

Book Review

Home in the Howling Wilderness: Settlers and the Environment in Southern New Zealand. By Peter Holland. (ISBN 978-1-86940-739-1). Available from Auckland University Press. February 2013, 256 pages, 16 photographs, 22 figures, Paperback. \$49.99.

European settlers who came to South Island, New Zealand, in the first half of the 19th Century were promised a benign, familiar and balmy climate similar to Florence or Tuscany, with ample rain, kind temperatures and mild-mannered snowfalls. In reality, the conditions into which they were plunged were new and an immense challenge. The vegetation was unfamiliar, animals absent, weather patterns strange, and there were sometimes appalling snowfalls, heavy rainfall and large floods. At times, even, this southern wilderness was plagued by howling winds of biblical intensity (Deut. 32:10).

In *Home in the Howling Wilderness: Settlers and the Environment in Southern New Zealand* Peter Holland captures the harsh struggles and personal stories of European settlers in southern New Zealand in the 1800s. Holland astutely allows settlers to speak in their own words, by using richly detailed quotations and anecdotes from an extensive array of original documents. These include about 120 diaries, also letters, farm and business ledgers, and newspapers (Scene, 2013). Then, as now, weather was central to rural life: more than 10 000 of the diary

entries that Holland read were weather related.

Holland is Professor Emeritus of Geography at the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand. He was awarded the Distinguished New Zealand Geographer Gold Medal from the New Zealand Geographical Society in 2008. This book reflects a lifetime of interest in the Canterbury region of New Zealand, biogeography, grassland landscapes and environmental history. The idea for this book was conceived 30 years ago. Holland's home town is Waimate, Canterbury, and his family has farming roots in the area. Locating, transcribing and collating information from original sources occupied his 'spare' time for decades. He examined more than 1000 diaries in the process. This was a monumental task but, in Holland's own words, "Late one afternoon I found a diary, which was a wonderful account of what was going on at a place near Windwhistle.... [and] I got hooked" (Scene, 2013).

Home in the Howling Wilderness begins with an introductory overview of the key questions in "The New Land", the challenges settlers faced and sources of information. It sets the context, i.e., the experiences of the first two generations of European settlers in the rural lowlands and low hill country of Southland, Otago and Canterbury in South Island, New Zealand, from roughly 1840 to 1899.

Chapter 1 deals with Māori environmental knowledge and describes the expertise Māori possessed in the 1800s in weather forecasting and

seasonal predictions. This knowledge was largely ignored or undiscovered by the European settlers in southern New Zealand at that time.

Chapter 2 addresses how settlers learned about “Wind, Warmth and Rain”, began to record and measure meteorological parameters with increasing precision, and developed skills in forecasting. Fortuitously, this era coincided with the development of forecasting, instrumentation and observational networks in Britain, and these innovations were known to the well-read colonial farmer. Holland’s analysis shows that at first settlers tended to look back to the weather they had known ‘at home’. However, they built up knowledge and understanding of local conditions as the seasons, years and decades passed. Holland collates, presents and analyses data from original sources, and is able to draw out standardised data in temporal series, e.g. the monthly average number of days with unusually high air temperature on a particular farm in Southland. He also makes wider comparisons among a number of qualitative parameters (such as ‘windiness’, ‘hot’, ‘cold’, ‘clearing weather’ and ‘snowfall’) for several sites and regions, and identifies frequency, temporal and spatial patterns.

As settlers gained local experience, and began to make use of barometers, the first steps were taken towards informal weather and flood forecasting. Holland examines success rates using simple criteria for identifying predictions, e.g. a diary entry that stated “it looks like rain tomorrow”, and then it did. He finds that farmers with about five years of

local experience could forecast a change in weather (e.g. onset or cessation of rain or a fall of snow) one to three days ahead correctly 80% of the time. This gave them a distinct advantage when harvesting grain or floodwaters threatened.

Advances were also made at this time in formal forecasting. Newspapers reported weather observations and forecasts, and promoted the science of meteorology, the use of the electric telegraph for disseminating data, and occasional hypotheses about lunar influences.

In Chapter 3, Holland describes the “Exceptional Challenges” faced by settlers due to “Flood, Drought, Ice and Snow”. Here are presented historic but strangely familiar accounts of severe weather and its consequences. For example, in January 1868, widespread flooding killed stock and damaged roads, bridges and telegraph lines in Canterbury, and the editor of the *Otago Daily Times* questioned the wisdom of building houses on areas known to flood. In contrast, the summer of 1886 was described as the driest known in New Zealand since European settlement—pastures withered, stock suffered and died, and farmers petitioned the Government for financial relief. In 1895, flocks in southern New Zealand were decimated by severe snow storms and freezing conditions—one farmer replaced 9 000 out of 14 000 sheep lost to snow and cold, and had to relinquish the farm two years later.

With relatively little tweaking, these stories could be *ours*: transport and telecommunications damaged by floods

in Westland (Anon., 2013), tensions over houses built on the floodplains of Takaka (Anon., 2008), drought relief for a 'worst ever' drought in North Island (Johnston, 2013), and crippling stock losses in Southland due to snow, where some farmers were "thinking they might just have to walk away, and lose their farms" (Dixon, 2010).

As well as providing gripping tales of past events, Holland also collates extreme weather data to allow a temporal comparison across six regions and decades (1850-1899). These data demonstrate the expected dominance of snow events in Otago Lakes and drought in Central Otago, and how common flooding is in several regions. Holland points out that, while settlers could survive and learn from severe events, and try to reduce vulnerability, they could neither predict them nor anticipate their severity. Often severe events were temporally clustered—the 1860s saw many floods, gales, severe cold and snow events—and this caused much hardship.

Chapters 4 to 7 also make fascinating reading. They deal with the removal of native vegetation in southern New Zealand by European settlers ("Away with the Old", Chapter 4), the introduction of imported plants and animals ("In with the New", Chapter 5), environmental problems such as pests, weeds, erosion and declining soil fertility (Chapter 6), and the social events where settlers had opportunities to meet, compete and exchange ideas (Chapter 7).

Home in the Howling Wilderness closes with an over-arching discussion

(Chapter 8). Holland revisits key issues, situates his findings in scholarly and environmental contexts, and explores philosophical issues. For example, why *did* the first two generations of European farmers in southern New Zealand learn so little about their physical environment from local Māori, who were demonstratively knowledgeable about many things including weather? And, after 150 years spent taming the 'howling wilderness', what comes next for human management of this landscape?

I really enjoyed this book. One branch of my own family tree emigrated to Waimate in 1873, and we also cherish tales of the hardships faced by the early settlers. I have only two criticisms of this volume. First, none of the informative and interesting diagrams are in colour, which would have enhanced interpretation. Second, and much more irksome, the easy legibility of the diagrams is compromised by the small font size used in the labels. This is persistently frustrating, because thought has obviously gone into Holland's research and other aspects of the book's design.

Home in the Howling Wilderness is a book for scientists, scholars and the general reader who enjoys real-life accounts of the struggles of early settlers. This work extends the potential bank of data for researchers interested in historical weather and climate in southern New Zealand in the 1800s. It demonstrates the deep interest settlers had in weather, how quickly they learned about New Zealand conditions, and it may highlight patterns that were previously hidden (Holland et al.,

2009). The original data employed are largely descriptive, and their handling may inspire other authors grappling with such data, be that in copperplate handwriting or electronic. In addition, Holland's take on past challenges and responses by the farming community may inform how we view our own contemporary issues, such as recent flood and drought events, or the conflicts involved in wetland conservation on freehold farms.

This scholarly work is rich in topic, detail and potential resources—a banquet feast, rather than a lunch snack. I recommend that meteorologically inclined readers dip into those parts that most satisfy their research needs or personal interests. However, to misquote Holland, one afternoon you may start reading and get hooked into reading much further.

Katrina Richards
Nelson, New Zealand
14 May 2013
katrina.richards@clear.net.nz

References

Anon., 2008. 'Flood no bar to Takaka expansion'. *Nelson Mail*, 25 November 2008. [Online copy]. Accessed on 1 May 2013 at <http://www.stuff.co.nz/nelson-mail/news/733858/Flood-no-bar-to-Takaka-expansion>

Anon., 2013. 'West Coast highway closed after bridge washout'. *Fairfax NZ News*, 3 January 2013. [Online copy]. Access on 1 May 2013 at <http://www.stuff.co.nz/national/8137812/West-Coast-highway-closed-after-bridge-washout>

Deuteronomy 32:10. In: *The Bible. King James Version*. Accessed online on 1 May 2013 at <http://www.jambe.co.nz/bible/05.htm>

Dixon, A., 2010. 'Snow claims hit \$47m'. *New Zealand Farmer*, 4 November 2010. [Online copy]. Accessed online on 1 May 2013 at <http://www.stuff.co.nz/business/farming/4305733/Snow-claims-hit-47m>

Holland, P.G., Wood, V. and Dixon, P., 2009. Learning about the weather in early colonial New Zealand. *Weather and Climate*, **29**, 3-23.

Johnston, K., 2013. 'North Island drought worst in history'. *New Zealand Farmer*, 10 March 2013. [Online copy]. Accessed online 1 May 2013 at <http://www.stuff.co.nz/business/farming/8405004/North-Island-drought-worst-in-history>

Ryan, K. (Interviewer), 2013. From Nine to Noon, 5 February 2013. [*Radio New Zealand* broadcast]. Podcast retrieved on 1 May 2013 from <http://www.radionz.co.nz/national/programmes/ninetoon/audio/2545572/peter-holland-home-in-the-howling-wilderness.aspx> 25 min 19 seconds.

Scene, D., 2013. 'Book examines southern settlers'. *Southland Times*, 11 April 2013. [Online copy]. Accessed 13 April 2013 at <http://www.stuff.co.nz/southland-times/news/8532517/Book-examines-Southern-settlers>