

A Return to

Bill Lennox retraces the journeys his family made in a Bradford sixty years ago

Story & Photography by Bill Lennox

It was supposed to be a straightforward Christmas trip. Across on the ferry from Wellington, drop my partner with her family in Nelson, then cruise on down the West Coast to my family in Wanaka. We joked about it being a man-alone event, a third-age road trip to the land of my first-age. The previous week on a Sydney railway platform, a billboard had exhorted me to visit 100% Pure NZ, and recommended a South Island road trip.

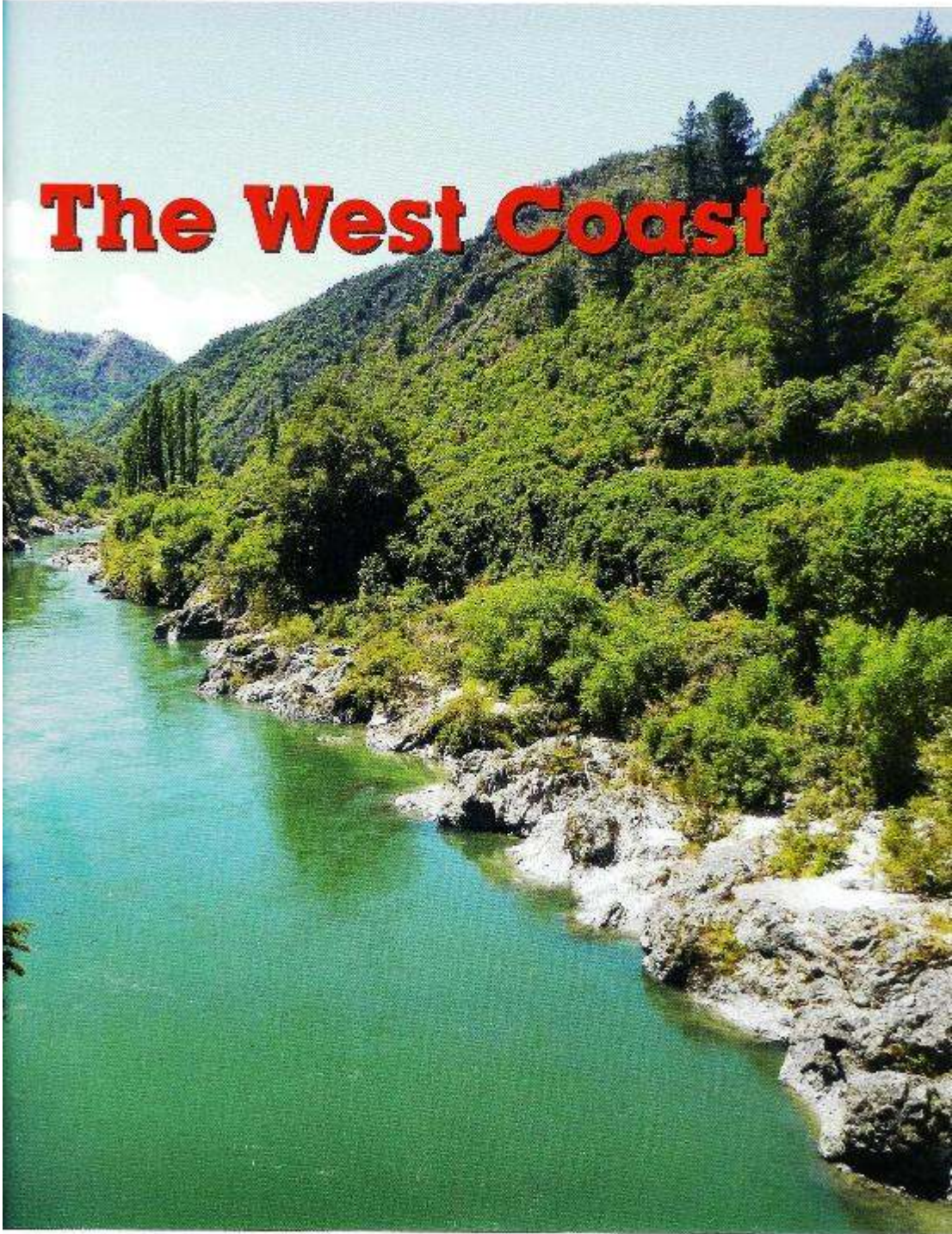
The drive would also serve as a Coming Home experience after four months in South East Asia and India. Why resist?

After an hour, I'd heard not a single horn, been immersed in no hordes of motorbikes, edged round no sacred cows and experienced no maniacal overtaking. I was definitely home.

I must have driven south-west from Nelson before but I recognise none of it, possibly because it was five decades ago. I swing into the hills and the subtle grandeur of the Arthur Range is a surprise. You glide, climb and swoop over forested giant mounds. Then just when you're marvelling at how beautiful this unheralded landscape is - how different from Nelson Bays - it shifts a gear. The Buller River starts crisping down from the black beeches and jading into gorges. Fluid pounamu.



The Buller River - fluid pounamu



The West Coast

WEST COAST

Coming out of Murchison, childhood bells start sounding. I must have been about ten. My parents had arranged to meet Uncle Ted and his family near here. We all lived in Dunedin but were converging on Nelson from opposite sides of the island. So the plan was to meet at noon on, say, Friday 28 December at Inangahua Junction.

I knew this was absurd. There were too many reasons that it would not happen. None of us had been this way before – it was all numbers on a map. Our family was travelling in a two-cylinder Bradford that rarely got into third gear. Uncle Ted had a flasher Austin station wagon – I think it was an A40 Devon Countryman – but it was loaded

with even more stuff and children than the Bradford. And Ted suffered the occasional seizure – he'd been shelled in a tank in Egypt – so there was a fair chance they'd make unscheduled stops. If we did all make it to Inangahua, I reckoned there was no chance we'd make it by noon. I was ten and I knew. To cap it all, there were no mobile phones.

Our parents weren't given to rash behaviour, but they seemed blithely convinced the rendezvous would happen. And it did. Just after noon we trundled down the shallow slope from Reefton and there was the A40, resting – a little smugly I thought – on the gravel verge at Inangahua Junction. They'd just arrived. It was a miracle. The adults played it cool, but I could tell from their broad grins they were a bit stunned too.

Fifty-five years on, Inangahua Junction is garishly islanded and median-stripped but I swear the gravel lay-by is intact. I pause a few minutes with just a weka and a pukeko for company. I'm remembering sweet, funny Uncle Ted and his lifelong legacy from the desert war, as I do every time I repeatedly blink or clear my throat.





Reefton

The weka scuttles into the bush but the pukeko, surely the least road-savvy animal on earth, gangles to the white line, has a think and lopes back. It brings to mind another ungainly driving hazard - our Bradford station wagon.

My Dad used to ride a grunty BSA 500 motorbike to his job at the Burnside freezing works, so to go camping at Taleri Mouth we had to load our gear onto Granddad's three-ton truck. But when I was seven my parents found the money for a car. I think they re-mortgaged the house. I use the term 'car' loosely - they chose a Jowett Bradford. Even at that age, I struggled to understand why.

This was the early fifties so our street was full of hefty and very groovy old Chevys, Fords and Buicks, surely cheaper options than a new car. But I guess they figured a new vehicle would be more reliable and the Bradford was as cheap as they got. At least they didn't buy a Morris Eight.

The clincher was that the Bradford was a station wagon - it would take the whole family on camping holidays. We took out the rear bucket seats, laid down a kapok mattress and hung curtains. The Braddie would supplement our old square tent with leaky extensions made from stitched together canvas off cuts from the freezing works.

Bradford's were basic. Developed in 1947 as affordable commercial transport, they were post-war rationing on wheels. By the time we bought one, the original van had evolved into an 'estate car', though 'station wagon' was good enough for us. Its wooden frame was topped with rubberised fabric that made water dripping from the roof of the Homer Tunnel sound like a tropical storm. It was a 'deluxe' model so had chrome bumpers and trafficators, stubby indicator arms that popped out from the door pillars - so long as you remembered to reach

round and give them a bash from the inside.

Its two-cylinder 800cc alloy engine was designed in 1906 and generated a whole eight horsepower - probably less than the BSA. It had a rumoured top speed of 53 miles per hour (85 km/hour) which it reached inadvertently on long downhill into Dunedin.

Dad skited about its new-fangled synchromesh for top gear, but you had to learn the dreaded double-de-clutch to change down. Then you wedged your left knee under the gear lever going uphill in



The Braddie and tent at Glendhu Bay

WEST COAST

second or it would pop out, causing the Braddie to rev wildly and embarrass you even more than usual.

It took ages to get anywhere but over ten years we went just about everywhere in the South Island, generally tailed by a stream of drivers anxious to get out of second. The Bradford did about 30 miles to the gallon (8 litres per 100km) – so if you calculated fuel consumption by the hour, you were onto a winner.

Appropriately, Bradford's were produced in the northern England town of Idle. Ours was at its best while idling. In the same factory, Jowett produced the Javelin. There was zero risk of mistaking a Bradford component for a Javelin one – the Javelin was a zippy machine with aerodynamic styling, curved windscreens and headlights set into the wings. My brother had one and it went up Stuart Street faster than the Bradford went down.

I tear myself from these grim but fond memories and turn left at Inangahua Junction to follow the KiwiRail and the Inangahua River to Reefton. This means I miss the Buller Gorge (never our favourite), Westport and the pancake rocks and blowholes at Punakaiki, one

of the more riveting sights the Bradford took us to. I understand they haven't changed a lot. Nor has Reefton, though it's now approached through avenues of trudging cows busting for relief, as I often was, perched on the mattress in the Bradford.

Reefton still has coal to burn, most of it by the Chinese, and it's learned to cash in on an early benefit of all that solid energy – in 1880 it was the first town in the hemisphere to reticulate its electricity. I first read that in one of those AA itinerary sheets you picked up before launching into each trip – 'Murchison to Hokitika, via Reefton and Greymouth'. But I don't recall the AA using hard words like 'reticulate'. I would have puzzled over it all the way to Greymouth – was it shock treatment for the insects that kids at school got in their hair?

I used to be disappointed the Grey River was the wrong colour but thrilled to walk on the sea wall, not something it's easy to do today. Greymouth is still Greymouth – only the sign writing has changed. But the place is being cleaned up – the council is determined to demolish a building that's a particular

eyesore and vigilante residents want to deal to an alleged sex offender.

South of Greymouth the road-rail bridge over the Taramakau River cranks out memories of another fifties' car.

By the time I was married at the end of the sixties, I was the delighted owner of a 1953 Ford Prefect. It was only just a step up from the Bradford and you still needed the knee trick to keep it in second, a habit I had to consciously resist when I moved on to real cars. Come to think of it, my recent knee problem can be traced to second gear deficiencies in 1950s cars.

Honeymooning from Dunedin was simple. You did the loop – up to Christchurch, through Arthur's Pass, down the West Coast, through the Haast to Wanaka (or Queenstown if you were flash) and back through Central Otago.

My new wife and I must have detoured north after coming through Arthur's Pass because crossing the road-rail bridge over the Taramakau River is lodged in my mind as a slow-motion movie.

The river was high – we could feel it crashing against the bridge supports – so we were anxious to get across as soon

Taramakau road-rail bridge





The Prefect after the crash

as possible. We somehow figured haste would make us safer. The road starts on the right of the railway line and exits on its left, so somewhere on the bridge you need to cross the tracks. I chose to do this as we neared the southern end, but the Prefect's axle track seemed to match exactly the gauge of the lines and I felt the wheels lock onto the rails. Of course I braked, the rails were wet and we slid gracefully into a car waiting on the other side. If it hadn't stopped unwisely on the tracks we would have glided elegantly down the line. My wife hit the windscreen, we spent some time at Hokitika Hospital and the Prefect

finished the honeymoon with a dented wing that gave the impression of a knowing wink.

I'm surprised the Taramakau road-rail bridge is still here. I guess roading authorities are waiting for the railway to close, but milk powder and butter from the independent dairy factory at Hokitika keep the line viable. They say rail reduces the number of trucks by 6000, something users of the road would be grateful for - if they didn't have to stop for so many trains.

In fact the Hokitika Line's future is so assured they're renovating the bridge. So the Taramakau bridge joins

the ranks of famous landmarks - Musée de l'Orangerie in Paris, New York's Flatiron building, the Astronomical clock in Prague, Tokyo Station - that are boarded over for renovation when I turn up to see them.

A few minutes later I pass Kumara Junction. This is where the Arthur's Pass road emerges from the mountains and I'm reminded that the road-rail incident wasn't the only imperfect Prefect event of the honeymoon.

Winter weddings created an additional challenge for drivers of simple vehicles like Prefects - you had to negotiate alpine crossings without a heater. Wrapping up warm helped but to keep the windscreen from fogging inside, you attached an electric demister to the glass with suction pads. This worked well until the Otira Gorge. The downhill zigzag looked and felt like a mudslide so a clear windscreen was useful - I could see we were still on the road - but as we edged gamely round the unstable bluffs of the gorge itself, the demister burst into flames, by far the hottest moment of the honeymoon.

In Hokitika today there are more jade shops than you can shake a mere at. One or two offer 'greenstone' but I see no pounamu. Foreign tourists looking for an indigenous experience (or even a local angle on a ubiquitous international product) must

be disappointed, especially as Aotearoa's main source of pounamu is the Ararua River, just north of here. Anyway, 'jade' and adventure tourism have helped establish Hokitika as a stopover before you charge on to Franz Josef.

This is The Coast but most of us come for the land, the rivers, mountains, valleys, not the sea. So this time I spend some time on the beach, a strip of rugged grey sand sprinkled with driftwood. Henry and Pat must have spent time here too - there's a very cool concrete armchair in their memory, forever frowned on by the Tasman.

Henry and Pat's concrete armchair Hokitika



WEST COAST

My main memory of this coastline is from the air. The flight from Christchurch gives you a startling close-up view of the Southern Alps, but then you fly right past Hokitika and way out over the Tasman. Just when you conclude the pilot's decided to skip The Coast and head for Hobart, you do a tight turn and lunge at the Hokitika airstrip, just a few kilometres from the mountains you've just skimmed. This is even more riveting when wild weather obscures the Alps – you know you've made it only when you bounce out of the cloud over the ocean.

The country's first licensed scheduled air service started here but I guess flying into Hokitika these days, even in a storm, doesn't count as adventure tourism. Here people don't just gaze at the landscape

– they do energetic things in and at it. In the process, of course, their colours and din transform the landscape into something you might not bother coming all this way to see. But the locals seem happy – they're adept at herding cows and tourists for profit.

The night I'm in Hokitika it's easier to catch a movie or a wetlands' paddle-boat ride than a meal, but a bed is no problem. My \$56 cabin at the Hokitika Holiday Park, in the shadow of Westland Dairy Products, is right beside steaming showers and a kitchen where Kiwi dads still wear orange towelling hats to wash the dishes.

This is where we should have camped back in the sixties. Instead, my Dad pointed the Bradford down the coast and misjudged the onset of dusk. He must have thought he could make it to Franz Josef. Instead, he had to act out of character, suffer excruciating embarrassment and ask a Hari Hari farmer for help.

These were the tidy and obedient fifties, camping grounds were bulging and what we now call freedom camping happened only on the edges of remote rivers and lakes. But the farmer was generous, so a suburban family pitched its patched tent in a paddock. We woke to drink milk warm from a single cow and I rode a draught horse.

I find the paddock just south of Hari Hari township. There's a tumbling barn and a miniature pony channelling Eeyore.

Dad wouldn't need to blush up to a Hari Hari farmer today – there's a Bush Motel, a licensed camping ground and a pioneer cottage that offers hand knits and internet.

There's also the Pukeko Tearooms. If I had half a million to spare I could buy it. It was 30 years ago, but the For Sale sign plugs the store's fifteen seconds of fame in *Goodbye Pork Pie*. I have bacon and mushroom muffins with my cuppa but I'm too early for the scones, so come away with shortbread and an afghan. This really is a dip into my southern childhood.

Early morning is moss-scented in the river valleys. Mist is lifting to the Alps over the Mikonui and Kakapotahi. There'll be no glimpses of Aoraki Mt Cook today. I remind myself how near this coast is to the peak – Fox township is almost as close as the Hermitage – both Tasman and Cook spied it from their ships, though only one had the immodesty to name it after himself.

It's too early for the kayakers who helicopter to gorges and ride the rivers as they pummel out of the Southern Alps. Nearer the coast the rivers are relaxed, braiding across gravel. At the Whataroa River there's a perfect tableau – beside an idle helicopter young people are excitedly life jacketed for white water rafting; a heavily bundled old man (or maybe it's a woman) sets up a pump to sluice, I guess for gold; in the background, an abandoned tractor and sheep yard, and stumpy bridge piers from the old road.

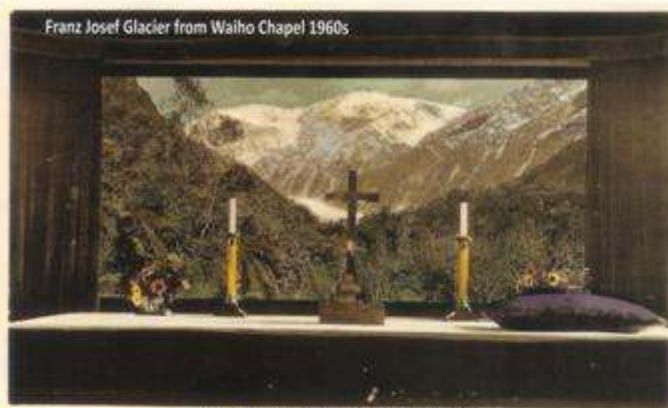
Between river flats, the road weaves through stands of huge totara and rimu, recovering still from a century of human aggression. DOC doesn't make it easy to pause here but I ease into a tiny verge and walk into the bush to savour the hugeness of it all.

South of Hari Hari the road winds over Mount Hercules. It's wide and sealed now, but in Bradford days this was the scene of our scariest moment. We were following a large truck up a steep, muddy, twisting incline when the truck suddenly stopped. Had he missed his double-de-clutch? It was raining, of course, and the truck started to slide back, directly at us.



The camping paddock Hari Hari
Above Pukeko Tearooms Hari Hari Right That hill on Mount Hercules





Franz Josef Glacier from Waiho Chapel 1960s

Photo: Josef Glacier from Waiho Chapel, N.Z. 4/104

Dad seemed transfixed. He eventually rolled back a little, but the road behind us fell away into deep forest so we stopped and watched the truck's tray loom over us. The monster stopped a yard or so away, roared into action, spattered us with tan mud and trundled off as if nothing had happened. Nothing had happened, but we had time to visualise the possibilities. After that we stayed well behind large vehicles, not that it was common for us to follow anyone up hills.

At Whataroa, I finally find a shop that trumpets pounamu as indigenous taonga. Kotuku Gallery was once voted 'Top NZ Maori Art Gallery', though they're not saying when. It still celebrates – not quite trades on – the work of its founder, the late Lou Kereama Armstrong.

I choose a 'blue stone' piece found and shaped by a pakeha from Haast. It's a tear shaped scoop of toto tu puna – when you hold it to the light you see specks of 'the blood of our ancestors'. I figure it's OK for me to have it as one of my tupuna gave blood, or at least lots of sweat, building the Haast road. I also paid plenty for it.

The Haast road didn't connect Otago with this stretch of the Coast until 1965, so in the fifties we got to Franz Josef and Fox Glaciers the long way round, through Arthur's Pass. The glaciers were the climax of a slow and (for us) hazardous haul from Dunedin, and back.

As the display at the Franz Josef observation point cleverly demonstrates, when we were here, the glacier was in one of its resplendent phases, its bulbous head towering into what is now a river bed.

Oddly, I have a stronger memory of viewing it through the window of a church, maybe because I have the postcard. Waiho Chapel is hard to find today and not just because it's actually called St James Anglican Church – it's tucked in the bush behind the information centre. It's a functioning church – a note on the door virtually begs tourists to come to a service – but you can still stand at the window behind the altar and see where the glacier used to be.

My memory of standing beside the glacier itself is more about fear – if this thing is creeping down the valley, should we be standing here?



Franz Josef Glacier from St James Church 2011

WEST COAST



face where boulders the size of a Bradford slide off the cliff.

I decide not to pause at Haast village – I've just got past one of those drivers who brakes at every curve in the road, including going uphill – so I roll on along the Haast River.

Even this flat and relatively placid stretch was hard going for road builders. The broad river slides round the ranges, so the road had to be carved round bluffs. Their names hint at the toils of road gangs in the 1930s and again in the 1960s. Big Bluff is followed by Thomas Bluff. There would have been mixed feelings at Halfway Bluff. Clarkes Bluff

is where the river valley finally swings right into the Southern Alps.

Soon the road will plunge into the ranges, the start of the Haast road proper. This trail – Tioripatea – was used by Maori long before Europeans came this way in the 1860s. It was never easy but on paper it's simple – you follow the Haast River almost to its source, and then hook up with the Makarora River for the descent to Lake Wanaka and Hawea. The road bridges the Haast River just twice, and it's these crossings I want to see again.

The bridge at Pleasant Flat signals the start of the real Haast road. I'm guessing the spot was named by foot travellers emerging from tough mountain tracks. I overlook the one unpleasant aspect of

Pleasant Flat – the sandflies – and make the mistake of parking under a tree for what turns out to be a very brief lunch. Anyway, I'm keen to get onto the bridge. Soon I'm loitering dangerously on the road taking photos to match a family snap from 1960.

From the late 1950s, our family holidayed regularly at Lake Wanaka. We eventually bought a section and gradually built a crib. As a break from sawing, hammering and chopping rosehip bushes, we'd drive as far as we could up the Haast road. In 1960 we made it as far as Pleasant Flat Bridge and I've got the photo to prove it.

There were no safety measures. Workers in the background are laying decking, while three generations of us pose on loose planks over an eight metre drop into the river. That wasn't a big deal for my 84 year old grandfather standing beside me – in his youth he wrestled crocs and rode a bike from Darwin to Adelaide. Uncle Ted's holding the baby – the Austin was parked beside the Bradford behind the camera.

The previous year we made it only as far as the Gates of Haast, because that's where the road just stopped. We walked past bulldozers, idle for the summer holidays, and looked across the rapids at red rags on stakes in the bush where a Bailey bridge would soon rest. My brother thought he might climb across to the other side but changed his mind when he came up close with white water surging round boulders.

Beyond the Gates, the road to the summit is sliced from the landscape. I can still see the moss-covered vertical drill lines they stuffed with gelly to whumph the cliff away. I had really wanted to be there for one of those.

Then it's all downhill to Central Otago. I stop to wander into silent beech forest, drink from the icy Makarora and stand on the road at The Neck. The AA itinerary reckoned you could stand in one spot and see two lakes, but you can't – if you look at the headwaters of Lake Wanaka, you have your back to Lake Hawea, and vice versa. I figured that out when I was ten.

I turn from snapshots of my childhood to another Wanaka Christmas, but can't resist just one drive past the crib we built five decades ago. It was built to last – Dad always used four nails where two would do and he wrote down the cost of every screw and sheet of Pinex. It's virtually unchanged. Except for its rateable value. ©

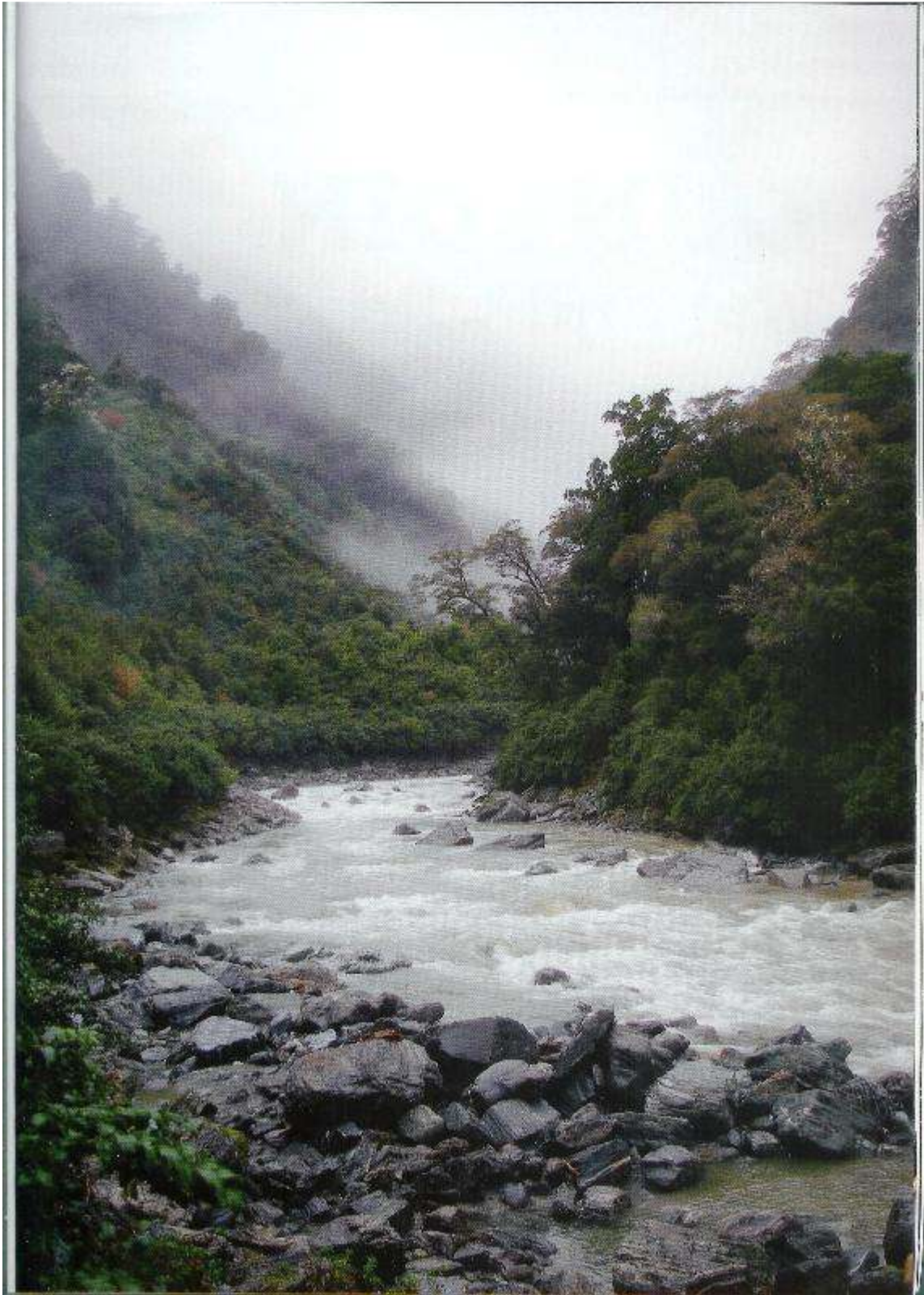
I was probably right. There were no barriers so we were close enough to hear water dripping from blue ice – well beyond today's warning signs and in the sort of spot that killed people just a few years ago.

I fill up on a huge vege pastie from a stylish Franz Josef bakery and head for Haast. First though, there's Knights Point and other even hairier bluffs that delayed the Otago-Westland link. The alpine Otago-Haast section was completed in 1960 but it took another five years to edge a road along this coastline.

There are no river flats here – the Tasman pounds at the base of high unstable hills. It's still a challenge for roading engineers. At Seal Point there's a permanent detour round a crumbling

Franz Josef cross. Opposite page Haast Pass





NZTODAY
JOURNEYS THROUGH OUR HEARTLAND

CAPE REINGA

THE WINTERLESS NORTH:
BY MOTORHOME & 4X4

ASCENDING MT OWEN

MANAWATU: MORE THAN JUST
PALMERSTON NORTH

A RETURN TO THE WEST COAST

PLUS

Masterton's Secret Garden

Dunedin: Wet and Wild

Christchurch's Future?



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