

Home in the Howling Wilderness: settlers and the environment in Southern New Zealand

PETER HOLLAND

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As the Mainland cheese ads aver, 'good things take time'. In the early 1960s a young Canterbury geographer found himself at odds with some of the conclusions relating to the post-European environmental transformation of the South Island outlined in celebrated Canadian geographer Andrew H. Clark's *The Invasion of New Zealand by People, Plants and Animals* (1949). Clark's contentions that the settlers had lacked 'any peasant-like feeling of love for the land', looked on it essentially 'as a commodity', and therefore developed 'no strong response to practices leading to the mutilation of the area' jarred. Doubts as to this interpretation, partially arising from farming family origins, lingered through an overseas academic career, and they remained when Peter Holland took up a chair in Geography at the University of Otago in 1982. Over the ensuing thirty years, traversing terrain and assiduously fossicking in archival repositories large and small, he has sought to address two critical questions. First, were the initial settler generations uninformed, reckless in respect of the landscape, driven by the profit imperative regardless of consequences; second, did they learn from their experiences and adapt to the new conditions? The culmination of Professor Holland's searching is this thought-provoking book.

New Zealand witnessed probably the most rapid and extensive landscape transformation of all of the 19th-century temperate settler colonies in the 50 years prior to 1890. Even acknowledging the scale differences, what had taken three centuries in North America was accomplished in little more than half a century in this country. The natural landscapes first encountered by the migrants were a far cry from what they had been led to expect, the pre-embarkation intelligence circulated being frequently risible. It was logical, therefore, that they should endeavour to convert the unknown to more comfortable forms. The native vegetation was removed in many districts and replaced with imported plants. Grazing animals and northern hemisphere farming methods were introduced. Streams were diverted and wetlands drained. The mechanics of this transformation remain of absorbing interest. What has become increasingly evident is that the result was the end product of extended processes of trial and error, learning experiences, what

Australian geographer J.H.R. Cameron more than 30 years ago labelled 'coming to terms' with the environment. Here the focus is on how these processes played out in southern New Zealand, in particular the lower lying country between north Canterbury and Southland, in the first half century of colonisation. That there might be major differences between manifestations in the often heavily wooded North Island and the generally more open South Island is readily understandable, but Holland stresses that even in southern New Zealand there was no one uniform pattern, that there could be quite distinct variations between districts, even between individual farm properties. The result was 'a mosaic of ecologically diverse areas', each primed to deliver surprise after surprise to the newcomers.

In southern New Zealand the impacts on the encountered landscapes of vegetation clearance, consequent soil erosion, declining soil fertility, invasions by introduced flora and fauna, were clearly entwined – and directly related to settler actions. Some of these surprises, of course, have already been well canvassed. As far back as the 1940s K.B. Cumberland probed the causes and consequences of soil erosion. Aspects of the southern New Zealand landscape transformation are covered in essays in the recent volumes edited by Tom Brooking and Eric Pawson. Robert Peden has paid particular attention to the tussock grasslands, emphasising the deleterious effect of the rabbit invasion. On all of these topics Holland usefully elaborates, provides informational texture. More than any previous writer, however, he highlights the importance of coming to terms with weather conditions. Migrants had been led to believe they would encounter a Mediterranean climate; the reality was far different, the capacity for weather extremes – flood and drought, ice and snow – being soon painfully brought home. In drought, sown pastures parched and crops withered. Unexpected floods and snowfalls could heavily reduce stock numbers. Unforeseen weather events only exacerbated early faltering attempts to tame the 'howling wilderness', to recreate more familiar farming landscapes. The newcomers had to learn not only how to manage the remnants of displaced ecosystems, but also the uniquely new ones they were creating. Only slowly were the insights necessary for the development of ameliorative strategies acquired, these the product of constant observation, careful recording, and exchanges of information with fellow settlers.

That settler learnings could have been enhanced and actions expedited by greater recourse to existing Māori environmental knowledge has been suggested, a possibility to which Holland usefully devotes a

chapter. While the Māori population density was far less than in the North Island, southern New Zealand was no unoccupied land, indigenous residents having been in situ for over 700 years. Critically, they too had had to come to terms with the milieu. While it has been fashionable to cast Māori as neolithic conservationists, this scarcely holds up to closer scrutiny. Recent Landcare research, for instance, strongly indicates that Māori fires burned off much of the South Island's lowland forest within two centuries of arrival. A surprising number of avian species had been hunted to extinction. But, by and large, by the nineteenth century Māori had come to terms with their surroundings, the resultant knowledge being formalised and passed on through generations. They understood the potential of soil types, the properties of local plants, were able to predict weather conditions with reasonable certitude. Borrowing from this accumulated lore may have enabled at least some of the new settlers to avoid repeating errors, but with only a few exceptions they chose not to do so. To have expected otherwise may be unrealistic. Ignorance of Māori language and custom played a part, and undoubtedly elements of cultural prejudice were involved. Moreover, beyond the first colonising years, just how valuable Māori environmental knowledge may have been remains an open question. There was a knowledge garnered in the context of food gathering and subsistence cultivation, not that of cash cropping and extensive pastoralism.

A primary concern for readers of this journal is the evidential foundation upon which the study is based. By any measure it is impressive. Whereas Clark primarily employed statistics and secondary sources in developing his 1940s conclusions, Holland's are fundamentally derived from careful scrutiny of primary records. Further, the findings are not drawn from any single cache, his searches having extended throughout the study area and beyond. Literally hundreds of farm diaries and journals have been combed in the quest for day-to-day observations by the key agents of modification, the farming settlers. These are augmented by detail drawn from letter books, ledgers, newspaper articles, and any other prospective sources presenting. While there is particular emphasis on documentation from eight widely spread properties, there is supporting material from over 40 other farms. In an interesting appendix the author discusses at some length the characteristics of the farm diaries located. With laconic entries, idiosyncratic spellings and punctuation, they were frequently difficult to decipher. These were aids to farm management, not literary contributions. In form they were commonly of lined paper in bound volumes, and from the 1850s pro forma diaries were widely

available. Their sturdiness implies they were intended to be kept. Holland nevertheless concludes the discussion with an important caveat: the diaries contain only what their writers *chose* to record. What a settler might have observed or thought about an event, but did not set down in writing, remains unknown.

Peter Holland's specialism is biogeography, and the mark of his discipline is evident in the interpretations of historical sources and the ways in which arguments are presented. Helpful maps, graphs and tables are bolstered by explanatory diagrams and flow charts, this reviewer's only regret being that publication requirements have necessitated reduction of detail to a degree that strains ageing eyes. In the end, however, how successful has Professor Holland been in scrutinising Andrew H. Clark's statements, in answering his own self-posed questions? Interestingly, on the antepenultimate page of the text he concludes, on the basis of diary entries, that southern New Zealand's European settlers 'saw it as their God-given responsibility to create economically viable, functional, supportive and pleasing lowland landscapes, with the plants and animals of their choice'. Ipso facto, Clark got it partially right, but only partially. This outlook did not mean the settlers developed no feeling for the lands they occupied, or that they were wilfully destructive. With livings at stake, and lack of awareness at first of the likely consequences of landscape change, how otherwise were they likely to have behaved? Thanks to Professor Holland a much more nuanced view is now available. What this study demonstrates conclusively is that many learned from their experiences, and quickly, thereafter attempting to mitigate mistakes. In many respects it is a throwback to the best academic scholarship of an earlier time, before publish or perish and PBRF, and a model to which researchers in a range of disciplines might aspire.

*Brad Patterson
Stout Research Centre for New Zealand Studies
Victoria University of Wellington*