BEHIND THE HILL

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

Robin began her writing career in the 1950s by contributing fortnightly articles to the Auckland Weekly News. She was author and photographer for two series of social study books; *Families of New Zealand*, and *People at Work*. Publisher Price Milburn.

Robin's *Country Readers* sold in New Zealand, Australia, and the United Kingdom.

In the 1980s and early '90s she studied people's lives in 63 countries, as diverse as North Korea, the Soviet Union and Saudi Arabia. Her articles were syndicated in the The Dominion, The Christchurch Press and Waikato Times.

In 2014 Random House published Robin's best-selling memoir, *Hard Country: A Golden Bay Life*.

BEHIND THE HILL

where kids ran wild and resilience developed

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Dedicated to all those who grew up
in isolated rural settlements.

CONTENTS

PROLOGUE

Behind The Hill is a social history, recording people's lives from interviews, from one end of Golden Bay to the other. Real names have been used, for those who generously agreed to it, and identities changed for others. But each and every portrayal has something to say about the values and norms of the time.

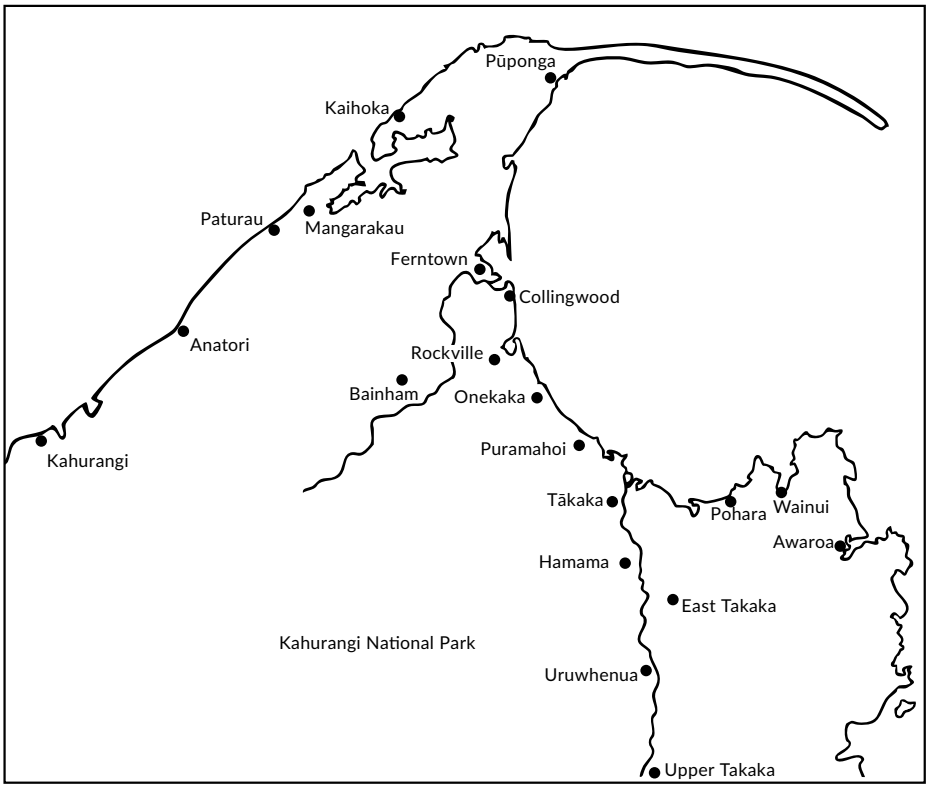
The book follows the revolutionary changes that affected one of New Zealand's most isolated areas over succeeding decades – with the arrival of hippies, worldly foreigners, IT specialists, retired professionals and bearded environmentalists.

Clearly demonstrated is the advantage to children brought up in the pre-digital age, with little money, but with the freedom to run wild and take risks, to develop character and survival skills.

Equally important, life behind the physical and psychological barrier of the Tākaka Hill, has forced residents to become resilient and develop leadership ability, that might not, in easier circumstances, and larger populations, have been discovered.

"We are what we are because our community is geographically defined. The Tākaka Hill makes sure of this. It clearly defines the make-up of our unique, diverse community."

Karen Savage. Golden Bay High School teacher.


Pūponga
Kaihoka
Paturau
Mangarakau
Ferntown
Collingwood
Anatori
Rockville
Bainham
Onekaka
Kahurangi
Puramahoi
Tākaka
Pohara
Wainui
Awaroa
Hamama
East Takaka
Kahurangi National Park
Uruwhenua
Upper Takaka

PREFACE

My credentials for having written this social history, were that I had witnessed its situation in nearly every way, and had only to listen to my own world talking. Thus a thread of autobiography runs strongly through it.

Having been born between the wars, during the last years of the Great Economic Depression, I was in a kind of natural conversation with all three generations who spoke to me about their lives. And I've kept listening and observing over the decades, up until the present day.

In *Hard Country: A Golden Bay Life*, I told how Garry, my husband, and I had come to Golden Bay in 1957, to take on 1,500 acres of weed-strewn, mountainous country. The farm's infertility had bankrupted its three previous owners. Rocklands was all we could afford.

Hidden away in the north-west corner of the South Island, separated by mountains and sea from the rest of New Zealand, Golden Bay was beautiful, quaint, but a back eddy from the mainstream of life.

The tortuous road to get here struggled up from a more worldly life on the eastern side of the Pikikiruna Range, to a height of 791 metres, to descend even more steeply to the Takaka Valley below.

You could see our little house from a long way off, a tiny four-roomed dwelling under a peaked roof, with a small veranda. I'd looked at the rotten floorboards. What if a child were to fall through the gaps? We soon had three children under four years of age.

We had no money, just a mortgage, a few sticks of furniture, and some farm tools.

"You won't last long here, my girl," a whiskery chap had said, leaning on the gate while charging his pipe. "It's as bleak and useless a farm as you could wish for."

A more cheerful greeting had come from a younger man. "I've got a cauliflower for you, but it's not ready yet," he declared from the doorstep before making a hasty retreat. An hour later he returned. "It's ready now. Here it is. Have it for your tea."

Robert, a farm neighbour, invited us to call. He had two dogs, Sky and Patch, and a cat who could open doors and eat cabbage. We talked for a few minutes about the weather, and then I remember two things Robert said.

Firstly, with his tang of acid: "You know what they always said about your farm, don't you? That it was the poorest land in the district." The other, with the warmth that spread like butter around him, "But it will be nice to hear children's voices at Rocklands again."

Indeed, for our children, Tim, Sally and Michael, we had come to a place with the best possible environment, and the best possible era to grow up in. The 1950s and early 60s are recognised by academics today as *The Golden Age for Children*.

Our offspring's world in a beautiful but isolated region, on hopeless land with impoverished parents, was to be an entire way of being, which involved the inter-weaving and understanding of landscape, village, family and self, only to be found in the pre-digital age, in isolated communities where the outside world intruded little.

With native bush beside the house our children would wake with the bell birds. If it wasn't a school day, they would dig into drawers to dress in something. Anything. Then breakfast was on the go. Once the chores were done, they were off.

"Come home before dark," I'd yell after them.

It's not good for children to have a life that was too easy, I decided. No money? Good. It pushed children to find their own resources. No toys? So, they made their own. Chores? Kids in hard-up families learned to work, pull their weight, and develop skills.

There'd been so few allowances made for our kids. It was a difficult farm, the infertility, the diminished returns, but a lack of money did not matter in Golden Bay.

CHAPTER 1

GOLDEN BAY

Golden Bay in the 1950s, when I first came to live here, was a back eddy from the mainstream of life. It was quite literally the end of the earth.

Most people who lived here rarely went anywhere else. They were isolated, physically and sometimes emotionally. Anywhere else, Nelson or Nicaragua, was simply "Over the Hill", and "Over the Hill" was "Outside" – a different world

I met people who in their whole lives had never left the district.

Outside the Bay there were plenty of threats at this time. The death penalty was still in force. Eight people were executed during this decade, with four hangings at Mt Eden prison in 1955 alone. On the other side of the Pacific the Korean War was raging. Christchurch

was engulfed in the fall-out from the Parker-Hulme murder.

"What do you know about the waterfront strike in Wellington?" I ask Bill Owen, who was driving past in his old Morris car, with the head of his dog stuck out the window, mouth open, tongue out, who had drawn up for a chat.

"Not much," he replied. "I don't take much interest in the news normally."

"Never?"

"Nothing much on, is there?"

"Well…"

Events that happened locally were more interesting than anything that occurred in the outside world. When Pam Peacock had twins, the whole district felt proud.

At about the point where the Pikikiruna Range becomes the Arthur Range, Highway 60 coils its way over the Tākaka Hill, around 257 bends, with some corners being almost 320-degree hairpins.

Any decent storm sends rocks and rubble tumbling down its sides, sometimes sweeping away the road itself. It was not uncommon for the Bay to be isolated for a week, but the region was used to isolation and well populated long before the road was completed in 1900.

There was a hunger for survival. People had to be prepared to fend for themselves, so they made things happen.

In 1941, when they heard that the Minister of Public Works, Bob Semple, was coming on an inspection, a convoy of timber trucks was hastily organised to meet, and possibly pass him, on the Hill. One grazed the side of the ministerial limousine – either by design or accident.

A very shaken Government Minister alighted at the pub at the bottom of the Hill, phoned his headquarters, and ordered an immediate improvement to the road.

There was a daily bus service to Nelson city, provided by Newmans

Coach Lines. An early driver was Henry Franklyn, the youngest in a family of eleven children, with the nickname of Tinny. He was a mere lad of 14 when he first drove the bus, carrying a hockey team over the Hill.

He was still driving over the Hill when he was forty. This was not to say that he didn't meet trouble. A certain distance on his route cost 7s 6d which Tinny, with his stammer, was incapable of saying.

"How much is the fare, driver?" came the enquiry.

"F…f…fifteen bob…but Half Price!"

CHAPTER 2

HAWKES BAY

The contrast between the Bay where I'd spent my childhood, Hawkes Bay, a prosperous province in the North Island, and Golden Bay, could not have been more extreme.

The Hawkes Bay I knew in the 1940s was a region sustained by style. Social strata were clearly defined and preserved. Horizontally speaking, the top layer consisted of the sheep station families, with status within that class depending upon length of ownership.

Young heirs were expected to marry *the right girl*. A rigid social conformity had long before set in.