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REGION AND NATION

Phil May, Pat O'Farrell and Bill Pearson were products of the interwar years. They were far from prosperous times and as the chill winds of economic depression settled over the Coast, like the infamous 'Barber' snaking down the Grey Valley, the inherent weaknesses of the local economy were laid even barer. The gold rushes of the 1860s had populated a wilderness. An event rather than an industry, they encapsulated what was to become the region's lasting dilemma. Briefly and brilliantly, gold conquered the remoteness of the place. But the moving tide of diggers moved on and so too did the investment that might have enabled those who remained to tame its rugged, dangerous terrain. In hindsight the gold rushes had simply come too soon; there was nothing in either the local or the national economy in the 1860s that could carry the West Coast into the future. Refrigeration, which was to provide a new dynamic for a floundering colonial economy, was still several decades away. Despite its role in providing a viable national export economy, on the West Coast its primary impact was to stimulate the exploitation of another wasting mineral asset—coal. The two decades of economic stagnation that separated gold and coal as the mainspring of the local economy ensured that it was outside capital that reaped the benefit in the days when coal was king. Indeed, by the 1920s and 1930s, the coalmining communities of the Grey Valley had already begun to mimic, more slowly if just as terminally, the process of exploitation and decay that had marked the earlier goldtowns.

The shadow of the past thus looms large in the 'West Coasts' the three writers individually and collectively created in the 1950s and 1960s. The stories they weave explore the interaction between people and place where these two fundamentals of human experience rub together in ways

that challenge both the human spirit and ingenuity. They share a concern with communities whose very existence is determined by a diminishing mineral asset. As much as the gold and coal mining communities that peopled the West Coast brought with them quite different attitudes, forms of organisation and expectations, they shared a common need to come to grips with an environment little softened by the trappings of civilisation. Each had travelled light to their new home; nor did they expect that the West Coast would be their last move in the journey of life. They were, in this sense, transients and the considerations that eventually persuaded them to stay or move on were inevitably tied to the minerals that alone could sustain them in an otherwise inhospitable environment. The camp-like settlements in which they clustered were overwhelmingly male and youthful in their composition, improvised and primitive in nature and a testimony to a pragmatic reluctance to commit to a place with no past and an uncertain future. How something more permanent was built in this environment and the implications of this struggle for the individuals and communities who made up the 'West Coast' is the central concern of all three writers. Taken together, their writings about the Coast set a framework that has proved to be an enduring and a creative one.

Philip Ross May's *West Coast Gold Rushes* (1962) devotes its first 100 pages to recounting how 'one long solitude, with a forbidding sky, frequent tempests, and impenetrable forests' frustrated and sometimes defeated navigators, explorers, prospectors and adventurers. Only gold possessed the ability to populate such a place. The lure of instant riches allowed the West Coast to squeeze, as May puts it, the 'normal process of colonization' into just 'three hectic years'.¹ May's thick description of this accelerated history emphasises the distinctiveness of the West Coast experience and an awareness of the common ingredients that bound together the nineteenth-century gold rushes of the Pacific borderlands. His sympathies are with the 'digger' confronting what must surely have been the most threatening landscape encountered by those whose gold trail stretched from California to Ballarat and Bendigo before grappling with the incessant rain and impenetrable bush that was the West Coast. Nowhere is this more evident than in his evocation of their spirit in his final paragraph:

1 Philip Ross May, *The West Coast Gold Rushes*, Christchurch, Pegasus, 1962, p. 13; O'Farrell, 'Review: P.R. May, *The West Coast Gold Rushes*', p. 90.

The diggers have not gone.

Motor up the Waimea Valley some frosty night in June. Take your stand on the slopes of Scandinavian Hill. You'll find Jimmy the Slogger and Liverpool Bill, Gentleman George and Yankee Dan, all hard at work. The gullies echo to the ringing shovels, and the picks go flashing in the moonlight.²

This stirring end to *The West Coast Gold Rushes* is itself a response to an environment that had all but reclaimed the creeks and gullies that had once been rushed by the diggers. It is the historian's Eureka—an affirmation that by diligent prospecting the researcher could bring people and place of times past once more to the surface so that the present might rub shoulders with the past. *The West Coast Gold Rushes* was universally hailed as a notable piece of historical research and a landmark in the writing of New Zealand regional history.

The appearance of a second edition in 1968, however, drew a questioning of both the historical perspective that underpinned it and, by implication, the interpretation of West Coast history it presented. The critique came from Patrick O'Farrell, a fellow West Coaster and, like May, a product of the University of Canterbury's History Department. The essence of O'Farrell's criticism was that as much as *The West Coast Gold Rushes* was 'a prodigy of dedicated, scrupulously careful, exhaustive and extremely well-organised historical research',³ it was, nonetheless, infused with a 'curious air of isolation'. As an event, the rushes unfolded, in O'Farrell's view, very much on their own terms, as part of a 'picaresque narrative local history' in which the author is present as chronicler or guide but rarely as 'social critic' or 'interpreter of the past to the present'. By taking his stand on Scandinavian Hill with 'Jimmy the Slogger and Liverpool Bill, Gentleman George and Yankee Dan', May had recovered the 'three hectic years' that were the West Coast gold rushes and produced, as O'Farrell writes, a 'slice of the past preserved in antiquarian's apic'.⁴

O'Farrell leaves us in no doubt as to the interpretation he would place upon this 'scrap of New Zealand history'.⁵ Where May found vigour, ingenuity and significant achievement, he suggests 'historical tragedy, the

2 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 503.

3 O'Farrell, 'Review: P.R. May, *The West Coast Gold Rushes*', p. 89.

4 O'Farrell, 'Review: P.R. May, *The West Coast Gold Rushes*', pp. 89–90.

5 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 14.

more bitter for its essential triviality, the more dismal for its enactment in drizzle, cloud and rain'.⁶ Where May expressed the hope that 'those who cannot forget the sound of the rain on a tin roof, the smell of the bush, and the sight of the Alps' would enjoy his book, O'Farrell 'missed the sour smell of decay which is also of the bush, the cheerless rotting damp, and the rust on the tin roof ... the erosion of minds and hearts, the bitter lines etched deep in the faces as well as land'.⁷ His *West Coast* is very different from that evoked by May; its people and its places scarred by past and present struggles to build community in an environment as unyielding as it was unforgiving. O'Farrell's assessment plainly turns as much upon the interaction of people and place as it does upon a particular conception of the historian's role.

May's first excursion into the history of the West Coast reflects the colour and frenzied movement of a short span of years that catapulted the region into the pages of New Zealand's European history. The focus of O'Farrell's review and his future *West Coast* writing was upon the 40 years that followed. Gold had populated a wilderness, but in the years that followed there was no obvious sustaining economic activity capable of surmounting the realities of time and place. Too remote, too rugged and too wet, the West Coast was a land hard won. Communication along the narrow coastal strip bordering the Tasman Sea long remained at the mercy of the elements. The inland route across the Southern Alps to the more ordered Wakefieldian settlement of Canterbury stretched nerves and patience. Fifty years were to pass before a tunnel more than 5 miles in length was cut through the Southern Alps to provide a rail link with the more prosperous eastern settlements. And the continued reliance upon the sea for access to markets and produce placed all development at the mercy of the notorious harbour mouths of the Grey and Buller rivers. Coal offered the best hope for the long-term future. It required, however, a level of capital investment beyond the resources of the post-gold rush community and something of an act of faith by prospective coal barons. Not the least of the problems was finding skilled labour. Attracting canny colliers to risky, colonial ventures set in environments raw beyond their comprehension depended, as always, upon push factors propelling them to leave their present situation to embrace a future in places unknown.

6 O'Farrell, 'Review: P.R. May, *The West Coast Gold Rushes*', p. 90.

7 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 19; O'Farrell, 'Review: P.R. May, *The West Coast Gold Rushes*', p. 90.

It was to this predicament that O'Farrell turned his attention as historian. He was drawn to what he came to see as a contest between people and place as post-gold rush West Coast sought to forge a future. His MA thesis, 'The Workers and Grey District Politics, 1865–1913', completed in the History Department of what was then Canterbury College in 1955, was, like May's thesis that preceded it, a pioneering work. In the first place, it was written at a time when it was a commonplace to regard the New Zealand experience as not quite the stuff of which history was made. Able students were directed towards the histories of those societies where the historian's footprint was already more visible and where scholarly debate allowed newcomers to the profession to display the trappings of scholarship and engage with 'big' ideas. Commonly, and perhaps inevitably in the 1950s (although the tendency may have been more pronounced in the Canterbury experience), students were directed towards things English. In those days, before the Celtic fringe reasserted itself, England was not so much a geographical entity as a synonym for Britain. To allow students to embark upon an exploration of the New Zealand past, and the past of a failed province at that, was thus, at least within the more rarified confines of colonial academia, questionable if not dangerous. It was neither sufficiently replete with scholarly markers nor concerned with matters of historical moment to warrant the attention of the emergent historian.⁸

That May and O'Farrell should embark upon research projects that spurned the preferred academic pathways of their time owes a very great deal to the particular ways in which, as both a place and a past, the region shaped their historical thinking. Their decisions also reflect the changing nature of the colonial world. As historians who first made their mark in the decades after World War II, they stood on the cusp of a significant shift in the way New Zealanders saw themselves. In 1940 when historians reviewed the centenary of what was a settler colony bound by treaty to the Māori, they did so within a framework defined very largely by, what F.L. Wood called, the 'silken bonds of Empire'.⁹ World War II loosened these bonds and created an environment in which the New Zealand past could be seen through lenses that were more overtly nationalist and less cringingly colonial. The talisman of this shift was Keith Sinclair's *History of New Zealand* (1959), a determinedly nationalistic account whose 'nervy,

8 Oliver, *Looking for the Phoenix*; Keith Sinclair, *Halfway Round the Harbour: An Autobiography*, Auckland, Penguin, 1993.

9 F.L. Wood, *New Zealand in the World*, Wellington, Department of Internal Affairs, 1940, p. 94.

energetic and staccato¹⁰ prose stressed the radical and the innovatory and a shared Pacific environment. Something of this new mood is evident in the way Pearson, May and O'Farrell look at their respective 'West Coasts'. Looking as much to Australia as to other parts of New Zealand for its capital and people, the West Coast seemed the ultimate frontier. Innovation was necessary for survival. In short, the West Coast past challenged the less exciting and more prevalent view that saw New Zealand's story as 'conservative, traditional and shaped by its foundational inheritance'.¹¹ As pioneering West Coast historians, May and O'Farrell wrote before what came to be seen as rival interpretations of our past had been consolidated into Keith Sinclair's *History of New Zealand* and Bill Oliver's *Story of New Zealand*.¹²

Alongside these academic concerns, New Zealand history had since the 1940s developed a more public face. The passage of 100 years moved communities everywhere to reflect upon achievement and prospect. To a degree a South Island phenomenon, it was a mood nowhere better captured than in the monumental histories produced by the Wakefieldian settlements of Otago and Canterbury.¹³ As W.J. Gardner, fresh from writing his path-breaking *The Amuri: A County History* (1956), observed in a seminal *Landfall* article, centennials 'made these histories possible' but also 'made it impossible for them to be definitive'.¹⁴ Reflecting upon his article more than 40 years later, he observed: 'there were probably some raised eyebrows, even shock as readers came upon my article. Local history as then perceived by the literati, lay outside any pale of serious study'.¹⁵ Of necessity, the genre rested upon an 'army of enthusiasts' whose lack of context easily allowed the 'antiquarian' to triumph over the analytical. At a time when popular national histories were emerging, it seemed more

10 Oliver, *Looking for the Phoenix*, p. 97.

11 Oliver, *Looking for the Phoenix*, p. 97.

12 Keith Sinclair, *A History of New Zealand*, Harmondsworth, Penguin Books, 1959; Oliver, *The Story of New Zealand*.

13 A.H. McLintock, *The History of Otago: The Origins and Growth of a Wakefieldian Class Settlement*, Dunedin, Otago Centennial Historical Publications, 1949; James Hight and C.R. Straubel, general eds, *A History of Canterbury, Vol. 1: To 1854*, Christchurch, Whitcombe & Tombs/Canterbury Centennial Historical Association and Literary Committee, 1957; W.J. Gardner, ed., *A History of Canterbury, Volume II: General History, 1854–76 and Cultural Aspects, 1850–1950*, Christchurch, Whitcombe & Tombs/Canterbury Centennial Historical and Literary Committee, 1971; W.H. Scotter, *A History of Canterbury, Vol. III: 1876–1950*, Christchurch, Whitcombe & Tombs/Canterbury Centennial History and Literary Committee, 1965.

14 Gardner, 'Grass Roots and Dredge Tailings: Reflections on Local History', *Landfall* 43, vol. 11, no. 3, September 1957, p. 227.

15 Gardner, 'Grass Roots and Dredge Tailings: Reflections on Local History', *Where They Lived*, p. 9.

important than ever that the generalisations in which these histories were couched should be grounded in the experience of the 'ordinary lives of ordinary people'. As Gardner saw it, local history was 'a wonderful antidote to schematic history' and a testing ground for the meaning of the shorthand labels of the generalisers who, by the stroke of a pen, turned individual pastoralists into 'oligarchs' or collectively into members of a 'squattocracy' and wealthy city folk into 'bourgeois radicals'.¹⁶

Outside the South Island's Wakefieldian settlements of Canterbury and Otago, the histories of the regional building blocks of the national experience remained largely unwritten. To a degree, the West Coast had fared better than most. The contours of the region's written history as they were available to Pearson, May and O'Farrell had altered very little from those identified in A.J. Harrop's *The Romance of Westland: The Story of New Zealand's Golden Coast* (1923).¹⁷ At its hub was gold. A tale of 'adventure rather than avarice' and of 'magnificent fortunes won and lost' by 'vigorous men', who provided the basis of the 'permanent settlement of an 'isolated, bush-covered Westland'. Previously visited only by whalers, ever in danger of being 'cast away on the desolate shore' and 'fearful of the fierce [Māori] inhabitants',¹⁸ the explorers who paved the way for the gold seekers thus become, by Harrop's account, 'the first martyrs to the cause of Westland—men who died while endeavouring to make a road to the west open to all'.¹⁹

The celebration of the exploits and hardships of pioneers is, of course, a familiar enough feature of colonial history. In the West Coast variant, the timing of its creation—during the years immediately after the 1914–18 war—sees it couched in explicitly imperialist terms:

The examples of self-sacrifice and heroism in which the story of Westland abounds must play no mean part in moulding the future of the race. The fathers of Westland knew how to face death bravely, and the sons of Westland have since proved that the race has not degenerated—the spirit that taught men how to face the floods of Westland was very active in the men who fought in Gallipoli and in France.²⁰

16 Gardner, 'Grass Roots and Dredge Tailings', *Where They Lived*, p. 5.

17 A.J. Harrop, *The Romance of Westland: The Story of New Zealand's Golden Coast*, Christchurch, Whitcombe & Tombs, 1923.

18 Harrop, *Romance of Westland*, pp. 167–68.

19 Harrop, *Romance of Westland*, p. 168.

20 Harrop, *Romance of Westland*, p. 170.

Thus was the struggle to establish a viable future, in an environment almost universally seen as inhospitable, linked to the progress of Empire.

The historical framework available to May and O'Farrell in the 1950s was primarily an optimistic one. It was an optimism that coloured predictions of the region's economic prospects. However much political rivalries and parochialisms may have hindered progress in the past, the opening of the Otira tunnel in 1923 was seen as marking the dawn of a new prosperity. 'In 50 years time', wrote Harrop, Westland could be 'as busy and populous as her neighbour [Canterbury] is today'.²¹ Harrop was vague about precisely what the economic driving force of the new prosperity would be. Like most commentators, he assumed that coal would continue to be king in the postwar world and that it would remain the central pillar of the local economy. Timber milling, farming and tourism would, he believed, become increasingly important. What was needed above all else was enterprise: 'Enterprise first opened up Westland for the white man, and it is enterprise which Westland requires today'.²²

Thirty years later, as the Coast prepared to celebrate its golden century, some of the optimism had evaporated. The coal industry was now in retreat. New and less labour-intensive technologies had eroded the bargaining power of the coalminers and ultimately spelt the end for the communities that had grown around the pits that had given them life. Already the coaltowns had begun to resemble the decayed goldtowns that had flourished and withered before them. The industrial and political radicalism that had flourished as these communities had sought to confront the realities of time and place had been largely played out. As the mining communities withered so did their mouthpiece, the *Grey River Argus*, once proudly defiant as Labour's pioneer daily, begin the slide that would see it finally expire as the 1960s came to an end.²³ The completion of the Haast Pass promised to increase the flow of tourists—always an element in the West Coast's appeal.

As a cluster of young writers, May, O'Farrell and Pearson were products of this period of shrinking horizons. Philip Ross May (1930–1977) proudly proclaimed himself a native of Ross, the 'Ballarat of Westland', where his

21 Harrop, *Romance of Westland*, p. 169.

22 Harrop, *Romance of Westland*, p. 169.

23 In 1966 the Grey River Argus Company was taken over by the Buller Westland Publishing Company. The paper was relaunched in February 1966 as the *Argus Leader*. Gone was its traditional claim to be New Zealand's pioneer Labour daily. In November 1966 the *Leader* closed its doors.

father for nearly 25 years managed a timber mill and served several terms as mayor. Born in Hokitika, he was educated at Ross Primary School. Like Pearson, he was a student at Greymouth Technical High School before going 'over the Hill' to Canterbury College in the late 1940s. In 1954 he was awarded an MA with first class honours in history after completing a thesis, 'The West Canterbury Gold Rush to 1865: The Analysis of a Gold Rush of the Mid-Nineteenth Century' (1953). After a time as a high school teacher in Christchurch, he joined the history staff of the University of Canterbury and was able to complete the transformation of his thesis into the path-breaking *West Coast Gold Rushes* (1962).

Thus it was that May's arrival on the historical scene coincided with the centennial moment. In late 1959 the Westland Centennial Council published its official centennial souvenir and proclaimed 1960 as centennial year. Its objectives, as spelt out by the then mayor of Greymouth, F.W. Baillie, were 'to present a summary of the thrilling and romantic history of our beautiful province and to recall the indomitable spirit of our pioneer forbears'.²⁴ Gold loomed large in the official history and was emblazoned in its title, *Westland's Golden Century*. Choosing the historic moment had exercised the mind of the committee. They were conscious that Westland's historical pedigree lacked the 'planned and organised' stamp of the Wakefieldian settlements of which they were offshoots. And they were equally aware that it was the rushes of 1864 and 1865 that marked the birth of the West Coast they knew. They chose as their founding document 'the completion of the purchase of Westland from the Maoris, in 1860'.²⁵

The year 1960 was a time of celebration up and down the Coast, and it was as part of this community and public remembrance that May (and, as we shall see, O'Farrell) emerges as historian. He contributed three short articles to *Westland's Golden Century*: 'Exploration and Purchase', 'The First Gold Discoveries' and 'The Year of the Rush'.²⁶ They were followed two years later by the monumental *West Coast Gold Rushes*. Its 588 pages offered a detailed picture of the West Coast's foundation years, with nearly 100 pages devoted to the exploration and mapping of the region before the rushes of 1864–65. It was an immediate success; the 2,000 copies printed

24 Rupert A. Kay, ed., *Westland's Golden Century 1860–1960: An Official Souvenir of Westland's Centenary*, Greymouth, Westland Centennial Council, 1959, 'Foreword'.

25 Kay, *Westland's Golden Century 1869–1960*, 'Foreword'.

26 Kay, *Westland's Golden Century 1860–1960*, pp. 13–19, 21–26, 27–32.

sold within three months and it was selected by the New Zealand Literary Fund advisory board as one of the 10 New Zealand books to be displayed at the International Book Design Exhibition in London in 1963. And, when Hokitika came to mark its own centenary in 1965, May 'added some new material' to 'relevant sections' of the *West Coast Gold Rushes* and produced a 48-page booklet, *Hokitika: Goldfields Capital* (1964).²⁷ In short, by the mid-1960s the name Philip Ross May was synonymous with the West Coast. As one reviewer put it, 'no other area of the country has had such a well-balanced and exhaustive treatment of the foundation years of settlement'.²⁸

Patrick James O'Farrell (1933–2003), unlike both May and Pearson, was a first-generation New Zealander. His Irish Catholic parents had migrated to New Zealand separately from Borrisokane, Tipperary, Ireland, before World War I. They married in New Zealand and settled in Greymouth where Patrick was born and where his father worked as a tailor. Educated by the Sisters of Mercy and the Marist Brothers, O'Farrell joined the exodus of the young over the Hill and studied history at Canterbury University College. In 1955 he completed an MA thesis 'The Workers and Grey District Politics, 1865–1913', which traced the fortunes of the labouring classes in the aftermath of the gold rushes. At its centre were the coalminers of the Grey Valley and their organised industrial and political responses to the particular circumstances in which they lived and worked. Like May, O'Farrell had been drawn into the celebratory enterprise that was *Westland's Golden Century*, contributing an article, 'Politics in Westland'.²⁹ By then, he had already become the first of what was eventually a cluster of Canterbury history graduates to take up a PhD scholarship at The Australian National University, newly established in Canberra. Thus O'Farrell, unlike May, did not immediately or directly develop his West Coast research for publication.

Less obviously, his doctoral thesis, a political biography of the Australian-born Harry Holland who led the New Zealand Labour Party from its foundation until his death in 1933, unfolds against a West Coast backdrop. Arriving in New Zealand in 1912, Holland quickly thrust himself to the forefront of radical politics. When fellow Australian 'Paddy'

27 Philip Ross May, *Hokitika: Goldfields Capital*, Christchurch, Pegasus, Hokitika Centennial Committee, 1964.

28 Murray McCaskill, 'Review: *The West Coast Gold Rushes* by P.R. May', *Historical Studies: Australia and New Zealand*, vol. 11, no. 41, November 1963, p. 141.

29 Kay, *Westland's Golden Century 1860–1960*, pp. 42–48.

Webb, MP for Grey, was imprisoned in 1918 for refusing military call-up, Holland successfully contested the by-election that followed. Boundary changes that preceded the 1919 general election saw the West Coast coalfields Labour strongholds moved into the Buller electorate based on Westport. And it was the northern coalfields town rather than Greymouth or Hokitika that Holland called ‘Home’ during his parliamentary years. Later revised and published as *Harry Holland: Militant Socialist* (1964),³⁰ O’Farrell’s thesis drew him inevitably to dwell further upon the nature of the West Coast community, its place in the national history and especially its role in the emergence of organised labour.

The amalgam of industrial unionism, labourism, socialism and communism that swirled around pit-top debate was the dominant strand of West Coast labour politics in the early 1920s. Holland was comfortable moving within it; more comfortable than he was in the wider New Zealand political environment. It was in his dealings with Grey Valley unionists that Holland came to recognise and accommodate the important role played by the working-class Irish Catholic community within organised labour. It was this dimension of the West Coast experience that engaged O’Farrell’s attention. The proportion of Irish-born in New Zealand had never been high and had declined from 46,037 (6.5 per cent) in 1896 to 37,380 (3.5 per cent) in 1916. It was an unevenly spread population and considerably more thickly deposited on the West Coast. Even before the birth of the New Zealand Labour Party, in July 1916, something approaching an alliance had developed between the labour movement and Irish nationalists. In 1913, when Paddy Webb won the Grey seat for the Social Democratic Party—a forerunner of the New Zealand Labour Party—the conservative press had proclaimed his victory a triumph for an unholy alliance of the ‘Reds and the Greens’. Holland championed the Irish cause. In 1916 he wrote a series of articles on the historical foundations of Ireland’s Easter Rebellion. Whether or not they shared his militant socialism, a significant section of the West Coast’s Irish Catholic community recognised and endorsed Holland as a voice of protest.

At precisely this juncture, O’Farrell’s parents, Paddy and Mai, set up their home in Puketahi Street at the heart of Greymouth’s Catholic community. Here the young Patrick O’Farrell observed at close quarters the making of Greymouth’s Catholic/Labour politics. It was a formative experience evoked

30 O’Farrell, *Harry Holland: Militant Socialist*; Patrick James O’Farrell, ‘H.E. Holland and the Labour Movement in Australia and New Zealand: With Special Emphasis on the Activity of Militant Socialists’, PhD thesis, ANU, 1960.

brilliantly some 50 years later in *Vanished Kingdoms* (1990).³¹ A masterly personal excursion, it shows how the O'Farrell family saga illuminates the interaction between people and place that was the West Coast experience in the first half of the twentieth century. Its pages reveal Irish loyalties strongly held. To 'symbolise his commitment to the ideals of 1916', his father changed the family surname from Farrell to O'Farrell. This apart, Ireland and things Irish did not dominate family life. If there was an ideological commitment in the Puketahi Street household Pat O'Farrell grew up in, it was 'a very practical involvement in the New Zealand Labour Party'. And it is from this that he traces the unfolding of his historical interests. 'The Workers and Grey District Politics' led naturally enough to examining the socialist impulses that produced the New Zealand Labour Party, exploring the impact of the Russian Revolution upon Australasian labour movements and the biography of Harry Holland.

As Westland celebrated its centennial in the early 1960s, O'Farrell was teaching Russian history at the University of New South Wales. His research in this area was limited by rudimentary Russian language skills. By chance, however, he came across a British White Paper examining allegations that there had been negotiations between Sinn Fein and the Bolsheviks under Lenin.³² The discovery led in 1965 to a period of study leave in Ireland (where he taught primarily Russian history), a decision greeted dismissively in Australian academic circles where Ireland was seen as 'a historical backwater, where nothing ever happened'.³³ As O'Farrell wrote in 1999, the time in Dublin took him, however, into Irish history and 'radically changed' his life.³⁴ Before travelling to Ireland, he had begun work on the history of the Catholic Church in Australia, and in the process of immersing himself in the Catholic Archives had sampled, in the correspondence of Irish bishops and priests, 'a treasure trove of private and very illuminating historical conversations between Ireland and Australia'.³⁵ His return to the University of New South Wales in 1967, where he began teaching a course on Anglo-Irish relations, marks the beginning of the Irish Catholic phase of his academic career.

31 P.J. O'Farrell, *Vanished Kingdoms: Irish in Australia and New Zealand. A Personal Excursion*, Sydney, University of New South Wales Press, 1990.

32 P.J. O'Farrell, *The Irish Echo* (Australia), 7–20 October 1999, p. 14.

33 P.J. O'Farrell, *The Irish Echo* (Australia), 21 October–3 November 1999, p. 12; also: Brad Patterson, ed., *The Irish in New Zealand: Historical Contexts and Perspectives*, Wellington, Stout Research Centre for New Zealand Studies, Victoria University of Wellington, 2002, p. 3.

34 O'Farrell, *The Irish Echo*, 7–20 October 1999, p. 14.

35 O'Farrell, *The Irish Echo*, 21 October–3 November 1999, p. 12.

The most obvious product of this shift of emphasis was the publication of *The Catholic Church in Australia: A Short History* (1968) and *Ireland's English Question: Anglo-Irish Relations 1534–1970* (1971).³⁶ The link between the two books is obvious and direct. Less obvious, but just as significant, was the revisiting of the West Coast in the review of the second edition of Phil May's *West Coast Gold Rushes* that came in the midst of this transition in O'Farrell's historical preoccupations. The optimism that infused his earlier treatment of the Grey district labour movement, especially evident in the treatment of the arrival of the Red Feds (the radical New Zealand Federation of Labour), gives way to an emphasis upon the relationship between a harsh and unyielding environment and the individuals who struggled to make the best of the circumstances they had been dealt. In traversing the turbulent slice of the past—1887 to 1923—that lay at the heart of his first foray into Irish history, O'Farrell was grappling with the issues that in Borrisokane, Ireland, and in Greymouth shaped, in different ways, the lives of his parents and their generation. They were years of reform and rebellion: the Anglican Church had been disestablished in 1869; Land Acts notwithstanding, peasant unrest remained endemic; Home Rule become a religious crusade and, after the 1911 Parliament Act, a possibility; revolt came closer as Ulster dug in its heels, partition gained popularity in Britain and a revolutionary vanguard emerged determined to free Ireland.

Over the next 20 years, in which he produced four books, O'Farrell's historical concerns were Ireland and Australia rather than New Zealand and the Grey Valley. After a further academic year in Dublin, 1972–73, there followed, in quick succession, *England and Ireland since 1800* (1975) and *The Catholic Church and Community in Australia* (1977), a revised version of the earlier *Short History*³⁷ that doubled the length of the original work. A hospital operation that, as O'Farrell put it, 'went wrong, leaving me without speech, my writing hand and severely reduced mobility' slowed down the production line. The creative surge that followed subsequently in the 1980s and early 1990s was remarkable. In many respects, *Vanished Kingdoms*, with its skilful interweaving of the threads of Catholic, Irish and West Coast experience, is O'Farrell at his most brilliant. It is in this

36 P.J. O'Farrell, *The Catholic Church in Australia: A Short History: 1788–1967*, Melbourne, Nelson (Australia), 1968; P.J. O'Farrell, *Ireland's English Question: Anglo-Irish Relations 1534–1970*, London, Batsford, 1971.

37 Patrick O'Farrell, *England and Ireland since 1800*, London, Oxford University Press, 1975; Patrick O'Farrell, *The Catholic Church and Community in Australia: A History*, revised edn, West Melbourne, Nelson (Australia), 1977.

exploration of how old-world themes were worked out in new-world settings that O'Farrell captures that convergence of people and place that shaped the West Coast experience.

The son of a railway clerk, Bill Pearson (1922–2002) was born in Greymouth just as the O'Farrells had settled in the town. He was educated at the Grey Main Primary School and the Greymouth Technical High School before going 'over the Hill' to Canterbury University College in 1939. He subsequently trained as a teacher in Dunedin and was for five months a probationary assistant teacher at the Blackball Primary School. He served in Egypt during World War II and on return to New Zealand graduated MA in English from Canterbury University College in 1948 before embarking on a PhD at the University of London. After completing his doctorate in 1952, he taught for a period in London schools and then returned to New Zealand to take up a lectureship in English in 1954 at Auckland University College. It was while in London that he began work on what became *Coal Flat*. At this time also he wrote his celebrated essay 'Fretful Sleepers', a critical assessment of the New Zealand character.³⁸ The relationship between the two has been much commented upon and for present purposes they will be considered as forming a part of Pearson's West Coast phase.

Pearson was a product of the 'bit in-between' the two world wars. Whereas O'Farrell can be firmly placed in Greymouth's Irish Catholic community, Pearson grew up in a more austere Scots Presbyterian household. His father was a member of the local Masonic Lodge and stood apart from the 'boozy' West Coast that was to attract admiration and condemnation in roughly equal measure. Where O'Farrell senior was active in the fledgling Labour Party and a director of the town's pioneer labour daily, the *Grey River Argus*, Pearson senior preferred to take a conservative Christchurch daily and to keep his politics to himself. What the two families shared was a lowly position on the Grey Valley hierarchy of physical endeavour that prized male manual work and placed all other occupations in relation to coalminers and timber workers. In this sense, both Bill Pearson and Patrick O'Farrell stood 'alongside' the slice of life that was to dominate their West Coast writing.

38 Pearson, *Coal Flat*; Bill Pearson, 'Fretful Sleepers: A Sketch of New Zealand Behaviour and Its Implications for the Artist', *Landfall* 23, vol. 6, no. 3, September 1952, pp. 201–30; reprinted with corrections in Charles Brasch, ed., *Landfall Country: Work from Landfall, 1947–61*, Christchurch, Caxton Press, 1960, and in Bill Pearson, *Fretful Sleepers and Other Essays*, Auckland, Heinemann Educational Books, 1974, pp. 1–36.

The mining communities were, even on the West Coast, communities apart. Set at some distance from the larger towns of Greymouth and Westport, the mining towns only slowly disintegrated as road and rail transport made it possible for miners to live in the more congenial environments of the port towns. O'Farrell and Pearson lived in times when it was still common to hear Grey Valley critics of the miners refer to the 'foreign twangs' and equally foreign ideas that prevailed in the mining towns. As first-generation New Zealanders they were both especially aware of the differences of accent and nationality that could be used to place the miners outside what it suited their critics from within to define as the mainstream of the West Coast community. Yet, in many respects, the Grey Valley labour movement that the miners spearheaded was one of the strongest bonds bridging the town and mining communities. It was also the point at which the convergence between the numerically strongest groups of 'outsiders'—the miners and the Irish Catholics—occurred. O'Farrell saw this alliance between the 'Reds' and the 'Greens' from close to the power centre of lay Catholicism; Pearson from the Protestant end of town. Each was attracted by the community, unionist and socialist solidarities mining towns affirmed. Both were conscious of generations of ideologues who had turned to the coalfields in the hope that the miners would be the revolutionary vanguard of their dreams and equally aware of the realities of time and place that had frustrated them.

The five months Pearson spent in Blackball as a probationary assistant teacher had enabled him to observe a mining community at closer range than on the fleeting opportunities he had experienced while living in Greymouth. It left a 'lasting impression'. The thought of writing about it was something that continued to preoccupy him after he enlisted in 1941 and, as he was later to recall, was first conceived when he was with the J-Force in Japan in 1946 at the end of the Pacific War. To that point, he had envisaged a story about 'a young idealist crushed by a materialist community'. In the long gestation that preceded *Coal Flat's* publication in 1963, the relative weighting given to the individual and the collective shifted as Pearson 'found the young man less interesting than the community'. By the late 1940s, this preference for the collective rather than the individual led him to toy with adopting elements of the emerging discipline of sociology or, as he put it, 'those studies that see all the parts in relation to the whole, taking in geography, history, economic

and social relations'.³⁹ It was a style he had admired in Lewis Mumford's books on technology and cities. He became aware of a New Zealand study, H.C.D. Somerset's *Littledene* (1938), said to employ, to some degree, this sociological framework in a pioneering study of the community based on the rural Canterbury town of Oxford. Pearson appears to have first read *Littledene* in 1949 during a short time spent teaching at Oxford, but recalled some 40 years later that 'it wasn't the sort of study of a small town that I had in mind'.⁴⁰ One suspects that he was already moving towards the novel as the chosen vehicle for the social realism to which he was attracted.

It was to be more than a decade before this thinking resulted in the publication of what was to be Pearson's only novel, *Coal Flat* (1963). After returning from the war, in 1946, he had joined the throng of returned servicemen who filled university lecture theatres and completed an MA in English at Canterbury College (1947–48). The following year he took up a PhD scholarship at King's College, London, and completed his thesis on the nineteenth-century English Catholic poets in 1952. It is hard to conceive of anything more removed from the idea of a novel set at Blackball, nestled as it was beneath the Paparoa Range on an elevated plateau above the Grey River, than the Hampstead Heath environment in which Pearson returned to the project. The idea of using a West Coast mining community to explore a range of attitudes and assumptions held to be widespread in New Zealand society was brought back into closer focus by the playing out of New Zealand's own Cold War drama—the 1951 waterfront dispute. Viewed from London, the Emergency Powers promulgated by the Sidney Holland-led National Party smacked even more starkly of incipient fascism than they did from Blackball. That Holland was able to assume such an authoritarian approach was possible, in Pearson's view, 'because the ground is already prepared in these conditions: a docile sleepy electorate, veneration of war heroes, willingness to persecute those who don't conform, gullibility in the face of headlines and radio peptalks'.⁴¹ Precisely what elements of individual and community behaviour evident in the functioning of a West Coast coalfield town of the late 1940s provided Pearson with the link between

39 Bill Pearson, 'Beginnings and Endings', *Sport* 5, Spring 1990, pp. 15, 21.

40 H.C.D. Somerset, *Littledene: Patterns of Change* (1938), 3rd edn, Wellington, New Zealand Council for Educational Research, 1974; Pearson, 'Beginnings and Endings', p. 15. See also Paul Millar, *No Fretful Sleeper: A Life of Bill Pearson*, Auckland, Auckland University Press, 2010, p. 163.

41 Pearson, *Fretful Sleepers and Other Essays*, pp. 3–4.

'Fretful Sleepers' and *Coal Flat* will be explored in Chapter 5. But, as we have already observed, it had become clear to him by this stage that his interest was increasingly less engaged by the inner struggles of the idealistic young man at the centre of his story and more concerned with the community in which he moved. How much this owed to the peculiarities of place and how much it reflected the wider preoccupations of life in the 1950s is likewise central to an understanding of how *Coal Flat* came to play a critical role in the wider perception of the West Coast as a place apart. Whatever the source of Pearson's interpretation, readers of *Coal Flat* would have found little of May's optimism and more of O'Farrell's concern for the harshness and grimness that surrounded the efforts of both individuals and communities. For some, the final words of the novel seemed 'bleak and laconic', if not fatalistic, and indicative of a surrender to the contingencies of time and place.

Pearson rejected such a reading of *Coal Flat* as being based on an ignorance of just how good a West Coast summer could be and certainly at odds with his intention. He had been attracted by the artistic symmetry involved in leaving his story very much as he had entered it—an idea he later attributed to Arthur Koestler's novel *Arrival and Departure*.⁴² Thus, when readers meet *Coal Flat* it is on 'a sunny February morning throbbing with cicadas'; they leave on a 'sunny November morning' where 'already the air was singing with grass cicadas'.⁴³ Life goes on much as it always had, seemingly untouched by the crises that had enveloped the lives of the individuals at the centre of the novel. Its central character, whose estrangement from that community provided the dynamic of the narrative, comes to accept much of what Pearson calls the 'hopes and beliefs'⁴⁴ of the majority. Exploring precisely what this compromise tells us about the West Coast environment in which it was negotiated, as distinct from the literary artifice employed by the author, takes us to the essence of the relationship between people and place.

42 Arthur Koestler's novel *Arrival and Departure* was published in 1943 and was the third novel in a trilogy that explores the conflict between morality and expediency. See also Pearson, 'Beginnings and Endings', p. 21.

43 Pearson, *Coal Flat*, pp. 6 and 418.

44 Pearson, 'Beginnings and Endings', p. 21.

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