THE Exiles OF Asbestos Cottage

Also by Jim Henderson

*RMT** (Official New Zealand War History, 1954)
Tobacco Farm (1954)
Te Kao 75 (1957)
22 Battalion (Offical New Zealand War History, 1958)
One Foot at the Pole (1962)
Unoffical History (1964)
Open Country (1965; and five succeeding radio Open Country books: 1967, 1969, 1971, 1974, 1982)
New Zealand's South Island in Colour (with K. & J. Bigwood, 1966)
The New Zealanders (with J. Siers, 1975)
Swagger Country (1976)
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Down from Marble Mountain (1983)
No Honour; No Glory (with Spence Edge, 1983)
Tales of the Coast (1984)
Jim Henderson's People (1986)
Jim Henderson's New Zealand (1989)
Jim Henderson's Home Country (1990) *From Top To Bottom – Reinga to Bluff* (1998)
Mountain Farm – Bush Farm (2000)

Jim Henderson received the MBE for writing and radio.

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* Reserve Motor Transport

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To, for and because of Peg –
and Annie

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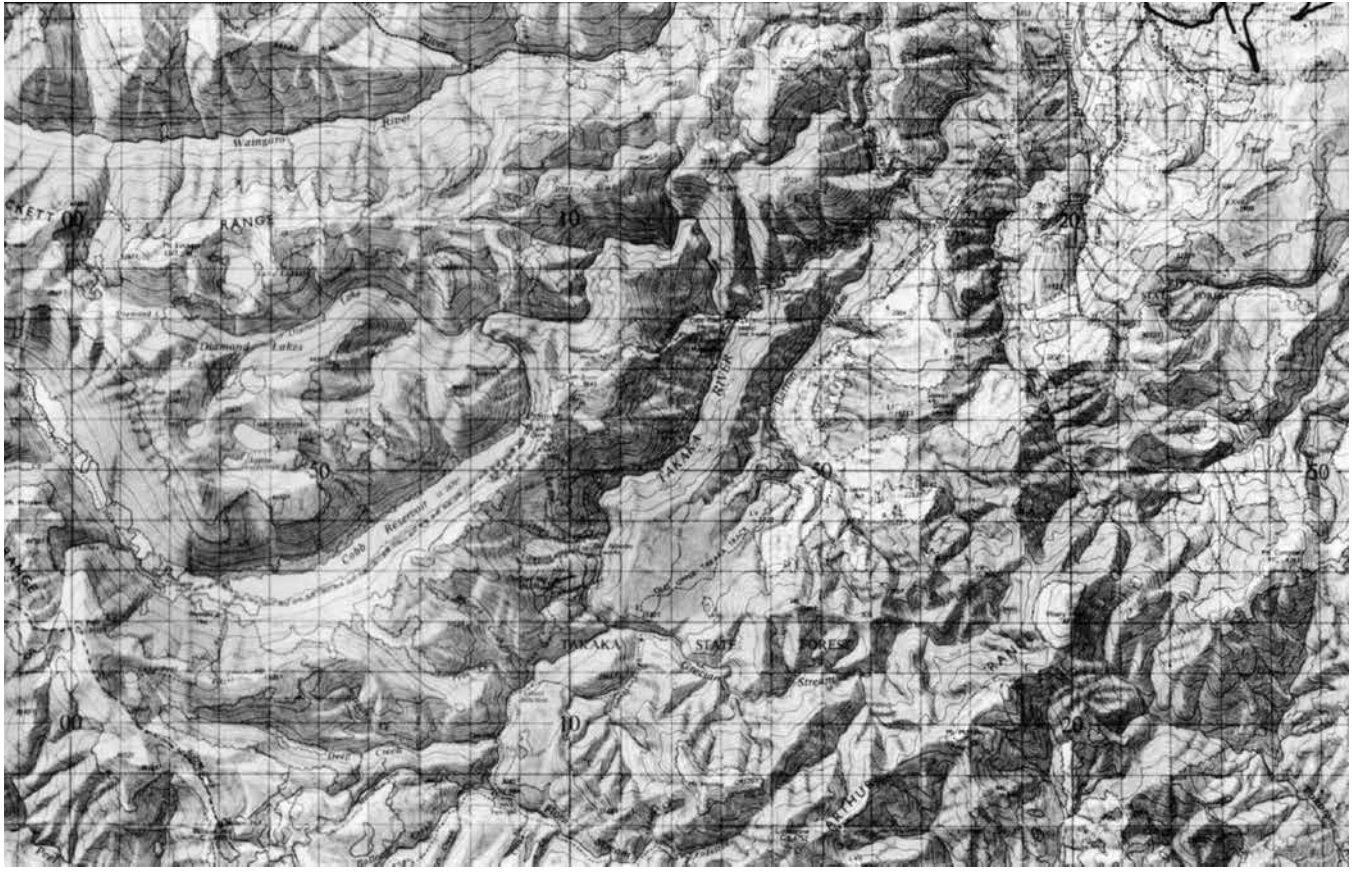
"You will never drink the fresh water out of the Arthur Creek that the Chaffeys enjoyed in 1913 and 1914. Chaffey could never do that today with his runaway girlfriend to their hideout, so I think you are writing about an era that will never be repeated. Today we have red tape, red tape, we have lost our freedom to roam as we wish without having a *permit*. I love my freedom." Roy Mytton, trackmaker, musterer, Mount Arthur and Cobb Valley, Motueka, August 1979. Returning to Mount Mytton, overlooking the Cobb, his ashes scattered, August 1980.

Just across Cook Strait, higher than any North Island mountain, stands Mount Tapuaenuku, "The Footsteps of the Rainbow God". Here in mid-winter young Ed Hillary went climbing and learning with Jack McBurney before tackling Everest. When Jack McBurney later became forest ranger at the Cobb, he built the hut now known as Chaffey Hut close by Hannah Creek and Chaffey Stream. Mountains must have more than homage.

"Tapi" was first climbed by a twenty-five-year-old local farmer Nehemiah McRae, May 1864, who returning from a pig hunt just eight years later was drowned in the flooded Awatere River, calling to the weeping shepherd helpless on the bank: "Farewell, remember me."


Waimano
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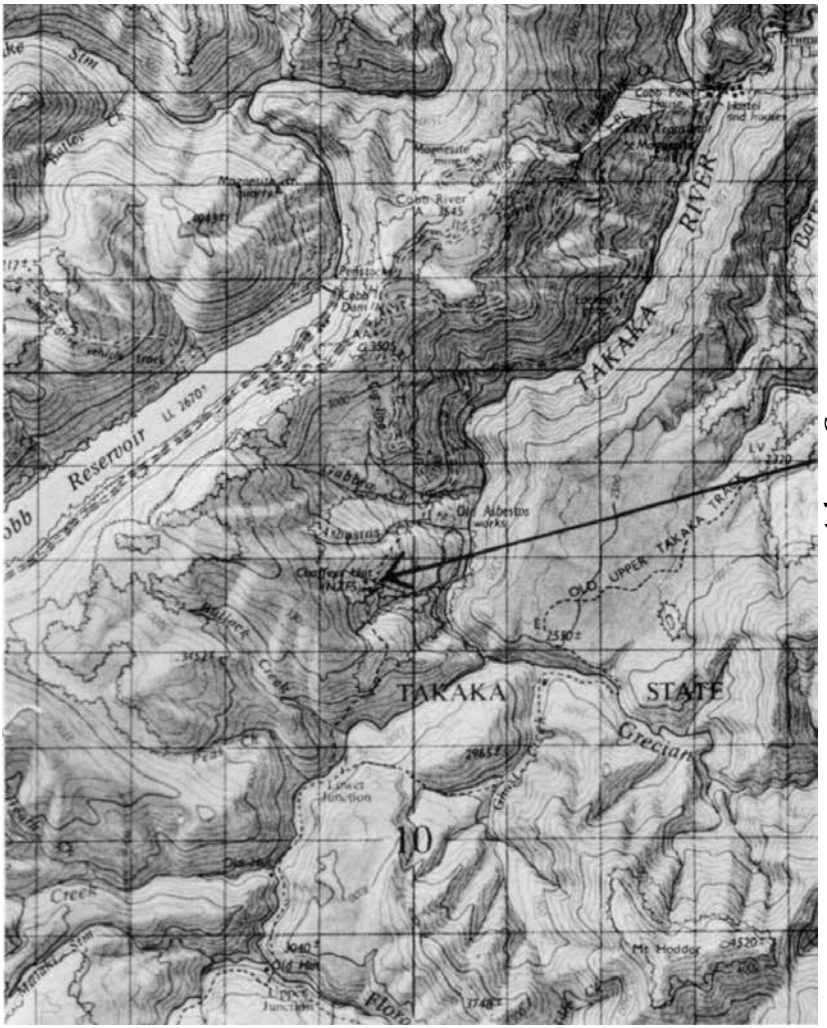

Asbestos Cottage

Motueka

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CHAPTER 1

Up, Up and Away

"JUST A HUT on a hillside," some say, with a touch of impatience.

A run of the mill hillside too at that, chiefly brown drab scrub, patches of beech with a hesitant ragged air in parts where different minerals or fires of long ago had affected the growth. Not much of a place to start a garden. But the man and the woman did – classical gooseberries, flowers too, and hollyhocks.

In mid-distance to the east the tops of rimus showed in the Takaka Valley. Not a sign of man in sight, except of course after dark, provided no snow or rain was falling or stealthy fog creeping, those tiny brief streaks of light for a minute or two on the Takaka Hill, another world away.

But what do you expect, at 2700 feet, lost in the uninhabited hills away behind the small town of Motueka, where the bush and few mountain tracks, wild rivers and wilder creeks roughly cover most of the western top of the South Island.

No roads. Not even a neighbour. No sign of a neighbour anywhere. Why, the place hadn't been explored thoroughly, or mapped in detail. Doubly weird, doubly haunting, the cry of a woodhen, eerily underlining the loneliness.

What a place to live in.

What a place to take a woman. She would not see another woman for seven years. What a woman, a city woman at that, to remain there. For almost forty years. Even when she broke her leg, Annie refused to budge. And in that time, out to civilization only once, compelled by an internal trouble, a hospital job, bitterly resented.

Chaffey, her distinctive lover, mining asbestos, had the scarcely endearing whim on an occasional wintry night of sleeping with imperfect explosives under his armpits. Did this dauntless woman continue to share the bed on such occasions?

What would Annie have missed most?

"She was leading the life she wanted to lead."

She missed children. She never saw them up there for years. She had two young sons of her own, left behind, and after some time had passed one would visit her occasionally, briefly, on holiday.

Nevermore to cuddle a baby with its fat little bent-up legs, the hollow in that so-vulnerable neck.

Never more:
Miranda,
Never more.

The absence of children could have been her greatest ache. Back they would come in dreams, and for years she would awake with the soft touch still of a child cheek against hers.

Only in dreams, only in dreams.

Years later Phyllis Wilkins, wearied but triumphant, patient as a limbfitter, succeeded in carrying her sixteen-months baby boy up the steep track to Asbestos Cottage; for Annie a baby in that setting and circumstance was difficult to contemplate, putting it mildly: "She was overwhelmed, so delighted, to see this baby boy of mine, she cuddled the baby to her, hugged him over and over, made a great fuss of him, nearly ate him. There's something which can never equal cuddling a baby like that, and she hadn't seen one for twenty years. So many years of empty arms. She didn't want to let him go."

And at Christmas. See Annie smiling and reflecting and stroking an orange – did an orange always fill the toe of her bulging Christmas stocking in her South Canterbury girlhood summers?

Ruth Pahl gave her this orange in 1941—she was "absolutely delighted, she said she had not seen an orange in the twenty-eight years she had been living there so far. I hope she ate it, didn't keep it to look at." "I remember mother carefully packing and posting off from Timaru boiled sweets, and some beef dripping in a baking powder tin, for Annie had written saying she fancied dripping on fresh bread with pepper and salt," writes a niece in Timaru, Ethel Finn. (Annie wasn't the only one – this can be delicious: to be deprived of such modest yet unattainable fancies increases the longings, until, somehow, you just forget.) "We never knew how long

the parcels sat at Takaka before he collected them, and perishable things were at risk."

The well-meaning gift of a tin of condensed milk from another visiting party was refused. Annie felt she had detected a hint of patronage. Unless a gift came with love, it would be refused, with a touch of coldness, for she was hostess, and they her guests, not grocers.

Annie had her pride. Above all, her pride.

"Gentleman Annie" her family in Timaru had called her, part teasing, part approving, as she grew into a woman.

Annie was strong, she had to be, always, she was particular about her appearance, "liked nice things", sewed well, admired the royal family and all they did, and especially what they wore.

She is our stronger of the two? Our main character to emerge as these pages and the years turn? The more memorable?

A no-nonsense woman, with a perkiness always about her little hats. Those chipper little hats her symbol? For a full day's expedition in the sun, she had a big shady hat. Sometimes, although it wilted fast, she wore a sprig of honeysuckle pinned on her jacket.

Her pride never faded.

Neither did Chaffey's, for all the batterings which came to each of them.

Welded together by their wedding wounds. Lean and lanky to the day of his true packman's death alone by the packtrack in the snow, his features weathered into that bony, laconic, subdued-humorous look the outdoors and the windy heights whittle and bestow, an indefatigable prospector and one of the best packmen in New Zealand, Henry Fox Chaffey prided himself too on those first great loads totalling twenty tons and more he had hauled, not on his back certainly, but as a South Canterbury contractor-carter, grinding and streamer-smoking his way over South Canterbury for the cockies – mountains of woolbales, sacks of grain by the thousand!

That time when the South waved gold, and the heartbreaking silver of swaying barley.

Ah, the Mackenzie Country, where thieves are commemorated, and honest men forgot!

A carrier and contractor, savouring and rejoicing into his thirties, "Give it a Go" Chaffey's beat now ranged from Burkes Pass to Lake Pukaki and probably

took in most of the sheepstations in the Mackenzie Country. Feeling his way into the blood and bone of a new country, he'd slogged on shearingboards and sheepstations, behind him a great bewildering sorrow to belt him like a hammer unexpectedly at times, and whispering memories of the well-to-do home with servants and silver he'd left in Somerset.

He owned a threshing mill at Timaru around 1906, a spectacular sight.

He hauled away now at cut prices, irritating competitors. Over very poor roads, if roads at all, he delivered in triumph one grain load which to the end of his days he reckoned couldn't be beaten: 315 bags of wheat on four trucks from seventeen miles out of Timaru. What's more, part of the way three miles up a by-road, grade one in six. There now!

"These were 240-lb bags," Chaffey would stress, leaning against the bar or squatting with smoke-oh pannikin of tea, gently moving it to and fro by wool-greased knee. "That load you know would go from thirty-three to thirty-five tons."

Chaffey, the first man to drive a traction engine to the Hermitage – and they put politicians on our postage stamps.

His cavalcade in full marching order, the pride in this array sensed in Chaffey's own description: "The trucks built to order at Andersons Limited in Christchurch, patent 3½-inch axles, springs to carry nine tons, ironbark wheels with six-inch by one-inch tyres – good stuff. Believe me." See him smoking his way, a land-going captain, from Balmoral Station, Lake Tekapo way, over rise and fall and twist into Timaru, a Herculean load of 108 bales of wool, thirty-six bales piled, roped and supine on each of the three trucks. Stray kids, stray dogs, circled in madness, trundling and mouthing before such a load. How those chaffinches flew up, sparks from an anvil, from the roadside! In years to come, these darting birds infuriating from season to season, would be digging up all Chaffey's peas in his remote hideout far away in Nelson's mountains.

Of course when this wool mountain arrived in the dark right opposite the Excelsior Hotel in Stafford Street, the two back trucks had to collapse clean through the pavement into the main sewer below. Twenty minutes before closing time – the boozers closed at 11 pm then. Plenty of garrulous half-shot but willing hands, generous with advice and counter-advice, had all the wool stacked safely in the store by I am, when they turned to even more willingly and cut the keg.

"Help yourselves, boys. Wool's always going down anyway, the cockies say."

No friend of the railway commissioners, the county councils, the roads boards, he fought the lot, to his deep satisfaction found they looked on him rather like a plague, "and in the law suits won the first four and lost the rest".

He would have had dealings, particularly wool from the Mackenzie Country, with early traction engine carter-contractors Wigley and Thornley, where again no record is available. Timaru has forgotten him.

Chaffey, mounted upon his fire-breathing traction engine all gleam, grease, grime and go, streaming his black banner of coal smoke up and away from the hungry guts of his furnace, both knight and dragon, crusading and clanking over rolling Mackenzie countryside, such a contrast to the waiting broken poorhouse of Nelson's backblocks.

But in the Nelson backblocks, as strange shadows in time beckoned and joined, Annie would be with him, warm-hearted, tender-hearted, worth a horizon of stinking old engines, a county of elegant Somerset houses.

How in the first place did Chaffey and his companion Annie quit Canterbury's plains and disappear to the brink of forty years into their extraordinary hideout and life?

"Prospecting," says Chaffey bluntly.

A brief and somewhat astringent summary Chaffey put down in his old age says he simply heard of, then followed up, asbestos interests in Nelson's remotest mountains. Hand in hand with this go stories passed on from old-timers up the Motueka Valley at the beginning of this century.

A stranger came to the valley, to Pokororo district. He came from the south, a first-class shearer, and he boarded with the Boyes family for several months well before the First World War.

He knocked up excellent tallies on neighbouring shearingboards, proved no stranger when it came to handling hefty merinos and Romneys, and yarned entertainingly about southern sheep and stations and bosses.

He told of one shearing gang doing the rounds, probably in North Canterbury, where a leathery Australian was always the ringer, or top shearer, by a few sheep from the stranger. The shearers' rations in those days were not too good. Neither was the accommodation. A hayloft was the stranger's sleeping-place. A sympathetic hen first thing every morning laid an egg right by him in the hay.

"This daily egg," said the stranger solemnly, "after a week managed to give me just that extra nourishment and strength to beat that Australian shearer."

Always obliging and glad to pass on shearing tips and hints, the stranger taught Les Green to shear, and to shear exceptionally well. The stranger urged his accomplished pupil to join a southern circuit of woolsheds next season, but Les said no, and later went away to the war, and was killed.

When that shearing season (or perhaps the following one) ended around Motueka, the stranger, who called himself Charlie Fenton, took off from the Boyes place, a handy jumping-off point in the valley. He slipped away and vanished into the mountains, looking for gold as he said, plausibly enough. Not a word about asbestos. But neither gold nor asbestos was the main motive. An extra – ordinary idea and resolve possessed him.

The stranger was not Charlie Fenton. He was Chaffey, seeking a hideout. He paid particular attention to the Leslie Valley, and up and around Arthur Creek.

He was learning to know, feeling out one of New Zealand's most silent and unvisited areas as only he would ever know it, to prepare a hideout, a shelter for his companion Annie when the time came for them to make the break.

That's how some oldies tell it up the Motueka Valley today, and basically, they're right. Chaffey began probing up there in 1908, the year he got his divorce from his first wife. The heights, the setting, the campfire, could have given some consolation, some soothing escape.

Each year, coming up briefly from Timaru, he made these short visits, with a bit of shearing to cover expenses, then back down south. He would join up with a fellow enthusiast or two, gold and asbestos the lure. He would have had much to learn. Knocked back by unseasonable snow in December 1911, he made up for it with three others camping and prospecting for five weeks in 1912, delving and speculating about minerals and goldbearing reefs around the rugged setting of Mount Arthur.

By 1913, a climax of his life approaching, growing ever more familiar with this lost land, lured and enchanted, he was drawn to one area "practically unknown", ideal for his growing purpose.

He made ready and began to stock a runaway hut abandoned by a once-hopeful mining syndicate, a small quick unobtrusive bush hut crouching close by Arthur Creek, a beautiful and emphatically secluded spot, but prudently not too close

to the water. How those creeks can rise, to swirl and gnaw in yellow rage, within a couple of hours of downpour.

He made quiet arrangements with the Mytton family, in Motueka Valley, for his wife-to-be to stay there briefly. He then went south, fixed up all business arrangements, then returned to his Arthur Creek shack with more food, and came down to the Valley at a given time to pick up his partner.

As arranged, up Annie came from the south, leaving behind her two young sons to be trained as sailors, cruel and wrenching though the decision was, even with her unhappy marriage falling apart.

So, presumably by ship, via Wellington to Nelson:

A ship is floating in the harbour now,
The wind is hovering o'er the mountain's brow.

Annie stepped ashore with "8 packs goods" at Motueka wharf from the little coastal ship Koi on 2 February 1914 *to be lady of the solitude*. Charging 30 shillings, Hubert Holyoake with his two horse cart, took her wondering and wide of eye, up Motueka Valley to the side branching Graham Valley, to the Myttons' secluded home.

In a week Chaffey appeared, out of the mountains, the mists behind him, to take her back on the incredible journey and destination, like some fated ancient Greek led numb and almost stunned mentally through an underground labyrinth, to engender a legend.

At last, at last, blessed ALONE. But to this extent?

"Believe me and it was a hideout too in those days," Roy Mytton said. "Chaffey told me himself that the First World War was going three months before he knew.

"They were very scared that the husband she was now separating from might get on their trail, but it never happened."

Hard feelings too could have remained somewhere from Chaffey's own divorce five years earlier from that disastrous marriage made in Wellington.

Prepare her though he must have done for a lonely place, this raw exile must have come as a shock, an almost incomprehensible blow. We can only hope and believe the remarkable Annie swallowed hard, as the beset Lady Macbeth advised, screwed her courage to the sticking-place, or as Joy Shepard of Blenheim more

recently put it "The don't-give-in grit of *living*", and in time found the setting tolerably idyllic; or drove her mind to considering it was: this extraordinary force to command a brain: "We will not be beaten". Either way, like a castaway, she could do precious little about it.

A clumping packhorse, hairy, sardonic with grass-slobbered bit in drooping mouth, farting derisively on steep places, carried her away.

A Ruth into an alien land.

The couple moved from the secretive Arthur Creek hut to the slightly less remote Asbestos Cottage after two to three years. But they both moved back and forth between Arthur Creek hut and Asbestos Cottage for some time, as an apprehensive wild creature shuttles on impulse between shelters.

Each time, they shifted their humble belongings as well.

In incredible – almost unbelievable – contrast, as this shuttling to and fro at last drew to an end, Chaffey's half-brother Ralph was made an honorary Aide-de-Camp to the Governor, Lord Liverpool. He would have been familiar with the luxuries and lavishness of Government House in Wellington. Behind the booming and the braid, when would he suddenly be fish-hooked with the thought of his half-brother in the hills, a hundred miles and a world away to the west?

Eventually, after nearly twenty years had passed, Henry and Annie married, he now sixty-three, she fifty-four, following the death of her forsaken husband.

Annie must have given the most tremendous sigh of relief of her lifetime when the two finally settled permanently into Asbestos Cottage. "Now I can see the car lights going over the Takaka Hill, making it more civilized," she remarked, with admirable understatement or irony, to young Roy Mytton as he appeared with packhorse to deliver some stores to them.

In the pocket of her coat, touching as one does for comfort and reassurance some special tiny stone or fingernail fragment of smooth wood picked up in a musing mood from the beach, she carried into exile in 1913 into those wild hills, a simple little china willow pattern pin-tray (a little saucer) three and a half inches across. This had belonged to her mother. The keepsake was said to be then 100 years old. The little blue ornament remained very dear to her, very close and comforting, among the scrub, manuka, and the ancient remembering cries from the stalking brown woodhens.