempt on the summit and so it appears that the expended energy of the massive avalanche mirrors his own feelings of defeat. But while the avalanche is reduced to nothing, Green has the strength to return to camp (and home) which gives this passage an allegorical tone. The powerful but reckless force of nature is contrasted with culture. Man, the ‘lesser’ force, is able to overcome and survive.

Beauty *and* danger are highlighted in Green's references to nature. He has far too much practical experience of mountaineering and its risks to see the mountains merely as spectacular scenery. He assesses his surroundings and in this regard his response to the mountains differs from that of the poets chosen by him for the epigraphs. He is a participant in the action, whereas they make their observations from a place of safety.

Depictions of dramatic events are frequent in Victorian mountaineering literature. Avalanches, rock-falls, bergschrunds, crevasses, storms, and spectacular light-effects impart life to the narrative. But, more than that, they help fill a void — one that occurs because most mountaineering literature can draw on only a very limited number of human characters. If a climbing party consists of only three people, for example—and there is no one else (no local or exotic population) to provide colour—then such things as avalanches and beautiful sun-rises tend to assume the role of character, contribute to dramatic tension and help move the story along. Non-living objects or animals and birds might also be anthropomorphised—as in this extract from Green's attempt on Mount Cook via the Mount Tasman spur:

As the morning wore on the mists were gradually rent asunder, bright shafts of sunshine made the great ice-fall on our left to shine resplendent, while at intervals a hoarse rumble amongst its séracs told us that it was waking up to its daily life (233-234).

Here, the mountain is given a living form. It is described as 'waking up to its daily life'. But its daily life is far more vivid than that of most people. The mists around the mountain are 'rent asunder', the sun falls in 'shafts', while the ice-fall itself appears to 'shine resplendent'. The language is religious and attention is focussed on both the 'light' (a kind of heavenly light) and the massive scale and power of the mountain. Because of its size, the mountain is not so much human as mythical. So, although the mountain is described as 'waking up to its daily life', it appears to the reader to be some mythical creature waking from deep sleep. In this strange realm, men must go to battle with a waking giant in order to reach their goal.

Earlier in this section I examined Green's use of epigraphs but he also incorporated poetry into the body of his text. Describing a scene when he was left alone in camp, Green writes:

...if any spot can be pure and undefiled, what more likely to be so than this shining world of spotless snow? Though all men do not analyze the charm of Alpine travel, I feel convinced that it lies to a great degree in the highest joy of our higher nature; by being brought out of the world for once in our lives, and face to face with absolute sublimity. Plato tells us that the higher thoughts and aspirations of our lives arise from the memories which linger of a past existence, in an ideal world where goodness was absolute.

“Trailing clouds of glory do we come  
From God who is our home.”

If this is true, or if even it merely represents a truth in parabolic form, it must be a good thing to repeat our experience of purity and sublimity. And I can't but think that a visit to one of these holy places of nature must re-ignite those reminiscences and make us less capable of falling into the narrowness and littleness of mind, from which half the sins of the world take their rise (218).

The couplet is taken from Wordsworth's "Ode: Intimations of Immortality" (101). It is a famous piece of writing, so well known, in fact, that Green saw no need to attribute it to the poet (presumably because his readers would have recognised the author). Wordsworth was often quoted by British mountaineer-writers of the nineteenth century and the inclusion of his writing in Green's book is nothing out of the ordinary. It is a conventional choice and in this context, the purpose of the couplet is to draw attention to the sublime world of the mountains and strengthen the link between man, nature and God. So it performs the same purpose as the Byron epigraph we have already seen.

Within the extract as a whole, a number of adjectives direct us specifically towards the sublime. The alpine environment is 'pure and undefiled' and the world is 'shining'. The snow itself is 'spotless'. In fact, so pure is this world that sublimity is described as 'absolute'. In other words, the mountain location is a 'holy place of nature'. Such a world offers protection from the 'narrowness and littleness' of the mind and 'half the sins of the world'. In this example, Green suggests that the mountain world is a setting for spiritual enlightenment.



Clearly, while Green is sitting safely in camp, he has time to ponder and ‘analyze the charm of Alpine travel’. While the adjectives he uses to describe the sublime are conventional it is clear that his feelings run deep. A purely pragmatic climber, one who strives to make a first ascent, might spend less time pondering alpine charm and spiritual enlightenment while spending more time focussed on the business end of mountaineering—planning a route to the top. But Green reveres the mountains and he displays a willingness to share his thoughts and feelings with the reader (and one could argue that few New Zealand male mountaineers would do the same). It makes sense that, like British mountaineers before him, Green calls on the writing of the Romantic poets both to set the tone for his own personal musing and to help him find words to articulate his personal response to the alpine setting.

However, (although we know mountaineering reality does not always fit neatly with the sublime) is the sublime mountain world described by Green specific to Mount Cook? Is it possible to identify Mount Cook because it presents itself to us in ‘absolute sublimity’? The answer to both questions is ‘no’. In this example, it is the ‘world of spotless snow’ and not Mount Cook itself which captures Green’s imagination. His writing, with its emphasis on alpine mysticism, describes a communion between mountain and man. But the mountain described by Green could be *any* mountain—not Mount Cook. Even when Green introduces some ‘New Zealand’ colour to a mountain scene—by the mention of keas, for example, as we saw in an earlier excerpt (205-06)—the overall impression is that of a Romanticised alpine world rather than a specific Mount Cook environment. Thus it appears that Green is still firmly rooted in the Victorian tradition of mountaineering and that his writing, with its emphasis on sublimity, actually harks back to mountaineering-writing of the mid-1850s. His ‘holy place of nature’ will find no true-match in the later New Zealand response to Mount Cook.

Sadly Green didn’t reach the summit of Mount Cook but, having discovered a way across the Linda Glacier, he was able to write that ‘at 6P.M. [we] stepped on to the top-most crest of Ao-rangi’ (248) and that ‘Mount Cook was now practically conquered.’ (249). Although he wasn’t on the summit itself, Green had completed the most

dangerous and difficult part of the mountain. He was higher than anyone in the entire country had been and this is how he described his surroundings:

Our first glance was, of course, down the great precipice beneath us towards the Tasman Glacier—the precipice up which we had gazed so often—but the dark grey masses of vapour swirling round the ice-crag shut out all distant view.

A look backwards, down into the dark, cloud-filled abyss out of which we had climbed, was enough to make us shudder, it looked fathomless; and this white icy ridge on which we stood, with torn mists driving over it before the fierce nor'-wester, seemed the only solid thing in the midst of chaos (249).

Green introduces elements of a supernatural, fantastical nature: the dark grey 'masses of vapour', the 'cloud-filled abyss', and the 'torn mists'. In this world it is impossible to see clearly—the distant view is blocked. The ground itself no longer feels secure: the abyss is 'fathomless' and only the 'white icy ridge' on which they stand feels solid 'in the midst of chaos'.

Such a world of mist and chaos brings to mind the cold, ice, fog and ghostly light of Coleridge's "The Rime of the Ancient Mariner" or a darker, more remote version of Wordsworth's "The Simplon Pass". The language, too, is exaggerated but familiar—the images conjured up by Green are easily visualised and we see them almost as illustrations for a text (in the style of Gustave Doré, for example) rather than as a real, natural environment. We are being presented with a version of the sublime. And yet within this sublime world is a fragment of a New Zealand identity. Green uses the word 'nor'-wester'—a word that has its roots in the local vernacular. Presumably, for him, the term sounded exotic or lyrical, more suited to the scene he has described than its alternative, blander, 'north westerly'

Green and his party continued upwards. By now the gale had gained so much force that the men had to crouch down and hang on to their ice axes to prevent themselves from being blown off the mountain. They were showered with icicles falling off the cornice above them. And they became very anxious about their descent. The storm was intense and they had little more than an hour of daylight. This is Green's observation of that final summit climb:

There was no chance of a view. We were hundreds of feet above any rocks, so that we could build no cairn, or leave any record of our ascent. We were all agreed that we were fairly on the summit of the peak, and that we ought to commence the descent (250).

The contrast in voice between this final statement—when Green knows there is little hope of reaching the summit—and the dramatic voice from the just-earlier point in the climb is remarkable. In what appears to be a clear example of ‘literal inexpressibility’ (Lawson-Peebles 118), Green effectively dismisses all poetic language and in spare, short sentences bears witness. What we have now is the reduction of the environment to its most important elements: the mountain, the weather and the climber.

In earlier passages Green describes the mountain environment as a place where men could be brought ‘face to face with absolute sublimity’ (217), emphasising that mountains were ‘holy’ (218). But these observations were made from the relative safety of camp—not from the mountain top during a storm. It would appear that the sublime is easier to appreciate from a distance. When Green is actually faced with the practicalities of mountaineering and staying alive, he discovers that the language of the sublime is inadequate. At this moment Green is not being brought ‘face to face’ with sublimity but with the very real possibility of his own death.

Because the language of this final section is unadorned, attention falls on the repetition of the negative statements: ‘no view’, ‘no cairn’, nor ‘leave any record of our ascent’. Green knows he is beaten and his writing conveys a sense of mental exhaustion when he writes: ‘We were all agreed that we were *fairly* on the summit of the peak, and that we *ought* to commence the descent’ (emphasis added). At this critical stage in the climb Green was still battling with himself. He knew what he *ought* to do but because he was ‘fairly on the summit’ he feels torn by indecision. He cannot bring himself to simply ‘commence the descent’.

The men continued upwards a short distance, following the cornice towards the summit. Green noted that ‘Ten minutes more and the last bit of snow would be under the sole of my boot’ but just as it seemed that they might still make it to the top they encountered a

bergschrand. Negotiating this obstacle would take twenty minutes and although the climbing beyond the gap in the cornice looked relatively easy, they couldn't afford the time to continue. At last, Green called a 'retreat' (251).

Describing the first stages of the descent, Green's language becomes animated once more:

“Clink, clink,” went the axes into the hard ice with a constant rhythm, and we kept time with our feet, step after step—down, down, down! (252)

Direct speech creates a sense of immediacy but it is the emphasis on sound, the 'clink, clink' of the ice axes, which brings the real shift in tone and atmosphere. The reader's attention becomes focussed on the sound of the ice axes, and this 'clink, clink' becomes a background pulse over which the repetitive 'step after step' and 'down, down, down' is layered. Green almost creates a sense of falling, rather than descending—a sense emphasised by the inclusion of the exclamation mark after the final 'down'. Green's attention to sound makes sense when he follows the passage quoted above with the statement that descending a mountain is 'far more trying work on the nerves than going up' (252). Clearly, all his senses are on high alert as 'step after step' he continues 'down'.

Green didn't make it down, however. His party was forced to spend the night standing on a sloping ledge '10,000 feet above the sea' (256). The time passed very slowly but 'at 4.30, not one moment too soon, came the first glimmering dawn of the 3<sup>rd</sup> of March' (259). He continues:

The light seemed to come very slowly, as the rain-clouds hung in heavy masses on the ice-slopes. Now and then we saw the cliffs of Mount Tasman looming ghost-like for an instant, and again all would vanish (259).

Although Green was standing on a ledge, he was in relative safety (having survived the night). His language, therefore, becomes richer in adjectives and metaphor. The light comes 'very slowly', the clouds hung in 'heavy masses', and the cliffs of the Tasman loom 'ghost-like'. Green describes what he can see but the emphasis is not on him as a

participant in the action but, rather, as a spectator. A sense of distance is created between him (standing on the ledge) and the cliffs of Tasman which loom ‘ghost-like for an instant’ and then ‘vanish’. His words create an impression of the mountain as a *spectacle*. Whereas the men are of this world, the mountain is otherworldly, ‘ghost-like’. But this impression of other-worldliness is quickly broken because, having created one mood, Green disrupts the rhythm of these slow-paced, two-clause sentences with the following:

I might have made a little sketch, or I might have taken down the reading of the aneroid, but all such thoughts were absent from our minds. Could we get down? Could we reach our provisions? Would our limbs do their wonted service? Could our hands clutch our ice axes, which would be our only means of gaining a grip once we stepped off the ledge? These questions were more than enough for our benumbed brains (259-60).

The first adjective employed by Green is ‘little’. Immediately, then, we are directed towards the insignificant. What Green ‘might have’ chosen to do—a little sketch, an aneroid reading—is human in scale, far less imposing in nature than the environment he has just described. Creating a permanent record of his surroundings (through the sketch and the aneroid reading) ‘might have’ occurred to Green had he been in a happier, calmer state of mind. But at this point he is less the ‘text-book’ mountaineer than a man with a ‘benumbed brain’ anxious to reach camp. His thoughts are reduced to a series of simple questions: ‘could’ his team get down, ‘could’ they reach their food supply, ‘could’ they keep hold of their ice axes. The ‘could’ of these questions helps maintain the rhythm and tone established by the previous repetition of ‘might’. Suspense is also created. The first two questions are straightforward and general but an increasing level of doubt is generated as the questions become more specific and the syntax more complex. Green uses archaic language to ask if the men’s ‘limbs’ would ‘do their wonted service’. This phrase, although not to be found in the King James Version, has biblical overtones, bringing to mind Samson’s loss of power and concern over the strength of his arms following the removal of his hair by the Philistines (Judg.16:19-20). Green’s language becomes even more elaborate when he asks if the men’s hands would be able to ‘clutch’ their ice axes, adding that the ice axes would provide the only ‘means of gaining a grip’ once the men ‘stepped off the ledge’. Stepping off a ledge is

far more dramatic than ‘getting off’ a ledge and Green’s use of ‘stepped off’ is dynamic and *almost* suggests that the men will be launching into thin air. A sense of danger is thus created. But just as the tension reaches its peak, Green strikes a feeble (humanising) note, concluding with the remark that such questions ‘were more than enough for our benumbed brains’.

Throughout this extract Green hints at the difference between what is known and what ‘might’ or ‘could’ be. The physical world is given a ‘ghost-like’ quality and the men’s brains are described as ‘benumbed’. In other words, nothing is as it should be. Green’s world is one of uncertainty and vulnerability. But on an emotional level the writing is nevertheless restrained. In this passage Green does not *directly* communicate his feelings of anxiety. He does not say he was anxious or scared—nor does he say he was ‘relieved’ to see the sun rise. What he must have *felt* with regard to continuing the descent is not recorded. All we are told is that once it was ‘sufficiently light to make a move’, the men ‘crept cautiously into the ice-steps and resumed our descent’ (260). The words ‘crept’ and ‘cautiously’ emphasise the vulnerability and ‘littleness’ of the men in their alpine location. These are not men who ‘stepped off the ledge’.

When we read Green, we are struck by his sense of curiosity. Whether he is writing about his voyage to New Zealand, his journey inland to Mount Cook, his scientific observations, or the climb itself, he appears wonderfully eager for new experiences. There is no doubt that being in the mountains fed his imagination and provided a respite from daily life but his writing also shows that he took pleasure in understanding—and living in harmony with—his surroundings. Thus, art and science are aligned—just as they were for many exploratory mountaineers of the Victorian era. Green also feels a strong spiritual connection to the mountains—one highlighted by his references to the sublime and the ‘holy’ places of nature (218).

Through an examination of Green’s *The High Alps of New Zealand*, we can begin to identify a useful template for early mountaineering writing set at Mount Cook. In style, it belongs within the long tradition of British mountaineering books and is rich in imagery. Through reading a selection of extracts, we have been able to highlight his use of metaphor—even epic simile—the attribution of ‘character’ to non-animate objects such as avalanches, the inclusion of quotations from well known Romantic poets and

the presence of archaic and religious language. At times, Green opts for a well-worn phrase or image but in general his writing is vivid and imaginative. His use of imagery is rarely ‘site-specific’, responding to Mount Cook itself. Nevertheless, the episodes described by him sit nicely with the adventurous theme of his narrative. All these features help mark his writing as typical of British mountaineering writing from the Victorian period.

Green cannot be considered as one of the true ‘pioneers’ of mountaineering as most of his mountaineering took place in the late nineteenth century, beyond the Golden Age of British mountaineering (1854-65). He is important, however, in terms of New Zealand mountaineering history because he was the first mountaineer to attempt Mount Cook and he was the first to write a book describing mountaineering in the largely unknown, ‘uncivilised’ Mount Cook region.

#### **b. George Mannering**

In order to trace the beginnings of a New Zealand voice in mountaineering literature it is necessary to turn to the writing of New Zealander George Mannering.

Born in North Canterbury, Mannering was well-educated and a member of the affluent middle-class—alongside such fellow New Zealand mountaineers as A. P. Harper, Marmaduke Dixon, and Malcolm Ross. In 1886, when Mannering began climbing at Mount Cook, New Zealand mountaineering books didn’t exist. Thus, all the books he read and studied on the topic of mountaineering were British (Mannering 15) and it is clear, when examining his writing, that he was influenced by these texts. Mannering’s account of five seasons climbing at Mount Cook, *With Axe and Rope*, was published in 1891.

The publication of Mannering’s book occurred at the same time as the foundation of the New Zealand Alpine Club. This would suggest, amongst other things, that New Zealand mountaineers (such as Mannering) were attempting to gain recognition for mountaineering as a recognised (respectable) sport in this country while, at the same time, hoping to create links between New Zealand mountaineering and established

British mountaineering-culture. The Canterbury-based club was modelled on its British counterpart and drew its membership from ‘amateur’ mountaineers—that is, middle-class climbers who were not professionally employed as guides. Like the British Alpine Club, the New Zealand Alpine Club operated a system based on ‘qualification’. Thus, only people with mountaineering experience were permitted to join the club. However, unlike the British Alpine Club, the New Zealand Alpine Club was open to both male and female mountaineers. Due in part to the restrictive, class-based nature of the New Zealand Alpine Club, however, and in part to the movement of mountaineers away from Canterbury, the club went into decline between 1896 and 1914 and no *New Zealand Alpine Journal* was published between 1896 and 1921.

*With Axe and Rope* was the first New Zealand mountaineering book to have been written about the Mount Cook region and it was published in Britain. Mannering’s preface makes clear that he ‘hopes that the contents may not prove uninteresting to the general public, more especially to Swiss and Caucasian climbers’—the ‘Swiss and Caucasian climbers’ being British mountaineers who climbed in those regions (vii).

Mannering introduces each chapter of his book with an epigraph. Typically, epigraphs set the scene and create a sense of atmosphere for the forthcoming action and he quotes from Byron’s *Childe Harold’s Pilgrimage* (Canto the Third) when introducing the pivotal chapter detailing his fifth and final (failed) attempt on the mountain:

Are not the mountains, waves, and skies, a part  
Of me and of my soul, as I of them?  
Is not the love of these deep in my heart  
With a pure passion? (3.75)

The source of the quotation is not given—presumably because it was so well known and so often quoted in mountaineering literature. By drawing on Byron, Mannering balances the human motivations for mountaineering—such as a desire to experience nature, overcome danger and reach the summit—with a ‘pure’, noble aspect. The actual failure of his ascent is underplayed, replaced with a reference to a deeper connection between mountaineer and mountain. The mountains become ‘a part’ of the mountaineer and his ‘soul’. The love for the mountains lies ‘deep’ in the ‘heart’ and the ‘passion’ for the



mountains is 'pure'. The mountaineer essentially 'loses' his identity in the mountains. The depth of this relationship supports a degree of alpine mysticism. Failure rests in the human world, whereas the mountain world has spiritual and metaphysical meaning.

In reality Mannering doesn't 'lose himself' in the mountains, nor do the mountains become 'a part' of his 'soul' (and vice versa). The practicalities of mountaineering—of dealing with poor snow conditions, bad weather, lack of light, poor equipment, hunger and exhaustion—keep Mannering fully occupied and in this world. Thus while he loves being in the mountains and although his writing embraces Romantic cliché, he can't afford to lose his identity—at least not until he is in a position of safety, a place from where he can look back and elaborate on his adventure. His writing does imply a certain reverence for nature, however.

An interesting contrast can be made between the Byron epigraph and one chosen to introduce an earlier attempt on the mountain—the second attempt:

If at first you don't succeed,  
Try, try, try again.—*Nursery Rhyme.*

Whereas Mannering saw no need to reference the quote from Byron's *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, he identifies this epigraph as a 'nursery rhyme'. In fact it is a proverb popularised by nineteenth-century British educational writer W.E. Hickson. In identifying the quote, Mannering is able to maintain a hint of sophistication despite the fact that the proverb has a child-like ring. There is a touch of wry humour in Mannering's selection and the tone set by the proverb is less serious than that set by the Byron piece. So clearly, Mannering is having fun. Whereas the British mountaineer Green quotes only from the work of such well known writers as Wordsworth, Byron, Coleridge, Shakespeare and Tennyson, Mannering gives the impression of not taking himself *too* seriously. And it is notable that New Zealander Malcolm Ross—whose work we will study later in this thesis—chose the same rhyme to open his chapter on 'The Conquering of Aorangi' (52)—an attempt which, despite the chapter heading, also ended in failure.

The inclusion of the proverb, ‘Try, try, try again’ by both Mannering and Ross would suggest that New Zealand climbers possessed enough self-awareness to at least acknowledge some of the absurdities of mountaineering. But this kind of humour isn’t specific to New Zealand mountaineer-writers. British mountaineers, such as Alpine Club president Clinton Dent who published *Above the Snowline: Mountaineering Sketches Between 1870 and 1880* (1885), frequently incorporated humorous anecdotes into their texts. And you only have to look at the titles of several famous British mountaineering books, titles such as Leslie Stephen’s *The Playground of Europe* (1871), Edward Whymper’s *Scrambles Amongst the Alps in the Years 1860-69* (1871) or even travelogues such as Mark Twain’s *A Tramp Abroad* (1880) to see that self-deprecating humour and irony played a role in mountain literature. In fact, a look at Whymper’s *Scrambles Amongst the Alps* shows that he, too, quoted from Hickson at the beginning of a chapter outlining his failed attempts (up to and including his fourth failed attempt) on the Matterhorn (88). However, what is very New Zealand about the inclusion of the ‘try, try, try again’ rhyme is that it hints at the ‘give it a go’ mentality of the New Zealand climbers. These were men with very little in the way of mountaineering experience and climbing skills, rudimentary equipment, and only crudely drawn maps. Nevertheless they decided to climb Mount Cook—the tallest mountain in the country and a mountain that had never been climbed. By contrast, *all* of the overseas mountaineers who attempted Mount Cook had extensive climbing experience and employed professional guides. Rather than quoting from a simple child’s rhyme, as Mannering and Ross have, these overseas mountaineers appear more comfortable with late Romantic tropes, preferring the heroic tone of Tennyson’s ‘Ulysses’, with its call ‘To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield (165).’ This difference in tone implies that writers like Mannering and Ross were appealing to a local audience as well as the British educated class. While their work was published in Britain, they were also very conscious of their work operating as a piece of indigenous literature—writing that informed readers ‘here’ about the ‘glorious sport’ (Ross 311) of mountaineering.

The most important chapter of *With Axe and Rope* in terms of this study describes Mannering’s fifth and final attempt on Mount Cook. This ten-day trip took place in December 1890 and Mannering was accompanied by his regular climbing partner Marmaduke Dixon. On the lower slopes they were aided by musterer and Hermitage

employee James Annan but for the actual climb to the summit they went on alone despite the fact that a party of two guideless climbers ‘would not be looked upon with favour by such a body as the English Alpine Club’ (94)

According to Mannering’s account of the climb, the two men reached the final ice-cap at 5.30pm (100). The wind was blowing from the north-west and the weather was deteriorating and although the men were about 140ft. from the summit they decided to turn back as they could not risk being caught out in the dark. As Mannering says, they ‘were caught in a trap’ (101).

The difficulty of the climb and the dangers encountered by the men leading up to the point of retreat were described by Mannering. At the point of turning back, he captured the view:

The view is magnificently comprehensive. Looking northwards we could see clear over the top of our giant neighbour, Mount Tasman (11,475 feet). On the western side, the ocean, but twenty miles distant, was covered by a mantle of low-lying clouds creeping into the bays and inlets of the coast, studded here and there with islanded hill-tops, and stretching away to what seemed a limitless horizon on the west. A streak of blue ocean showed through the cloud mantle near Hokitika, seventy miles northwards (101).

The first thing we notice about this extract is that Mannering opens his account in the present tense despite having used the past-tense up to this point. The shift in tense immediately places both Mannering and the reader in the action. The tone is dynamic and when Mannering writes ‘we could see’ (rather than ‘I could see’) there is a sense of inclusion as if he is inviting the reader to see with him. On the face of it, this ‘promontory description’ (Pratt 198) places Mannering at the centre of a ‘monarch-of-all-I-survey’ scene (Pratt 197). The fact that he is not on top of Mount Cook appears irrelevant as he is, nevertheless, higher than the ‘giant’ Tasman.

But if Mannering ‘claims’ the landscape we need to know who for? He doesn’t claim it for himself as he does not use the word ‘I’ but rather ‘we’ and ‘our’. It would seem that he is not only writing on behalf of his team but acting on behalf of his readers—the

educated readers back in the British Alpine Club and the middle-class elite in New Zealand. In other words, he is claiming the landscape as part of the imperial project. He writes of a ‘magnificently comprehensive’ view—not simply a ‘magnificent’ view—and the inclusion of the word ‘comprehensive’ gives his writing gravitas. While ‘magnificent’ is conventional—a clichéd Romantic trope—‘comprehensive’ creates an impression of objectivity, as if what he is about to say is factual rather than emotional.

The language, however, becomes increasingly literary and aestheticised which suggests that Mannering is struggling to sustain the language of domination. In one long and complex sentence, he describes the view of the west coast. Switching to the past tense he says the ocean was ‘but twenty miles distant’ and covered by a ‘mantle of low-lying clouds creeping into the bays and inlets.’ The change of tense permits a gentler, more lyrical tone. There is no personal pronoun and so the landscape begins to dominate the scene—not the person looking down on it. The ocean is described as ‘but twenty miles distant’. The syntax has a poetic ring to it which is accentuated by the use of the lyrical ‘mantle’ where ‘layer’ would have sufficed. The clouds, which are far below Mannering, are described as ‘creeping’. Although we might expect fog or mist to creep rather than clouds, the image created by Mannering works nicely particularly when he draws attention to the ‘islanded hill-tops’. The reference to ‘islanded-hilltops’ emphasises Mannering’s height once more but the more notable aspect of this sentence is that Mannering has managed to create and maintain an image of a coastal-ocean landscape. By presenting the hills as islands, rather than as part of an alpine setting, the entire sentence—and the one following it—is unified in terms of its imagery. The repetition of words ‘ocean’ and ‘mantle’ also help to frame the passage.

Mannering continues to describe the view, turning his attention to the land:

North-eastwards the glorious array of the Southern Alps extended, presenting a panorama of such magnificence and comprehensiveness that it defies any attempt at description. It is one of those vast pictures which are indelibly impressed upon the memory—one of those overpowering examples of Nature’s sublimity which seems to move a man’s very soul and call him to a sense of his own littleness (102).

Now, the voice of domination collapses completely to be replaced by that of the sublime. The view is such that Mannering is rendered powerless to describe it—it ‘defies any attempt at description’. The ‘literal inexpressibility’ of the panoramic view becomes, in the words of Robert Lawson-Peebles, ‘a flourish of rhetoric’ (118).

Mannering presents us with a ‘vast picture’ but he does not provide any more details—presumably because it ‘defies any attempt at description’. ‘Vast’ draws our attention to scale and the scale, in this case, is not human. The image, which cannot be described but only felt, is ‘indelibly impressed upon the memory’. The ‘indelibly impressed’ suggests that some sort of exchange has taken place between the mountain and man and this, in turn, reminds us of Byron’s words, quoted at the beginning of this chapter. The reverence Mannering feels for the mountain is highlighted by the capitalisation of ‘Nature’ and the fact that in this sublime landscape, man gains a ‘sense of his own littleness’.

The writing in this paragraph is conventional drawing heavily on clichéd Romantic imagery. Mannering would be familiar with the writing of Green’s *High Alps of New Zealand* as well as in the earlier ‘travel’ writing of Thomas Bracken (*The New Zealand Tourist*.) and Julius von Haast’s *Geology of the Provinces of Canterbury and Westland*. He was also familiar with the writing of the British mountaineers through the *Alpine Journal* and such books as Clinton Dent’s *The Badminton Library of Sports and Pastimes-Mountaineering*. Furthermore, Mannering was the son of a Canterbury sheep farmer and had been educated—until the age of fifteen—at Christ’s College in Christchurch. Although his education did not include university, he would have had an introduction to classical and Romantic literature.

This knowledge of the Romantic writers—at least those included in the epigrams of *With Axe and Rope*—enabled Mannering to adopt the style of writing used by members of the British mountaineering elite, a group he hoped to join as a result of his own mountaineering success and literary achievement. So, while Mannering made the ‘greatest contribution to establishing local mountaineering’ (Langton 87) and sought to beat foreign visitors to the top of Mount Cook, he also knew that his writing gave him entry into the established world of British mountaineering, a world which had the power to validate his own mountaineering contribution to history. It is difficult, therefore, to

see how Mannering contributes to an emerging New Zealand voice in mountaineering literature. But there is an additional factor at play here.

This was Mannering's *fifth* attempt on the mountain. Getting to the point where he now stood consumed a lot of time. He had not reached the summit despite all his hard work over the past few seasons. He had followed in the footsteps of Green but, like Green, had little to show for his effort. The following paragraph, which follows directly from the section quoted above, offers a more personal response to events:

Close under us lay the scenes of all our joys and sorrows of the past five years: the Tasman Glacier, encircled by those splendid peaks and snow-fields whose forms we had learned to know and love so well; further afield lay the Liebig Range, and, showing over this, Mount Jukes and his attendant satellites of rocky peaks. Beyond this again, far, far away in the blue and indefinite east, we could distinguish the hills of Banks Peninsula, close to our homes near Christchurch, whilst we could imagine that the blue haze distinguishable there was indeed the eastern ocean, 120 miles distant (102).

The writing is sentimental and reflective, and far more human in tone than the previous extract. While the previous quotation reminds me of the writing of British mountaineers, this paragraph has a stronger New Zealand character. To begin with, Mannering establishes a personal connection with the Mount Cook region by writing that 'all our joys and sorrows of the past five years' took place in this area. 'Joys and sorrows' is a well-worn phrase but this doesn't prevent it from being true. Mannering had spent many weeks over the past five years looking across the Tasman Glacier at the surrounding mountains. Again he relies on a clichéd phrase to inform us that 'we had learned to know and love' the 'splendid peaks and snow-fields' but again it is true. In 1890 no one had spent more time on the flanks of Mount Cook than George Mannering.

Within this long sentence, Mannering then lists and highlights specific geographical features: the Tasman Glacier, the Liebig Range and Mount Jukes. It is the naming of these landmarks—and the unclimbed Mount Jukes in particular—which captures the attention. It is difficult to imagine that the name 'Mount Jukes' was familiar to readers of Mannering's book. Whereas Tasman, Sefton or Malte Brun—'the Matterhorn of New

Zealand' (11)—might have rung a bell, Jukes was unknown. And yet it clearly meant something to Mannering—otherwise he wouldn't have included it. This very specific reference to a mountain that Mannering could see (but that meant little or nothing to his audience) informs us of the depth of the climber's knowledge. And the fact that he mentions this mountain supports the notion of a stronger New Zealand voice than found in the previous extracts. The language used by Mannering might still be conventional with its reliance on adjectives and clichés but the content hints at a break with convention. Mannering essentially informs us that this unfamiliar (and perhaps unremarkable) land has a place in his heart.

Now that he has established that this area does have a place in his heart, he reinforces the connection by ending the paragraph with a reference to the 'hills of Banks Peninsula' a spot 'close to our homes'. Moreover, the words 'far, far away in the blue indefinite east' create a sense of longing for that home. The grandeur and sublimity of the previous paragraph is now replaced by heart and home. In other words, these mountains really are 'a part' of Mannering because he lives with them and within sight of them. In that sense, they form part of his New Zealand identity.

In general Mannering's writing style, with its references to the sublime and its reliance on familiar adjectives, is fairly typical of that used by British mountaineer-writers. However, there are occasions when he adopts a less literary, less metaphor and cliché laden style of writing. This alternative style is more site-specific with regard to the Mount Cook environment and more detailed and 'exact' in its descriptions. It is also more representative of the New Zealand mountaineering voice.

The best way to highlight the differences in Mannering's style is through comparing a paper read to the Philosophical Institute of Canterbury in September 1890 with a corresponding extract from *With Axe and Rope*. The paper, entitled "On the Murchison Glacier" appeared in the *Transactions and Proceedings of the New Zealand Institute* a few months prior to the publication of his book. The Philosophical Institute of Canterbury was a scientific society with members drawn from the academic and scientific community as well as prominent clergy members. The nature of the audience and their expectations influenced Mannering's writing.

Mannering describes the exploration of the Murchison Glacier (which branches off the Tasman Glacier to the east) and the discovery of the Onslow and Cascade glaciers on the Malte Brun Range. The trip itself was made in January 1890, and Mannering was writing about places that had neither been explored nor seen.

First is his description of crossing the Cascade Glacier, as it appears in the *Transactions*:

After a futile attempt to cross these crevasses at right-angles to their trend, we struck up the ridges of ice which lay, like the leaves of a half-opened book, between them, until we had reached their extremities, and then struck across the western side of the glacier, where we ascended to a point of observation and studied the view before us. Looking in the direction from whence we had come, a magnificent panorama was presented, for we were in full view of the major part of the Malte Brun Range with all its glorious peaks and glaciers. We also noticed that the only distant point visible from this spot was the upper part of Mount Sealy, situate at the northern end of the Ben Ohau Range...Turning our attention northwards, we began to realise more than ever the immenseness of the Murchison, and at the head of the eighth or most northerly tributary glacier from the west we discerned what must be the saddle leading into the Tasman (359-60).

This is essentially an account detailing the exploration of the Murchison Glacier and the search for a crossing leading back to the Tasman Glacier (thus making a loop). In the first sentence he uses the word ‘futile’ to describe his attempt at crossing the glacier. The emphasis is on the lack of a result rather than suggesting an emotional response which would have been conveyed through a word like ‘disappointing’, for example. The climbing party ‘struck up’ and ‘struck across’ the glacier—thus, they moved with purpose. They reached a ‘point of observation’ and ‘studied’ the view. Again, this is purposeful language—they are not admiring the view but examining it (even though they are presented with a ‘magnificent panorama’).

Mannering provides specific view-points and describes them in detail. Looking northwards he realises how ‘immense’ the Murchison Glacier is and then coolly counts



out the number of tributary glaciers—concluding that the ‘eighth or most northerly tributary glacier’ must lead to the Tasman. Familiar adjectives such as ‘magnificent’ and ‘glorious’ do appear in the extract—but only in passing. The one metaphor that he uses is notable for its originality and its descriptiveness: the ridges of ice lay ‘like the leaves of a half-opened book’. This metaphor is useful—it provides the reader with a very clear image of the ice formations. Clearly, he doesn’t want to provide an *impression* of the view but, rather, wishes to describe it in careful, unadorned detail.

The need for clarity is further emphasised when Mannering continues with his report of the journey, describing an incident which occurred when reaching a col on the eastern side of Mount Darwin. There is a moment of great confusion as the climbing party finds itself at a complete loss when faced with the scene below:

The scene on the other side of the saddle was enveloped in mist, but after a few moments the fog vanished as if by magic, disclosing directly at our feet a large glacier, with a strange peak immediately opposite to us. We expected to gaze on Mount De la Bêche, Mount Green, Mount Elie de Beaumont, and the Hochstetter Dome, and all the well-known features at the head of the Tasman, and it was not until we suddenly discovered that the flow of the glacier below us pursued a course to our right (whereas the Tasman would have shown a directly opposite course) that we realised we were in full view of the true head of the Murchison Glacier, which commenced at our left, and led down a valley in an easterly direction, curving, round the rocky spur ( a saddle in which we were now on)[sic], and eventually assumed a south-westerly course (361).

Long, complicated sentences are a major feature of this extract and yet they do not obscure the meaning or add confusion. Rather, they allow Mannering to convey a full, accurate account of the events taking place. Geographical detail makes it possible for the reader to orientate themselves. The scene unfolds for the reader just as we imagine it must have unfolded for the climber. Like Mannering, the reader makes sense of the view through slowly coming to terms with the area’s topographical features. The writing is not altogether dry, however. Mannering permits some embellishment through the way he ‘reveals’ the scene to the reader. Initially the view is obscured by mist. Thus, Mannering is able to create a sense of anticipation as the reader (like Mannering

himself) wonders what is below. Then, ‘as if by magic’ the fog vanishes and the full scene is brought into view. The reference to ‘magic’ is a good one. It raises the reader’s expectations and draws us in, ensuring that the writer has our full attention.

Both these scenes (the Cascade Glacier and the view from the saddle) are represented in *With Axe and Rope*. However, the writing style is far more dramatic and the helpful detail of the previous passages obscured in an exaggerated narrative. In the chapter headed “First Exploration of the Murchison Glacier”, Mannering makes clear that he is being presented with a ‘virgin field’ and that it was ‘with feelings of intense eagerness’ that his party set off (78). The very term ‘virgin field’ imparts the language of exploration with a literary flourish. It also changes the nuance of the piece. Rather than suggesting discovery, ‘virgin fields’ puts us in mind of conquest so this is a grander gesture than in the previous extract.

A short distance after reaching the terminal face of the glacier, the men left the valley and started to climb, eventually coming out onto the Onslow Glacier. From there, they crossed over to the Cascade Glacier—the glacier described in the previous extract—which is not identified in *With Axe and Rope*. Neither the Onslow nor the Cascade glaciers had been seen before. The men were confused about their surroundings as they had expected to re-join the Murchison Glacier at a higher point:

We made for it and climbed its enormous face of ice, and then we discovered our error, for there, a mile away across the moraine, lay the clear ice of the Murchison, and, far, far away northwards, the valley extended completely filled with a magnificent *mer de glace* of pure white ice. We stood transfixed, for none of us had imagined that such a grand glacier lay beyond. (82).

Mannering does not use the metaphor of the leaves of the half-opened book to describe the glacier. He condenses the scene, and in doing so describes only an ‘enormous face of ice’. He then goes on to describe the Murchison as a ‘magnificent *mer de glace* of pure white ice’. The image of ‘virgin’ field is re-ignited through the emphasis on the purity of the ice. Typically, Mannering uses the word ‘grand’ in connection with the scenery—in this case it is the glacier which is ‘grand’. The mountaineers are ‘transfixed’ by the scene. This hints at a certain passivity—such as an audience

transfixed by a performance on stage. Highlighting just how remarkable the view is, Mannering then refers to the Murchison Glacier as a '*mer de glace*'. Mention of the '*mer de glace*' connotes Mont Blanc's famous Mer de Glace and with it all the images and writing associated with that vast glacier.

Because Mannering does not identify his whereabouts—that is, he does not name the Cascade Glacier—the entire scene is painted less accurately than in the earlier excerpt. The emphasis, then, is not on descriptive detail but on narrative drive. Mannering wants to get us to the dramatic climax of the story which occurs a few pages later.

After deciding to carry on with their exploration and search for a saddle leading back to the Tasman Glacier, the men

...pushed slowly upwards, resting every few minutes. Thoughts of turning began to arise in our doubting minds. But this would not do with the *col* so nearly within our grasp, and the cry was almost one of 'Death or victory!' as we plodded laboriously upwards. (84)

They go on and:

Hurrah! the saddle was conquered! But what lay beneath? Mist! Mist! Nothing but a thick impenetrable mist...

As it cleared we looked in vain for the familiar points at the head of the Tasman, which Annan and I knew full well. 'Where's Darwin? Where's Elie de Beaumont? Where's the Dome?' No point in sight could be associated with the prominent features of the Tasman. As the low-lying portions of the mist disappeared, we observed that the glacier below flowed to the right! The Tasman should have flowed in the opposite direction.

The truth flashed upon us, and a great cry of surprise went up, 'The Murchison! The Murchison!' The very glacier whose middle parts we had left three hours previously (85).

In his attempt to capture an emotional response and communicate the drama of the moment, Mannering draws on short sentences and makes use of frequent exclamation

points as well as a piece of direct speech. Rather than create a sense of anticipation and tension through slowly revealing the scene to the reader and inviting the reader to share the moment of disclosure (as in the earlier extract), Mannering simply signposts the action. For example, he writes:

The truth flashed upon us, and a great cry of surprise went up, ‘The Murchison!  
The Murchison!’

The emphasis is on the moment of ‘truth’, the ‘great cry of surprise’ and then capped off with the findings: ‘The Murchison!’ There is an element of school-boy adventure-drama in this style of writing. So, as a piece of writing, it is as entertaining as it is informative.

Mannering’s emphasis on adventure brings to mind some British mountaineering first-person narratives (such as Edward Whymper’s *Scrambles Amongst the Alps*). One of the problems of relying on this conventional British style of mountaineering literature when describing unexplored areas at Mount Cook is that, rather than creating a strong image of the Mount Cook environment itself, Mannering creates a generic mountain scene, a hybrid landscape of New Zealand and the Alps. Despite the reported cries of excitement, the direct speech, and the short, dramatic sentences, the overall writing style is forced and the detail vague.

By contrast, the unadorned, detailed description favoured by Mannering in his report to the Philosophical Institute of Canterbury opens the way to an emerging New Zealand voice in mountaineering literature. This earlier version is less dramatic but more insightful than the account published in *With Axe and Rope*. It relates specifically to the Mount Cook region and offers detailed descriptions of the area. In being both specific to the landscape and detailed in its focus, Mannering establishes a connection to the Southern Alps rather than viewing them as some exotic ‘other’. Metaphors are used sparingly in order to add clarity. The unembellished style has more in common with the writing of the New Zealand working-class mountaineers who follow Mannering to Mount Cook and are responsible for the mountain’s first ascent.

## CHAPTER TWO: Tom Fyfe, George Graham and Jack Clarke

In *Abroad: British Literary Traveling Between the Wars*, Paul Fussell distinguishes between explorers, travellers and tourists in the following way:

All three make journeys, but the explorer seeks the undiscovered, the traveler that which has been discovered by the mind working in history, the tourist that which has been discovered by entrepreneurship and prepared for him by the arts of mass publicity (39).

Mountaineering at Mount Cook encompasses all three of these areas. The language of explorer-mountaineers—and in particular Green—highlights the difficulty in describing a ‘new’ landscape, one that lacked the historical and literary associations of the Alps. The Mount Cook environment prompted him to imagine what might unfold in the future—the development of a New Zealand mountaineering culture (such as the formation of the New Zealand Alpine Club) and tourism, for example. This future projection and its allusion to development is quite different from observations made during the 1880s of Mont Blanc, for example. While the cultural history of Mount Cook appeared insubstantial, Mont Blanc connoted permanence—it had been described by poets, painters, scientists. Europe had, what American author Washington Irving described in 1819 as ‘storied and poetical associations’ (593) which presented an opportunity to escape from ‘commonplace realities of the present, and lose myself among the shadowy grandeurs of the past (595).

This thesis will show that the writing of working-class New Zealand mountaineers was, unlike the writing of earlier mountaineers, founded in the ‘realities of the present’. The concept of an ancestral ‘home’ on the other side of the world had less traction with these mountaineers and, as a result, they did not seek to form storied associations between Mount Cook and the known European landscape. Rather, they responded to nature ‘here’ and their writing most strongly reflects the interaction between the mountaineer and the physical mountain, focussing on snow conditions, weather, and progress to the summit.

On Christmas day 1894, Tom Fyfe, George Graham and Jack Clarke became the first men to reach the High Peak of Mount Cook. In an article published in the *Otago Daily Times* two months after the ascent, Fyfe described the last few hundred feet of the climb, saying

I am afraid that the reckless way in which we romped over those last rocks was very foolhardy, but one would indeed need to be phlegmatic not to get a little excited on such an occasion (2).

This short passage gives some indication of the joy experienced by Fyfe and his team on finally reaching the summit of Mount Cook but a closer look also reveals that Fyfe is making a jibe at the mountaineering elite. Words such as ‘reckless’, ‘foolhardy’ and ‘excited’ suggest a lack of restraint but they are also defiant, attacking and subverting the British tradition and emphasis on safety and caution in the mountains. ‘Romped’ is similarly irreverent—none of the mountaineers before Fyfe were able to ‘romp’ to the summit. ‘Romped’ also references sport—as in a team which romped to victory or a horse that romped to the finish line—which suggests that Fyfe may have regarded mountaineering as a sporting activity which is hardly surprising given his own sporting interests and success as a competitive cyclist (Haynes 20-21). The word ‘phlegmatic’ takes an additional swipe at gentlemen climbers, bringing to mind the ageing armchair mountaineers of the British Alpine Club. It is a word that another climbing outsider (that is, a climber excluded from the mountaineering elite due to education, class, gender and race) Freda du Faur employs in mocking fashion in her book, *The Conquest of Mount Cook* (226).

Fyfe uses a negative structure—‘not to get a little excited’—in the context of a positive occasion and this brings to mind the way New Zealander’s frequently use terms like ‘not too bad’ for ‘good’ and in doing so conceal emotional engagement with the subject. Thus, rather than simply admitting that the team were ‘excited on such an occasion’, Fyfe is being laconic and creates a sense of distance between himself and the action.

However, a real sense of the joy is indicated a few lines later, when Fyfe adds

...at 1.30 on Christmas Day we exultantly stepped onto the highest pinnacle of the monarch of the Southern Alps (2).

This passage represents one of the few occasions when Fyfe's writing breaks free from a very contained, controlled account of the climb itself. Here, the language—and the predominance of adverbs and adjectives—is very much in keeping with that of Green and Mannering—writers whose work Fyfe would have read and been familiar with. On the other hand, Mount Cook is replaced with 'monarch' and the use of 'monarch' as a metonym rather than a metaphor suggests a slight move away from Romanticism (Ashcroft 50) which, in turn, indicates a difference in approach between Fyfe's writing and that of his predecessors Green and Mannering.

When the passage above is re-read, attention is drawn to the pronoun 'we' as in: 'we exultantly stepped onto the highest pinnacle'. There is no indication of this group of climbers being anything other than a team. It is not 'I exultantly stepped' nor is any clue given as to who actually placed the first foot on the summit. Was it Fyfe? Or Graham? Or did they stand back and allow Clarke, the youngest member of the group, to go first? There is no doubt that the first ascent of Mount Cook was a historic moment and it is significant that no individual mountaineer was singled out being first to the summit.

Fyfe's use of the pronoun 'we' suggests that he was reluctant to 'claim' the ascent for himself. That is, he places more weight on the (democratic) team effort involved in getting to the top than he does on 'conquering' the mountain or possessing the landscape. This seems to me to be a strong indication of his attitude towards mountaineering. Mountaineering is not exploration or travel but sport (just as it was for Edward Whymper). It is an activity that allowed him to test his physical fitness and skill in an environment free of written rules. Prior to this ascent he had proven himself a capable mountaineer on a number of occasions—such as during his solo (and therefore unorthodox) ascent of Malte Brun in March 1894. By not claiming the ascent for himself, Fyfe rejects the British model of mountaineering with its emphasis on 'virgin' ascents and conquest. As a member of an entirely working-class team of climbers who made it to the summit without the aid of guides or the inclusion of 'moneyed' amateurs, he all but establishes a new New Zealand approach to mountaineering, one that owes little to British mountaineering traditions and culture

Having referred to the moment of reaching the summit of Mount Cook, Fyfe leaves behind the clichéd references to the ‘monarch’ of the Southern Alps and reverts to a less mannered style of writing, one that permits him to offer a detailed description of the summit itself:

Three principal arêtes meet at the summit. The angles of two of them, the southern and northern, are fairly steep right to the summit. The other, the Tasman arête, is an easy grade. The actual top consists of a sharp ridge sloping quickly north and south, a precipice on the eastern side, and a crescent-shaped ice cap running from the western side (2).

Whereas readers more familiar with the Mount Cook writing of Green or Mannering might have expected a grander impression, one richer in metaphor, Fyfe offers a graphic likeness of what he sees. His precise description reminds us that he is describing the actual summit of the mountain for the first time. Readers of the article need to be able to see what he sees. And so, rather than creating an impression of the mountain, Fyfe recreates it as a topographical model. His sentences are short, directing the reader to the essential features of the summit. Whereas Green might have told us *how* the summit appeared (using metaphor), Fyfe constructs it—as if a model. Thus Mount Cook is presented in technical terms, as a kind of tripod. But even with the information Fyfe supplies, it is not easy to visualise the summit. You almost need a compass and a map to make sense of the three dimensional image. In fact, metaphor might have helped make the scene clearer.

But Fyfe steers clear of metaphor. Nor does he spend time attempting to find alternative ways to say ‘summit’. Furthermore, he offers no definition of mountaineering terms such as ‘arête’ or ‘ice-cap’. In fact, his use of specific mountaineering terms lends his writing a certain weight. His account, therefore, owes more to science—geography, topography and geology—than it does to poetry, the imagination or emotion.

But his writing is not always objective. His individuality does creep in. Thus, when he describes the southern and northern arêtes as ‘fairly steep’ and the Tasman arête as an ‘easy grade’, he is clearly *interpreting* the gradients through his own mountaineering lens. As this ascent of Mount Cook proves, Fyfe was a remarkable mountaineer and an



extremely talented rock-climber. Even by today's standards, he was a gifted climber and because of that he may have under-estimated the difficulty of the climb he had just made—which, according to Palman's *Aoraki Mount Cook* mountaineering guide book, is a technical Grade 4 (87). He might not have known that the route he took to the top was significantly more difficult than any other route thus far attempted. Nor could he have known that fifty five years would pass before his route was repeated, during the one-hundredth ascent of the mountain in 1955.

Once Fyfe has described the summit, he sets about describing the view:

Westward, our view was somewhat marred by clouds, but beyond the clouds the coast line, especially towards the north, could be seen stretching mile after mile. Eastwards, owing no doubt to the great heat, there was a haze through which we could just discern the ocean. Southwards, towards the coast, we saw a very high peak, which we took to be Mount Aspiring (2).

Again, he does not use metaphor. But he does include a human eye, albeit an eye which recalls 'our view' rather than 'my' view. The audience is provided with a description of what the climbers saw: clouds to the west, haze to the east, and Mount Aspiring to the south. Fyfe doesn't draw our attention to the 'magnificent' view, or the 'grand' panorama. Despite the personal element provided by the observer's eye, he presents us with an aerial map. He can see the ocean to the north-west and east. He makes a scientific observation relating to the heat haze above the plains. Looking south he makes an observation concerning topography: the mountain range continues, and, standing taller than the rest is Mount Aspiring, a mountain that resembles the Matterhorn. This mountain appears 'very high' (it is 9951 feet) and it would have aroused Fyfe's interest because it was unclimbed.

By utilising a pared-down language—one that is free of metaphors, poetic quotations and emotion—Fyfe is able to appear objective and cool rather than carried away by the thrill of finally claiming his long-held goal to reach the summit. Thus his words appear credible. We accept his description as factual even though we have no proof of its accuracy (through photographs, for example).

But when, in the following sentence, Fyfe turns his attention northwards, a strange thing happens. His description—which up until now has read like a factual report of topographical features—suddenly swerves:

Turning northwards we looked into the very heart of the Southern Alps. Range after range, and peak after peak in wild confusion impressed one with an almost overpowering sense of desolation and solitude (2).

One reading of Fyfe's work could suggest that he is simply providing the reader with a 'promontory description' (Pratt 198) and that his writing forms part of a 'monarch-of-all-I-survey' scene. Such an interpretation would suggest that Fyfe takes visual possession of the landscape and then defines and reorders what he sees, committing it to the page. But, in fact, Fyfe doesn't need to search for 'order' or 'name' this northern panorama. He doesn't need to 'explain' his surroundings because he is not gathering information for an implied reader in Britain. He is not a surveyor or an explorer—he is a mountaineer—and his main interest lies in identifying future mountains to climb (such as *Aspiring*). Though this description appears non-specific—as if it could relate to the view from any number of mountain tops—it is actually very accurate. The mountain and valley systems to the north of Mount Cook are complicated and, from the summit of Mount Cook, it is not easy to determine the lie of the land. With this in mind, Fyfe's 'non-specific' mountain-scape is actually a local mountain-scape. He is, in truth, providing a site-specific description of a complex, partly unknown region.

The description, does, however, rely on standard tropes. Given his Scottish background Fyfe could have been influenced by a familiarity with the work of James MacPherson (*Ossian*) or Robert Burns (Haynes 18) but it is just as likely that his writing was influenced by the more accessible mountaineering texts of Whymper, Green and Mannering—works he knew and which include similar promontory descriptions to those used by Fyfe.

For example, Mannering described the view Fyfe has just described—albeit from a slightly lower point on the mountain:

North-eastwards the glorious array of the Southern Alps extended, presenting a panorama of such magnificence and comprehensiveness that it defies any attempt at description. It is one of those vast pictures which are indelibly impressed upon the memory—one of those overpowering examples of Nature's sublimity which seems to move a man's very soul and call him to a sense of his own littleness (102).

The restraint of Fyfe's writing now becomes clear when held beside Mannering's elaborate interpretation. While Fyfe was 'almost' overpowered by feelings of desolation and solitude, Mannering was brought face to face with the sublime and a sense of his own 'littleness'—a sentiment which we will encounter again when looking at the writing of Freda du Faur. The addition of the word 'almost' in Fyfe's account suggests an unwillingness to commit himself (in writing) to total emotional engagement. Emotional reticence—which is more a feature of a masculine, sporting culture than a Romantic, literary one—places Fyfe's work at a distance from Mannering. Whereas Mannering feels at ease with references to the sublime, Fyfe does not and part of the reason for this could relate to differences in background and class between the writers as well as differences in audience for their work. Mannering was writing for an audience both in New Zealand and Britain whereas Fyfe was addressing a local, Canterbury and Otago reader.

Fyfe places far less faith in Romanticism than he does in realism which is why, in his very next sentence, he makes an observation concerning the curvilinear dirt-bands visible on the Tasman Glacier:

A phenomenon which, as far as I can remember, has seldom previously been noticed in New Zealand, was the curvilinear dirtbands extending across the Tasman Glacier, which from this height were clearly visible (2).

This sentence serves to increase the distance between himself and the feelings of desolation and solitude. In making this 'scientific' observation, Fyfe dispenses with inherited literary tropes and asserts his presence in the Southern Alps. In other words, he breaks with the British literary tradition through choosing not to define his surroundings in relationship to the metropolitan centre. In Fyfe's writing, the Tasman

Glacier is not perceived in terms of ‘otherness’, it is not compared to glaciers in Europe, but is recognised on its own terms.

The extracts taken from Fyfe’s description of the ascent of Mount Cook suggest that he did not identify himself as a member of British mountaineering society or culture. He claims to be ‘reckless’ rather than careful, he makes no individual claim to being first to the summit of Mount Cook, he notes specific landmarks visible from Mount Cook—such as Mount Aspiring and the dirt-bands on the Tasman Glacier—without making comparisons to European locations, and he rejects the standard (emotional) tropes of the sublime. On the other hand he is clearly familiar with mountaineering texts and his aestheticised descriptions recall those of Whymper, Green, Mannering and possibly Macpherson’s *Ossian*, too. On the basis of the text it is easier to identify an emerging New Zealand mountaineering ‘character’ than a clearly defined ‘voice’ and yet the pervasiveness of a masculine, understated, laconic tone does signal a departure from traditional British mountaineering publications. His writing also differs from the way the climbers before him described Mount Cook. This difference could be due, in part, to his educational background and class, or the audience he addresses. However, it could also relate to a difference in attitude towards mountaineering—that Fyfe appears to have taken a sporting approach to mountaineering rather than one linked to exploration or travel. Mountaineers such as Green could be described as sentimental travellers, but Fyfe—who spent the summer seasons working at Mount Cook—strikes me as a sportsman. And it is possible that this difference—the shift in genres from mountaineering-travel writing to mountaineering-sport writing—accounts for the change in voice.

Fyfe’s account wasn’t published until almost two months after the ascent was made and the ascent itself ‘led to no outpouring of patriotic pride’ (Langton 116). However, there must have been a fairly high level of interest in the ascent because the *Otago Daily Times* published two versions describing the climb—one by Fyfe and the other by his companion, George Graham. Graham’s account pre-dates Fyfe’s by almost a month but because Fyfe was the leader of the party I chose to examine his work first.

Like Fyfe, Graham was employed at the Hermitage and, like Fyfe, had grown up in Canterbury. Graham had worked as both a musterer and carpenter and had less

education than Fyfe—who had a middle-class upbringing, although he was now employed as a plumber. Graham and Fyfe, who were close in age, had climbed together on numerous occasions and during the months prior to the successful first ascent of Mount Cook had made several attempts on the mountain.

Graham's account of the climb was published in the *Otago Daily Times* on the 22<sup>nd</sup> January 1895. The sections in capital letters reflect how the extract appeared in the newspaper. The description of the summit experience makes an interesting contrast to Fyfe's:

At 1.30 the troubles of the ascent were over. We were the first human beings who had stood on the actual summit of the great Aorangi, and we were gleefully shaking hands on the

VERY HIGHEST POINT OF NEW ZEALAND.

The top was rounded off on all sides excepting the east, where it dropped sharply. The view was certainly vast and magnificent, but it lacked a central feature. North-east and south-west there was nothing visible but snow tops or jagged peaks. The three Waitaki lakes were sighted, and a great stretch of the western shore, which unfortunately was partly shrouded in fog, extending into the hazy distance. Mount Tasman was the most prominent peak. It seemed quite as high as Cook, and with its tremendous ice cliffs covering it from the top right down to the plateau, it was far more showy. Mount Stokes and Hector [now named Dampier] were quite overshadowed, appearing insignificant in comparison. A sharp wind was blowing, but it was not disagreeably cold. After spending about twenty minutes in contemplating the grandeur of Alpine scenery from a vantage ground not previously attained by man, we prepared for the descent, first pegging an old ruck sack down on the topmost point (6).

Compared to Fyfe's account, there is little indication of recklessness in Graham's version of reaching the summit. His tone is almost one of relief when he claims that 'the troubles of the ascent were over'. There is an absence of bravura in admitting to having faced 'troubles' without suggesting that they were overcome. The troubles are simply 'over' and it is possible to detect a hint of thankfulness. Graham, like Fyfe, uses the plural 'we' and so, once again, the emphasis is placed on teamwork rather than

individual skill or effort. A degree of humility is also suggested by the inclusion of the words: ‘first human beings’. In this situation—an account describing the first ascent of a significant mountain—you would expect to encounter a word such as ‘men’, ‘mountaineers’ or even ‘conquerors’ but ‘human beings’ is smaller somehow and draws attention to the littleness of the men standing on the ‘actual summit’ of the ‘great Aorangi’. Although Graham does claim to be one of the first to stand on the ‘actual’ summit—a reference to Green’s earlier attempt which was reported by some newspapers as an ascent—he steers clear of any reference to conquest. Despite the lack of ego, the term ‘human beings’ does bring to mind Samuel Butler and the remark made by him in 1860 when he said that he did ‘not think any human being’ would ever reach the summit of Mount Cook (65-66). It is possible, therefore, that Graham is responding to Butler and making a pointed remark with reference to the English man’s earlier pronouncement.

The heading of Graham’s article is “The Ascent of Mount Cook” and yet Graham himself uses the local ‘Aorangi’. It is possible that the word ‘Aorangi’ indicates a regional pride, or even a sense of ownership. ‘Aorangi’ identifies the mountain as a South Island landmark and Graham, of course, was a South Island, local mountaineer. ‘Aorangi’ might also suggest an archaic, pre-European age—one that was less ‘European’ and therefore more authentic, a truer representation of the New Zealand environment.

Graham focusses his attention on describing the summit itself—the ground beneath his feet—and then the view. The first thing that strikes me is the reference to a ‘rounded’ summit. Such a summit description would not be possible today (given the state of the mountain), but it does provide a realistic picture of how the summit appeared in the 1890s. However, Graham’s ‘rounded’ top is far softer in tone than the summit described by Fyfe (who provided a description of three arêtes and a precipice). This suggests that Graham may have been less familiar with picturesque alpine tropes than previous mountaineer-writers or it could indicate that Graham simply wanted to describe the ‘top’ as he saw it—that is, free of conventional, clichéd images. Even the use of the word ‘top’ in place of ‘summit’ hints at a lack of artifice.

The difference between the unadorned ‘top’ of Mount Cook and the more elaborate ‘vast’ and ‘magnificent’ view does suggest, however, that he did feel compelled to add some kind of literary flourish to his description. The inclusion of ‘vast’ and ‘magnificent’ hints at his awareness of a reader and his need to meet their expectations through the inclusion of standard embellishments. But, it could also be that the view actually was vast and magnificent and that he is simply describing the language available to him. He is not over-awed by what he sees as he remarks on the lack of a ‘central feature’ and he also focusses his attention on familiar landmarks. In other words, he side-steps the sublime through localising the scenery and through drawing on the vernacular ‘sou.’-west’ when scanning the mountains for recognisable peaks. His eye is drawn to the Waitaki lakes—because he came from Waimate and he would have followed the course of the Waitaki River to locate his home. This singling out of the Waitaki lakes is important because it helps to locate him (and his readers) in a South Canterbury landscape rather than in one on the other side of the world. The lakes are not compared to any other lakes in Europe but are ‘here’.

He mentions the ‘western shore’ in passing but his attention is focussed on Mount Tasman. As a mountaineer who had just climbed Mount Cook it is to be expected that his gaze would fall on the second highest (and unclimbed) mountain. Thus Mount Tasman is described as a ‘prominent peak’. The ‘tremendous ice cliffs’ are also described and although this is an example of aestheticised language in use, the word ‘showy’—used to describe Tasman—is not clichéd. ‘Showy’ does not convey grandeur but something far more ornamental, like a rose in bloom. ‘Showy’ is not a word regularly used in association with mountains and yet that is exactly how the mountain must have struck Graham.

Graham notes the nearby surrounding mountains, Stokes and Hector—which strike him as ‘insignificant’—and contemplates ‘the grandeur of Alpine scenery.’ The phrase: ‘the grandeur of Alpine scenery’ sits somewhat uncomfortably with the rest of Graham’s account. Its inclusion hints at a degree of self-consciousness. The capitalisation of ‘Alpine’ does not strike a tone of personal reverence for the mountain but, rather, highlights Graham’s attempt to replicate the style of mountaineer-writers whose work he would have read—men such as Green and Mannering.

The most personal, emotionally weighted section of Graham's account of climbing Mount Cook appears at the end of the sentence, when he says that:

After spending about twenty minutes in contemplating the grandeur of Alpine scenery from a vantage ground not previously attained by man, we prepared for the descent, *first pegging an old ruck sack down on the topmost point* (emphasis added, 6).

There is a wonderful contrast between the clichéd 'grandeur of Alpine scenery' and the modest 'pegging an old ruck sack down on the topmost point'. There is a sense of humility in Graham's writing that comes across in this final sentence. Moreover, pegging down an 'old ruck sack' rather than raising a flag subverts notions of the imperial heroic conquest. It is difficult to reconcile Graham's apparent modesty with Pratt's 'monarch-of-all-I-survey' with its overtones of possession and domination. Although Graham is clearly describing the view, there is little to indicate that he was doing anything other than 'contemplating' the scenery. He has not used the word 'conquest' and the overall tone of his piece is gentle: the top is 'rounded', Tasman is 'showy', the weather is not 'disagreeably cold' and an 'old' rucksack is pegged to the summit. It seems to me that he is trying to down-play his achievement—so as not to appear too grand to the local readers (some of whom would have been men of the land, like himself)—while, at the same time, attempting to do justice to the 'great Aorangi'.

Both Fyfe and Graham adopt a low-key style when describing the ascent of Mount Cook. This unaffected style is even more pronounced when they come to describe the descent from the mountain. At one point the team is delayed an hour because Graham has dropped his ice axe. Finally, having retrieved the axe, the party moved on but, as Fyfe writes in the *Otago Daily Times*:

This delayed us the better part of an hour—a delay that we could ill afford, as it would soon be dark (2).

To say that the team could 'ill afford' a delay was an understatement. Fyfe was anxious because they still had to cross a large bergschrund. His options were not good: they could either stand out on the mountain until dawn or they could continue on and



negotiate the bergschrund in the dark. Fyfe tells us that they decided to keep going and reached the bergschrund:

Too dark to see either hand or foot-holds, our sense of touch was all we had to rely on. One at a time we moved on, the other two endeavouring to anchor; but, judging from the holds that I myself could obtain, a slip by one would have “done for” us all. However, the schrund was left behind, and with it the greatest difficulties of the descent. Now for the first time we gravely congratulated each other on the ascent and descent of Mount Cook (2).

This is a key moment in the climb of Mount Cook. It was an incredibly dangerous situation and Fyfe, in the briefest manner possible, creates a strong impression of the seriousness of the challenge. He doesn't actually say that the situation itself was grave, however. Instead, he simply describes the scene but with the addition of the phrase ‘a slip by one would have “done for” us all’. The origin of this phrase—which Fyfe adapts—comes from British mountaineer Edward Whymper and was published in *Scrambles Amongst the Alps*. In a discourse about the use of the rope on ice-slopes, Whymper famously wrote:

On difficult rocks and on snow slopes (frequently improperly called ice-slopes) it is a great advantage to be tied together, provided the rope is handled properly; but upon actual ice-slopes, such as that on the Col Dolent (p.338), or upon slopes in which ice is mingled with small and loose rocks, such as the upper part of the Pointe des Ecrins (p. 201), it is almost useless, because the slip of one person might upset the entire party (363).

Readers with any knowledge of mountaineering literature would have recognised the allusion to Whymper's ‘slip of one’ remark. The phrase had become popularised and was included in such works as Dent's 1885 mountaineering handbook, *The Badminton Library of Sports and Pastimes-Mountaineering* (250). However, the highlight (in quotation marks) of the words ‘done for’ strikes me as modern and laconic. That is, Fyfe is using the idiom of the day rather than relying solely on the British mountaineer's more polite version which contains the words ‘upset the entire party’.

Fyfe's description of the bergschrund is free of literary pretension. The bergschrund—which was so dark that they had to climb by touch—is not *likened* to night, a well, a grave or any bottomless pit. They do not do 'battle' with the bergschrund, nor do they conquer it. And, whereas Green and his men 'crept cautiously' from their ledge (Green 260), Fyfe's party simply 'left' the obstacle 'behind'. There is no doubt that this incident was dangerous. An accident or death was a very real possibility. But the words which convey the danger are not trumpeted but rather slipped in when Fyfe writes 'we gravely congratulated each other'. This casual remark, which does not draw attention to the bergschrund itself, carries the weight of the moment. Fyfe's lack of pretension—and the absence of an aestheticised literary style—gives his work presence.

Fyfe's writing conveys a distinctive New Zealand tone with regard to mountaineering literature. It is unadorned, modest—given to understatement—and occasionally laconic. The language used tends to be in the idiom of the day and when it does reference literary precedents—such as Edward Whymper's writing—it focusses on topics relating specifically to mountaineering itself (such as rope handling). It is intended to inform rather than entertain. Observation with regard to the surrounding landscape is detailed (such as in the case of the description of the view from the summit) and is fully located and contained in the Southern Alps setting. He does not seek to legitimise his descriptions through comparing the landscape 'here' with that overseas and he does not address an overseas reader, nor seek to have his achievement validated by the metropolitan centre.

Fyfe was not a writer who mountaineered but someone who mountaineered for sport and, later, for a living. Clearly, he knew the writing of other mountaineers and was familiar with post-Romantic tropes relating to discovery and mountaineering. At times he does employ these tropes in his own work but, given that as a 'professional' mountaineer he would never be admitted into the world of the 'amateur' elite (and be able to contribute to the British *Alpine Journal*), there was no particular reason why he should dedicate a great deal of effort to his writing—unless he enjoyed writing, that is. Even today, the names of Tom Fyfe, George Graham and Jack Clarke are absent from the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* while the names of the affluent middle-class mountaineers George Mannering, Malcolm Ross and Australian, Freda du Faur, are

included. This would suggest that publication and transmission of information is as much a class issue as an imperial/ colonial one.

George Graham, like Fyfe, did not submit written accounts of all his climbing achievements. His writing appears less assured than Fyfe's and he has a tendency to place his words very carefully. He also tends to adopt a style of writing more suited to an adventurous and dangerous endeavour. In his version of the bergschrund crossing, Graham appears tentative as he attempts to write in a manner similar to that of Green. The sections in capital letters reflect how the extract appeared in the *Otago Daily Times*:

[We] quickly

SCRAMBLED DOWN TO THE DREADED LEDGE.

In the dim light it looked worse than ever. Fyfe anchored while Clark[e] and I lowered ourselves carefully to the limit of the rope, where we were joined by the last man. Our position was decidedly awkward. None of us was fixed to stand even a slight strain. In the uncertain light the sense of feeling was all we could depend on. Little by little we edged down, and after what seemed an age the difficulty was over (6).

Graham embellishes his writing with aestheticising adjectives—the 'dreaded ledge', the 'dim light', the 'uncertain light'—but the length of his sentences are all fairly short and the tone clipped. Overall Graham's writing style is somewhat awkward. For example, in an attempt to vary his writing, and avoid repetition, he replaces 'Fyfe' with 'last man'. However, in doing this he creates confusion. The reader might be forgiven for thinking there was a fourth climber in the party when, in fact, Fyfe has followed his companions after first lowering them down on the rope. Graham does not attempt to define the mountaineering terms used in this piece. Fyfe simply 'anchored'—that is, he held the rope. Graham and Clarke lowered themselves to the 'limit of the rope'—that is, they went as far as they could. The 'last man' is a mountaineering term. During difficult descents the strongest climber, usually the leader in the party, often went last. This position as 'last man' was dangerous. While the first two members of the party were protected by the rope (held by the 'last man'), the 'last man' descended without a rope to his companions. Because of the danger implied, it is difficult to read this account without feeling slightly sick. But I suspect that if you didn't know a great deal about

mountaineering, these hints at danger might go unnoticed. They are not sign-posted or turned into a major dramatic moment. This is why Graham's writing—despite his use of standard adjectival embellishments—can be distinguished from those writing in a more conventional, British heroic style.

Graham does not refer to the handshake—that grim punctuation mark in Fyfe's account of the climb. But his account does create tension. We are told, for example, that the climbers were unable to hold 'even a slight strain' and that the negotiation of the bergschrund 'seemed an age'. Graham might well have been feeling responsible for the situation the climbers were in because he had dropped the ice axe which cost them an hour of daylight and yet his account lacks some of the gravitas of Fyfe's. His writing is rich with adjectives but they don't necessarily add weight to his account. Fyfe's writing, by contrast, is spare and unambiguous. Part of the difference between Fyfe's account of this climb and that of Graham's relates to the fact that Fyfe was the leader of the party. When he describes the view from the summit or the descent from the mountain, he does so as the leader—the man responsible not only for the well-being of the other members of his party but as the man charged with recording the climb for posterity. Graham is not weighed down by a similar sense of obligation. He is a member of a team but not the leader.

Jack Clarke was with Tom Fyfe and George Graham during the first ascent of Mount Cook. He did not write about his experience of that first ascent. As a nineteen year old—and the youngest member of the party—he may have felt he had nothing to add to Fyfe and Graham's thorough accounts of the climb. And yet later, when employed as the Chief Guide at the Government run Hermitage hotel (1900-1906), Clarke was obliged to submit annual reports to the Department of Tourist and Health Resorts. These reports, published in the *Appendices to the Journals of the House of Representatives* between the years 1901 and 1906, provided an account of each summer season at Mount Cook.

The following extract forms part of an account of the first crossing, in 1904, of a pass on the Main Divide. This pass, which Clarke's client, Hokitika-based doctor Ebenezer Teichelmann named Pioneer Pass, is located between Mount Haidinger and Mount Haast and leads down to the Fox Glacier and from there to the west coast. In order to

reach this pass, Clarke (and companions Peter Graham and Ebenezer Teichelmann) had to navigate the region of the Grand Plateau, an area negotiated by Green and Mannering during their various attempts on the summit of Mount Cook.

Here is Clarke's description of climbing up to the saddle:

Leaving at break of day we crossed over Glacier Dome, 5,500 ft; and descended to the plateau; there rejoined the Haast Ridge at a point higher up (8,000 ft.), and followed the jagged arête along until above the badly broken ice of the Haast Glacier. Then a long traverse to the head basin of the Haast; here it was a heavy tramp in soft snow to the foot of the final 500ft; and then to the pass itself (14).

There is no doubt that Clarke's writing was influenced by the fact that he was submitting a report. This was a controlling factor—both in terms of audience and expectation. His writing focusses on describing events, outlining the route taken and describing the conditions encountered throughout the climb. Only the opening statement with its poetic 'break of day' lifts the language beyond a simple set of directions. When Clarke uses adjectives such as 'jagged arête', 'badly broken ice' or 'heavy tramp' it is because he wishes to provide an accurate description of the ascent. They are not included for any literary purpose.

Clarke continues to describe the climb up to the pass and, upon reaching it, describes the view that no one else had seen before:

The view was magnificent. Looking east we saw the great glacier-system and the barren rugged hills of Canterbury, while to the west were the immense snowfields of the Fox Glacier, then lower the luxuriantly bushclad hills and valleys trending to the Tasman Sea.

Clarke uses some familiar adjectives (words such as 'magnificent', 'great' and 'immense' which appear in the majority of mountaineering texts) but he does not make any reference to the high mountains—Haast and Haidinger—which rise above and dominate over the pass. The features which make the view 'magnificent' are the 'great glacier-system', the 'barren rugged hills of Canterbury', the 'immense snowfields of the

Fox Glacier’ and the ‘luxuriantly bush-clad hills and valleys’. The nice thing about this description is that it so clearly defines the mountaineers’ position on top of a pass without suggesting that they were dwarfed by their mountainous surroundings. The men straddle the line between the ‘barren’ east and the luxuriant west, and much as an explorer or surveyor would do, Clarke essentially maps the route. Although the writing is matter-of-fact, there is something very modest about this account which is due, in part, to Clarke’s reliance on the (anonymous) ‘we’.

What Clarke doesn’t do—which a mountaineer like Green would have done—is attempt to create atmosphere. Clarke is not concerned with creating *an impression* of a magnificent alpine scene. There are no looming cliffs—although cliffs do feature on Mount Haast—nor any pinnacles—although Haidinger (which Clarke climbed on its first ascent) is pinnacle-like from certain angles. Rather than draw attention to the mountains above him, he focusses on the landscape below him and, undoubtedly, some of these features did strike him as magnificent. Clarke, himself, recognises (and apologises for) the lack of literary flourish in his work. He says:

The whole trip from Haast Ridge was, I think, the most interesting I have ever made in the course of a varied mountain life. It would need the pen of the writing climber and not that of a climbing writer to do it [the scene] anything like justice. (14)

Clarke’s point is obvious even though he has written ‘writing climber’ (that is, mountaineers who do a bit of writing) when ‘climbing writer’ (writers who use their skills to describe the climbing they sometimes do) would have been more appropriate. Clarke is a climber and not a writer and yet I believe his writing conveys both an accurate and engaging image of the Mount Cook region. He is observant and his descriptions differ from earlier mountaineer-writers such as Green and Mannering because he does not rely on generalised, and, at times, clichéd literary images.

Clarke belongs to the small group of working-class climbers—a group which includes Tom Fyfe and George Graham. These men made no claims to possessing literary skill. They showed little inclination to belong to—or have their mountaineering achievements legitimised by—the established and formalised world of Alpine Clubs. They were not

cut off from the world of the affluent-amateur climber, however. Employed as guides, they relied on clients to guarantee their income.

All three men wrote in a clear, unadorned style, and described their surroundings in specific detail using colloquial language. Flourishes which we would expect to find in British mountaineering texts are largely absent. Epigraphs, lengthy sentences, ornate metaphors, quotations, and Biblical references are not a feature of their work. Dramatic or exaggerated language is minimal (there are few exclamation marks, or instances of direct speech) and emotional responses are low-key. Adventure and danger is played down and when such things are mentioned, the mountaineer's voice tends towards the laconic.

One of the marked differences between overseas mountaineers and working-class New Zealand mountaineers lies in their attitude to the New Zealand mountains and to the importance of writing. Like Douglas before them, the working-class New Zealanders made their living from working in the mountains and they had little investment in writing about them—either for pleasure or income. When, out of obligation or work-related necessity they did write or publish, they appear most at ease when 'reporting' on what they have seen and done rather than 'interpreting' and embellishing their activities for the benefit of an audience. And so, although their work was published in local newspapers (and later included in the *New Zealand Alpine Journal* or added to books such as Malcolm Ross's *A Climber in New Zealand*) their effort is not directed towards winning over a specific audience but rather in getting the words on the page.

The reason why the writing of these mountaineers is engaging is because it is observant, detailed and conveyed in accessible language. Whereas middle-class New Zealand climbers struggled, at times, to make the imported, received language of British mountain-writing 'fit' and respond to the uniquely New Zealand alpine world, these working-class mountaineers had no desire to be part of the British literary project. Their work does not privilege the metropolitan centre and they do not attempt to 'locate' a New Zealand setting within an European one (through making comparisons to European locations, for example). It could be argued that these New Zealand mountaineers adopted an attenuated version of British mountaineering-writing but it seems to me that their emphasis on personal (sporting) triumph—rather than on conquest—and the

grounding of their descriptions in a local, South Island setting (that 'home' is here) represents more of a 'cross-cultural hybrid'(Ashcroft 29)—the first stages in an emerging New Zealand *mountaineering* voice.



### CHAPTER THREE: Mattias Zurbriggen and Edward FitzGerald

Twelve years after Green's journey, fellow British mountaineer Edward FitzGerald travelled out to New Zealand with the aim of claiming the first ascent of Mount Cook. Upon discovering that Mount Cook had been climbed by the New Zealand party of Fyfe, Graham and Clarke just prior to his arrival, FitzGerald turned his attention to the unclimbed peaks of Mount Sealy, Mount Sefton, Mount Silberhorn, Mount Tasman and Mount Haidinger—making first ascents of all four mountains. He described his experiences in *Climbs in the New Zealand Alps* (1896). The first overseas mountaineer to scale Mount Cook was FitzGerald's Italian-Swiss guide, Mattias Zurbriggen. Zurbriggen climbed the mountain in March 1895, shortly after FitzGerald had left the area to return to Christchurch.

By the time Zurbriggen came to New Zealand he was already famous and far more experienced than any of the New Zealand climbers of the period. His 1899 autobiography, *From the Alps to the Andes*, documents his childhood and mountaineering history as well as including sections on New Zealand. Zurbriggen wrote in Italian but the publication—a translation of his manuscript—was intended for a British audience (the book was eventually translated from English back into Italian in 2001). Apart from the fact that the work is a translation, there are several other points concerning its publication that need to be taken into account when discussing Zurbriggen's writing. According to the 'Publisher's Note', Zurbriggen did not consult with the translator or correct the proofs (because he was mountaineering in India at the time). The publisher also remarks that 'there were several points in which the original—the work of one more used to the ice-axe than the pen—was obviously at fault, and several in which the information supplied was insufficient'(vii). The publisher T. Fisher Unwin, who had been Zurbriggen's client on the Matterhorn (44), therefore supplemented the narrative with 'various quotations from the works of his co-travellers'(vii). He also sought assistance from 'those who could speak with authority on matters of fact'(vii). These authority figures included Zurbriggen's New Zealand climbing partners, client E.A. FitzGerald and his companion C. Loraine Barrow. Zurbriggen's book is included in this study, however, because he was a highly skilled and experienced mountaineer who had climbed throughout the Alps and in the Himalayan ranges (and so was able to make comparisons between New Zealand and

overseas mountains), and because he was neither British nor a New Zealander and so can offer an alternative point of view to the mountaineers studied so far.

In his preface, Zurbriggen states two reasons for writing an autobiography. The first is to tempt ‘all who can afford it, to forsake the town when the warm season sets in and stay awhile among the mountains’(xv) so that they might indulge in exercise and be rewarded with ‘peace of mind’(xv). The second reason for writing the book ‘is to help those who are too poor to travel, to imagine for themselves, and thereby in some degree partake of, those pleasures, of which the actual substance is denied them’(xv-xvi).

If these are his aims, then they are far more ambitious than those of any New Zealand guide who wrote about mountaineering. But Zurbriggen was not limited to writing only about New Zealand mountaineering experiences. He was one of the foremost guides in the world and had guided some of Britain’s leading mountaineers such as William Martin Conway in the Himalayan ranges and Andes, and Lily Bristow in the Alps. In view of his climbing experience and his connections with British mountaineers, his writing had the potential to draw a large readership.

In a chapter headed ‘Expedition to the New Zealand Alps’ Zurbriggen offers the promise of adventure in a distant location. The word ‘expedition’ also strikes a solemn note—with its connotations of long-distance travel and exploration. The title does not give the impression of having any sense of entitlement or conquest with regard to the Southern Alps. This is noteworthy given the response of some New Zealand newspapers to the visit by FitzGerald and Zurbriggen. In an editorial in *The Press*, for example, the editor suggested that the New Zealand climbers (who made the first ascent of Mount Cook) should have waited for the ‘English visitor’ FitzGerald ‘who had come so many thousands of miles, at much sacrifice of time and money, to make acquaintance with our Alps’ before making an attempt on the mountain. This, the editor continued, would have been the ‘gracious’ thing to do (4).

Because Zurbriggen’s chapter ‘Expedition to the New Zealand Alps’ does not begin with an epigraph, it lacks the initial flourish which is evident in the writing of Green and Mannering. We might expect his work, then, to have more in common with the

unadorned (but detailed) writing of Fyfe and Graham. However, as we will see, this is not entirely the case.

Zurbriggen writes that he ‘was anxious to climb Mount Cook—the highest of the New Zealand Alps—whose summit, like that of Monte Rosa, has three principal peaks, although its summit had already been achieved’(164). The chief appeal of Mount Cook appears to be the fact that it is the ‘highest’ mountain in the ‘New Zealand Alps’. And so, following FitzGerald’s departure, he set out to make an ascent. With him was the manager-caretaker of the Hermitage—Jack Adamson. They climbed together to 10 000 feet and then Zurbriggen went on alone. His ascent followed a new route via a ridge from the Tasman Valley (since known as Zurbriggen’s Ridge).

This is his description of the ascent from the point where he left Adamson behind:

I determined to go on alone to the summit, being most anxious to achieve it, and in this I was successful, arriving there about 3 p.m. As here it was all ice—its height is 13,000 feet—I only remained long enough to take some photographs and then went down about 160 feet to a rock where I left a card, containing the date of my visit, enclosed in a bottle. I then hastened to rejoin Adamson, and after having taken some refreshment, we began the descent, going very slowly, however, on account of the crumbling snow with the ice underneath, on which it was easy to slip. We reached our encampment at 12 o’clock and here, after having been out for twenty-three hours, we were glad enough to rest(175).

This is a remarkably brief account of the climb. Unlike the mountaineers before him, Zurbriggen doesn’t provide a detailed description of the ascent. He doesn’t describe his new route or the major obstacles encountered on the way. He doesn’t supply any information about the alpine features—geological or otherwise. Nor does he provide a description of the view (although the weather was poor and the view obscured).

Even if we take into account the fact that Zurbriggen’s chosen route to the summit is more technically straightforward than Fyfe’s (and therefore less ‘interesting’ in a factual-descriptive sense), his account gives the impression that he was interested *only* in getting to the top of the mountain. He was ‘determined to go on alone’ and ‘anxious’

to reach the summit. He records his time. And he also leaves proof of his ascent by taking photographs (although not from the exact summit because the wind was so strong) and by leaving a card in a bottle.

Having already climbed Sealy, Haidinger, Sefton, Silberhorn and Tasman it is apparent Zurbriggen wants to finish his trip to New Zealand with a successful ascent of its highest peak. In his account of the climb, he exaggerates the height of the mountain—rounding it up to 13,000 feet rather than giving its true height of 12,349ft. There was no reason for Zurbriggen to be confused. Even if he had forgotten the exact figure he would have known it was closer to 12,500 feet than 13,000 feet. In view of Unwin's statement regarding 'matters of fact' given at the beginning of Zurbriggen's book, it is remarkable that no one bothered to correct this mistake.

From Zurbriggen's point of view, Mount Cook was not a particularly high mountain. By the time his book was published, he had made first ascents of mountains in the range of 22,000-23,000 feet (Pioneer Peak in the Karakoram, and Aconcagua in the Andes) and so, by comparison to these other peaks, the height of Mount Cook may not have impressed him. He certainly appears not to have viewed it through the same lens as New Zealand mountaineers: as *the* highest and most important mountain. By contrast to Zurbriggen, George Graham, who climbed the mountain only a few months before the Italian guide, took a great deal of care when conveying facts concerning the mountain's height. In the opening paragraph of his *Otago Daily Times* article, he wrote:

Mount Cook is a spur from the main divide, and consists of three peaks – the northern 12,349feet, the middle 12,178feet and the southern 11,787feet. The distance between the two extremes is about one mile and three-quarters (6).

Zurbriggen was employed by a wealthy American-British climber and had no choice about where he climbed. A sense of detachment and even weariness comes through in his writing. Unsurprisingly, after twenty-three hours of climbing he says he was glad to 'rest' (175). There is no sense of satisfaction or celebration in his account. Aestheticising language is absent from his account and there is no promontory description, no 'monarch-of-all-I-survey' possession and domination of the landscape. There is nothing to suggest that being the first overseas mountaineer to reach the

summit meant anything to him but at the same time, it could be that as a working-class guide he does not feel ‘entitled’ to claim the scene below him. This could partly explain why his account of the ascent takes up barely a page and fulfills none of the aims set out in his preface.

But if we cast the net a little wider and examine Zurbriggen’s accounts of his ascents of Sealy, Haidinger, Sefton, Silberhorn and Tasman, a different picture begins to emerge. For example, this is how he described the summit of Haidinger:

Having by means of steps gained the crest, we followed it for six hundred and fifty yards to just beneath the top of the peak, and here I had more than enough work for the ice-axe until we reached the summit where we arrived at 10.20 a.m. The weather left nothing to be desired: we enjoyed a marvellous view which embraced the multiform glaciers, the valleys below and, beyond, the sea – whose wondrous colour enhanced one of the most magnificent spectacles imaginable – while far away in the distance, remote specks on its azure expanse, lay the islands (157).

At first we notice that Zurbriggen is focussed on the labour involved in mountaineering. His tone is matter-of-fact as he states that ‘by means of steps’ the party ‘gained the crest’. He adds that from the ‘just beneath the top of the peak’ he had ‘more than enough work for the ice-axe’. It’s easy to imagine him bent double, furiously cutting steps for his client, FitzGerald, who followed behind. Once on the summit, however, Zurbriggen is able to relax. Familiar adjectives such as ‘marvellous’, ‘wondrous’ and ‘magnificent’ are present—but, of course, it is impossible to know if these words belong to Zurbriggen or his translator. Yet if we look at *what* Zurbriggen says (rather than *how* he says it) it is possible to see that he was describing a view that, to a European, is out-of-the ordinary and exotic. Unlike New Zealand mountaineers who were attuned to seeing the ocean from the top of a mountain, Zurbriggen is allowing the reader a glimpse into the mind of a European climber more used to mountaineering on a continent than an island. Thus, Zurbriggen places the emphasis not on the surrounding mountains—as Fyfe had done when describing the view from Mount Cook—but on the sea. The sea is a ‘wondrous’ colour, it is an ‘azure expanse’. The colour of the ocean

‘enhanced’ the surrounding landscape. The ocean and far-off small islands (presumably off the coast near Haast) serve to display the mountains at their best.

Edward FitzGerald (who was with Zurbriggen) provides a more thorough—and engaging—description of the summit of Haidinger and the surrounding mountains. His account, published in 1896 as *Climbs in the New Zealand Alps*, follows :

The top of Haidinger is a ridge, some 100 yards long and very sharp. The south end is the highest point, as we discovered with the assistance of a level. The actual summit is of rock, very much fused in places, and blackened by electric discharges. We built there a large cairn, and having drunk the bottle of wine that Zurbriggen had brought from the Hermitage, lay ourselves down full length in the sun on a ledge of smooth rock, and thoroughly enjoyed our conquest. The day was a perfect one, not a breath of wind stirred, and the clouds that we had noticed over the sea were gradually evaporating, revealing great expanses of the deep blue Pacific beneath them. We could see Mount Tasman and the Silberhorn rising behind Haast, and Mount Cook towered up behind. Our route up Tasman was clearly visible. Beneath us on the left lay the great Tasman Glacier, visible in its entire length of some eighteen miles. Then, to the right, we saw the Fox and Franz Josef Glaciers, their spotless névés glittering in the bright sunlight – a striking contrast to the deep green forest through which they thread their way to the sea. These glaciers seem to have no surface moraine or dirt bands, but are white and spotless down to their very snout. Presently one by one we dozed off to sleep, and it was not till 12.30 that I awoke. I took some photographs, and then gathering together our effects we roped ourselves together for the descent (174-75).

FitzGerald’s account of the summit is noticeably longer and more detailed than Zurbriggen’s. FitzGerald describes the top of Haidinger and then tells us that the mountaineers determined the highest point by using a ‘level’. He provides detailed observations with regard to the ‘blackened’ rock on the summit as well as pointing out features of the surrounding mountains and glaciers. Although he mentions the ‘deep blue Pacific’ it does not hold his interest in the way it did Zurbriggen’s. Rather, he

echoes Fyfe in the very exact, detailed nature of his observations. He notices that the West Coast glaciers have no surface moraine and he draws attention to the absence of dirt bands—a detail which puts us in mind of Fyfe’s earlier observation made from the summit of Mount Cook concerning the dirt bands visible on the Tasman Glacier.

From where FitzGerald stood, he was able to observe that Mount Cook ‘towered’ above the other mountains. He can also see the route taken by his party up Mount Tasman. (Zurbriggen’s gaze was clearly elsewhere as neither of these features warrant his attention). The precision of FitzGerald’s observation, which is rich in topographical and geological information, reminds us that he was describing a first ascent. As leader of the party it is his responsibility to provide as accurate an account as possible.

Although the emphasis is on accurate detail, FitzGerald does employ long, complex sentences which he sprinkles with adjectives. For example, he describes the ‘spotless’ névés, ‘glittering’ in the ‘bright’ sunshine. ‘Spotless’ is a familiar adjective used to describe snow and ice. Green used the same word to describe the scene from his camp (218). FitzGerald contrasts the ‘glittering’ and ‘bright’ snow scene with the ‘deep green forest’ below. In a nice image, he adds that the glaciers ‘thread their way’ through the bush to the sea.

The actions of the mountaineers while on the summit strikes a slightly decadent tone. Relying on the pronoun ‘we’ for much of his account, FitzGerald describes his party building a cairn and then sharing a bottle of wine. He then adds that the men lay ‘full length in the sun on a ledge of smooth rock, and thoroughly enjoyed our conquest.’ The tone is smug, as if the men ‘deserved’ to have reached the top. It seems unlikely that New Zealand mountaineers would admit to ‘thoroughly enjoying’ a ‘conquest’. The voice is very British and the rituals—those of building a cairn—are also British. Fyfe’s party, it should be remembered, made do with a ripped rucksack left on the summit. Interestingly, nowhere does FitzGerald (or Zurbriggen) mention shaking hands or congratulating each other (or Jack Clarke). This significant ritual is noticeable by its absence.

The moment FitzGerald steps off the summit his language becomes more elaborate in style. So, a few hours after standing on top of the mountain, he describes the sunset on Haidinger like this:

The whole place had the appearance of some mystical gnomeland wherein one might conjure up those superstitious legends of spirits or devils of the hills which the native Maori tribes, in common with all races dwelling among mountainous districts, firmly believe in. Absolute stillness reigned, broken only by the occasional sharp cry of the Kea parrots as they circled high above us in the air, the only guardians of this vast and solitary region. The scene was now rapidly changing. The whole sky became illumined with a dark crimson flush, and the snow mountain-caps were gradually tinged with red. All the objects around us appeared distorted and thrown out of proportion by this new light reflected on us, and as it changed slowly to the dark grey of twilight the mountains seemed to totter above our heads as though they would fall and crush us who dared to violate with our presence the stillness of their sanctuaries, and desecrate with our tread the snow-white purity of their peaks (179).

In this passage, the ‘mystical,’ the ‘superstitious,’ ‘spirits,’ ‘devils’ and ‘legends’ are brought to the forefront. These words imply a world that is not entirely human. The partnership of ‘Maori’ with ‘tribes’ and the reference to ‘all races dwelling among mountainous districts’ further emphasises the difference between the ‘cultured’ world of the British visitor and that of ‘the native’ inhabitant. The New Zealand Alps are presented as not only remote but mystical, a ‘gnomeland’—a concept that would have struck the New Zealand mountaineers, familiar with the Mount Cook region, as silly. Because FitzGerald presents himself as the central figure, a man from the ‘real’ world brought face to face with an unnatural environment his writing brings to mind Samuel Butler’s *Erewhon*. He does not give his companions individual identities and this enables him to further emphasise the image of himself as isolated, cut off from civilisation, and alone.

‘Absolute stillness reigned’ in FitzGerald’s account. This ‘stillness’ is backed up by Zurbriggen who had written that the ‘weather left nothing to be desired’ (157). However, despite the weather being perfect, FitzGerald continues to create a sense of



unease. The ‘stillness’ is ‘absolute’ and this creates a sense of claustrophobia. Despite the stillness, the scene ‘rapidly’ changes: the ‘whole sky’ turns ‘dark crimson’, the mountains are ‘tinged with red’. It is as if blood is seeping over the scene. But then, just as rapidly, the scene changes and the light fades to ‘the dark grey of twilight’. The repetition of ‘dark’ to describe both the ‘crimson’ and the ‘grey’ appears symbolic. FitzGerald is not providing us with a colour chart but, rather, a mood chart—and the mood becomes increasingly menacing as the ‘mountains seemed to totter above our heads as though they would fall and crush us who dared to violate with our presence the stillness of their sanctuaries, and desecrate with our tread the snow-white purity of their peaks.’

FitzGerald starts this passage in a ‘mystical gnomeland’ and concludes it with a sanctuary of ‘snow-white purity’. This shift isn’t convincing. There is nothing resembling a sanctuary in the tone and atmosphere created by FitzGerald. But the image of the mountains as gods, and the immediate world around them as sanctuaries in which they live is immediately familiar to any writer or reader of British mountaineering-literature. FitzGerald is taking us through the standard responses to *any* mountain environment. He could be writing about the Matterhorn or Mount Cook. The only thing that makes this mountain area ‘New Zealand’ is the patronising reference to Maori and the clichéd ‘sharp cry’ of the ‘kea’.

While FitzGerald writes about the mountains he climbed in New Zealand, Zurbriggen’s account of his ‘expedition’ must be considered as part of a broader autobiography. It is the mountaineer’s life and not Mount Cook that is the focus of the work. And central to the mountaineer’s life is his relationship with the mountains and God. We know that he felt drawn to the mountains because he tells us so. He says ‘my blood danced in my veins and I longed to become a companion and guide in mountaineering ascents: this desire grew within me till it became irresistible’ (18). But what really sets Zurbriggen apart from New Zealand mountaineer-writers is not his drive to climb mountains but his emphasis on the virtues associated with the mountain world which are summed up in the following statement:

And now let us away to the mountains, for there we shall find health, strength and resolution; there in the midst of Nature's fairest scenes, we shall feel most strongly the impulse to praise and bless the Maker of all (xvi).

New Zealanders may have viewed Mount Cook as an unspoiled environment but their writing is less reverent than Zurbriggen's. They respond to and appreciate the mountain environment but they do not share Zurbriggen's 'impulse to praise and bless the Maker of all.'

Zurbriggen is an outsider in terms of writing about mountaineering at Mount Cook. He was not a New Zealand local, nor was he a wealthy British mountaineer travelling the world in search of new mountains to climb. He came to New Zealand because, as FitzGerald's guide, he had no choice. But he was also a famous mountaineer in his own right and his autobiography, with its references to the Himalaya, the Andes and New Zealand, is a remarkable record of ascents.

It is noteworthy that Zurbriggen says so little about his experience of reaching the summit of Mount Cook. One has to assume that this is because he climbed the mountain alone. His clients (the mountaineers who contributed to *From the Alps to the Andes*) didn't share in the achievement or the glory. And so, although Mount Haidinger is a smaller (and relatively little known) mountain, its first ascent, which was made by FitzGerald with Zurbriggen and Clarke acting as guide and porter, gets more coverage than the first ascent of Mount Cook by an overseas climber via a new route from the Tasman Valley. To all intents and purposes the ascents described by Zurbriggen are only important if they reflect well on his British employers. It would seem, then, that whereas New Zealand mountaineering (and mountaineering-writing) was democratic in approach and permitted a variety of voices, this is less true of its class-based British counterpart.

## CHAPTER FOUR: Malcolm Ross

In 1906 Tom Fyfe climbed Mount Cook for a second time. On this occasion he was accompanied by second guide Peter Graham and client Samuel Turner with New Zealand climber Malcolm Ross. The climbers approached the mountain from the Tasman Valley, via Zurbriggen's ridge, but descended into the Hooker Valley, via the North ridge. It was a notable ascent because it was the first traverse of the High Peak. Aesthetically pleasing though they are, traverses are nevertheless difficult because at no point can the mountaineers re-trace their footsteps. They have to break new ground and cut new steps both during the ascent and descent from the mountain—a process which can be time consuming as well as potentially dangerous.

Malcolm Ross was a journalist who began his career writing for the *Otago Witness* and the *Otago Daily Times* during the mid-1880s, before moving on to become a freelance journalist. He moved to Wellington in 1897 and was a parliamentary reporter (Oosterman 277), as well as correspondent for both the *Times* in London (Oosterman 279) and the *Melbourne Age*. In 1915 he was appointed as New Zealand's official war correspondent. Politically conservative, he was a friend of Prime Minister William Fergusson Massey and Governor to New Zealand, Lord Ranfurly.

As well as having a journalistic background, Ross was also a keen sportsman who played for the Otago Provincial team in rugby during the years 1885-86 before becoming a representative to the New Zealand Rugby Football Union from 1898 (Oosterman 25). He was chair of the New Zealand Lawn Tennis Association from 1905, played golf, and was a founding member of the New Zealand Alpine Club in 1891. He was editor of the *New Zealand Alpine Journal* from 1893-95. By 1914, the year *A Climber in New Zealand* was published, he was regarded (along with his wife Forrestina Ross and son Noel) as a member of 'the country's first family of journalism' (Oosterman 280). As well as writing, Ross was recognised for his photographs—images which were published in newspapers (Oosterman 32), the *New Zealand Alpine Journal* and included in his books.

As a professional writer, Ross grabbed the opportunity 'to make a name for himself' writing tourist guides and books about 'New Zealand's mountain country' (Langton

89). His writing ‘was important for the greater popularisation of climbing’ (Langton 90) and his work was published at a time when tourism in the South Island and at Mount Cook was increasing: guest numbers at the Hermitage having risen from 185 in the 1905-06 summer season to 539 in the 1913-14 season (Pawson 141).

Ross was an experienced mountaineer and had introduced Tom Fyfe to mountaineering. Aged forty-three when he made the traverse of Mount Cook, Ross was now the ‘client’ with Fyfe acting as the senior mountaineer and guide. Despite repeated attempts, Ross had not climbed Mount Cook before. However, at one o’clock on the 9<sup>th</sup> January, 1906, he reached the top after almost fourteen hours of climbing. This is how he recorded the moment in his book, *A Climber in New Zealand*:

The view was again magnificent—almost indescribable. We looked across the island from sea to sea, and in addition to the views northward, eastward, and westward, we now beheld a glorious Alpine panorama stretching to the south as far as the eye could reach. The giant Tasman and all the lesser mountains were dwarfed, and the whole country was spread out like a map in relief at our feet (295).

Ross is clearly a confident writer. Unlike Fyfe and Graham, who described the view first from one direction, then another, and another, and then another—as if turning to the four points of the compass—Ross is able to provide a broad sweep, a fluid circle which takes in all directions at once. Although offering a ‘promontory description’, Ross cannot claim to make a ‘discovery’. The view from the summit of Mount Cook had already been described by several mountaineers before him (including Tom Fyfe) and so Ross can only hope to reinforce what has been stated, or offer a new perspective—the latter of which he fails to achieve because of his adherence to clichéd description. His roving eye captures the ‘grandeur’ of the scene but he does this at the expense of detail. In an attempt to avoid clichéd phrases, he writes that the panorama stretched ‘as far as the eye could reach’ but the awkwardness of this replacement of ‘see’ with ‘reach’ does nothing to elevate the language from the conventional.

Ross then says that the ‘giant Tasman and all the lesser mountains were dwarfed’ and that the country appeared ‘spread out like a map’. The word ‘giant’(which can be

interpreted as either an adjective or a noun) used to describe Mount Tasman is typical. As we have seen earlier in this thesis, George Mannering also described Mount Tasman as a ‘giant’ in his book *With Axe and Rope* (101). From his position on the summit of Mount Cook, Ross looks down on the surrounding landscape, describing it as a ‘map’. So vast is this view that he asserts that he has the ‘whole country’ at his feet. This is hyperbole: he is not describing what he can see but *how* mountain-top views have been conveyed in standard mountaineering texts. He can’t see the entire length of New Zealand but he wants to make clear that he is standing on the highest point in the country and so, figuratively speaking, the entire land is at his feet. This being the case, there is an element of conquest in his claim. Yet he also bows down to nature. The word ‘alpine’ is capitalised and preceded by the words ‘beheld’ and ‘glorious’. The statement that ‘we now beheld a glorious Alpine panorama’ has a certain biblical quality, and illustrates Ross’s feelings of reverence for the mountain environment.

Ross then goes on to describe the surrounding mountains:

Hector, the third highest mountain in New Zealand, seemed a pimple; St. David’s Dome had become a low peak; but Elie de Beaumont, near the head of the Tasman, still looked a grand mountain, the effect of distance seeming to make it the more imposing (295).

He doesn’t provide detailed topographical or geological descriptions, but, rather, gives a brief over-view. Thus, Hector [Dampier] is ‘a pimple’. St. David’s Dome [Hicks] is described as a ‘low peak’ (10,492ft.) whereas Elie de Beaumont (10,200ft.) is a ‘grand mountain’. From these remarks, it is impossible to gain a clear image of individual mountains but, having said that, it is significant that Ross has singled them out in the first place. With the exception of Mount Tasman and possibly Elie de Beaumont, none of these mountains were well known to non-climbers. It is doubtful that the audience for Ross’s book would have recognised the names and yet he mentions them anyway. He does this because he can see them and because they form part of his personal landscape—that is, they are part of a specifically New Zealand landscape. In drawing our attention to these mountains, Ross by-passes familiar adjectival embellishments (with the exception of the word ‘grand’ to describe Tasman), replacing them with less literary or poetic descriptions such as ‘pimple’ to describe Mount Hector. Thus, at last,

he is introducing an element of realism into his work—the kind of specifically New Zealand topographical information which appeared in Graham’s reference to the Waitaki lakes, or Fyfe’s reference to Mount Aspiring.

Ross briefly describes the sea to the west and then continues:

Through rents in the clouds to the westward patches of sea appeared like dark lagoons. I stepped out of the rope to secure the first photograph that had ever been taken of the summit of Mount Cook; then we congratulated each other, and while [Peter] Graham got the provisions out of the rucksacks Fyfe employed himself in taking in the view and coolly cutting up his tobacco for a smoke (295).

The language describing the view to the west is, once again, aestheticised but the scene essentially becomes the backdrop for human activity. Ross can’t claim to be the first mountaineer to set foot on the High Peak, but he ensures that he has visible proof of his achievement by taking the ‘first photograph’ of the summit. Ross’s use of the word ‘first’ indicates the importance he placed not only on the photograph but also on the historical significance of the first traverse. The mention of ‘first’ in relationship to the photograph also suggests a hint of egotism in the author. He is making a claim to history. That the photograph was taken before the mountaineers ‘congratulated each other’ also suggests just how important the climb was to Ross, personally.

The photograph is reproduced in *A Climber in New Zealand* (296). Ross, of course, is absent from the image. His presence is indicated by the carefully arranged rope and the empty loop which lies in the foreground of the image. Of the three men on the summit, only one—the client, Samuel Turner—faces the camera. Both Fyfe and Graham stare into the distance. The image as a whole appears unstaged except for the climbing rope which directs the eye towards the (non-visible) photographer. Arguably, it is the empty loop which is the most arresting feature of the photograph.

Ross’s party was made up of strong and experienced mountaineers. None of the men were novice climbers, and Fyfe and Graham had climbed Mount Cook before. It is reasonable that the group should have felt at ease on the summit, getting on with taking

pictures and eating before heading down. Ross observes that Fyfe ‘employed himself in taking in the view and coolly cutting up his tobacco for a smoke’. The insertion of the adverb ‘coolly’ helps to create a nice picture of Fyfe, in so much as he seems self-assured. In practical terms, as leader of the party, Fyfe might just have been contemplating the best route down off the peak.

Ross continues to describe the events which took place on the summit, writing:

Fyfe had intended to take the pulses of the party, and I to make some careful notes of the surrounding mountains; but we did not do so. Professor Tyndall in his famous description of the ascent of the Weisshorn says that he opened his notebook to make a few observations, but he soon relinquished the attempt. There was something incongruous, if not profane, in allowing the scientific faculty to interfere where silent worship was a “reasonable service”. Thus felt we as we gazed around at the marvellous panorama. (296).

Ross states that Fyfe ‘intended to take the pulses of the party’ while Ross, himself, intended to ‘make some careful notes of the surrounding mountains’. Neither Fyfe nor Ross had a scientific background and yet, despite this, they appear almost duty-bound to undertake some form of amateur scientific research. The fact that Ross was a member of the New Zealand Alpine Club would have played a role in this regard. While the major focus of the club was alpine exploration and adventure, matters relating to orographical and topographical information, scientific study and alpine photography were also important. However, neither Fyfe nor Ross carried out any research, a fact which Ross justifies by drawing attention to the actions of the British mountaineer and notable scientist, John Tyndall, who had made the first ascent of the Weisshorn (14,783ft.) in Switzerland in 1861. Ross tells us that Tyndall ‘opened his notebook’ but ‘soon relinquished the attempt’. Ross then states that there was ‘something incongruous, if not profane, in allowing the scientific faculty to interfere where silent worship was a “reasonable service”’.

Only the words ‘reasonable service’ are placed in quotation marks. Because of this emphasis, the reader of Ross’s work is initially directed towards the Bible, specifically Romans 12.1. The rest of the sentence appears to convey Ross’s thoughts. However,

when Tyndall's account of the Weisshorn ascent is examined more closely, it becomes apparent that Ross relies more heavily on the British mountaineer's words than first imagined. Tyndall writes:

I opened my notebook to make a few observations, but I soon relinquished the attempt. There was something incongruous, if not profane, in allowing the scientific faculty to interfere where silent worship was the 'reasonable service.'(58)

The words which originally appear to relate to Ross's experience of standing on the summit of Mount Cook now clearly belong to Tyndall and reflect his response to standing on a peak in Switzerland. Ross's version differs from Tyndall's in only two regards. Where Tyndall writes 'the' reasonable service, Ross inserts an 'a'. And while Tyndall's 'reasonable service' appears in single quotation marks, Ross opts for double quotation marks. However, because Ross addresses Tyndall's remark and follows it with a response: 'Thus felt we as we gazed around at the marvellous panorama' there is a level of doubt as to whether or not Ross was intentionally claiming Tyndall's thoughts as his own.

With its biblical inversion—and journalistic pretension—Ross's words imply agreement with Tyndall. However, Tyndall's reaction to being on the summit of the Weisshorn is far more emotionally charged than Ross's response to being on the summit of Mount Cook. Just prior to the reference to opening his notebook, Tyndall wrote:

I had never before witnessed a scene which affected me like this...An influence seemed to proceed from it direct to the soul; the delight and exultation experienced were not those of Reason or of Knowledge, but of BEING:—I was part of it and it of me, and in the transcendent glory of Nature I entirely forgot myself as man. (58)

The two accounts could not be more different in terms of describing the emotional impact of standing on top of a high mountain. Tyndall makes a clear reference to Byron and the frequently quoted section from the Third Canto of *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, when he suggests that he was 'part of it [the scene] and it of me.' Ross's account



focuses on describing the view from the summit and recording the actions of his party while resting. Because of his attention to the physical, rather than emotional or spiritual, aspects of the summit, Ross's reference to 'silent worship' creates an unexpected shift in the tone of his work. The preceding passages—with their descriptions of relatively unknown mountains and photography—provide very little context for a scene of 'worship'. By contrast, Tyndall's account—with its emphasis on the spiritual and transcendental, and the emotional impact of the scenery on his mood—makes such a call for 'silent worship' logical.

From his writing, Ross appears not to have been particularly 'moved' by gaining the summit of Mount Cook. There is a degree of emotional restraint in his writing—as if showing too much emotion might be inappropriate. In some ways, his behaviour seems to conform to the image of the 'typical' twentieth century New Zealand male mountaineer in as much as he does not waste time wondering why scientific research was 'incongruous' or 'profane' in such a setting but immediately turns his attention to practical 'thoughts of the descent'(296).

Ross's *A Climber in New Zealand* appeared eight years after he made the traverse of Mount Cook. However, it is not the only account of the climb written by him. In March 1906, approximately two months after reaching the summit of Mount Cook, Ross published a long article recording the climb for the *Otago Witness*. This feature article was addressed to a New Zealand readership. However, comparisons between the two works—in relation to the description of reaching the summit of Mount Cook—show the two versions to be identical except for one sentence. It appears that Ross has simply copied the earlier account into his later book. However, the one dissimilarity is significant.

Here, again, are the last two sentences from Ross's published book:

There was something incongruous, if not profane, in allowing the scientific faculty to interfere where silent worship was a "reasonable service". Thus felt we as we gazed around at the marvellous panorama (296).

And here are the corresponding sentences from his earlier newspaper report:

There was something incongruous, if not profane, in allowing the scientific faculty to interfere where silent worship was a “reasonable service”. Thus I felt as I gazed around at the marvellous panorama (86).

Two changes have taken place. Instead of “thus felt we”, Ross had earlier written “thus I felt”. The placement of the verb “felt” has changed but, more significantly, the choice of personal pronoun has also changed. On one level, the ‘I’ of the earlier report gives the piece a more personal tone because it relates to an individual, but, on the other hand it is also slightly egotistical.

Given that this article was written shortly after the climb was made, I think that it reflects more accurately the way Ross actually felt while standing on the summit—that is, that although a member of a team, reaching the summit marks a personal achievement. We are reminded that after many attempts on the summit, Ross has finally succeeded in reaching his goal. In view of that fact, he is not really engaging in ‘silent worship’ but celebrating a masculine, sporting achievement. The fact that this version appeared in local newspapers—rather than being published in Britain as the book was—suggests that Ross was attempting to make the experience of climbing a mountain accessible to an audience less comfortable with Romanticism than with tropes of sporting triumph and success.

Ross is a journalist by profession and so writing comes more easily to him than it does to either Fyfe or Graham. It is somewhat surprising, then, that in a chapter in *A Climber in New Zealand* headed ‘The Conquering of Aorangi’, Ross devotes almost ten pages (106-115) to reproducing Fyfe’s *Otago Daily Times* account of the first ascent of Mount Cook. Although Ross had climbed with Fyfe in the weeks leading up to the first ascent, he was not with Fyfe on Christmas Day when the summit of Cook was reached for the first time. This means he could not have written a first-hand account of the climb himself.

Ross adds very little by way of extra commentary. Neither does he re-imagine or re-interpret Fyfe’s words. Ross had great respect for Fyfe as a companion and as a mountaineer. His observation, quoted earlier, that Fyfe ‘coolly’ cut up his tobacco

suggests that Ross may also have been impressed by Fyfe's personality. No doubt Ross added Fyfe's account to *A Climber in New Zealand* because he wanted to establish a connection between himself and the younger, successful mountaineer. But the fact that Ross included Fyfe's account also suggests that he valued the younger man's narrative. Ross must have believed that Fyfe's writing was worthy of a wider audience—an audience that Ross had connections with through being a member of the *Alpine Club*—but it also suggests that Ross, unlike Fyfe, sought validation for his mountaineering from this same audience whereas Fyfe did not. Thus, Ross was more heavily invested in the imperial project of transmitting knowledge than Fyfe was—which is hardly surprising given their differences in profession and class connection.

Ross does add a concluding statement to Fyfe's account, summarising:

Thus was the conquering of Aorangi, after many heroic struggles, accomplished by the pluck, endurance, and initiative of the young New Zealanders, who, in a far country, had taught themselves the craft of mountaineering (115).

In effect, this response departs from the New Zealand vernacular of Fyfe's account and re-instates the received literary style. Thus, Aorangi is once again conquered, the mountaineers' struggles were 'heroic' and they showed great 'pluck, endurance and initiative'. These are all familiar tropes which, in the past, sought to establish mountaineering as a reflection of British character: that one struggles with and overcomes difficulties through perseverance and grit (Mummery 213). Drawing on the Bible, Ross references Isaiah 13.5 when he alludes to New Zealand as the 'far country' but the main thrust of the sentiment is that New Zealand is only 'far' in relationship to the metropolitan centre: Britain. This reliance on a binary relationship between Britain and New Zealand suggests that Ross's implied audience was not in New Zealand.

On the other hand, Ross's writing also has a distinctive New Zealand identity. He refers to the mountain by its Maori name, 'Aorangi'. 'Aorangi' does conjure up images of a rustic, pre-European 'authentic' age—it is far more 'exotic' than 'Mount Cook'—and so Ross may well be catering to the European taste for wilderness and a search for the 'other'. But 'Aorangi' was also in common use in the South Island—and is featured in everything from maps, to advertisements, to newspaper headings and books. Ross's

own guide-book, *Aorangi or the Heart of the Southern Alps, New Zealand* was published in 1892. So it could be that Ross's inclusion of the word signals the vernacular, a distinct feature of New Zealand-English. He doesn't define 'Aorangi' or offer any explanation for its presence. The phrase 'young New Zealanders' refers not only to the ages of the mountaineers who made the first ascent but highlights the youthfulness of New Zealand itself—as a nation separate from England. In this 'far country' the 'New Zealanders' have 'taught themselves' the 'craft of mountaineering'. In emphasising the fact that New Zealand mountaineers 'taught themselves', Ross asserts independence from the 'old' country and its mountaineering traditions and highlights the New Zealand aptitude for overcoming obstacles and being innovative. This, again, brings to mind the 'have a go' attitude of New Zealanders.

Ross, like Mannering before him, struggles to keep a foot in both the British and the New Zealand camps. Stylistically, *A Climber in New Zealand*, is similar to the mountaineering chronicles written by British mountaineers. Like Green's *The High Alps of New Zealand* and Edward FitzGerald's *Climbs in the New Zealand Alps*, it is a first person narrative which focusses on the seasons spent climbing in the Mount Cook region. Like Green and FitzGerald, Ross begins each chapter with an epigraph which sets the scene and tone for the forthcoming action. He also draws on heroic language in order to elevate the character of the mountaineers. Thus, they are shown to struggle and conquer—and seldom give up. Biblical references are included in his work as are references to the work of more famous British mountaineers such as John Tyndall.

But despite his posturing Ross is essentially a New Zealand mountaineer and writer. He displays pride in the differences between the British and New Zealand way of mountaineering, emphasising the fact that New Zealanders were self-taught (115) and pioneered an indigenous strand of mountaineering without the aid of guides, huts or specialist equipment. He identifies individual mountains in the Mount Cook region—a fact that highlights his familiarity with the alpine area, and its importance to him.

Regardless of his pride in the emergence of a New Zealand mountaineering culture, Ross cannot bring himself to cut all ties with British mountaineering culture. His desire for acceptance in 'cultured' mountaineering circles—such as through membership of the New Zealand Alpine Club and the British Alpine Club—elevated his stature in the

New Zealand and British mountaineering community but may have denied him some of the freedoms of the less conventional mountaineer, Tom Fyfe.

We can see traces of the dual nature of Ross's allegiance in the first chapter of *A Climber in New Zealand* when he talks about the influence of Green on New Zealand mountaineering:

It was his work in the Southern Alps that fired the imagination of that hardy band of young Colonial pioneers who, like their forefathers in the Alps of Switzerland, were destined to lead the way in Alpine conquest (14).

Ross acknowledges Green and the mountaineering 'forefathers' in the 'Alps of Switzerland'. He says that Green 'fired the imagination' but he concludes that it was the 'hardy band of young Colonial pioneers' who 'were destined to lead the way in Alpine conquest'. In other words, he credits Green with introducing mountaineering to New Zealand but claims success or 'conquest' came through the work of the 'Colonial pioneers'. In the end, then, Ross takes a stance. Essentially mountaineering has broken away from its British origins, clearing the way for the development of a New Zealand sport.

## CHAPTER FIVE: Samuel Turner

Samuel Turner was an Englishman who settled in New Zealand in 1911. During his short life he climbed Mount Cook five times. His first ascent—the first traverse of Mount Cook— took place in 1906. On this climb he was accompanied by guides Tom Fyfe and Peter Graham, with Malcolm Ross. He climbed the mountain again in 1912 and 1916 and made a solo ascent in 1919. His final ascent—with his son Cyril— was made shortly before his death in 1929. His first book *My Climbing Adventures in Four Continents* was published in 1911 and his second, *The Conquest of the New Zealand Alps* in 1922.

In the foreword to *My Climbing Adventures in Four Continents*, Turner claims to be a

commercial man, not a literary man, and I write a plain, uncoloured narrative, feeling that I leave myself at the mercy of all literary critics (xi).

In describing himself as a commercial man who writes an ‘uncoloured narrative’ Turner makes a claim for authenticity. He wants the reader to accept his narrative as the truth. As Lydia Wevers points out the absence of flourish ‘reflects both the conventions of the medium – the common mouth through which the story is told – and the deliberate avoidance of any textural dimension which might detract from the reader’s perception of an unproblematically transferred reality’ (Wevers 69). As we have seen, New Zealander Jack Clarke made a similar claim in 1904 when he wrote that it would take the pen of a ‘writing climber and not that of a climbing writer’ to do justice to the mountain world at Mount Cook (14). However, Turner—unlike Clarke—published several full-length books describing his mountaineering exploits and, as we will see, was fully aware of mountaineering literary conventions—and was not above exploiting them in his own writing.

Samuel Turner was aware that mountaineering literature was important in cementing a reputation. At least two factors prompted him to write, however. He claims that his 1905 book *Siberia: A Record of Travel, Climbing and Exploration* was so favourably received by the public, that his publisher T. Fisher Unwin asked him for more work (*My* 18). Secondly, while giving a lecture on the subject of his Siberian adventures in

London in 1905, he made the acquaintance of the Superintendent of the New Zealand Tourist Department: T.E. Donne. Donne invited Turner to visit New Zealand and climb Mount Cook as the guest of the New Zealand government. In return Turner was expected to publicise New Zealand through lectures and writing about the trip (*My* 177).

Although not a confident writer, Turner regarded himself as a great mountaineer. In *My Climbing Adventures* he claims that :

The *Westminster Gazette*, in reviewing my book on Siberia, called me “The most adventurous living climber,” and I hope none of my critics will call me anything worse (xii).

Turner’s egocentricity made him unpopular with mountaineers—both in Britain and New Zealand. As a result he did not become a member of either the Alpine Club or the New Zealand Alpine Club and so, to all intents and purposes, he remained on the fringes of mountaineering society.

Turner did have a tendency to make grandiose statements (such as the one above) and yet his account of reaching the summit of Mount Cook during his first ascent offers a sustained, articulate emotional response to climbing. It appears, at first, to be a very personal piece of writing, candid and quite moving. He is overwhelmed as he notes:

I had tried to imagine what the panorama was like, and now that view was before me. The day was wonderfully bright; a sea of cumulus clouds extended for about 50 miles in a north and west direction. They were too low to interfere with the higher peaks, about 7000 to 9000 feet high. Heights and depths were bathed in a profusion of light, which formed a striking contrast to the dense, black, huge shadows of the mountains. The incomparable sight appealed to me so strongly that I could hardly speak. I felt overcome by a sense of my own nothingness (*My* 214).

Although Turner ‘had tried to imagine what the panorama was like’, he was now in a position to tell the reader what was before him. He places the emphasis on light, initially informing us that the day was ‘wonderfully bright’ before adding that there was a

‘profusion of light’ and then presenting a rhyme with ‘incomparable sight’. Thus, he skips from ‘bright’ to ‘light’ to ‘sight’ which he then contrasts by presenting the ‘dense, black, huge shadows of the mountains’. The reliance on the adjectives ‘dense’, ‘black’ and ‘huge’ creates a sluggish tone particularly when read against the ‘light’ images. Turner’s attention to light and shadow imbues the scene with symbolic meaning—that of life and death. Clearly the view had an emotional impact on him because he ‘could hardly speak’ and was ‘overcome by a sense of my own nothingness’. This, then, is a moment when man is brought face to face with the sublime.

He continues:

These enormous precipices of black and grey rock are void of vegetation or even the humblest lichens, and are only inhabited by desolate and gloomy shadows, increased or decreased by the rising and setting sun. The rock avalanches which we heard reminded me that Mount Cook’s precipitous rock was being splintered and shaped by Nature herself.

The snow, which had melted by the sun [sic], had found its way into cracks and crevices in the rock to await the inevitable night frost. The water had been turned into ice, and in its expansion had burst the rock; but the ice held the rock until the sun became hot enough to release its grip, and then allowed the rock to dash itself from its giddy height, taking with it any loose rock that might be in its course (*My* 214-215).

Turner continues to play with contrasts between light and dark, and life and lifelessness. The ‘enormous precipices’ are described as ‘black and grey’ and ‘void of any vegetation or even the humblest lichens’. The only substance that can live in this environment are ‘desolate and gloomy shadows’. The light from the ‘rising and setting sun’ is not appreciated for its own sake but for the effect it has on the shadows—that is, they can be ‘increased or decreased’. This is a strangely negative way of describing light but one which serves to emphasise the desolate, lifeless aspect of the high mountains.

Turner’s responses are not simply visual. He makes note of the sound of the ‘rock avalanches’ and this sound reminds him ‘that Mount Cook’s precipitous rock was being splintered and shaped by Nature herself.’ Turner displays a conventional sense of



reverence through the capitalisation of 'Nature' but it is the force of nature that really captures his attention. Nature is not benign but capable of shaping rock and causing rock avalanches. Once the ice has melted, it releases 'its grip, and then allowed the rock to dash itself from its giddy height'. This emotive language is aimed at conveying the dynamism of the natural world, an environment where rock can 'dash itself from its giddy height'.

From his vantage point on the summit Turner turns his attention to the distant view and writes:

I could see the green plains of Canterbury 10,000 feet beneath us in the distance, with pretty homesteads dotted here and there. Between the distant plains and Mount Cook there were the most rugged forms and the most graceful outlines: bold perpendicular precipices and cliffs, with gentle, undulating slopes; rock mountains, sombre and solemn, or glittering with snow, and white glaciers crawling down the mountain-side, split into turrets, pinnacles and pyramids, domes, cones and spires. I could see Lake Pukaki, some 55 miles away, glittering in the sun. There was every combination and every contrast that the world of mountains can give or the eye desire. Three ridges of rock dipped down from the summit on which we stood. One to the north, the other to the south, were very steep; the one which was the Tasman Arête, was the one down which we picked our route. We remained on the summit for twenty-five minutes of crowded but glorious life (*My* 215-16).

The great sense of distance—the vast expanse from 10,000 feet high is emphasised by including a reference to the small number of homesteads dotted around below. What Turner gives us is the birdseye view of the surroundings and he does it by repeating the very simple phrase 'I could see'. Thus, although he makes use of adjectives—even describing the mountains as sombre and solemn—there is something unguarded in his work. He gives full vent not only to his observation but to his imagination as well.

But, when reading Turner's description of the view, something seems not quite right. Having spent so long imagining the panorama before him, he has trouble with the facts. For example, he writes:

I could see the green plains of Canterbury 10,000 feet beneath us in the distance, with pretty homesteads dotted here and there.

The date of this ascent is January 9, 1906, the height of summer—a time when the Canterbury plains are often dry and brown. From the top of Mount Cook looking east, the view is dominated by the barren Mackenzie Basin not the Canterbury plains. In reality just the merest glimpse of ‘green’ plains is visible, a thin strip along the coastline. The number of ‘homesteads’ in the vicinity of Mount Cook (between Mount Cook and Lake Pukaki) was small: Birch Hill station, Glentanner station, Mount Cook station, with Tasman Downs further away. The Hermitage hotel was the largest building in the area but hardly a ‘homestead’. In other words, there were very few buildings and nothing to compare with a Swiss village like Zermatt or the French village Chamonix at the foot of Mont Blanc. Given Turner’s height and distance from these homesteads, it is unlikely that he could have seen how ‘pretty’ they were. Turner, in fact, is describing a picturesque, civilised landscape: a ‘green’ land ‘dotted’ with ‘pretty homesteads’—one that you might expect to see in Europe.

Malcolm Ross, who was standing beside Turner on the summit, makes no mention of either ‘green’ plains or homesteads. When describing the view to the east, he writes:

Eastward a few fleecy cumulus clouds sailed over the foot-hills, and beyond were the plains of Canterbury and the distant sea (294).

In fact, Ross barely looks in the direction of the plains, preferring to look into the mountains at the head of the Tasman glacier and west. Yet Turner continues to gaze eastward, adding:

I could see Lake Pukaki, some 55 miles away, glittering in the sun. There was every combination and every contrast that the world of mountains can give or the eye desire.

But the distance between the summit of Mount Cook and Lake Pukaki isn’t fifty-five miles, it’s closer to twenty-five miles. Exaggeration of all the features ‘seen’ by Turner

helps to create a truly remarkable landscape, but the problem is that the view described by Turner doesn't belong to him at all. It has appeared before in the work of another mountaineer—someone far more famous than Turner could ever hope to be.

In 1865 British mountaineer Edward Whymper made the first ascent of the Matterhorn. The ascent captured public attention for two reasons: because it was the first ascent of this iconic mountain and because shortly after leaving the summit four members of Whymper's team fell to their deaths. Arguably, the accident on the Matterhorn was the most famous mountaineering event of the nineteenth century. *Scrambles in the Alps*, published in 1871, was an immensely successful and influential book. In this extract, Whymper describes the view from the summit of the Matterhorn—a description all the more poignant due to what was about to take place:

Ten thousand feet beneath us were the green fields of Zermatt, dotted with chalets, from which blue smoke rose lazily. Eight thousand feet below, on the other side, were the pastures of Breuil. There were forests black and gloomy, and meadows bright and lively; bounding waterfalls and tranquil lakes; fertile lands and savage wastes; sunny plains and frigid *plateaux*. There were the most rugged forms and the most graceful outlines—bold, perpendicular cliffs, and gentle undulating slopes; rocky mountains and snowy mountains, sombre and solemn, or glittering and white, with walls—turrets—pinnacles—pyramids—domes—cones—and spires! There was every combination that the world can give, and every contrast that the heart could desire.

We remained on the summit for one hour—

“One crowded hour of glorious life” (382).

At the beginning of Turner's book, he admitted that he was not a 'literary man'(xi). He might have felt unable to do justice to the scene encountered at Mount Cook. Climbers before him have had similar difficulties. George Mannering wrote in *With Axe and Rope* that the panorama from near the summit 'defies any attempt at description' (102). Malcolm Ross, who was a journalist, stated in *A Climber in New Zealand* that the view was 'almost indescribable' (295). I *imagine* that Turner had read Whymper's work, been attracted to his vivid description of the view from the Matterhorn and decided to

use it to describe the view from Mount Cook. With a few tweaks, Turner could adapt Whymper's words to fit his needs. Turner might also have identified with the older mountaineer. Whymper, who died in 1911, was highly regarded in British mountaineering circles and was one of the foremost mountaineers of his day. Turner, believing himself to be 'the most adventurous living climber' might have felt it was appropriate to use Whymper's writing because they were mountaineering equals. Although it is impossible to know why Turner adapted Whymper's work, his decision to do so displays a certain boldness because Whymper's book was so well known. However, although Turner's words are not his own, his emotional response to the mountain is genuine. It is true, I think, when he writes that he was 'overcome by a sense of my own nothingness' (*My* 214).

Not all of Turner's account is taken from other sources. He also describes the features of the summit of Mount Cook, saying:

Three ridges of rock dipped down from the summit on which we stood. One to the north, the other to the south, were very steep; the one which was the Tasman Arête, was the one down which we picked our route (216).

At first glance this appears a very matter of fact description, far more controlled than his previous observations. But things become interesting when we look at his description of the north and south ridges:

One to the north, the other to the south, were very steep; the one which was the Tasman Arête, was the one down which we picked our route (216).

Turner uses the intensifier 'very' to describe the steepness of the north and south ridges. If we compare his description with Tom Fyfe's description of the same two ridges, we get a clear idea of Turner's exaggerated viewpoint and, by contrast, Fyfe's tendency towards understatement. Fyfe says:

Three principal arêtes meet at the summit. The angles of two of them, the southern and northern, are fairly steep right to the summit. The other, the Tasman arête, is an easy grade (2).

Turner's 'very steep' ridges become Fyfe's 'fairly steep' ridges. And the Tasman Arête, which Turner does not classify in terms of its steepness, is described by Fyfe as an 'easy grade'. Fyfe's use of the negative 'fairly steep' downplays the difficulty of the route and although understatement is a feature of Fyfe's individual writing style, it also appears to reject the conventional, heroic tone of British mountaineering literature. George Graham, who was with Fyfe on that first ascent didn't even mention the southern and northern arêtes but focussed his attention on the eastern ridge. In his article for the *Otago Daily Times* he wrote:

The top was rounded off on all sides excepting the east, where it dropped sharply (6).

Both Fyfe and Graham tended to write in a less literary and exaggerated style than that adopted by Turner and yet when we look at the latter's 1919 description of his solo ascent of Mount Cook we can see a change has taken place in his work. This was Turner's fourth ascent of Mount Cook and it took place eight years after he had settled permanently in New Zealand.

In this account, published in *The Conquest of the New Zealand Alps*, Turner exhibits a degree of irreverence, saying:

The summit generally was in a scraggy, unsatisfactory condition compared with the nice smooth summit I have always seen before, with but only one exception (191).

This is the first time the summit of Mount Cook has been described as 'scraggy' and the word stands out because it is so unexpected and original. To add that the summit was in an 'unsatisfactory condition' also creates a sense of a value judgement: that on this occasion the summit did not live up to expectations.

Whereas, earlier, Turner spoke of feeling overcome while on the summit, he now describes how he planted a 'British Ensign' in the snow and then:

Standing up and stamping the snow around it I felt that by that act I had conquered Mount Cook alone; if the mountain had made me feel cautious and unable to move about freely, the proud feeling of conquest could not have survived (*Conquest* 192).

Turner provides a very clear description of his movements on the summit. Because he is emphasising his personal response, he stresses his feelings—telling us how he ‘felt’—as well as emphasising his actions through such verbs as ‘standing’, and ‘stamping’. He is testing his strength against the mountain and it is important that he should not ‘feel cautious’ nor ‘unable to move about freely’. Emotional depth is created through the inclusion of the adjective ‘proud’ which describes his ‘feeling of conquest’. The fragility of his position, in terms of his frame of mind, is also emphasised by the admission that his feeling of conquest ‘could not have survived’ if he had been made to ‘feel cautious’. Still, there is a difference between being made to feel cautious and being ‘overcome’ by a sense of ‘nothingness’. Turner’s description of this ascent is less exaggerated than that of his 1906 ascent.

Turner’s writing is now more restrained and more situated in reality than previously. As he begins to provide details of the view from the summit, he notes:

I have seen the sea on both sides of New Zealand on seven occasions on which I have been on the summit ridge of Mount Cook, but besides this view there were a few clouds forming a background behind peaks to the north and south. I tried to see what Mount Tutoko was like, so that I would know what to expect on my trip down there, but was not sure of its identity, as some peaks were hidden which would have afforded me something to identify it with (*Conquest* 192).

Turner’s language is a little awkward. For example, the word ‘on’ occurs four times in the first sentence quoted above. He wishes to provide some information about his previous attempts on the summit but his repetition of ‘on’ tends to break up the flow of the sentence. It also seems that he is reluctant to offer a broad description of the view—a description already provided in his earlier book. He doesn’t define the view to the east and west, and he only says that there ‘were a few clouds forming a background behind

peaks to the north and south'. This writing has nothing in common with the description he took from Whymper.

His attention is directed south, towards Mount Tutoko. In 1923, after several attempts, he would make the first ascent of this mountain—but it is apparent it has already captured his imagination. Turner is not drawing the reader's attention to a generalised, magnificent panorama but a very specific geographical detail. This is what Tom Fyfe did when he directed his glance towards Mount Aspiring while standing on the summit of Mount Cook in 1894. Like Fyfe, Turner is now very much engaged with the New Zealand mountains. It would be impossible for him to rely on Whymper's words to describe this specific scene accurately.

Turner continues to offer an unromantic description of his surroundings, adding:

Mount Sefton looks very disappointing from Mount Cook, and so do many mountains; but Mount Tasman does not, as it is one of the finest mountains in any alpine region in the world, and it holds its own in some respects with Mount Cook. There was an unusually big plaster of snow on the Southern Alps, and one could easily understand the cold summer in New Zealand, no doubt caused by the extra 20 to 30 feet of snow fall. I got down off the summit to below the summit rocks in one and a half hours, according to my witnesses; but after this I had a tantalizing and cautious time re-cutting a number of steps which had not only been obliterated, but had been re-frozen into hard, shiny ice (*Conquest* 193).

Turner claims that Mount Sefton looks 'very disappointing'. In fact, 'many mountains' look disappointing from Mount Cook. It is difficult to reconcile this impression of the view with the one presented by Turner in his previous book. After four ascents of the mountain, Turner by-passes well-worn, romanticised descriptions of the view and simply describes what he sees (and feels). There is an honesty in his writing now and he doesn't appear to be pandering to audience expectations for glorious mountain scenery. Mount Tasman, however, is 'one of the finest mountains in any alpine region in the world.' He isn't comparing Tasman to well-known mountains in the Swiss Alps but asserting its right to be counted as one of the finest mountains *anywhere*.

Turner now begins to describe the features of the summit. He states that there was ‘an unusually big plaster of snow’. The term ‘big plaster’ is not necessarily a New Zealand phrase but it is colloquial, and somewhat coarse in comparison to more literary terms such as ‘blanket’. Making a note of the snowfall and the cold summer situates Turner’s writing fully in a New Zealand environment. He is describing events that have taken place in New Zealand that might not hold much interest for a British audience. And then suddenly, without any transition from one topic to the next, he states that he ‘got down off the summit’. This is very abrupt and very direct in terms of the language he uses. He does not wonder *if* he can get down or *how* he will get down, he simply ‘got down’. He gives the impression of writing a report. It is only when he refers to the ‘tantalizing and cautious time’ re-cutting steps that his language becomes more animated.

There is no doubt that Turner’s account of his 1919 ascent of Mount Cook is written in a different style to his description of his first, 1906 ascent. His writing in *The Conquest of the New Zealand Alps* is far more specific to the New Zealand location. Rather than offer generalised, clichéd descriptions of the alpine scenery, he pinpoints geographical locations and provides detailed accounts of alpine conditions. His writing is more original and even more assertive than his previous work. The summit of Mount Cook is described as ‘scraggy’, and Mount Sefton is ‘disappointing’. In other words, after eight years living in this country, Turner is beginning to see the mountains through a New Zealand lens.



## CHAPTER SIX: Freda du Faur

Australian Freda du Faur spent several seasons at Mount Cook and climbed the mountain twice: first in 1910 with guides Peter and Alex Graham, and again in 1913 with Peter Graham and Frank Milne. She was the first woman to reach the summit of Mount Cook and was a member of the team that made the first Grand traverse of the mountain. She described these climbs in *The Conquest of Mount Cook and Other Climbs*, published in 1915.

Du Faur described reaching the summit of Mount Cook in 1910 by saying:

I gained the summit and waited for them [Peter and Alex Graham, her guides] feeling very little, very lonely, and much inclined to cry...I felt bewildered, and could not realise that the goal I had dreamed of and striven for for years was beneath my feet, I turned to them with a flash and asked if it were “really, truly the summit of Mount Cook,” whereat they laughed very much and bade me look. Truly we were on top of the world, our little island world (104).

Like Samuel Turner, she is overcome at the moment of stepping onto the High Peak for the first time. Her use of direct speech—framed with a question—gives her account a sense of immediacy and vulnerability. Such features also serve to contrast her state of mind with that of her New Zealand companions, who, in this instance appear calm and in control, if somewhat fatherly in the manner they reassure her. Arguably, the fact that she also felt ‘very little’ and ‘much inclined to cry’ gives an indication of gender—although it must be remembered that Mannering expressed a sense of ‘littleness’ when close to the summit of Cook (*With* 102). And Samuel Turner was ‘overcome’ by a sense of his own ‘nothingness’ (*My* 214)

Du Faur’s use of poetic (even archaic) language, cliché and, at times, emotional language pushes her work towards the sentimental. According to du Faur, she felt ‘bewildered’ until her (male) guides ‘bade’ her look at her surroundings. When she does, she is able to confirm that she is on ‘top of the world, our little island world’. So, not only does du Faur cast herself as ‘very little’ but the world around her is similarly cast as a ‘little island world’. There is an element of the fairy-tale in this style of writing

and the effect is one of escapism. Du Faur has stepped out from the real world and found herself in an enchanted, 'little' world of her imagination.

Undoubtedly, imagination plays a crucial role in du Faur's writing. This makes sense because imagination and longing also played an important role in getting du Faur to the mountains in the first place. As she states in *Conquest*:

From the moment my eyes rested on the snow-clad alps I worshipped their beauty and was filled with a passionate longing to touch those shining snows, to climb to their heights of solitude and feel myself one with the mighty forces around me. The great peaks towering into the sky before me touched a chord that all the wonders of my own land had never set vibrating, and filled a blank of whose very existence I had been unconscious (27).

There is a breathlessness in du Faur's writing and her enthusiasm for the mountains may well have been unmatched by any other amateur climber. She says that she 'worshipped' the alps and yet she does not make a show of reverence through capitalising either 'alps' or 'beauty'. Still, such was her love for the Mount Cook region that the mountains 'filled a blank' in her soul. Everything concerning the Mount Cook region is exaggerated and filtered through her joy and imagination: she 'worships' alpine beauty, she is filled with 'passionate longing' to attain the 'heights of silence and solitude.' We see here that 'solitude' is a positive thing—it is not weighed down by loneliness. Being *alone* in the mountains offers a break from convention, from expectations—'solitude' implies freedom rather than desolation.

In such a setting du Faur anticipates being able to feel at 'one with the mighty forces'. So, some kind of communion will take place—a tangible, physical communion as du Faur wants to 'touch' the snow, 'feel' at one with the 'mighty forces'. The mountains 'touched a chord' which such force that she is left 'vibrating'. The mountains awaken du Faur both mentally and physically: 'they filled a blank of whose very existence I had been unconscious'.

So physical is du Faur's response to the Alps that:

My chief desire as I gazed at them was to reach the snow and bury my hands in its wonderful whiteness, and dig and dig till my snow-starved Australian soul was satisfied that all this wonder of white was real and would not vanish at the touch (27).

There is a physicality in her emphasis on wanting to ‘bury’ her hands in the snow and ‘dig and dig’ and I can’t help thinking that her response borders on the sexual—as if the ‘desire’ being described amounts to a physical, sexual awakening that demands satisfaction. Being in the mountains is clearly a revelation and du Faur’s writing reflects the degree to which she was carried away by emotion. The adjectives and metaphors chosen by du Faur are conventional. As we have seen, aestheticising adjectives such as ‘shining’ snow, ‘mighty’ forces or ‘towering’ peaks have appeared in the writing of Green but they also occur in the work of such British writers as Edward Whymper. In other words, du Faur has adopted standard mountaineering clichés—tropes familiar to the audience she was writing for.

At the same time, however, we are given a specifically Australian point of view—that of a person with no experience of ‘snow’ let alone ‘mountains’. Thus when you look at these extracts it is the word ‘snow’ that catches your attention: ‘snow-clad alps’, ‘shining snows’, the desire to bury her hands in the ‘snow’ and fill her ‘snow-starved’ soul. Du Faur is responding to ‘snow’ on an emotional level. She is not describing it. She is not telling us that the snow was firm, soft, crusty, deep or prone to avalanches. In this regard, her response is entirely new, and quite distinct from previous mountaineering accounts.

Du Faur, and Turner, were at least partly driven to climb Mount Cook because they had spent a great deal of time imagining what it would be like to reach the summit and gaze down on the land below. Of course, New Zealand climbers also imagined climbing the mountain and longed to reach the summit, but in describing the experience New Zealand climbers appear more inclined to create an accurate (factual) account and keep the emotional response to a minimum. Du Faur and Turner are far more open and show less restraint.

Escapism is a feature of du Faur's writing. Of all the climbers she expresses this sentiment most strongly. For example, while resting in a bivouac above the Hooker Valley during the evening before reaching the summit of Mount Cook, she describes the scene as evening mist rolls in:

The changes of colour were so quick it was impossible to follow them—they were here and gone in a breath. No voice was raised above a whisper; we seemed to be watching some scene in fairyland that at a sound would vanish and leave us dazed and desolated. Slowly the colours faded and the mountains were blotted out by the shadowy twilight, and innumerable stars glinted from the deep blue sky. The pageant was over, the day was done, and we who had witnessed it crept quietly to sleep, awed by a beauty such as one sees but once in a lifetime (102).

Other mountaineer-writers have used metaphor to impart the scenery with mythical, other-worldly qualities but du Faur layers sounds and rhythm for added impact. She mesmerises the reader with the double-d of 'dazed and desolated' and then again with 'day was done'. Not only does she play with sound but with contrasts, too: the colours were 'here and gone', the stars 'glint' from a 'deep blue sky'.

The whole scene is wrapped in ambiguity in order to increase the trance-like quality. She doesn't describe what she sees but, rather, what she 'seemed to be watching'. Her party doesn't talk in conversational tones but in whispers and even then sounds 'vanish'. The emphasis on such words as 'breath', 'whisper', 'sound' and 'vanish' increase the dream, trance-like aspect of du Faur's writing. The view is not permanent. Du Faur can not possess what she sees. As night falls, du Faur is threatened by a feeling of desolation—a rift between du Faur and the landscape appears imminent.

Both Green and FitzGerald, as we have seen earlier in this thesis, called up the supernatural world of mists, vapours and shifting light in their writing. At times their work hints at a sense of alpine mysticism. But their work doesn't share du Faur's sense of longing and escape. Their writing is more conventional but also more self-aware and controlled, grounded in the real world. Thus, for example, Green might write:

The Tasman Glacier lay cold and grey, like a huge snake coiled round the roots of the mountains, down in the deep gloom of the valley (213).

And although it is a very dramatic image, and relies for its impact on simile, it is also visually helpful. Green, essentially, prompts the reader to *see*. His writing clarifies rather than mystifies. The Tasman Glacier is grey. It is coiled like a snake in the gloomy valley. By contrast, du Faur's writing is more impressionistic. It prompts the reader to *feel*. The scene she describes is so startling that she cannot speak above a whisper. She will be left 'dazed and desolated' once the light show is over. And then, finally, when the 'pageant' finishes, she crawls to bed 'awed by a beauty such as one sees but once in a lifetime'. The last sentence adds pathos to the scene. 'Fairyland' exists only for a moment, cannot be held and is gone forever. Such 'sentimental writing', as Pratt suggests, 'explicitly anchors what is being expressed in the sensory experience' (74) and it is the writer's 'own bodily experience' which 'constitute the events and register their significance'(75).

Du Faur excels in creating a sense of immediacy. She is a very lively writer and throughout her book she makes use of direct speech, which introduces a level of informality to her work. As a result, it is more conversational in tone than any other account written by a mountaineer. This is most evident when she describes arriving back in camp after the long day spent climbing Mount Cook:

Arriving, just as I turned to go into my tent, Peter caught my hand and Alex stood beside me smiling. "Now we will congratulate you, now we are safe down and have beaten all previous records. Look!" and drawing out his watch he pointed to the time, 5.30 p.m. "By Jove! six hours up, two hours there, six and a half down; that time will take some beating, little lady," and Alex shook my other hand vigorously. "Thanks to the two finest guides in the mountains, it will," I answered, and I slipped past them into my tent, and throwing myself down, proceeded to rid myself of putties and boots, preparatory to a well-earned rest (107).

The dialogue is, however, somewhat staged and mannered. Important information about the climb is carried by Graham's spoken words. The reader is told that du Faur's climb

took ‘six hours up’ and ‘six and a half down’. Rather than claim the speed of the climb for herself—as Turner would have done—du Faur has Graham remark that ‘that time will take some beating’. The addition of ‘little lady’ to the end of the sentence permits du Faur to cast herself once more as a modest, if not demure, young lady—an impression furthered through her expression of gratitude towards the ‘two finest guides’ before ‘slipping’ into the tent and ‘throwing’ herself down. Du Faur diverts the reader’s attention from the fact that she is a fit, strong and ambitious mountaineer and instead exaggerates her feminine side, the ‘little’ lady who is guided up the mountain. In the final sentence, which describes the way she ‘slipped’ into the tent, threw herself down and rid herself of putties and boots, there is, once more, a vague hint of sexuality—as if it were a scene in a romance novel.

The image du Faur presents of herself—as a young, vulnerable woman—undergoes a degree of change as she becomes more confident and experienced as a mountaineer. Returning to her response to reaching the summit in 1910, we encounter du Faur feeling small and on the verge of tears. As she gazes over the scene, she notes:

My eyes strayed from point to point: everything was different; old landmarks were swept away, or recognisable from a new angle. With a sigh almost of relief I turned my eyes to the little patch of snow on which we stood (105).

Clearly, she has trouble making sense of her surroundings. Nothing looks as it should, and the scene is so vast, so incomprehensible that she has to lower her gaze to the ‘snow’ by her feet in order to regain balance and focus. Again, she adds a feminine touch by mentioning her ‘sigh’ and by drawing on the adjective ‘little’ when describing the patch of snow. But, apart from those two words, her response to the scene is very similar to that described by Turner during his first summit experience (although his words were drawn from Whympers).

Du Faur’s response, however, is not that of the New Zealand climbers. Mountaineers such as Fyfe and Graham had spent more time at Mount Cook, were more familiar with the area and were therefore more inclined to describe the scene *as it was* rather than *as it felt*. And, being male, it could be argued, they were even less likely to express their emotions. Familiarity with the environment grounds the writing by New Zealand

mountaineers in reality. And for proof that familiarity makes for a more realistic account of the climb up Mount Cook you only need to compare du Faur's description of her first ascent with her second.

This is her account of reaching the summit during the 1913 Grand Traverse:

At half-past one we stood on the highest summit of Mount Cook, conquerors indeed (203).

Du Faur and her guides take in the view and look back along the ridge they have just scaled and then she notes:

Very heartily we wrung one another's hands, and marvelled at our phenomenal luck in obtaining weather conditions which had enabled us to accomplish the greatest climb in New Zealand at the first attempt. Very happily we lay in ease on the summit, and putting all thoughts of the descent out of our mind, concerned ourselves only with the joy and triumph of the present (203).

Du Faur's sense of disbelief and admission of tears—noted in her first ascent—are absent. Now, she asserts her confidence as a mountaineer. But, like Fyfe, du Faur subverts the moment of 'conquest'. Whereas Fyfe climbed in a 'reckless' fashion—that is, in a manner that contradicted British mountaineering etiquette—du Faur appears to be amused and quietly laughing at the notion of 'conqueror'. Not only does she place a dismissive 'indeed' after the word 'conquerors' but she tempers her conquest with the suggestion that she had 'phenomenal luck' with the weather. She also notes that the party was able to complete the ascent 'at the first attempt' which indicates that she has spent enough time in the Mount Cook region to know that such good fortune with both weather and snow-conditions is unusual. Her ascent, then, is not claimed as 'heroic'.

Three reasons why du Faur might not claim a heroic conquest are because she took no part in leading the ascent. Despite her experience and skill as a mountaineer she did not participate in the more physical aspects of step-cutting, route finding, equipment carrying and so on. She was 'guided' up the mountain. Second, she was a woman and so although she was a paying client, she also relinquished authority to her guides—which

was something that male clients (such as FitzGerald) did not do when they employed guides. And third, it appears that du Faur interpreted ‘conquest’ as a personal achievement. Thus, the ‘conquest’ of a mountain is replaced with a triumph over the restrictive conventions of society and the (British) male mountaineering establishment.

In *Imperial Eyes*, Mary Louise Pratt claims that it is ‘hard to think of a trope more decisively gendered than the monarch-of-all-I-survey scene’ (209). Pratt also states that women, ‘in their writings, do not spend a lot of time on promontories. Nor are they entitled to’ (209). And so, in place of the ‘monarch-of-all-I-survey’ trope we ought to encounter ‘a monarchic female voice that asserts its own kind of mastery even as it denies domination and parodies power’ (209). Of course, Freda du Faur did, in her writing, stand on promontories—Mount Cook, Mount Sefton, Mount Tasman, Mount Sealy, Nun’s Veil, Malte Brun, the Minarets, De la Bêche, Silberhorn, Mount Dampier, Nazomi as well as lower peaks and passes in the Mount Cook region. Not only was she ‘entitled’ to be there but she also ‘claimed’ and named the mountains she made first ascents of: Nazomi, Pibrac, Cadogan as well as having a mountain named after her: Du Faur Peak. The fact that she did spend time on promontories and did write about them is further evidence of why mountaineering-writing can not be easily slotted into the travel-writing genre and must be examined as a separate—albeit related—category.

But, as we have seen, Pratt is correct in suggesting that women—or in this case, du Faur—deny domination and parody power. Du Faur subverted the term ‘conquerors’ and in both accounts of standing on Mount Cook, articulates feelings of gratitude rather than entitlement. She places a strong emphasis on desire and, with that, a focus on touch. She wishes to bury her hands in the snow, for example. Images of domesticity also enter her writing—such as when she returns to the tent and throws herself down, removing the trappings of mountaineering (her putties and boots). What comes across most clearly in du Faur’s writing is not a sense of ‘conquest’—although her book includes ‘conquest’ in its title—nor a ‘sporting’ attitude towards mountaineering (as we have seen in the writing of Fyfe), but an overwhelming sense of ‘relief’ (du Faur 105) to be free of convention and able to simply ‘be’ on a mountain-top and feel at ‘ease’ (du Faur 203). The mountains are, in effect, her home—a place where she can recapture the freedom she experienced while scrambling and rock climbing near her family property in New South Wales (du Faur 26).



Du Faur's is a feminine voice (what else could it be) but the fact that she wrote about her climbs for newspapers (*Otago Witness*, *Christchurch Press*, *Sydney Morning Herald*), journals (*Lone Hand Magazine*, *Dupain Quarterly*) and published *The Conquest of Mount Cook* suggests she was not only asserting a woman's right to mountain climb but also seeking recognition for her own successes. Financially independent, du Faur did not rely on book sales for income but given her educational and class background and her appreciation of the 'intellectual' (du Faur 24) aspect of mountaineering, it is not surprising that she chose to describe her ascents. Furthermore, as a woman she couldn't belong to the British Alpine Club, nor could she publish accounts of her climbs in its journal, and so her book, which was published in Britain, clearly aimed to redress an imbalance. In essence, du Faur uses the tools of the male imperial culture while seeking 'to remain faithful to the experience of another' (Ashcroft 59). Not content with subverting the tropes of imperial conquest, Du Faur also voices a claim for New Zealand nationalism in relationship to mountaineering (Langton 115). When providing an account of the first ascent of Mount Cook by the New Zealand party, she writes:

The performance was a fine one, and great was the joy of the New Zealanders at their success; for they had no desire to surrender the first ascent of their highest mountain to an Englishman, even though he was better equipped and trained than the colonials had a chance of being (20).

The implied reader for such a statement was primarily British although her book was also read (and reviewed) by members of the New Zealand climbing fraternity. Du Faur appears to side with New Zealand mountaineers. This is hardly surprising given that all her mountaineering took place at Mount Cook in the company of local guides. She never climbed outside New Zealand. As an Australian, her identity was also colonial. Yet her 'voice' is more identifiable as educated and 'feminine' rather than 'New Zealand'.

## CONCLUSION

The aim of this thesis was twofold. In the first instance, a close reading of mountaineering texts was undertaken in order to show that there are differences between the writing of overseas and New Zealand mountaineers climbing at Mount Cook between the years 1882 and 1920. The second level of inquiry attempted to show that a specific New Zealand *mountaineering* voice emerged during this period, a voice that was distinct from its British forerunner.

As this thesis has discussed, alpine climbing was introduced to Mount Cook in 1882. Prior to this date no one had mountain climbed in the high alpine regions of Mount Cook, nor attempted to reach the summit of New Zealand's highest mountain. Because there was no mountain climbing at Mount Cook there was no indigenous mountaineering-literature and so the first book detailing an attempt on the mountain was written by visiting Irish mountaineer William Spotswood Green. His book was written in the style of popular British mountaineering texts: works by such mountaineers as John Tyndall, Leslie Stephen, and Edward Whymper and by contributors to the *British Alpine Journal*. Green belonged to the British Alpine Club and his writing privileged the imperial project, transplanting the language of the metropolitan centre to the margins. Relying on the tropes associated with mountaineering-writing, exploration, travel and discovery, as well as the aestheticised language of post-Romanticism, Green's Mount Cook landscape was envisaged as an 'other' to the civilised landscape of Europe. Thus, he drew comparisons between the alpine landscapes he had left behind and the new landscape encountered in the Southern Alps. Because the European landscape was regarded as the standard, or 'norm', the Mount Cook environment was notable for its exoticism and strangeness—in everything from its climate, its glaciers and moraines, snow conditions, flora and fauna through to its lack of 'civilisation' by way of local inhabitants, dwellings, transport and a reliable food supply. As we have seen, Green was not always successful in describing the specific Mount Cook landscape or the alpine conditions encountered by his party. In many regards his language was suited to an imagined, generic alpine landscape and was inadequate to describe the place of Mount Cook in realistic terms. It is his reliance on post-Romantic literary tropes and aestheticising language at the cost of realism that signals one of the major

differences between his work and that of working-class New Zealand mountaineers a decade later.

Situated between Green and the local, working-class climbers were the New Zealand pioneers of mountaineering at Mount Cook. These men—such as George Mannering and Malcolm Ross—were themselves part of a literate elite who sought, through their publications, to stimulate interest in mountaineering in New Zealand, gain recognition for their own mountaineering achievements, make money, and gain entry into the British mountaineering establishment. Although these men addressed both a New Zealand and British audience, their work is largely an attenuated version of the British literary mountaineering model rather than being representative of a distinct New Zealand voice. However, in saying this, it is also apparent that they were capable of situating their writing within a purely New Zealand landscape, and that they did not attempt to identify Mount Cook *only* in relationship to the alpine landscapes of Europe. Thus, Mount Cook maintains its integrity: it forms part of a local landscape and is often described in realistic terms. From the writing of Mannering and Ross, it is also possible to detect a shift in attitude towards mountaineering. Whereas Green, the ‘sentimental traveller’, relied on tropes of discovery, Mannering—and particularly Ross—appear to adopt a ‘sporting’ approach to mountaineering, thus nudging the mountaineering genre from its connection to exploration, travel, discovery and conquest towards sport, adventure, triumph and personal achievement.

The greatest shift towards what could be regarded as the beginnings of a New Zealand voice in mountaineering literature took place in the mid-1890s when local, working-class mountaineers began to dominate the mountaineering scene. Unfortunately for this study these men did not write or publish a great deal (which might indicate that one of the most notable aspects of the New Zealand mountaineering voice is its reticence and reluctance to engage with the dominant, metropolitan centre through text). When they did write, climbers such as Fyfe and Graham addressed an audience ‘here’—that is, they wrote for a local reader. The fact that these mountaineers were marginalised due to background, education, class and profession, meant that they could not, and did not, seek to enter the world of the (British) mountaineering establishment. Thus, they had no investment in replicating British modes of writing and were freer to create new responses to the Mount Cook environment. Their success in doing this, however, was

only partial. On the one hand—perhaps because they were not ‘skilled’ writers—they simply adopted some of the tropes of mountaineering literature. And yet, as we have seen, they also subverted these tropes: mocking the heroic moment of arrival, for example, when they described the way they romped to the summit of Mount Cook or disrupting the trope of ‘conquest’ by stating that they placed an old sack rather than a flag on the summit.

Their success in developing a New Zealand mountaineering ‘voice’ is most apparent in their adherence to realism (over Romanticism) and their refusal to privilege the metropolitan centre through comparisons of the landscape ‘here’ with one in Europe. In other words, they did not represent Mount Cook as an exotic ‘other’ to the European ‘home’. In terms of language, these mountaineers disrupted the heroic voice of previous mountaineers. In its place was an understated, laconic voice that relied as much on the vernacular as it did on the received language of British mountaineering-writing.

However, although this thesis hoped to prove that a New Zealand mountaineering voice emerged during the period 1882-1920, I’m not sure that such a claim can be asserted. It seems that a larger study would need to take place in order to locate a fully formed New Zealand mountaineering voice. A greater number of texts by New Zealand mountaineers would need to be included and it would be helpful to compare the writing of New Zealand mountaineers not only to the writing of overseas mountaineers visiting Mount Cook but to the writing of mountaineers in other settler colonies—such as Canada, for example. Comparisons between colonies might help to identify trends in mountaineering literature, pointing to the development of ‘national’ voices in other parts of the world or simply indicate an erosion of the dominant voice of British mountaineering culture.

I would also like to look at the writing by New Zealand mountaineers in relationship to other, less developed (more isolated) regions in the country. It would be interesting to see if accounts relating to climbing in remoter areas of Westland and Fiordland, for example, displayed a stronger New Zealand voice. I would anticipate that the lack of tourism, the difficulty of access and the general ruggedness of these environments might bring out a more masculine, less ornate style of writing—one that could push

mountaineering-writing away from its reliance on post-Romantic tropes and towards a preference for the vernacular and colloquial.

Leading on from this, it would be interesting to see how quickly the New Zealand voice developed following the First World War. The formation of tramping clubs and the rise of guideless climbing in the 1920s as well as better access to mountain areas and advances in mountaineering equipment changed the nature of mountaineering. The inaccessible regions of the country opened up and mountaineering had the potential to draw on a much wider social class. The majority of participants in back-country activities were male, however, and their experience of the wilderness was frequently recorded in a 'yarn' with greater emphasis placed on adventure, danger and humour with even less emphasis on beauty and aesthetics. Although there are signs of the beginnings of an emerging New Zealand 'voice' in mountaineering literature in this thesis, it might be that a fully developed voice did not emerge until the 1920-30s.

I am also interested in the link between a mountaineer's familiarity with the Mount Cook location over an extended period of time and the writing such familiarity produced. We have seen, for example, that the writing of Samuel Turner and Freda du Faur changed and developed as they spent more time in the Mount Cook region. It is difficult to know if this change is the result of feeling more 'at home' in the Mount Cook environment or whether it was due to a gain in confidence or experience on the mountain itself. I wonder if problems of 'literal inexpressibility'—such as those identified in relationship to Green's near-summit experience—have less to do with the failure of language than with a shortage of time which could have prevented the mountaineer from engaging with or 'understanding' the environment they wanted to describe.

As we have seen, the earliest and strongest suggestion of a New Zealand mountaineering voice belonged to 'labouring' mountaineers rather than paying clients. The writing by mountaineers cannot be separated from the experience and realities of climbing a high and dangerous mountain. In climbing Mount Cook, all the mountaineers encountered discomfort and danger that was partly compensated for by reaching the summit and returning safely to camp. But there are differences in levels of responsibility and 'work' involved in climbing the mountain which exist within

mountaineering parties. These differences not only impact on the way mountaineers climbed but on how they wrote about mountaineering at Mount Cook. The mountaineer who has to read the weather and snow conditions, find a route, carry equipment, set up camp, and spend hours bent double cutting thousands of steps up the mountain will ‘see’ and experience the mountain differently from someone who is able to follow and enjoy long periods of rest while looking at, and thinking about, the view. Had the overseas mountaineers climbed without guides and porters their writing might have been quite different.

The mountaineers in this thesis have ranged from New Zealand born farm labourers to Cambridge-educated, independently wealthy British residents. Differences in background, education and class play a part in the writing of mountaineers as does the role of audience and the means of transmission of text. However, many of the mountaineers in this study were not ‘typical’ of their educational background, social class or gender. Early mountaineers, by their very nature, tended to be unconventional and highly individualistic which makes comparisons between them difficult. It would be useful, then, to spend more time looking at the motivations behind mountaineering and examine the mountaineers’ attitudes towards conquest, adventure and risk. Reading about these mountaineers, it is rather unsettling to note that of the six who published full-length books, two committed suicide during a time when they could no longer continue mountaineering. It would also be useful to examine the connection between mountaineering and identity, to see to what extent the mountaineer-writers in this study defined themselves as mountaineers: whether they devoted a lifetime to mountaineering (as in the case of Zurbriggen) or just a few seasons (as in the case of Freda du Faur).

Finally, in undertaking a close reading of mountaineering literature focussed on Mount Cook during the period 1882 to 1920 I have been struck by the changes that have taken place in the region over the past 130 years. The mountaineering texts, whether written by New Zealanders or overseas mountaineers, have described a Mount Cook environment that is barely recognisable today. It was staggering to visualise—and see photographic evidence of—the size and mass of the Tasman, Hooker and Mueller glaciers and realise just how much smaller they are today. Accounts describing the actual ascent of Mount Cook and the exploration of surrounding glaciers, such as the Ball Glacier, also reinforced the fact that there is far less snow on the mountain today

than in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The very summit of Mount Cook has changed as the result of a massive landslide in 1991. The ‘rounded’ summit described by early mountaineers no longer exists and in its place is a sharp, spiked peak.

At times, I experienced a sense of loss whilst reading these early mountaineering accounts—a loss that relates to my personal experience of the Mount Cook region. The tussock flats I enjoyed camping on ten years ago are now large gravel parking areas. The snow-field where I learnt to ski in the 1960s has disappeared because the Ball Glacier has retreated. The silence of the valleys interrupted only by the sounds of avalanches off Mount Sefton now competes with aeroplanes and helicopters. The flocks of keas described by the early mountaineers (and which I remember) are so rarely seen these days that it has been more than five years since I saw a single kea near the Hermitage. Walking up the Hooker Valley, venturing to Kea Point or to the site of the famous Blue Lakes (now also gone, submerged under the Tasman Glacier terminal lake) usually results in being stuck behind a long line of dawdling tourists.

The greatest sense of loss comes, I think, from realising that it is impossible to feel alone or experience solitude and that there is no longer any sense of Mount Cook as an ‘end of the road’ location. It is no longer a frontier between the ‘civilised’ and ‘uncivilised’ world—and it is no longer a place of escape. It’s just a depressing tourist spot. When the first mountaineers journeyed to Mount Cook they had a real sense of exploring an unknown region. Their written accounts are a pleasure to read because of their infectious curiosity and their appreciation of the wilderness as a place that fosters the imagination. There is a wonderful mix of the matter-of-fact and the Romantic and knowing what Mount Cook is like today, it is difficult to read their work without feeling that the place has been completely ruined.

Reading the work of the early mountaineers has been a valuable experience and of all the passages I have read it is this one, published in the *Otago Daily Times* by Tom Fyfe, which most sticks in my mind. It is a simple, low-key account of the climber’s return to the bivouac after reaching the summit in 1894. It is weary in tone and offers an unadorned, spare description of the mountaineer’s immediate response to climbing Mount Cook. And yet the last sentence is so heartfelt and so bittersweet that it grabs my attention and draws an emotional response:

We turned in supperless: no one volunteered to face the cold and melt some snow. So cold did we become that at last we were forced to burn a candle in a tin underneath the blankets, while the hours of darkness passed wearily away. Day dawned at last, and, hastily packing up, we plunged away down the glacier. We reached our first camp at 7 a.m., and were glad to rest till 10.30, meanwhile basking in the sun and making great inroads into a bag of oatmeal. As we lay, idly watching the north-west clouds swirling overhead, our trials were all forgotten, and I regretfully thought – there is but one Aorangi (2).



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### Note on General Sources

In undertaking research on New Zealand mountaineering from 1882-1920, I have found three research libraries to be particularly useful:

- a) The Hocken Library, University of Otago is home to the New Zealand Alpine Club Archives. These archives contain the New Zealand Alpine Records from 1864-1988 [MS 1164] and include meeting records, membership records, personal papers, hut visitor books, section records, newspaper clippings, maps and miscellaneous items.
- b) The National Office of the New Zealand Alpine Club houses a Research Library in Christchurch. This library holds a complete set of the *New Zealand Alpine Journal* (1892- ) and the [British] *Alpine Journal* (1863- ). These journals contain articles written about Mount Cook from the 1890s onwards but also provide insight into how mountaineers described their mountaineering experiences of the Southern Alps. I have listed only the most relevant articles in the bibliography.
- c) The Alpine Collection held at the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch contains important archival material such as the W.A. Kennedy and Gordon Buchanan collections, the J. J. Kinsey photographic collection, as well as diaries by nineteenth century New Zealand mountaineers such as George Graham and Marmaduke Dixon. At the time of writing, access to this library is no longer possible as the result of the Canterbury earthquakes.

The *Appendices to the Journal of the House of Representatives* contain reports from government departments relating to mountaineering activity at Mount Cook. This information is usually included in the appendices rather than in the main body of the departmental reports. As these reports were made on an annual basis I have not



identified them individually in the body of the bibliography. These reports are available online: *AtoJsOnline*.

Chief guides employed at the Hermitage (Tom Fyfe, Jack Clarke and Peter Graham) made annual reports which often included information on visitor numbers (mentioning notable visitors from overseas), significant ascents and exploration, and notes relating to alpine huts.

The two principal reports relevant to this study are:

- a) The Annual Reports of the Department of Crown Lands and Surveys 1881-1913. This department was renamed the Department of Lands and Survey from 1892. The Department of Lands and Survey was responsible for the running of the Hermitage (Mount Cook hotel) from 1895-1901. Most of the reports are headed C.-1 and C.-1a.
  
- b) The Annual Reports of the Department of Tourist and Health Resorts relevant to this study are 1902-09, and 1913-22. The Department of Tourist and Health Resorts took over the running of the Hermitage from 1901 until 1922 when the Hermitage fell into private hands. The reports are headed H.-2.

Many New Zealand newspapers carried reports of mountaineering activity at Mount Cook during the period covered by this thesis. Because of their number, only a few of the most relevant articles have been included in this bibliography.

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