

## The Department of Tourist and Health Resorts and the Creation of the "Finest Walk in the World"

Jamie Jacobs, Heritage New Zealand Pouhere Taonga

**ABSTRACT:** The Milford Track – dubbed "the Finest Walk in the World" as early as 1908 – stands among New Zealand's most significant and best-known tourism destinations. This moniker stems from a combination of the exhilarating natural beauty encountered along the track as well as its essential visitor facilities that were developed and sustained for tourism. It was in the first decades of the twentieth century that the Milford Track, along with other places of cultural and natural interest, established tourism as an essential component of national pride, identity, and the burgeoning economy of colonial New Zealand. This paper will explore the establishment of the Milford Track with a particular focus on the development of the walking path and its facilities, and how they contributed to the creation of an early, codified visitor experience that has remained remarkably consistent for well over a century.

**AI Statement:** AI was not used in any aspect of researching and writing this paper.

### Background and early history<sup>1</sup>

The Milford Track is a well-formed walking track within the Department of Conservation's Fiordland National Park, which is also part of the Te Wāhipounamu World Heritage Site. The track travels along the Clinton River on the Lake Te Anau side, up over the Mackinnon Pass, and down the Arthur River down to the Milford Sound, a total of 53.5 kilometres, or more appropriately 33.2 miles as miles markers are still used there. The length of the track, the terrain crossed, the adverse weather conditions frequently encountered, and the spacing of overnight lodges and huts, requires, under normal

conditions, four days and three nights to complete. It passes through highly varied topographic and vegetative zones that constitute one of the most dramatic landscapes in the world.

The extraordinary, heavily glaciated landscape of Fiordland, and more specifically Milford Sound, has never been an entirely hospitable location for permanent settlement. Māori tradition holds that the demigod Tū te Rakiwhānoa cleaved the deep valleys and fiords along the southwest corner of the South Island from solid rock.<sup>2</sup> Tall mountains and rock outcrops reach down to saltwater inlets. Narrow river valleys are prone to flooding, slips, and avalanches, and intense rain is

possible at any time of the year. Māori did seasonally visit the Milford Sound area, which they called Piopiotahi for a native thrush—the piopio—now thought to be extinct. They came to gather food and collect takiwai, a type of translucent pounamu obtained solely at the mouth of Milford Sound in the vicinity of Anita Bay.<sup>3</sup> Māori usually accessed the area by sea, but a land route also existed roughly aligned with the eventual Milford Track.<sup>4</sup>

The earliest Europeans to visit the area were sealers and whalers, followed by surveyors, prospectors, and adventurers, all of whom lived in ephemeral camps. Milford Sound did not receive its first permanent resident until

---

<sup>1</sup> This paper is based on a larger, comprehensive history and heritage assessment of the Milford Track funded and held by the Department of Conservation. Jacobs "Heritage Assessment: Milford Track"

---

<sup>2</sup> DoC "History and culture of Fiordland National Park" np.

---

<sup>3</sup> DoC "History and culture of Fiordland National Park" np.

<sup>4</sup> Anderson *Milford Trails* p 32.

Donald Sutherland arrived in December 1877.<sup>5</sup> He established what he called the "City of Milford" on flat land near Bowen Falls and the mouth of the Cleddau River.<sup>6</sup> Sutherland was confident that sources of valuable minerals were present in the area and this, along with a goal of locating an overland route to Otago, encouraged him to explore up the Arthur River valley.<sup>7</sup>

On 10 November 1880, Sutherland and associate John Mackay came upon a spectacular waterfall they named Sutherland Falls. Word of the discovery spread and a goal to make the falls accessible for tourism occurred in tandem with sustained interest in finding a link through the ranges for commercial purposes; both efforts were reinforced in 1888 by government-funded surveys.<sup>8</sup> Sutherland was hired to establish a usable trail between Milford Sound and Sutherland Falls, and others explored the Arthur and Clinton river valleys in order to

---

<sup>5</sup> Parham "Sutherland, Donald" np. Unless otherwise noted, all biographical information about Donald Sutherland is drawn from this source.

<sup>6</sup> Anderson *Milford Trails* p 29.

<sup>7</sup> Parham "Sutherland, Donald" np; Anderson *Milford Trails* pp 29-30.

<sup>8</sup> Anderson *Milford Trails* p 33.

find a viable pass between them.<sup>9</sup>

Quintin McKinnon led the exploration of the Clinton River valley. Born in Scotland, McKinnon immigrated to New Zealand in the 1870s, settled in Otago, and became a surveyor.<sup>10</sup> In October 1888, McKinnon and Ernest Mitchell crossed over the pass from the Clinton River valley that would be named "Mackinnon."<sup>11</sup> It is thought that Sutherland surely knew about the pass. However, having discovered Sutherland Falls and understanding the commercial potential of controlling access to it via Milford Sound, Sutherland had little impetus to support an alternative route.<sup>12</sup>

Together, Sutherland, McKinnon, and their peers fully established a very-much-unimproved track in time for the first walking

---

<sup>9</sup> Anderson *Milford Trails* p 33; for a discussion of explorations and surveys of the Arthur and Clinton valleys, see: Egerton "Wonderland of the World" pp 40-42, 50-52.

<sup>10</sup> Foster "McKinnon, Quintin McPherson" np; Anderson *Milford Trails* p 35.

<sup>11</sup> McKinnon continued to help improve the trail and began guiding the first tourist walks along the Milford Track until he died in 1892, likely drowning in Lake Te Anau. Anderson *Milford Trails* p 58.

<sup>12</sup> [Bradley] "Heritage Notes for Dumpling Hut Rangers"

season during the summer of 1888-89. Forty people that season travelled from both directions to visit Sutherland Falls.<sup>13</sup> The approach from Milford Sound showed initial popularity as it extended from existing steamship links and presented a shorter overland journey to the falls.<sup>14</sup> In time, improved road access to Te Anau and better water transport across the lake made walking the entire track an attractive prospect. This attractiveness was further bolstered by continual improvements to the trail itself and with the construction of the first huts established for visitor use during the day and overnight. Government appropriations between 1890 and 1900 allowed the track to be solidly formed from Milford Sound up the Arthur Valley using both convict and contract labour.<sup>15</sup>

### **Tourism formalised on the Milford Track**

In 1901, the New Zealand government moved the Tourist Branch out of the Railways Department and established the Department of Tourist and Health Resorts (hereafter referred to as the "Tourist Department"),

---

<sup>13</sup> Anderson *Milford Trails* p 50.

<sup>14</sup> Egerton "Wonderland of the World" pp 34-42.

<sup>15</sup> [Bradley] "Milford Track Conservation Plan information"

which was the first fully independent government department for tourism in the world.<sup>16</sup> This action was a clear indicator of the central role that government and business officials thought tourism would play in the economy of New Zealand and in the formation of national identity.<sup>17</sup>

Upon its creation, the Tourist Department concentrated on the further development of hot springs and thermal features, in particular the baths at Rotorua, as well as huts and walking tracks, and hotels associated with the North and South Islands' prominent mountains and lakes. Two years after its establishment, the Tourist Department took over the administration of the Milford Track from the Lands and Survey Department and purchased privately held parts of the track experience such as Glade House on the Clinton River near Lake Te Anau and the steam launch used on Milford Sound.<sup>18</sup> This move was part of broader government centralisation of important industries and also an attempt to establish high-quality and consistent tourist experiences throughout the

<sup>16</sup> McClure *The Wonder Country* p 26.

<sup>17</sup> McClure *The Wonder Country* pp 26-27.

<sup>18</sup> Egerton "Wonderland of the World" p 62.

country.<sup>19</sup>

At the time that the Tourist Department took over, most visitors were walking the entire track from Lake Te Anau to Milford Sound and then back again on a track that was still under improvement over Mackinnon Pass; some visitors still walked to Sutherland Falls as part of steamship excursions.<sup>20</sup> A string of huts built by the government and private interests in the 1890s existed along the track: Glade House, Mid Camp, and Mintaro Hut in the Clinton Valley and the Beech Hut, also known as the Falls Hut, just off the track two miles from Sutherland Falls on the Arthur Valley side.<sup>21</sup> These overnight camps contained a hut with bunks for women and one with bunks for men that also functioned as a kitchen. Each camp had a WC, an enamel wash set, and was stocked with kitchen utensils, and guides carried provisions along the trail to restock the kitchens.<sup>22</sup>

<sup>19</sup> Egerton "Wonderland of the World" pp 61-62.

<sup>20</sup> DTHR "Department of Tourism and Health Resorts Report" (23 August 1904) p 16; [Bradley] "Milford Track Conservation Plan information"

<sup>21</sup> F Moorehouse to T E Donne, "Te Anau-Milford Track" (memorandum), c3 December 1903, in "Te Anau – Milford Sound: tracks and huts, taking over track from D and J Ross" R21484059

<sup>22</sup> F Moorehouse to T E Donne, "Te Anau-Milford Track"

In the early-twentieth century the Tourist Department quickly sought to complete a number of projects to enhance the experience of walking the track and to ease some of its remaining discomforts. It pushed for the improvement of the final segment of the track over the pass and down the Clinton Valley to Mintaro Hut, a campaign completed in 1908.<sup>23</sup> In order to create consistency at each overnight camp and have enough bunks during the most crowded parts of the season, the Tourist Department sought early on to have at each camp a men's hut, women's hut, a third hut for cooking, dining, and overflow bunks, and a hut for the guides and track maintenance men.<sup>24</sup>

Construction began in the 1905-6 season towards this end with the expansion and improvement of the facilities at Beech Hut near Sutherland Falls.<sup>25</sup> The Tourist Department also began planning for the

(memorandum), c3 December 1903, in "Te Anau – Milford Sound: tracks and huts, taking over track from D and J Ross" R21484059; "The Tourist Department" p 8.

<sup>23</sup> [Bradley] "Milford Track Conservation Plan information"

<sup>24</sup> DTHR "Fourth Annual Report of the" (22 August 1905) p 14.

<sup>25</sup> THRD "Fifth Annual Report of the" (28 August 1906) p 11.

installation of caretakers at the huts—married couples who would care for the accommodation, greet the walkers and make them feel at home, and cook meals and maintain provisions, which further enhanced the visitor experience along the track.<sup>26</sup>

In the same year, the Tourist Department decided to rework the stages that people walked the track.<sup>27</sup> In the 1890s, there were typically three overnight stops between Glade House and Milford Sound at Mid Camp, Mintaro Hut, and Beech Hut. The Tourist Department established a new camp three miles further up the Clinton Valley from Mid Camp called Pompolona, that reduced the nights spent on the track proper to two.<sup>28</sup> With the establishment of Pompolona Hut, the Mid Camp and Mintaro huts became resting places for walkers and as accommodation for men working on track repair.<sup>29</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> This is proposed in the Annual Report. DTHR "Department of Tourism and Health Resorts Report" (23 August 1904) p 16.

<sup>27</sup> THRD "Fifth Annual Report of the" (28 August 1906) p 11.

<sup>28</sup> Anderson *Milford Track Place Names* p 17.

<sup>29</sup> "Inspection of Milford Track – Te Anau & Manapouri" (29 November 1927) pp 2-3 in "Te Anau – Milford Track – Inspection reports" R21485425

This structuring of the walk in three segments in 1908 remains in place to this day for guided walker: 1 mile from Lake Te Anau to Glade House on day one; 10 miles from Glade House to Pompolona on day two; 9 miles from Pompolona over Mackinnon Pass to Beech Hut (later known as Quintin) on day three; and 13 miles from Beech Hut to Sandfly Point on day four. The brief, but effective "Freedom Walker" movement of 1965 resulted in the creation of a roughly analogous experience utilising three public huts constructed in 1965-66 that are currently managed by DOC.<sup>30</sup> This movement reacted to the perception that the track operated primarily as a high-end amenity directed to overseas tourists rather than encouraging New Zealanders to explore and enjoy their own natural environment.

It is also worth noting that the opening of the Homer Tunnel in 1954 contributed to the management of Milford Track with all walkers and trampers walking in one direction from Lake Te Anau to Milford Track with return by road. All of this contributes to a cultural landscape of shared experience between the hundreds of thousands of walkers and trampers for whom the track and

---

<sup>30</sup> Anderson *Milford Trails* p 170.

its facilities were constructed, maintained, replaced, and improved for well over a century.

### **Marketing the Milford Track**

In the earliest major account of walking the Milford Track published in 1892, William McHutcheson was moved not just by the things they were told to expect such as Mackinnon Pass and Sutherland Falls but overwhelmed by the entirety of the landscape. Considering the view up the Clinton Valley gorge emerging as they rose above the trees, he exclaimed: "we were absolutely struck dumb with amazement. The scene was one of unparalleled grandeur."<sup>31</sup> McHutcheson was so moved by his time in Fiordland, he positioned its natural landscape as "a perpetual and ever-increasing mine of wealth to the colony" and a source of "formative influences ... upon the mind of the coming New-Zealander."<sup>32</sup> The landscape was so moving to experience that it would shape the outlook of future generations.

With the establishment of the Tourist Department 1901 more systematic marketing

---

<sup>31</sup> McHutcheson *Camp-Life in Fiordland* pp 50-51.

<sup>32</sup> McHutcheson *Camp-Life in Fiordland* pp 130-131.

joined written observations about Milford Track. In addition to actual administration of the main tourist centres and hotels, the Tourist Department became an organised clearing house of advertising and assistance, opening offices in major towns and cities throughout New Zealand and, by 1906, in Melbourne and Sydney with aims for the broader Anglo diaspora worldwide.<sup>33</sup> As early as 1903 when it was beginning to strategise how to oversee the Milford Track, the Tourist Department confidently stated: the "Te Anau and Milford Sound Tour ... is destined to be one of the most popular in the colony."<sup>34</sup> One year later, it more confidently reported that "this overland journey is considered to be one of the grandest walking-tours in the world," and spoke equally of the "glories of the Clinton Canyon, the Arthur Valley, and the precipices of Milford Sound."<sup>35</sup>

Lacking a large budget for advertising, the Tourist Department also submitted essays and articles, well-illustrated, for magazines outside New Zealand, and individual writers

continued to publish essays globally.<sup>36</sup> The most iconic of these was Blanche E Baughn's 1908 essay in the *London Spectator* titled "Finest Walk in the World." The significance of this article to the creation of the Milford Track as tourist experience led track historian William Anderson to conclude that Baughan was as important to its establishment as Donald Sutherland and Quintin McKinnon.<sup>37</sup>

Baughan walked the Milford Track during the summer of 1907-8 just after the formation of the three segments still in use today. In a letter penned to the Tourist Department in April 1908 attributed to Baughan, and predating her well-known publication by five months, she provided suggestions for improving the walk experience, but also effused less formally than in her subsequent published account:

I have no words to speak adequately of the splendours of its scenery, and I have nothing but praise for the general arrangements, and for the attention and helpfulness of all the Government servants on the Track with whom I came in contact.<sup>38</sup>

Her thoughts expressed in the letter, and in the now iconic essay published later that year, document impressions of walking the track and communing with the natural landscape with the pace, duration, and relative comfort that has come to characterise the Milford Track as an experience.

Baughan moved from England to New Zealand in 1902. She was a poet and, in later life, a prison reformer.<sup>39</sup> The superlative—*Finest Walk in the World*—used in her *Spectator* essay was matched by her descriptive prose, which positioned the walk as experiencing "nature at her loneliest and fairest."<sup>40</sup> It was Baughan's "beauty of thought exhibited in depicting one of nature's grandest panoramas," as noted by the publisher, that helped to establish the Milford Track as an internationally known and recognised experience.<sup>41</sup> While it cannot be known whether her publication had direct influence, women became a significant portion of walkers early on. In the season following the publication, 137 out of 484 people who walked the track in 1908-9 were women.<sup>42</sup> Baughan's

<sup>33</sup> McClure *The Wonder Country* p 60.

<sup>34</sup> DTHR "Second Annual Report" (1 May 1903) p xiv.

<sup>35</sup> DTHR "Department of Tourism and Health Resorts Report" (23 August 1904) p 15.

<sup>36</sup> McClure *The Wonder Country* p 58.

<sup>37</sup> Anderson *Milford Trails* p 68.

<sup>38</sup> [Miss B. E. Baughan] to the "Head Manager, Govt. Tourist Dept.," 4 April 1908, in "Te Anau – Milford track – general" R21484403

<sup>39</sup> Harris "Baughan, Blanche Edith" np.

<sup>40</sup> Baughan *The Finest Walk in the World* p 9.

<sup>41</sup> "Publisher's Note" np.

<sup>42</sup> THRD "Eighth Annual Report of the" (21 July 1906) p

account places the Milford Track not only within the context of the development of tourism in New Zealand, but also as an internationally-significant place and milestone in the history of global outdoor and adventure tourism.

### Further contextual considerations

The tourist context, which made the Milford Track both accessible and more-and-more comfortable to visitors, is indivisible from its identity. Yet, of equal importance are the track's location and setting—passing through places of stupendous and well-conserved natural beauty, and the manner these are experienced—by means of a multiday walk open to what might be termed the "fit public."

Although placing more emphasis on scenic and historic sites related to tourism than conservation specifically, the Scenery Preservation Act 1903 still had favourable outcomes in the area of conservation.<sup>43</sup> The Act allowed for the creation of a massive reserve in Southland the following year that included the land through which the Milford Track passed, all of which became Fiordland

National Park in 1952. New Zealand, like many other relatively young nations, understood the wonders contained in their national parks and other types of reserves as making up for their perceived dearth of (European) culture.

While not having the time to discuss it in detail today, the formation of the Milford Track as a tourist experience is also inextricably tied to the history of tramping loosely defined as energetic and at least moderately challenging walks of more than one day.<sup>44</sup> Along these lines, the Milford Track permitted relatively affluent urbanised populations a sense of exploration while maintaining a degree of relative comfort.

Finally, when considering the heritage significance of the Milford Track, the physical integrity of the track itself and its component buildings, structures, and features are somewhat low by conventional standards as they have been in a dynamic state of continual modification. Seasonal repair and reconstruction from storms and regular wear, greater awareness of health and safety, and evolving notions of visitor comfort and

expectations, mean that change on the Milford Track is constant, but this change does not overwhelm the purpose and significance of its existence: to permit people to enjoy one of the world's most scenic natural environments. Indeed, the agents of change—both natural and manmade—have been an integral part of the Milford Track's history since its first establishment as a tourist destination. Thus, its overall physical integrity should be considered simultaneously permanent and transient within the context of its status as a cultural landscape.

While dynamic, the Milford Track is also a decidedly long-lived feature where generations of individuals having a decent level of physical fitness have walked the same path, in the same direction, with the same walking segments and locations for comfortable overnight accommodation – is the vehicle and material embodiment of the famed Finest Walk in the World.

---

15.

<sup>43</sup> Manatū Taonga "The Scenery Preservation Act" np.

---

<sup>44</sup> Barnett & Maclean *Tramping* pp 14-15.

## REFERENCES

- Anderson, William *Milford Track Place Names* Invercargill: W. Anderson, 1978.
- Anderson, William *Milford Trails* Wellington; Sydney; London: A.H. & A.W. Reed, 1971.
- Barnett, Shaun, and Chris Maclean *Tramping: A New Zealand History* Nelson: Craig Potton Publishing, 2014.
- Baughan, B[lanche] E. *The Finest Walk in the World, reprinted with permission from the Spectator* Christchurch: Whitcombe & Tombs Limited, 1909.
- [Bradley, Ken] "Heritage Notes for Dumpling Hut Rangers," undated typescript held by the Department of Conservation.
- [Bradley, Ken] "Milford Track Conservation Plan information," undated typescript [c2016] held by the Department of Conservation.
- Department of Conservation (DoC) "History and culture of Fiordland National Park" <http://www.doc.govt.nz/parks-and-recreation/places-to-go/fiordland/places/fiordland-national-park/about-fiordland-national-park/history-and-culture/>
- Department of Tourist and Health Resorts (DTHR) "Second Annual Report" (1 May 1903) *Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives* (1903): H-2.
- Department of Tourist and Health Resorts (DTHR) "Department of Tourist and Health Resorts Report" (23 August 1904) *Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives* (1904): H-2.
- Department of Tourist and Health Resorts (DTHR) "Fourth Annual Report of the" (22 August 1905) *Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives* (1905): H-2.
- Egerton, Rachael Elizabeth "Wonderland of the World: Tourism Development in Fiordland New Zealand" Melbourne: MA (in Public History) thesis, Monash University, 1997.
- Foster, Bernard John "McKinnon, Quintin McPherson" *An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand* (1966) <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/1966/mckinnon-quintin-mcpherson>
- Harris, Nancy "Baughan, Blanche Edith" *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/3b17/baughan-blanche-edith>
- Jacobs, Jamie "Heritage Assessment: Milford Track" Wellington: Department of Conservation, 2017.
- McClure, Margaret *The Wonder Country: Making New Zealand Tourism* Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2004.
- McHutcheson, William *Camp-Life in Fiordland, New Zealand: A Tale of the Sutherland Falls* Wellington: George Didsbury, Government Printer, 1892.
- Manatū Taonga – Ministry for Culture and Heritage "The Scenery Preservation Act" <https://nzhistory.govt.nz/culture/scenery-preservation/the-scenery-preservation-act>
- Parham, W T "Sutherland, Donald" *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography* <http://www.TeAra.govt.nz/en/biographies/2s53/sutherland-donald>
- "Publisher's Note" *The Finest Walk in the World, reprinted with permission from the Spectator* Christchurch: Whitcombe & Tombs Limited, 1909.
- "Te Anau – Milford track – general" (1908-10) Archives New Zealand, Wellington, New Zealand, R21484403
- "Te Anau – Milford Track – Inspection reports" (1928-1949) Archives New Zealand, Wellington, New Zealand, R21485425.
- "Te Anau – Milford Sound: tracks and huts, taking over track from D and J Ross" (1903) Archives New Zealand, Wellington, New Zealand, R21484059
- Tourist and Health Resorts Department (THRD) "Fifth Annual Report of the" (28 August 1906) *Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives* (1906) Session II: H-2.
- Tourist and Health Resorts Department (THRD) "Eighth Annual Report of the" (21 July 1906) *Appendix to the Journals of the House of Representatives* (1909): H-2.
- "The Tourist Department" *Otago Daily Times* (27 August 1904): 8.