

A True

By *ROB GREENAWAY*

Temple Sutherland was a Scotsman who emigrated to New Zealand in 1925. He rapidly developed the skills of a backcountry man through years of farming, trucking, hunting, fishing and living off the land through the Depression.

Despite being warned by a good friend that — "Scots shouldn't be allowed to write about the things or people they love. It's something they can't do. They ought to be locked up or put down before they start" — he penned seven books between 1953 and 1983 describing the country, New Zealand, he had adopted and grown to love.

Adventurer

The Story of Temple Sutherland

Fifteen years ago my school mates boasted that if New Zealand went to war, or if another depression hit, or if their parents withdrew access to the family car, they'd 'go bush'. "I'd live off the land," they would say. "Shoot deer, trap rabbits, skin possums, live in a cave or a tent or an old hut. I've been tramping lots. I could look after myself."

In reality things are different. During the Depression of 1929-1935 about 12 percent of the work-force were unemployed, accounting for 81,000 people, and some of them did go bush. While it was not very common, it wasn't considered unusual. Temple Sutherland and his wife Thelma — affectionately known as Sam — were reasonably ordinary folk who didn't like the idea of living off soup kitchens, or losing their means to a living when the Depres-

sion ended — namely a 1920s Reo Speedwagon Supertonner lightweight dump truck with a few years of payments still to go. They calculated carefully, left their cottage just north of Murchison at Gowanbridge, left their truck under a beech tree near Lake Rotorua and went bush for two years.

The picture is a bit different today. Over 200,000 people are currently without work, and that's over 10 percent of the workforce. However, not as many of us have as much grit as we did before the rise and fall of the Welfare State.

For the Sutherlands, living in a series of tents on various tributaries to the Buller River saved them from the breadlines.

Gold panning through bitter winters and sweet summers on the foothills of the Saint Arnaud Range kept the couple in flour for two years, and writing about a backcountry life — robins that shared their hearth and riflemen that fed at their door — helped keep them in comfort for the rest of their days.

This is the story of a man who called himself a 'green Kiwi'. That name sticks in the mind because it was the name of his second book — a title that reached the shops in 1956 (Whitcombe and Tombs). Born in Dundee, Scotland, in 1906, he grew up in an academic family to find he was not naturally inclined to be a man of letters.

Farming was a natural choice for a practical man, but without the opportunity to inherit land in Scotland, Temple was forced to look further afield to become master of his own destiny.

With no real idea of why New Zealand popped into mind he ended up here, first on farms in Northland at a place called Ruawai. There he learned the hard way how to handle sheep, cattle and dogs, and the art of clearing scrub.

He soon headed to work on the banks of the Whanganui River where he watched destitute returned servicemen and their families walk off the uneconomic farms they had been balloted on their return from World War 1.



Sutherland's 1920s Reo Speedwagon Supertonner during the depression.



Temple Sutherland at Ruawai in 1926.

Later he worked in the Wairarapa, and then back north to places that most New Zealanders have never heard of — Parahi, Kirikopuni, Parakao — to take on a job as a truck driver.

Soon afterwards he bought a driver's licence and then his first heavy vehicle, a bus converted into a lorry.

The new Speedwagon that saw him and Sam through the Depression had its first downpayment made when the Murchison earthquake of 1929 killed 17 people and raised pockets of land up to five metres, destroying roads and houses as far north as Nelson.

Temple, by now a seasoned Kiwi, sensed an opportunity to help out in the disaster, and with cartage work on the wane in the north he aimed to win a little employment with his new vehicle. He shipped his truck and his few belongings to the South Island.

Within a short time Temple was joined by his wife Sam in their home at Gowanbridge, halfway between Westport and Nelson, under the eye of Mount Mur-

chison.

The trout fishing and deer hunting had caught hold of Temple and there was little he could do about it.

The work of repairing the earthquake damage kept him and the Supertonner busy for a while, but the effect of the Depression had that work disappearing as government funds for public works dried up, and few private operators could afford the service of his truck.

Temple wrote in his first book, *The Golden Bush* (Halcyon Press), that even the people who didn't pay their bills had stopped buying.

Temple was not new to the art of gold hunting. He'd panned a little out of the Buller for the gold in Sam's wedding ring.

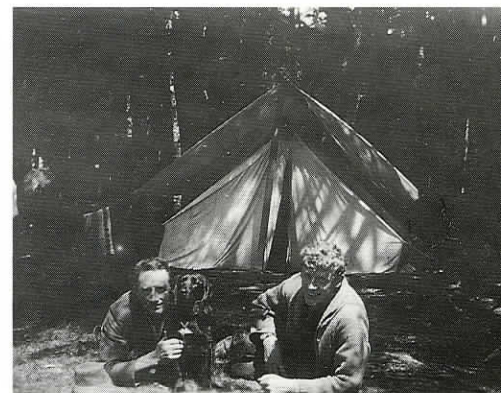
After fossicking amongst the creeks near Gowanbridge with only limited success they bit the bullet and struck out for a claim in the heart of what is now the Nelson Lakes National Park, their home for two years.

Falls of snow would block out all light from their canvas and slab hut. In freezing temperatures the gelignite they used to work their claim became unstable, forcing Temple to store the explosives under their bunks nearer the fire and their body heat.

The cold drove robins into the tent to warm themselves by the fire, and three birds became regular evening visitors — becoming so comfortable, in spring they took to plucking hair from the Sutherland's cocker spaniel for nesting material.

Their camp was a two by three metre calico tent

"Had any two people the right to be so happy in an unhappy country, squirming in the grip of a major recession; in a New Zealand of soup kitchens, clothes drives, so-called slave camps, breadlines, fund-raising concerts for relief causes; of riots and looting, disorderly confrontations, of hopelessness and despair? Was it right for two people to be aloof from it all, while knowing happiness the like of which many people could never know in good times or in bad?"



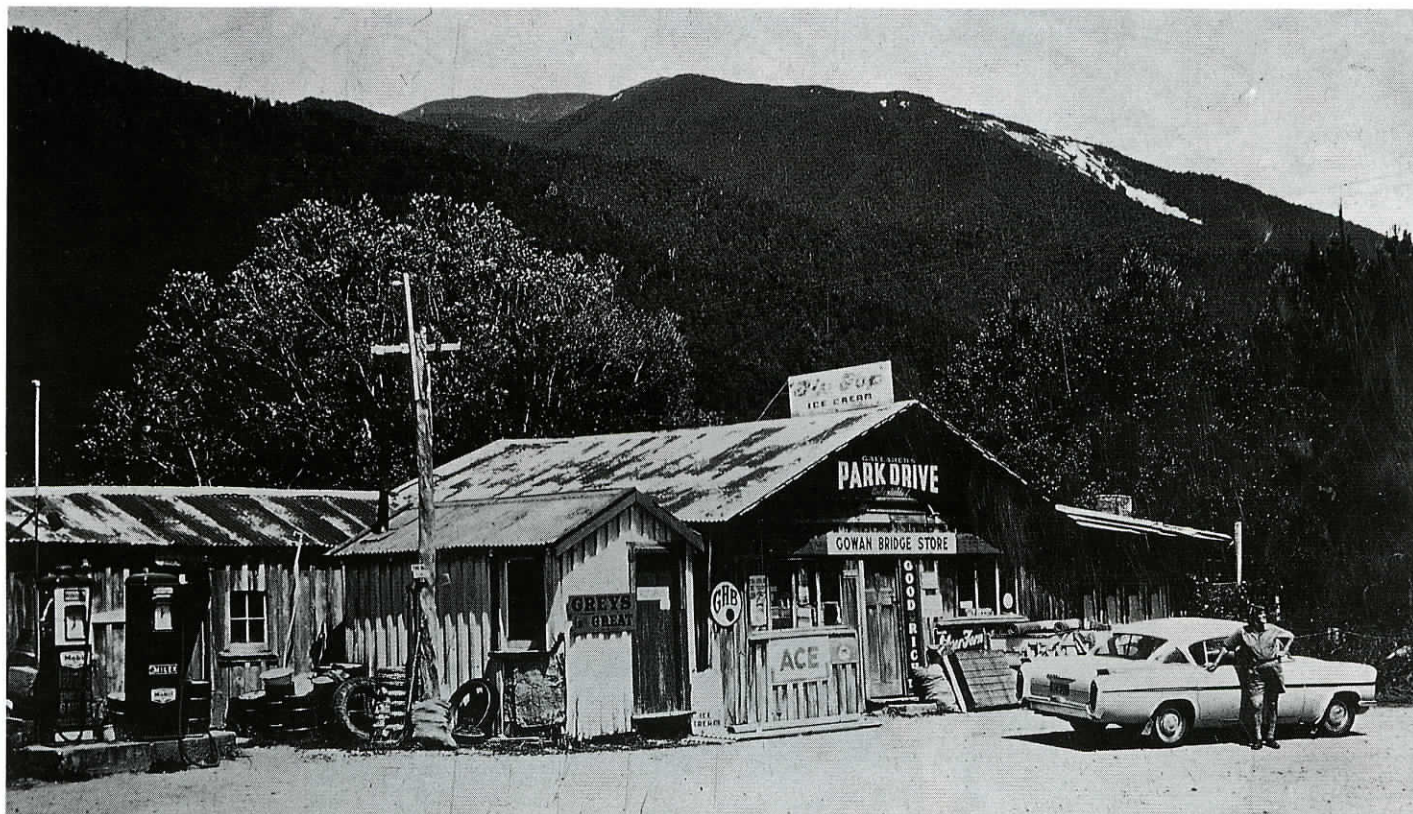
The Sutherland's tent home in the bush.

under a slightly larger fly. With the assistance of a neighbour they constructed a wooden floor, and to help withstand the weight of snow, lined the inner ceiling with beech saplings and reject boards of kahikatea — formerly called butterbox pine. Old corrugated roofing iron formed the chimney, and a clay surround made the fireplace, where Sam developed her skills in making camp oven bread over the coals of the open fire.

The recipe is potentially one for misery, dull food and rations that would run low when heavy snowfalls blocked the trails, sun that could only reach over the surrounding mountains to touch the campsite at midday, and the arduous work of sluicing



Sutherland with enough snapper for a banquet.



a claim set amongst massive boulders of greywacke and a heavy overburden of clay covered in forest.

The Sutherlands enjoyed a decent bath once a fortnight when they stocked up on basic food provisions, detonators, fuses and gelignite in Gowanbridge, followed by the long walk back to camp, backpacking their gear.

The experience left Temple feeling guilty. He wrote in his autobiography, *Evergreen Journey*:

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Temple reasoned that there was little he could do for others less fortunate, but he kept filing tax returns on the income they generated from gold sales.

The options for Sam and Temple were few. Although they would have been better off financially in a government run work camp, they felt better in their own surroundings. At the time, gold prospecting was serving a purpose as an employment scheme.

Close by, men lived in supervised camps, working under the management of experienced prospectors. What they earned through gold panning and sluicing was supplemented by a dole payment. Many individuals came straight from the cities to

make their way in the Depression gold hunt.

One old timer remarked to Temple, "They come to work half-way through the morning in blue serge pants and patent leather shoes and push their shovels with their bellies. I've seen hens that would shift more dirt than they do."

Within a few weeks many of these new arrivals returned to the cities and the dole queues, blistered and dispirited.

As the economy slowly improved the team of three (including Angus, the spaniel), emerged from the bush and began to readjust to life in a slowly improving economy. The two pounds they'd saved after two years of subsistence gold panning helped them on their way.

I first read about Temple Sutherland in his book *Green Kiwi*. It's the sort of title you see in second hand book stores, several copies at a time. In the 1950s, it was the ideal gift book, and my parents had several.

I phoned Temple Sutherland in June of 1995 to ask if he would mind being interviewed for an article, after re-reading *Green Kiwi* and finding that it captured New Zealand and the backcountry in its pre-World War 2 days better than anything I'd ever come across. After searching the Nelson phone book I reached a very kind female voice.

"I was hoping to speak with Temple Sutherland."

"I dearly wish you could," came the reply. "He died three years ago."

I apologised for my poor research. "Is this Sam?" I asked.

"No, it's Gwen Sutherland. Sam was Tem-

The store at Gowanbridge where the Sutherland's would stock up on basic provisions before heading back to the bush.

ple's first wife and she died in 1964."

I apologised a second time and explained why I was calling.

"Temple would have loved to have helped you, and I wish he could," said Gwen. "He was a very kind man and I do miss him. But read his autobiography."

His autobiography, *Evergreen Journey*, which Gwen pushed him to write, reveals that Temple was known to all his friends as Bill Sutherland. Bill Sutherland was the Scotsman who arrived a fresh young man in a young country, and became the bushman, the truck driver, deer hunter, trout fisher, gold panner and a Kiwi brave enough to go bush in the face of adversity.

Temple Sutherland was the man who tapped at the typewriter and wrote about the characters he met and loved in an adopted country, and about how the backcountry of New Zealand won his heart. Bill was concerned that his mates — the truck drivers, deer cullers, and farmers — would think differently if they knew him as one of New Zealand's finest writers.

Evergreen Journey is dedicated to Gwen Sutherland who had the foresight to push a man in his autumn years to tell all.

The Golden Bush is still in print. For the other books, search through a second hand bookstore. □