

## Chapter Four

# The Wild West

## Part One

### The High Country

On Palmerston's Puketapu Hill is the 13 metre Sir John McKenzie Memorial Cairn with its internal staircase. This was built to honour Sir John (1839-1901) who rose from humble shepherd to be the Minister of Lands. Fresh from Scotland in 1861 he climbed Puketapu Hill and saw that landlordism through the building of massive sheep runs, and the evil laws of the old land, were becoming established here in New Zealand. He had witnessed the ill effects of Scotland's notorious land clearances where landlords brutally evicted the traditional small farmers in favour of a new breed of sheep, the Cheviot, which was marginally more profitable. As Minister of Lands he bravely enacted legislation to breakup the huge estates and so allow closer settlement. Even so, the resulting much smaller pastoral leases were large by modern standards.

By the 1970s the era of big pastoral Crown lease properties was ending. For low rentals run-holders had full trespass and grazing rights including to native forests, braided river beds, scree slopes, rock faces, high peaks, snow fields and glaciers. Many were cashing in on snow, trout and game animals that weren't theirs. In the 1950s and 1960s a surprising number of lessees were cabinet ministers or had family connections. Deep down as a group they were of the view that the rest of the country was there to serve them. Their true thoughts could come out after a few drinks. In the 1960s an acquaintance had the run-holder of Mararoa Station point, rotate 360 degrees, and forcefully claim, 'This is all mine!'

The police were quick to act on runholders' complaints, usually without question. Road blocks were set up and there were prosecutions of people who were on roads and other land not part of their leaseholds. In a notable case, at Mesopotamia in Canterbury, they were convicted. Unfortunately they either did not have the means, or knowledge, to appeal. They were stuck with criminal convictions the rest of their lives. In another case one powerful runholder (a bull of a man) assaulted people he thought might be going even *near* his Crown lease. On an occasion when we were passing near his area above the Nevis Valley the party pre-agreed to come to one another's aid and, if necessary, "flatten the bugger" before he picked us off one at a time. Neither the police or authorities would follow up our complaints as their apparent attitude was that they, and runholders, controlled the district. However there were an increasing number of farmers with much more enlightened attitudes.

At the time that my brother Bruce was the researcher for the Public Lands Coalition it was conveyed to him that Federated Farmers had discussed his pending purchase of a property at Matakanui, presumably to prevent purchase. This was where

generations of our family had gold mined, farmed and had family holidays. Many relatives are buried in the nearby Drybread Cemetery.

Bruce built a micro-light plane and airstrip while living at Matakanui. As a result of his aerial inspections, in meetings in Wellington, Bruce was able to say to officials “That information is incorrect. This is what I photographed on my way here today.”

There was another aspect to this. We used to think that the farmers on the Land Settlement Board were entirely self-servers and not making good decisions. Bruce’s observations revealed that they were often making decisions based only on the material they had been tabled before them (Bruce use to fly to Wellington regularly to keep tabs on proceedings; despite not being permitted to say anything his presence was keenly felt).

At one LSB meeting Bruce observed delayed circulation of a massive pile of agenda papers until after the board had made a decision. Remember the classic British TV comedy 'Yes Minister'? I have also struck this with officially serviced organisations.

From the mid 1970s Bruce had been setting up the inaugural Otago Goldfields Park for the old Department of Lands and Survey. Run-holders often assumed that historic Crown-owned mining relics were theirs, especially water pipes. He was instructed to secure historic relics as a matter of priority.

Bruce discovered Arthur Borrell, of Branches Station, removing the spectacular Stoney Creek pipe siphon-crossing. It had been intended to be a feature of the Goldfields Park. Bruce reported this to his superiors, as he was duty-bound to do. However rather than insist on the return of the pipes, the Commissioner of Crown Lands authorised transfer to Branches Station.

A three-stamp quartz crusher in the Mt Aurum basin. KDM



When Bruce based himself at the retired Mt Aurum Station on official business, the Shotover Valley atmosphere was tense. Prior to this he was based at Macetown setting up this part of the Goldfields Park and doing public relations work. In nearby Arrowtown he was so violently abused by Borrell that his burly Lands and Survey assistant wanted to flatten him on the spot. Bruce prevented him.

Bruce was based at Mt Aurum Station homestead at Skippers. There would be a flurry of (someone-else on-the-line) clicks whenever we made calls from the homestead on the valley's only No.8 wire party-line.

In early January 1978, with the help of tramping friends we foot mustered and brought out 45 Branches Station cattle that had been illegally brought over a high ridge and into the retired Aurum Basin. This was Crown land awaiting to be set aside as public reserve. Normally this muster would be considered impossible without horses and dogs but we were very fit and didn't know any better. The Shotover Valley atmosphere became even more tense. Bruce left it to the department's field officers to deal with.

A refusal of access to Branches Station followed. However an intermediary, Peter Chandler, brokered a peace deal with the Borrells for Ranger Bruce to go further up the Shotover on official business. At the Homestead a smiling Lorraine Borrell gave our party of four food she had prepared and a newspaper to deliver in our 4WD truck to Arthur at 100-Mile Hut. This was a reasonable indication that Bruce

was welcome to proceed. She told us to go via the Shotover River bed rather than the normal track. We wound up bogged down mid-river and couldn't anchor our winch. Fortunately a passing Wellington Catholic Tramping Club party gave us the required leverage to get our of the river. I met our helpers that Easter when climbing Kaikoura's Tapuae-o-Uenuku. They told us that Mrs Borrell was laughing her head off back at the homestead.

Nearing 100 Mile Hut, but still out of sight of the hut, Borrell suddenly appeared over a brow and rushed forward and rammed the butt of his heavy mustering stick through our truck's open window and into Bruce's face.

Parts of the Skippers and Shotover catchment can be quite rugged (a helping hand). KDM



He managed to deflect the stick with an arm. I had to jump off the back of the vehicle, threatening Borrell to get him to desist. Somehow Bruce managed to hold and secure the vehicle on the sloping terrace-face above the river. We retreated to the far side of the river before treating his injuries. In retrospect this encounter had the appearance of a set-up: entrapment with an intention of assault.

Bruce, still trying to behave professionally, returned the goods to Mrs Borrell, rather than toss them into the river as he was inclined.

That night Bruce and I were the only ones occupying Mt Aurum Station. We spotted a convoy of vehicles coming down from Branches Station. We thought that this was going to be the big showdown. We arranged our vehicle to be a battering ram to force our way out if need be. The atmosphere was electric. Fortunately the convoy passed by. We slept that night with improvised weapons beside us and with a planned escape route to a regrouping place in the scrub.

The Commissioner of Crown Lands, Jim Shaw, refused to deal with the assault. Bruce was told that if he laid a complaint with the Police he would lose his job. Apparently Mrs Borrell had made a quick trip to Dunedin to soften up Shaw before-hand. When Shaw implied fault to Bruce by saying “he got off lightly” at a meeting of the Otago Goldfields Park Advisory Committee, Bruce, in private, told Shaw what he thought of him. The next day he was taken off the well-advanced Goldfields Park project. He was later reinstated by George McMillan, Lands’ Deputy DG, without apportionment of blame. McMillan asked Bruce what he had said to Shaw. When told, that Shaw was “feeble and pathetic,” McMillan laughed.

The Advisory Committee obviously had confidence in Bruce. They attempted to move a motion calling for his re-instatement. Shaw refused to accept this. In spite of being reinstated, Bruce was deliberately sidelined within the department. So much for performing public duty! The whole brilliant park concept subsequently withered and faded all over Otago.

Bruce told me recently that he has been written out of history. In *‘Rushing for Gold’*, 2016, DOC archeologist Neville Richie credits eight years’ Goldfields Park achievement (1974-82) by Bruce to Tony Perrett; the guy Bruce attributes to doing L&S’s ultimate dirty work on him and who was no-where in the district at the time! Richie worked closely with Bruce, as the *only* park ranger, during the time of the Clyde Dam construction. Richie states (p285)

“...the *nascent* park employed a ranger, Tony Perrett, to investigate and record and evaluate some 350 locations that came, to varying degrees, within the terms of the park concept” (emphasis mine).

About the same time as the ‘Shotover Affray’ there were reports that a ranger in Northland had dogs set on him by a man laying cyanide possum paste near picnic tables in a Scenic Reserve. Lands and Survey would not support this employee and said any attempt to lay an assault charge would result in his dismissal.

Bruce was so wary of meeting Borrell again that in order to complete field work for his landmark *'Outdoor Recreation in Otago'* publication, I had to accompany him, hopefully out of harm's way, over the Shotover Saddle from the Matukituki Valley. He was very nervous during our trip down the upper Shotover. We promptly exited via Lochnagar to Snowy Creek in Mount Aspiring National Park.



Bruce surveying the Lochnagar basin. This landslide-formed lake has a rhythmic wave harmonic. About every minute the outlet is swept by a surge of water. *KDM*.

*A reverse view. KDM*





Bruce was relieved to be out of Borrell Country.  
So too was this resident alpinist. KDM



In December 1983 two other tramping clubs were camped with us at the head of a valley in the Paparoa National Park. A neighbouring farmer had everybody scared to use a legal exit down this valley as he accosted people. It was reputed that he even invited people over to his house to get them onto his land and so commit trespass. A couple of prosecutions by the respective authorities could have easily sorted this out much earlier on. I devised a strategy for the dozen or so of us. We would travel in pairs 40 metres apart. If one pair was bailed up the next pair would surge past but be ready to come back to assist. More pairs could then surge past. I felt this would confuse any obstructor. It was almost an anticlimax for us to get through un-accosted. His property was later acquired for the National Park.

At Labour Day Weekend 1990 Bruce and I completed a ski ascent of Mt Mackenzie from the Mackenzie Basin. Unfortunately the snow crust softened turning the 1000 m descent into a wallow and dive epic. It was time to go elsewhere. We called in at the run homestead to notify 'Mum' Mason of our new plans. For our own safety we were traveling under an alias. There was Bruce on the landline in the runholder's lounge calling our elderly mum while trying not to give any clue to his identity. A fuming, muttering farmer was reading the newspaper four paces away. Bruce's high country preliminary Tenure Review work was the main feature in the paper.



Much has been written about the deer wars and the fierce, sometimes dangerous, rivalry between venison shooters. In what I experienced and saw it was a miracle there weren't more deaths. It was also the end of the Government deer culler era as many moved over to much more lucrative meat

Sharing a snack at a Government deer culler's bivvy in the South Huxley. 1966. *KDM*

shooting. I will only narrate one experience. In 1966 in the Huxley Valley we helped two government deer cullers recover a food drop that had been thrown without a parachute from a plane. A good percentage of the cans landed in the river and lost their labels. That night we shared a meal made from ruptured tins. On the hut wall there was a list of tin codes and matching contents built up from previous experience. No wonder many turned to meat shooting rather than a small payment for a deer tail plus three rounds of ammunition.



*A deer culler's sketch of his working life*

## Chapter Four

### Part Two

# The wild west out east

The Catlins bush region in South Otago did not have a connecting through-road until 1958. In the 1960s I met people that had been raised in tree-fern-walled, clay-floored huts. Some had not had their births registered as today's three hour round trip to Dunedin then took four days. Many bush farms were abandoned during the great 1930s depression.

My first connection with the Catlins was through Forest and Bird's Otago Branch in the mid 1960s. We had concerns regards the South-East Otago Scenic Board which consisted of a group of local land owners who appeared more interested in firewood than accepting choice bush that was offered to them for reserves. A lack of resource support by the Department of Lands and Survey, and probably the County, would not have helped. There was even alleged private selling of public land. By getting Mr J Wallace Ramsey from our branch committee onto the Scenic Board, things moved in a more pro-active and healthier direction.

In 1978 my car broke down when passing through Balclutha. We went to local tramping friends Brian and Jan O'Callaghan for help. Talk turned to the deforestation sweeping the Catlins. By the time we left I had Brian prepared to be the president of a new Forest and Bird Section and Jan the Secretary/Treasurer. On July 2, 1978 a public meeting was held in Balclutha and the South Otago Section of Forest and Bird was formed. It soon qualified for full Branch status. Brian was the right man for the job. He was a farm contractor in contact with 600 farms. "Brian a greenie? But he's such a good bloke!" was one cockie's comment. I find it ironic today that the Catlins economy relies on ecotourism based largely on what 'greenies' struggled to save. Just between 1970 and 1980 a survey revealed that a third of the forest had been cleared under government subsidy. At a later date, every time a ship load of clear-felled and chipped kamahi left Bluff Harbour to make glossy magazines in Japan, there was habitat loss for 2500 native birds. Much of this land was of little value for farming and has been subsequently planted in pines.

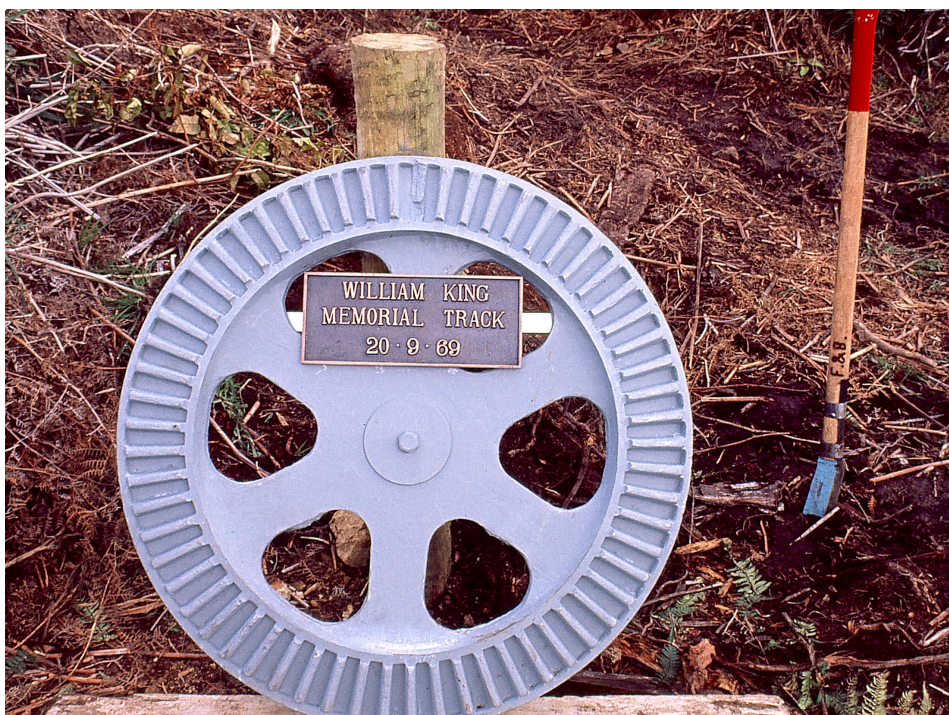
*ODT.* 27 August 1971. 'Robert Buchanan, farmer of Chaslands pleaded guilty to allowing his stock to wander on State Highway 92 saying " he had difficulty retaining stock on his property because of problems with the local scenic board over fencing."



Grazing the 'long paddock' had been a local tradition, sometimes up to 30 miles long in Bob's case. With a very efficient 'bush telegraph' the cattle usually vanished before the authorities arrived. After stock impounding, not far from the Buchanan homestead, large rimu crowns were felled from what I remember was then Forest Service land, down into the Tautuku River gorge to block access to one of today's major Catlins attractions. To me it was a sign that somebody's confidence to offend without redress had been broken.

Mr Buchanan was very skilled at moving cattle deep through the bush. Bob would purchase small bits of land adjacent to scenic reserves and his cattle were 'very skilled' at getting into the reserves. He was also paying the rates on bush farms that had been abandoned during the Great Depression. If a claimant did not turn up within a certain number of years the person paying the rates got the title. In the Tautuku Bay and Fleming River catchment Bob was not far from getting control of over a hundred hectares of land that is thankfully reserve today. Forest and Bird purchased the 550ha Lenz Reserve on the Fleming River in 1964. Just after the purchase a contractor was caught preparing to log the remaining old growth forest on the property. He claimed he had the permission of the previous owner.

Had Forest and Bird local Bill King not acted the last intact Catlins Valley down to the sea would have been replaced by about 2000 ha of lowland farm.



Bill King Memorial. When we started the initial Lenz Long Track cutting Bill would come out to encourage us. A strong friend helped me lug the heavy saw-milling cog out through 800 metres of bush. KDM

Maurice Yorke was reputed to graze anything that wasn't his up and down the coast. If so, little wonder he had the best regional stocking rates accredited to his actual farm in Progress Valley. Maurice was caught by the local policeman and the first reserves ranger, bulldozing an access road up from the coast through the Waipati Scenic Reserve. This was the second time. His retort was reputedly, "Well

if you don't give it a go, you don't get away with it.” The local Federated Farmer group actually backed him in his actions.



Gracing 'the long paddock' is a Catlins tradition. *KDM*

In 1988 Forest and Bird purchased the 67 ha Te Rere Property to safeguard a very important Yellow-eyed Penguin colony from deforestation. In 1995 a burn-off on Mr Yorke's land reignited itself and devastated the Te Rere Reserve and its penguins. A huge amount of voluntary restoration work was carried out. This seemed to bring about Mr Yorke having a most welcome and remarkable change in his attitude to conservation.

In March 1975 Forest and Bird's Wallace Ramsay was appointed to the Catlins Forest Park Advisory committee to advise the Minister on Recreational use of the Forest Park but apparently could have no say in the management of the forest. I was told at the time that a ploy was to appoint only very busy people. Fortunately local Park appointee Fred Bennett of Papatowai was retired and not very busy. He was a conservation stalwart, knew the Catlins very well, and did independent, unannounced, and unescorted inspections to see what was really happening in the forest. He could speak his mind at Catlins Forest Park Advisory Committee meetings.