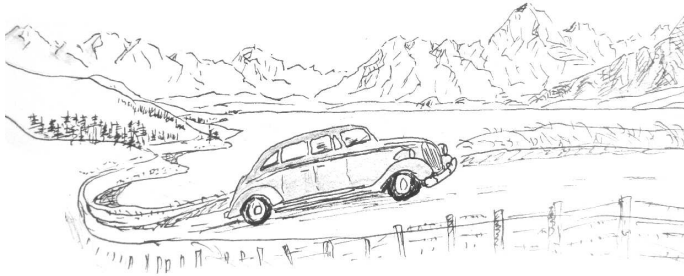


Now What've You Gone'n Done?

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Preface

These light-hearted stories of youth in New Zealand were written during decades lived away: an occasional fixation, a cause of midnight bursts of laughter, discarded, rediscovered, obsessively adjusted and reframed. Nothing weighty to be sure, yet perhaps a speck of time and place preserved. 1960-ish, the South Island, young men, rural types, their character and manner, their language and preoccupations, on farm, at school and university. Comprehensive? Not at all. Slanted? Without a doubt. Over-the-top? Perhaps a little. But you be the judge. Is this the way it was, more or less, for some of us, in the way-back-when?



Shearing at Taumata Hills

THE Monday morning shearers sat at the breakfast table at Taumata Hills, facing another week of woolshed toil. Whiskers yawned, and smiled as if from a weekend happily recalled. Murdoch stared at his empty plate, his thin bony head propped on a fist. Bert Dunnigan scratched a tattooed arm with his blunt fingers and glanced at his watch: quarter to seven, almost starting time – and Dave, the young shedhand they’d picked up last month, was missing.

“Where is that boy?” grunted Bert.

Old Mr. Nyland, boss at Taumata Hills, was just in from oiling the machines in the woolshed: “Needs a bit of straightening out, that Dave,” he muttered. Murdoch squashed his fag in the ashtray with the grimace of assent. Bert shrugged, and stomped down the passage to the phone. From the radio *Auckland, Waikato, Waitomo* came the voice of the Met. Office forecaster, *Taranaki, Taihape, Taumaranui*; and over that quiet, familiar intonation came fragments of Bert’s conversation: *David this morning? ... on Friday? ... back, Mrs. Rutherford?*

“Not seen since Friday,” he announced upon re-appearing. “Went fishing apparently, on account of the rain.”

Murdoch, upright and glaring, thumped the table. “Are you going to phone someone else then, Bert?”

Bert rubbed his unshaven stubble, deliberating. “We’ll give him ‘till smoko,” he calmly said, and glanced at Mr. Nyland.

Murdoch clicked his tongue and dropped his head back on his fist.

“Got a belly-ache, Murdoch?”

“I said we’ll be lucky to see him this side’ve Christmas, Bert.”



In the woolshed an hour later the hum and chatter of machinery reverberated about the old tin walls. Shafts of sunlight burst through grimy windows and fell on the skirting table, where Mr. Nyland was tearing belly-wool from a thin, ratty fleece. Opposite him Murdoch was picking out thistles, and quietly cursing Bert – who’d handed him the absent rouseabout’s job. On the smooth-worn, greasy boards, Bert and Whiskers, bare-armed in black singlets and dripping sweat, bent low over their ewes, their elbows flying. Whiskers, cutting belly-wool, worked the shears in prods and careful flicks; while Bert, with long and flowing swings along the ewe’s back, sprung waves of creamy wool onto the board. Overhead a canvas belt rushed through the wall, circled a pulley, and rushed back to its source in a droning outroom, driving the

clattering pieces in the shearers' hands. Bert's ewe scuffled down the ramp to his count-out pen, and Bert straightened up, tugged the switch-rope, and let go his handpiece.

"You on picnic, Murdoch?" he yelled, booting aside the shorn fleece as he hurried into his catching pen.

"Watch y'r gob, Bert!" hurled Murdoch recklessly. "Keep the lip for Dave, should he ever get here."



Murdoch dabbed aside the dags at Bert's stand, and crouched before the fleece. In one wide sweep of his long arms he gathered it into a ball and whipped it away, just as Bert returning with his next struggling ewe banged backwards through the pen door. Murdoch flung the fleece high over the skirting-table: it unfurled gracefully, and floated down onto the grating. Mr. Nyland, bending at once to pick off the daggy tufts and thistles, now remarked that the press was

full, Murdoch'd better "bang her down." But now Whiskers piped up: "Sheep-oh!"

"All *right!*" screamed Murdoch, striding into the pens. Waving outstretched arms, he crushed a dozen frightened ewes into Whiskers' catching pen, screeching at the top of his lungs: "Shoosh-sh sh sh sh - c'mon y' friggin' old bags - sh-sh sh sh sh." And as he walked by Bert on his way to the press he gave vent to his feelings: "I'll flatten that no-hoping little shit."

"Go easy now, Murdoch," Bert retorted casually, "what with

his pa 'n all. If you're still sour from what he said the other day – well you *are* too free with your boot when a ewe plays up.”

Ten o'clock, and Mr. Nyland switched off the machines. Sudden silence revealed the cough of a ewe in the back pen, and the tick-tick-tick of the tin roof expanding in the hot sun. Out on the loading ramp Mrs. Nyland had dropped off a steel teapot and a basket of warm scones. Bert, slouched on the ramp with his legs dangling, gazed absent-mindedly at the “Blueys”, whose bush-clad slopes, rising mistily beyond the Pomahaka River, rimmed the rolling paddocks of Taumata valley.

“Tough old bags, these,” he commented matter-of-factly to Mr. Nyland. “Lucky if I’ done thirty-five.”

“Y’ve done thirty-eight, Bert,” snapped Murdoch.

Mr. Nyland’s dogs, Tan and Ben, lay on the grass nearby, heads up and panting with contented, narrowed eyes; while from the count-out pens came a chorus of “baaah’s” from the disconcerted ewes, whose clean-shorn flanks gleamed in the sunlight. A pungent scent of nearby bluegums wafted over on the breeze, mixing with odours of wool and fresh dung. Murdoch dipped his cup in a jug of barley-water, appreciatively sipped the cold, floury brew, and spat on the grass.

“Dave’s not going to show,” he declared.

Bert nodded grimly, and wolfed his scone.

“Well are you going to call somebody else?” prodded Murdoch.

Suddenly all ears were tuned: “Burbble babble burble babble,” a motor hailed them, lip-flapping through blown gaskets – a car was coming up the drive, still hidden by the wind-blown pines. “Hee haw, hee haw,” bellowed a horn, “hee haw.” A familiar black heap hurtled through the gate. Murdoch’s barley-water spilled from his forgotten cup. Bert’s jaw hung. Dave’s heap – barrelling straight for them – Tan and Ben scattered – the flathead six roared, back