

ADVENTURES WITH THE TWO LUCYS - PART ONE

Katie Reynolds

MEMORIES OF COASTAL FIELD TRIPS TO TARANGA, HEN ISLAND, 1934

In November 1934 the two Lucys, Dorothy Ellin (now Mrs Pat Greechan) and I, spent a wonderful week on Taranga, Hen Island, in the Hen and Chickens group. We had calm gloriously fine weather throughout. In these bright days of early summer the weather was warm enough for comfort but not, as it can become later in the season, hot and enervating. The air was like wine! As we approached Taranga, from 80.4 metres offshore we could savour the sweet spicy fragrance of the vegetation. Pohutukawa was just beginning to flower and promised a brilliant display. The vegetation was luxuriant and beautiful. Our camp was in Dragon Mouth Cove, on the site which had been occupied a few years previously by Lady Alice Fergusson when her husband Sir Charles, was Governor General of New Zealand. Sir Charles's father Sir James had been a former G.G. of N,Z, and his son Sir Bernard was later to hold this position. Lady Alice was a very keen naturalist and it is for her that Lady Alice Island is named. Lady Alice landed on most of our offshore islands, including the Three Kings. As a lad Sir Bernard accompanied his parents on these island trips - often to service lighthouses - on the Govt. steamer Tutanekai, whose master Capt. Bollons was fluently bilingual. Young Bernard learnt his Maori (language) in those days and years later when he became Governor General he had only to brush it up to become fluent. He frequently enjoyed conversing with Maori friends. On the camp site, about 15 m above the beach the chimney and fireplace remained, with wires and hooks of which we made good use. A wire on which equipment could be hauled up from below ran from the beach to the camp site. Our first task on landing was to dig out our water hole. That meant just to scoop out rocks and shingle in a place just a few metres from the sea, and known to the Lucys. As clear fresh water flowed in we covered the hole with a board, to prevent any mishaps to penguins returning at night.

On our camp site a friendly tomtit enjoyed sitting on a perch in the smoke of our fire. We were able to watch, too, a pair of tieke, saddlebacks, as with vigour they pursued their daily search for insects, in crevices and under bark. From time to time they paused to regard us with bright and enquiring eyes. Their lively bursts of song embody for one the very spirit of this environment. Tieke! tieke! tieke! they call.

On Taranga we found that bird song is not confined to a dawn chorus but is a daylong symphony. Was it Ogden Nash who said "Birds are incurably philharmonic!"? Korimako (bell-bird) and tui mimicked one another, and when not actually seen were impossible to distinguish which from t'other unless tui interspersed his pure song with characteristic chucklings.

Very evidently food had been abundant that year, on the island, for all the bush birds were in good condition. For pure joy the tuis flew high up towards the blue vault of Heaven and then, with a fine display of aerobatics, came down with swooping bursts and snatches of song. At dusk kaka came out to play, flying high and then appearing to be blown

and tossed about like pieces of brown paper in the sky. From time to time as they played, snatches of soft sweet song could be heard. Kaka is a fun bird. Parrot that he is, he screeches and chatters. He can also be very melodious. One day we called a pair down from the "tops". Then on a horizontal bough of a large puriri, just above us they sang and chattered and walked parrot fashion. It was apparent that they were observing us with as much pleasure as we observed them. Every now and then they would screech, chatter together then look down as though to say "Won't you do that again? Please? It had been our screech-in-reply that had brought them down to us. To their delight, we did occasionally oblige! Their very elegant small green cousins kakariki, red fronted parakeet, were numerous, though we never got very close to them. A splendid sight it is to see kakariki on toe-toe-kakaho, Cortaderia splendens, particularly when there is a background of blue seas. As they feed on the large, handsome creamy plumes they tear them apart with gay abandon. Kereru, gentle pigeons, like to play, and they put on a fine display of tumbling. We noted that this could confuse a pursuing hawk, kahu, so that he would abandon the chase and seek some other prey. On a large pohutukawa near the camp, and where we could, at close quarters look down on them, there was a thriving colony of pied shag.

Our routine on Taranga was to rise at daybreak or earlier, cook and eat a substantial breakfast, then set off for the day to explore, on a route chosen the previous night. We returned at dusk to cook dinner and to sit round our fire discussing the days doings and listening to travellers tales. Of these our companion Dorothy had a rich store, much enhanced in the telling. She had trained as a nurse at Whangarei hospital, and then had gone overseas on a working holiday. Many young people of today do this. In our day it was unusual. After a spell in the British Isles she went to Africa where her experiences were many and varied. Dorothy has a tremendous sense of humour, a love of nature and all things beautiful. She is one whom Kipling might aptly have described as "a woman of infinite resource and sagacity" - a great companion.

We took in our rucksacks some fresh grapefruit, dried apricots and a small block each of Lancashire parkin. This is a confection that has much the same properties as "scrog" carried by trampers. It is compact, very sustaining and does not provoke thirst. It is not ruined by being sat on, nor even by being dunked in salt water! Also, it is "good for what is the matter with you". Dorothy had brought a large bag of poorman oranges - now more suitably called N.Z. grapefruit or golden fruit. By November these are very sweet and juicy. We speculated as to whether we could if necessary, sip water from the "tanks" at the bases of puwharawa Collospermum hastatum plants. The drawback was that many such a tank, upon inspection, disclosed the presence of a resident weta!

Over 50 years on and I can remember watching sunrise from the tops, a dramatic and awe inspiring sight. The sea all around looked like dark blue velvet and the islands, near and distant, the headlands and shorelines were beautiful and beckoning.

We wondered, up there, about three large rectangular pits. Had they been for water storage perhaps, or were they dewponds? Achaologists say that they are in fact whare sites. In these pits, above the natural peaty debris of the forest, there was a 20 cm deep store of water much enjoyed by the bush birds. As we watched there was an everchanging stream of feathered patrons to these pools. At any one time there would

be a dozen or more birds, of three, sometimes more species, bathing in the pool.

By its form and colour we spotted a small kauri ricker on a distant ridge and sped off to investigate it. It measured 18 m in height and was 15 cm in diameter at breast height. Evidence of regeneration, two much younger rickers grew near by. These, and an assemblage of kauri forest constituents suggested a former kauri forest here as on (comparatively) nearby Great and Little Barrier islands.

In former times many were the sailing ships in these waters. It would not stretch credibility too far to suppose that spars were cut here, though we have no proof. "Muritai" was wrecked on Lady Alice Island in 1908. From that wreck bullocks swam ashore. As well, the Waipu and Whangarei Heads Nova Scotians brought cattle out for grazing. Annually they rowed out - from Waipu - to camp and fish. They salted and sun dried the fish they caught, then nailed these fillets to the walls of their buildings. This was prudent storage for future use. I have seen this and have eaten such fillets. While today this would be considered extreme survival food, I can testify that when properly prepared it is by no means unpleasant. Dried fillets are soaked in fresh water, then steamed or boiled and served with potatoes, kumaras and other vegetables. Parsley sauce is a pleasant addition.

Miss Amy Crisp of Parua Bay (Whangarei Harbour) recalls that in 1910 Mt Manaia was swept from end to end by fire. As a five-year-old she witnessed this event. The second growth stage of vegetation on Mt Manaia and on Taranga show many similarities in progress. Coppermine Island was burnt in 1919. From the mid 1800s the users of these remote islands would have thought only of exploitation, never of conservation. The sighting of fire out there would have caused little concern.

In the 1800s too some sailing ships brought contraband, mainly spirits. On the Waipu coast there were whisky stills. Taranga could have provided a base for some of these activities - smuggling and distilling.

We were late returning to base after our day spent on the top ridges. I can remember travelling at speed down a rugged stream-bed strewn with large boulders and debris, to Old Woman Bay and then round the rocky shoreline to Dragon Mouth Cove. We reached "home" just as we were overtaken by darkness. In those high and far-off times our bodies were young and resilient; we were sure of foot and nimble of knee.

We explored much of the shoreline by dinghy, a refined and excellent form of "armchair botany" and one that gave us access to the study of marine algae. Both here on Taranga and later on the Knights, the dinghy gave us an added dimension. When doing a coastal or island botanical survey the ability to be outside looking in gives a tremendous advantage. One of the features of the N.Z. forest is the great diversity and the subtle differences in tone and shade of colour. Viewing from offshore one can see both the wood and the trees! In coastal forest where pohutukawa dominates the distinctive more yellow-green of tawapou is readily discerned. The rounded form and dark green of haekaro is distinctive. Years later in Whangaroa Harbour it was the "different" colour that alerted us, when among the Pseudopanax arboreus and the P. lessonii we found P. gilliesii. After a preliminary identification, members of the party can be landed to confirm, and if necessary to collect for the record.

Round a rocky shore where chasms and indentations can make progress on

foot difficult if not hazardous, it is with ease that we explore such topographical features by dinghy. Also, it's fun!

One day, when Dorothy and I were down at the water's edge we noticed with delight that little shore skinks were "surfing" in the wavelets. A little further out, on a rock standing a little offshore there was a large crevice about a metre down and overhung by rock. Lining this crevice were about a dozen large crayfish! We had no fishing tackle with us, but, thinking "such an opportunity might not occur again", I cut and stripped flax to make a line. Into this I tied a stone and for bait, some smashed whelks. Immediately this was lowered into the water eager crayfish came forward for the feast. When the first of these had firmly seized the bait I began, very gently to draw in the line. Meanwhile Dorothy had stepped down onto a submerged rock where she was ready carefully to lift the cray out by his long feelers. Afterwards she said "I did it because you told me to". That night, having no utensil in which to cook a "bird" of such proportions, we built up a fire of glowing embers. Over this, on two of those convenient aforementioned hooks, we hung our cray. There it swung and rotated. As legs and claws cooked we pulled them off and ate them. We then placed the carcass on its back on the embers to complete the cooking. On that dark night, by the light of our storm lantern, the glowing embers and the stars - in the absence of moonlight or street lights surprisingly bright- we had a banquet fit a king - the finest tasting crayfish ever!

Dinner music was provided by "Taranga Philharmonic" - the sea, the loud calling and crashing of shearwaters and petrels returning to the island and of penguins noisily treating us to their extensive repertoire of mewling, purring, screaming and trumpeting. They become very vocal when they have trudged up and settled on their home pad. Korora, little blue penguin is a charming fellow. In this island orchestra, by far the most rowdy member would be pakaha, fluttering shearwater. Very loudly he calls "pakahaa-aa-aa" as he comes crashing in, sounding very much larger than the little bird that he is. We found it easy to imagine a much larger, stranger creature, such as a giant prehistoric Pterodactyl. As well as the rumpus made by the birds, there was, all around us, the clicking and whirring of insects and the rasping "wolf-whistle" of the weta, Charles Fleming used this term for the day-time song of cicada. I feel that it is appropriate to borrow it for the weta's serenade. In spite of what sounds like a very noisy night we very soon became adjusted to it all and slept well. No doubt our very strenuous daytime activities contributed to this. We often heard the rustings of tuatara and of the Polynesian rat, kiore. It is thought that the latter have a taste for lizards, tuatara eggs, birds eggs and young. In us they discovered a "bonus" when they completely "peeled" our large sandwich loaves. We were usually awakened before daybreak by the wonderful hullabaloo of the seabirds leaving the island, to set off for their fishing grounds.

We did enjoy the many splendid puka, Meryta sinclairii, tawapou Planchonella costata, broad-leaved maire Nestegis apetala, kohekohe Dysoxylum spectabile, puriri Vitex lucens, the pure stands of taraire Beilschmiedia tarairi, turepo Paratrophis banksii, a rugged plant on windy ridges. On dry slopes about 50 metres up I thought that the large leaved wai-u-atua Rhabdothamnus solandri was a plant of special charm. Its light, elegant form of growth and its large leaves and flowers of soft gold are very charming. We climbed up to greet raupo-taranga

Xeronema callistemon on its rocky outcrop, where A.T. Pycroft had found it in 1933. On many such rocky stations rengarenga Arthropodium flourished in all its pristine glory, untouched by garden snails and slugs. Beautiful Hebe parviflora assumes the proportions of a small tree here. Round the shorelines harakeke, Phormium tenax, taupata Coprosma repens, ngaio Myoporum laetum, Hymenanthera novae-zelandiae form a dense shrubby barrier. On the rocks below we saw rauhuia, Linum monogynum, koheriki Scandia rosifolia, Senecio lautus, horokaka Disphyma australe, ma-ako-ako Samolus repens, remuremu Selliera radicans, Salicornia australis, punakuru Lobelia anceps. Many in the last bracket enjoy a seepage of fresh water.

In many places ferns form the floor cover of the forest. In places we saw Asplenium lamprophyllum dominant, hiding the ground for decametres at a time with its tufts of soft green fronds, presenting a vision of great beauty. A. oblongifolium and A. flaccidum were frequent, also Polystichum richardii.

One of the most amazing plants there must be nikau Rhopalostylis sapida which on Taranga, as on Little Barrier, assumes giant proportions. The largest can have trunks 26 metres in height, one metre in diameter and fronds measuring as much as 8 metres in length. I quote A.E. Esler is saying that these belong to the "southern" variety of nikau, and more nearly resemble the Kermadec R. cheesmanii and the Norfolk Island R. baueri than the northern nikau which is much smaller and holds its fronds more upright. The large grove of this "southern" nikau at Old Woman Bay with their elegantly arching huge fronds is truly magnificent. **No feather duster this palm!**

At no time during our wonderful week on Taranga were the Lucys consciously teaching me. I was however, a listener during their scientific discussions; and they were there to answer my questions. I absorbed a tremendous amount of exciting botany and knew that henceforth this would be my main interest. As my love and respect for this beautiful environment deepened I began to understand the vital importance of ecology.

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ROSS MICHIE

The passing of 93 year old Mr Ross Michie of Kaitaia will be mourned by his many botanical friends.

His extensive knowledge of the plants of the Far North was well known and he was frequently consulted about localities. I did not have the pleasure of knowing him until one summer evening when my husband and I were passing his gate and we stopped to chat. When he heard about my interest in botany he took us round his back garden to show us some of his trees. One of these, a Pittosporum virgatum had a remarkable diversity of foliage and he gave me some specimens which I later pressed. I would like to share these with members and have made this sketch as a memory of a short encounter with a very interesting gentleman.

Katie Mays
3 November 1987.