



ULVA ISLAND, PATERSON INLET

NAMING RAKIURA

Story and photographs
by Rob Greenaway

GREAT PREPARATION IS REQUIRED FOR UNDERTAKING ONE OF THE DEPARTMENT OF CONSERVATION'S NINE GREAT WALKS. There's the pasta to purchase, and maybe even something to flavour it with. A good bundle of tea bags and a sack of oranges. But more importantly, there's the trip to a library. Background research is essential for Great Walks - a few novels by Neville Shute being essential.

I've never taken tramping too seriously. Who wants to spend every night of a holiday pulling hook-grass out of their muddy socks? A tramp to me is an opportunity to relax, to give reality to the words of my grandfather: "Sometimes I sits and thinks and other times I just sits."

Tramping is about finding a place to "sits". Stewart Island and the Rakiura track, for example.

The fact that the Rakiura is classified by DOC as a Great Walk was not the rationale for choosing it. In fact, I don't think there is a rationale for tramping. You wake up one day and say, "I feel a tramp coming on."

The skies above Rakiura glow. The colours range from a pastel grey to hard blue and sharp orange. The name of the track actually means "glowing skies", and Maori originally gave the

name Rakiura to the whole of Stewart Island. A few centuries later Captain Cook mistook the island for a peninsula and almost called it Solander after his botanist. The confusion began there. William Stewart mapped the island in the early 1800's and gave the island his own surname. Officers aboard the vessel Acheron surveyed the island a little later and made new charts with new surnames. The title New Leinster stuck for a while, but since Governor Hobson had simultaneously decided to call the South Island New Munster and the North, New Ulster, the whole concept lost popularity. The name Stewart Island survived and eventually stuck.

Setting off from Bluff, we set ourselves a mission - to come up with a decent name for Stewart Island. Nothing that would ever end up on a map, but which would epitomise our short experience on the

anchor stone of the South Island (in Maori legend Te Punga-a-Maui, and we've all heard that story before).

Vomit Island came to mind early on. The voyage across Foveaux Strait had us sitting by the door of the Foveaux Express. According to the skipper it was a mere three metre chop, with the tops of the swells blown horizontal across the deck of the catamaran. "Not the best day for it," he said.

Someone's dog sat leashed to a handrail in the cockpit and the salt spray had it shivering as it crouched on the cold metal deck. The locals were laughing and chatting and occasionally walking past us to the "head" for a quick puke. One lady chuckled: "I'm a terrible sailor." Then why live on Stewart Island? I didn't ask.

We had an unfair advantage over other visitors to the island. A past flatmate was working in the village of Oban in

Halfmoon Bay and was waiting at the wharf. Diana took us home and fed us homemade bread. The kakariki were eating her neighbour's currants as we sat on her mossy front lawn. In winter she would leave for work at 8.00am using a torch to find her way in the night of morning. She would return at 5.30pm, using the same torch. But this was summer, and we could expect to have light until well after 10.00pm. Antarctica



"Not the best day for it" - crossing Foveaux Strait

is just around the corner.

We hired a double kayak and paddled around Paterson Inlet, starting the days with seas so calm the blue penguins set off tiny ripples that travelled for hundreds of metres, followed by afternoons of 30 knot westerlies that could only come from the Roaring Forties. Green water hit Elizabeth (in the front seat and strangely quiet) hard in the chest when we headed west. In the reverse direction we surfed the boat for minutes at a time, its rudder high over the backs of the waves, out of the water and mostly out of control.

Kayaking involves plenty of sitting, but it also requires constant thinking. We hadn't gone to Stewart Island to think.

We washed the salt from our eyebrows, emptied the Oban library of its few Neville Shute novels, picked up a couple of hut passes and walked off towards Lee Bay. Several days later we came back.

What else is there to say about a tramp? You go, you walk, you see, you take photos and depending on the weather you get wet, burnt or cold. You come back having been there - inspired maybe, but does inspiration last longer than sunburn? And what makes a Great Walk different from any other tramp?

Firstly, the hut passes are a different colour. The significant differences end there. The nine Great Walks are of no defined length, although overnight excursions are a minimum. The routes are all well known and relatively busy. The huts on a Great Walk are of no defined quality, although they are of quite a high standard and mostly sleep more than 20. Rakiura has



Lee Bay, Rakiura track

the cheapest Great Walk hut passes at \$8 a night.

The quality of the track is probably one common theme. Great Walks offer "Tramping for Dummies". A friend said to us when we were tramping another Great Walk, "It takes a very special person to get lost on the Kepler Track."

The Rakiura is certainly nowhere near the standard of the Kepler in track design, but you'd still have to be particularly silly to lose the path - even though it crosses open beaches from time to time.

I have to admit here that we never "did" the whole Rakiura. We walked for four hours to Port William and decided that the old wharf which extends from a rocky bluff into the bay was an ideal site to "sit" with books. We never went any further, staying a couple of nights in the Port William Hut. This raises a major philosophical question about the activity of tramping, and the essence of quality. I usually have to see the last bit of anything - be it a bad movie or the head of a river. I listen to a lovely piece of music thinking, "I hope the next piece is as good", and it kills the quality of the experience.

It's a true skill - much to be admired

I believe - to be able to grab the essence of a moment (*carpe diem* in Dead Poet speak) and enjoy it without thinking of the other things that are being missed as a result. Of course this applies to tramping and fully justifies our sitting on a wharf for a couple of days reading Neville Shute novels with all the hidden splendours of



Elizabeth "sits" with books

the Rakiura lurking just around the corner.

Although we'd had hot westerlies when kayaking, the wind began delivering cold, clear days. Sitting on the wharf with any comfort meant keeping in the sun. That special feeling of being chilled and warmed at the same time is something New

Zealand does so well. The blue light of Rakiura bounced off the wharf's silvered timber and heated the lichen, a visiting shag and us.

A grubby orange launch was moored offshore, and for two days we could see the back of someone's head at a window. Movement suggested the head was alive. We had warning of the boat's existence on the walk to Port William. A single high-powered rifle shot had echoed around the bay and reminded us that an old forester had retired to the island, where he had once worked, and now lived off what he could shoot and a few basic supplies. Here was a man who had chosen the perfect place to sit and think, perhaps about the days when he and his team fed timber into one of the old boilers that litter the island. These great iron tubes filled with heat-exchange pipes and big enough to camp in, drove a number of mills that fed the growing economy of New Zealand with income from rimu.

A map of the island shows names like Sawdust Bay in Paterson Inlet. We'd camped there while kayaking and the Rakiura track passes along the back of the beach. What looks like a forgotten steam locomotive sits in one corner, and the bottom of the nearby creek is littered with thousands of timber off-cuts. Our first assumption was that a wooden ship, carrying a steam train, had beached itself - the timber being the ship's ribs and the locomotive being too heavy to recover. But we worked it out - it wasn't called Sawdust Bay by accident.

It was with great relief that we discovered that not every point of interest on Stewart Island had an informative sign pointing at it. There is still room to look

at something with wonder, and to speculate about why it's there. Save us from the day when we don't have to think for ourselves or do our own research, even when we go tramping.

"IT TAKES A VERY SPECIAL PERSON TO GET LOST ON THE KEPLER TRACK."

Those old boilers are unlikely to ever be fired up again. Most of Stewart Island is administered by the Department of Conservation and some is tightly controlled Nature Reserve. A Marine Reserve is also proposed for Paterson Inlet. Despite cats, possums, red and Virginia

deer, and three species of rat, the island supports an amazing array of birdlife, leaving Fiordland for dead in the birdsong department. Even kakapo lived in the wild on the island as late as 1987, although

threatened by cats. The reason behind this diversity is the lack of mustelids - those nasty stoats that turn birds into dung.

What you hear on the Rakiura track is the tolling of the bellbird, the gossiping of the kakariki, and the cry of the oystercatchers as they run along the beaches like busy executives with their hands behind their backs. We spotted a small tree in an Oban back garden so covered with fat kereru it was being crushed.

Our naming exercise for the island wasn't coming along well. We could have named it after one of a dozen bird species, or after something as insignificant but as memorable as the wharf at Port William. Or maybe even after Neville Shute.

Our return trip to Bluff got us onto it. Now, commercial sailors aren't as chatty as most farmers. Farmers tend to spend all day in the back paddock talking to themselves, and so come up with some pretty deep thoughts and would like to share them. Sailors spend all day locked aboard a tiny vessel with a group of people from whom they can't escape. It's safest to keep your thoughts to yourself in such circumstances.

The return sailing was flat calm. The skies glowed with morning warmth and I had a long conversation with the skipper of the Foveaux Express.

"You've picked a good day for it," he said. In fact, that's all he said - several times. I could have been inquiring about the health of his cat and he would have replied "You've picked a good day for it."

I began listening to the conversations of the locals on board. "We picked a good day for it," they were all saying. We picked up our car from storage in Bluff. The operator handed us our keys and said, "Well, you picked a good day for it."

"Good day for it" island it is.

Fact File

Get yourself to Invercargill and travel to Stewart Island by plane with Southern Air (03 218 9129) or South East Air (03 214 5522), or get to Bluff and go by boat with Foveaux Express (03 212 8376).

There are vehicle storage services in Bluff and Invercargill (ask about these when you book your travel).

The Rakiura is a three day, 29km track and is fine for anyone of moderate fitness. You'll need two Great

Walk hut passes and you can get these from the Department of Conservation in Oban (03 219 1130).

Kayak hire is available in Oban from Innes Backpackers (03 219 1080). Stick to Paterson Inlet (which is huge) unless you are comfortable in seas and winds of sub-Antarctic origin