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## PHILIP ROSS MAY

### Making a Goldfield: Populating a Wilderness

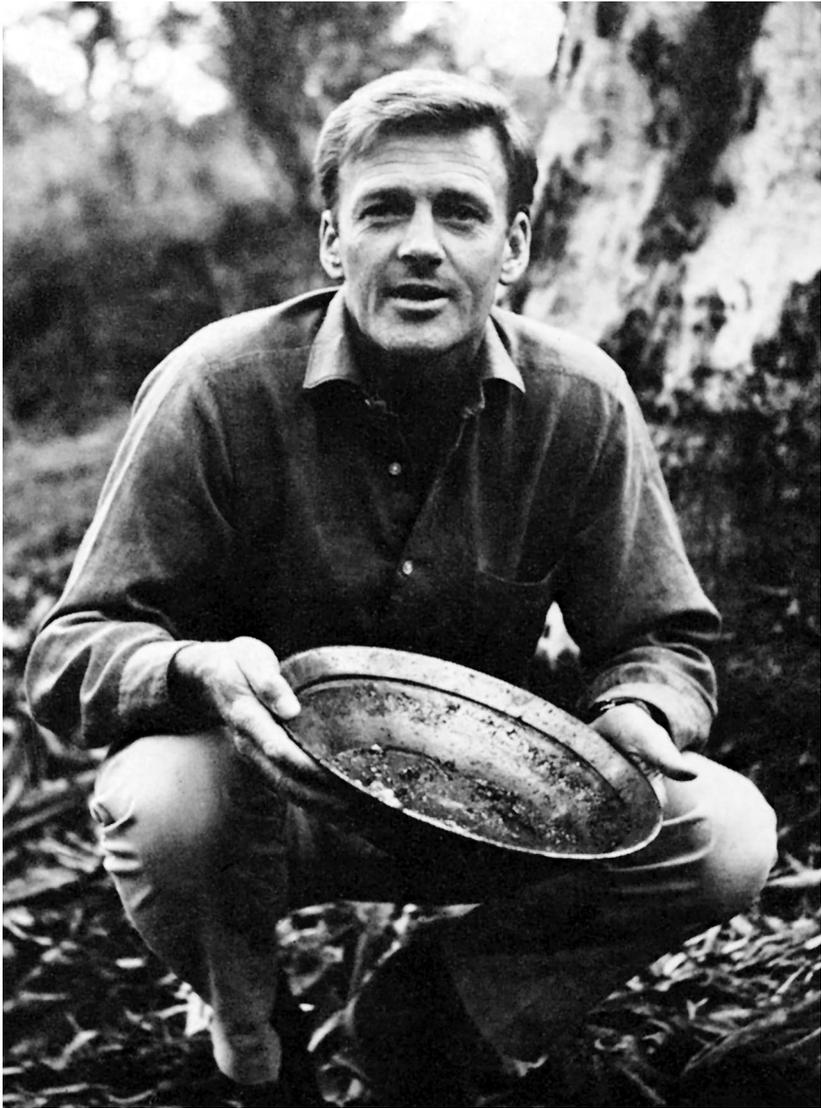
In the foreword to *The West Coast Gold Rushes* Phil May ponders ‘whether one can acknowledge a debt to a place’ and admits that ‘it is not easy to get the Coast out of one’s bones’.<sup>1</sup> The creeks and gullies that surrounded the Ross township in which he grew up carried the names and associations of the rush of ‘sixty-five’ and conjured up images of an event that brought people and place together with a suddenness that was as bewildering and unpredictable as it was chaotic and colourful. As historian, May sought to find meaning in the apparent randomness and, by taking his stand as it were alongside the diggers, presented a ‘scrap of New Zealand history in its own terms’.<sup>2</sup> As a phenomenon in their own right, the West Coast gold rushes took their place in that sequence of mid-nineteenth-century events that rippled through the Pacific borderlands from California to eastern Australia before reaching New Zealand. Those who opened up the West Coast goldfields were thus veterans who ‘moved with the speed and assurance of a well-trained army’,<sup>3</sup> taking with them the merchants, storekeepers, publicans, wardens, bank agents, entertainers, rogues and prostitutes who made up a goldfield’s community.

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1 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, pp. 18–19.

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

3 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 107.



**Figure 1: Philip Ross May in 1970 washing a ‘colour’ near Captains Flat, an old New South Wales mining town.**

Source: Courtesy May family.

The combination of isolation and rugged terrain limited human habitation. Traditional accounts suggest that Māori had discovered the alpine passes to the West Coast in the seventeenth century and had begun to value the place as a source of greenstone. Such accounts also suggest that by

the nineteenth century the land between Hokitika and Greymouth, the hub of May's 'West Coast', was under the control of Tuhuru, a principal chief of the Ngāti Waewae hapu of Ngāi Tahu. The heart of the Māori community was the Arahura River and its catchment, the principal source of pounamu. In the 1830s this control was weakened when the Ngāti Rārua, Ngāti Tama and possibly representatives of other northern tribes defeated the Poutini Ngāi Tahu in battle. After a brief occupation (1832–37), during which the Poutini Ngāi Tahu remained in residence, the victors withdrew but continued to assert authority over the entire west coast. Poutini Ngāi Tahu did not recognise this claim to the south of Kahurangi Point, and by the 1840s were occupying and cultivating land on the banks of the Kawatiri (Buller) River.

On the eve of the gold rushes, the 'West Coast' was still defined by the pattern of Māori occupation and use. 'Tiny'<sup>4</sup> in number—probably no more than 100—with the heaviest concentration between the Grey and Arahura rivers, theirs was a presence dictated, as was that of the Europeans who followed, by a precious mineral. It was greenstone that explains the substantial community of five storehouses and six substantial houses at Taramakau and the three houses that lent a sense of permanence to the Māori presence at Arahura. The camps along the alpine pathways to the east were staging posts in the passage of greenstone to the Ngāi Tahu community at Kaiapoi. Elsewhere, along the coast and on inland river flats were numerous settlements occupied seasonally for fishing, eeling and gardening. There was a settlement on the northern bank of the Kawatiri (Buller) River, a garden on the southern bank, and camps and gardens at Tauranga, Totara and Waimangaroa and in the Inangahua Valley at Oweka. The subsistence activities that sustained the quest for greenstone had flourished in isolation. Reflecting upon the position of West Coast Māori, as he had found them in 1846, Heaphy described a people without pigs, few European crops, virtually no iron implements and dressed in the traditional flax mat.<sup>5</sup> Such observations point to a people apart and, as Atholl Anderson puts it, among the last Māori communities in the colony to adopt a 'largely European mode'<sup>6</sup> of economic organisation.

4 Harry Evison, *The Ngai Tahu Deeds*, Christchurch, Canterbury University Press, 2006, p. 388.

5 Atholl Anderson, Judith Binney and Aroha Harris, *Tangata Whenua: A History*, Wellington, Bridget Williams Books, 2015, p. 166.

6 Anderson, Binney and Harris, *Tangata Whenua*, p. 166.

It was gold rather than settler pressure for land that refocused attention—both European and Māori—upon defining and asserting presences on the West Coast. There was less urgency on the European side to engage in the formal processes of colonisation inaugurated by the Treaty of Waitangi—a treaty process in which West Coast Māori had not been directly involved. Colonial administrators had regarded implementing the provisions of the Treaty of Waitangi on the West Coast as simply a minor detail of its South Island purchase. In the 1848 Kemp Purchase, ‘a careless and unsatisfactory’ transaction from which Poutini Ngāi Tahu received ‘no significant sum of money’,<sup>7</sup> the Crown was said to have acquired all land between Arahura and the Buller River. The following year, an agent of the Crown, W.D.B. Mantell, attempted to pay £110 to relatives of Poutini Ngāi Tahu. Little of the attempted payment found its way across the Alps and there was no effort to lay out any reserves, as required by the Treaty of Waitangi. The Poutini Ngāi Tahu had every right to think that any agreement to sell their lands was null and void.

Throughout the 1850s the colonial government negotiated payments to Māori (Ngāti Toa, Ngāti Tama, Ngāti Awa, Rangitāne) with historic claims to greenstone in the Māwhera district—between Hokitika and Greymouth. Negotiation with the Poutini Ngāi Tahu continued to be regarded as a loose end that needed some time to be tidied. European commentators, however, noted a change in the attitude amongst the Poutini Ngāi Tahu. Whereas in 1846 Thomas Brunner had noted an open hospitality, observers now identified the sharpness of the trader: ‘they required payment for everything, not in pounds, shillings, and pence, which latter coins they entirely ignored, but in pounds only’.<sup>8</sup> Europeans digging for gold were said to be viewed coolly by Māori grown uneasy about the slowness of the Crown to settle the land question. May observes this greater sensitivity and shows how gold hastened European purchase of the ‘West Coast’. By the terms of what became known as the Arahura Deed (1860) Poutini Ngāi Tahu ceded their land to the crown for £300 in cash. Some 6,724 acres were to be assigned as individual allotments; a further 3,500 acres were set aside as Reserves and preserved Māori control of the Arahura River bed—the hub of the traditional greenstone supply.

7 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 50.

8 Julius von Haast, *Report of a Topographical and Geological Exploration of the Western Districts of the Nelson Province, New Zealand*, Nelson, Nelson Provincial Government, 1861, p. 29.

The rush of newcomers in 1865 inevitably swamped the tiny Māori population. But in the period immediately following the settlement, Māori involvement remained significant. Māori were active in discovering and reporting the presence of gold deposits. It was Māori who in 1861 discovered gold on the Buller River and subsequently at Waimangaroa, and on the Lyell River.<sup>9</sup> Ihai Tainui's discoveries in the Hohonu district in 1862 drew attention to the Taramakau. A year later a group of Māori joined with Europeans working gold in the Hohonu.<sup>10</sup> Later discoveries in the Grey Valley and in the watershed of the Arnold were appropriately named Maori Gully (No. 1) and Maori Gully (No. 2). Māori were particularly prominent in the Totara and in the working of the old Buller diggings as the main body of the gold seekers moved on to richer pickings.<sup>11</sup> Along the entire length of the goldfields, if predominantly in the area between Greymouth and Hokitika, 'big parties of Maoris, men, women and children'<sup>12</sup> found a natural place alongside the cooperatively organised parties that characterised the early phase of the West Coast rushes. 'Never prominent on the big fields in their settled phase', May notes that 'the rumour that a Maori party was starting out to prospect could set half a mining camp striking tents and rolling swags'.<sup>13</sup> Such was the level of Māori involvement that, among diggers with experience of the Australian goldfields, it engendered, or so newspaper commentators claimed, an attitude that 'contrasted with the diggers' poor opinion of the Australian 'blacks'.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, as the trickle of newcomers became a 'rush', the settlement that preceded invasion was to irritate diggers impatient to exploit the moment.

Like the gold seekers themselves, Phil May as pioneering historian had to give meaning to the term 'West Coast'. The term itself was a product of the unfolding of the European presence. Prior to the establishment of the Wakefieldian settlements of Nelson, Canterbury and Otago, the term 'West Coast' was used to describe a 300-mile strip of country stretching from Kahurangi Point in the north to beyond Jackson Bay in the south. When the settler administrations drew their boundary lines, the title 'West Canterbury' was attached to land south of the confluence of the Grey

9 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, pp. 71–73.

10 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 89.

11 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 311.

12 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 311.

13 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 311.

14 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 311, quoting *Nelson Examiner*, 20 January 1866.

and Arnold rivers and 'West Nelson' to all land to the north. The term 'West-land', came to be used as an alternative to 'West Canterbury'. In the aftermath of the gold rushes it was adopted to describe the County of Westland (1868) and, from 1873 to 1876, the Province of Westland. May endorsed the contemporary definitions; the 'West Coast' of his title extends from Kahurangi Point in the north to beyond Jackson Bay in the south. There can be no doubt that the epicentre of his history is Hokitika and its hinterland; within a radius of 17 miles lay three of the biggest West Coast diggings—Waimea, Kaniere and Ross.

Māori presence notwithstanding, to the diggers the West Coast was an empty land. To historians, what set the West Coast variant of the gold rush apart was the coming together of experienced, acquisitive newcomers and a wilderness. The forty-niners in California were preceded by cattle ranches and mission stations, the eastern Australian rushes of New South Wales and Victoria took place in a gigantic sheep walk, and in New Zealand the squatters had already explored and occupied the gold-bearing country inland from Dunedin. Pioneers as well as miners, the diggers thus became, in European terms, the region's founding fathers. Their arrival initiated settlement and compressed into a few frenzied years the foundation of a region whose development was otherwise destined to be dictated by the more measured exploitation of coal and timber. Only gold could attract the capital needed to overcome an environment whose treacherous harbours, frequently swollen rivers and broken terrain had frustrated explorers and confined investment to the planned colonies of the east and the pastoral and agricultural potential of their hinterlands. Indeed, as May makes abundantly clear, the pioneering phase of West Coast history needs to be seen as part of a 'rushing' phenomenon that marked the search for gold across the Pacific borderlands in the middle of the nineteenth century. Within this framework the West Coast rushes developed as part of an Australasian mining frontier in which it became an economic dependency of Victoria.

As a mining frontier land and as an extension of the Australian goldfields, the West Coast developed in ways that gave it a number of distinctive features. Despite coming at the end of the gold rush chain, the West Coast's founding population remained surprisingly youthful. Nearly 80 per cent of those who rushed to Hokitika and Greymouth were aged between 21 and 40, at a time when less than half the colonial population fell into that age group. Put another way, in 1867 the West Coast contained 12 per cent of New Zealand's European population but 25 per cent of

the men between 21 and 40 years of age. The preponderance of men and the continued unrestrained flow of gold seekers seemed briefly to threaten the neat calculations that underpinned the settlement plans of provincial leaders in the east. But, as in so much of West Coast history, the Southern Alps determined that the contamination of the planned east by the unrestrained and unrestrainable diggers faded as quickly as the hopes of disappointed gold seekers. And it remained a fact of life on the diggings that men long outnumbered women. Even in 1867 there were fewer than 3,500 on the entire West Coast.<sup>15</sup>

Behind the fears of gender-imbalance expressed by east Canterbury political leaders lay questions of potential disorder and disruption. The spectre of an unruly gold-rush horde peopled by undesirables was quickly dismissed by May. In social background the goldmining communities of the West Coast differed in significant ways from the relatively homogeneous planned colonies of Canterbury and Nelson. Like their parent communities, they were mostly British-born (80 per cent), and noticeably more cosmopolitan: with 14 per cent from continental Europe and 3.7 per cent from America, when the proportion of foreign born in Canterbury and Nelson totalled barely 4–5 per cent. There was also a ‘big Irish minority’:<sup>16</sup> 26 per cent as opposed to 13 per cent for the colony, 4.1 per cent for Nelson and 10.9 per cent for Canterbury.<sup>17</sup> Of these differences, it was the Irish element that was to play the more significant part in the unfolding of West Coast history. As they applied to gold rush society, however, these defining differences—more cosmopolitan and more Irish—were of greater concern to sections of the Canterbury establishment than they were to the diggers. As May puts it, the bulk of the Canterbury settlers had more in common with the typical digger than with the ‘cultured middle-class families’ who set the social tone and provided the political leadership of the province. Conversely, by the time the typical digger had made his way along the goldfield chain of the Pacific borderlands, he had ‘undergone a process of’ natural ‘selection more rigorous than any English emigration agent might’ have applied.<sup>18</sup>

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15 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, pp. 282–83.

16 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 286.

17 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 284.

18 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, pp. 284–85.

The typical digger might have been a seasoned hand but would the label settler or colonist fit as well? May detected 'few signs of attachment to the place'<sup>19</sup> among the early diggers. The richest claim was always a 'homeward-bounder'.<sup>20</sup> The utilitarian approach to the land and its resources that marked their activities modified only slowly. The rawness of the terrain through which they moved coupled with an almost frenetic mobility that allowed little of permanence to take root produced squalor. Kanieri was 'a mere bog, the houses surrounded with pools of foetid water'.<sup>21</sup> On stormy nights the primitive campsites of tents and whares were a cacophony of 'flapping canvas and corrugated iron'.<sup>22</sup> Overrun by rats, bombarded by bush flies, mosquitoes and sandflies, the camps were incubators of sickness and disease. More than San Francisco and what May calls the 'the trinity of colonial capitals'<sup>23</sup>—Sydney, Melbourne and Dunedin—the emerging river ports of Greymouth, Westport and Hokitika were thrown together in the midst of what must have seemed like a 'peculiar human tsunami'.<sup>24</sup> Greymouth preceded Hokitika in sequence but took some time to shrug off the appearance of 'a big transit camp through which men drank their way into the Grey Valley'.<sup>25</sup> It was upon Hokitika that the title 'goldfields capital' was bestowed. Yet even here a sense of permanency developed slowly. One early visitor thought the town likely to be washed out to sea.<sup>26</sup> Another commentator described a town where:

The Commissioner lives in a tent, the wardens are accommodated ditto; prisoners are locked into a couple of twelve feet square wooden boxes; the court-house is a flimsy weather-boarded affair, about the size of a small cottage; hotels are of cabbage trees, calico, unseasoned boards and corrugated iron, tricked out with desperately big signs and loud bars; houses, tents, hovels and V-huts of so unsubstantial a character as to baffle description. Many of them seem to be nothing but masses of rags and old iron, the sort of rubbish that is usually found in a marine store.<sup>27</sup>

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19 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 294.

20 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 286.

21 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 289.

22 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 289.

23 May, *Hokitika: Goldfields Capital*, p. 11.

24 James Belich, *Making Peoples: A History of the New Zealanders from Polynesian Settlement to the End of the Nineteenth Century*, Auckland, Penguin Press, 1996, p. 346.

25 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 354.

26 May, *Hokitika: Goldfields Capital*, p. 29.

27 May, *Hokitika: Goldfields Capital*, p. 29.

Among the calico, canvas and corrugated iron, the survival instincts of the merchants and shopkeepers found communal expression in the formation of an Improvement Committee. This incipient sense of community came to be matched on the diggings by a cooperation born of agitation about claim, sluice and water rights. And, as we shall see, these separate forms of combination came to constitute the critical divide in goldfields politics.

Life on the diggings was predicated upon luck. The West Coast environment put a premium on experience and versatility; the seasoned had more luck than the adventurer. It was the precise nature of this seasoning that interested May. The West Coast goldfields had much in common with the other alluvial fields of the mid-nineteenth century. Each goldfield possessed distinctive features that taxed the ingenuity of the practical miner and it was only when experience and circumstance gelled that gold was more efficiently and quickly won. More diggers from California on the Waimea, May suggests, might have led to an earlier recognition that the field met the preconditions for the adoption of hydraulic mining—abundant rainfall, a very general distribution of gold and the prevalence of terrace country. Recovering the beach leads and buried beach leads of the West Coast<sup>28</sup> can also be traced to Californian diggers. Hartley and Reilly had passed on the method of saving river beach gold to men on the Clutha River and this experience came westwards with Otago miners and was adapted to suit local circumstances. On the West Coast deep-lead mining was unique to Ross, but the Victorians were well-steeped in its intricacies.

The experience of individual diggers was the single most important ingredient in the development of the West Coast goldfields. Westland's founding fathers were, as May was later to write, not so much New Zealand colonists as 'a variety of the *genus* Pacific Man whose habitat is no particular country but the goldfields'.<sup>29</sup> If their individual experiences frequently determined the where and when of gold recovery, their collective prehistory, as it was understood by contemporaries, did much to shape the framework in which it was played out. And, in the unfolding tale of the Pacific borderlands gold rushes, the New Zealand fields benefited from bringing up the tail. Nowhere was this more fundamental

28 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, pp. 250–51.

29 Philip Ross May, 'Gold Rushes of the Pacific Borderlands: A Comparative Survey', in Len Richardson and W. David McIntyre, eds, *Provincial Perspectives: Essays in Honour of W.J. Gardner*, Christchurch, University of Canterbury/Whitcoulls, 1980, p. 100.

than in the construction of the legal and political framework against which the New Zealand rushes took place. This accident of chronology does much to explain why violence and disorder were less in evidence on the West Coast and Otago goldfields than in California. In 1848, when California became American and gold was discovered, the territory was under tenuous military control, the legal provisions governing precious metal exploitation were weak, and the goldfields remote from a federal authority absorbed with the pressing issue of slavery. Australia's goldfield communities largely stood on the shoulders of the Californian experience but developed a comparatively less troubled mining frontier. May describes the legislative framework in which the Australian gold rushes occurred as 'musty'. It was the presence, he suggested, of a more homogeneous and overwhelmingly British army of diggers familiar with, if not always amenable to, British law, that shaped events in Australia. Drawing heavily upon the Australian experience, New Zealand's goldfields legislation (*Gold Duty Act 1858* and *Gold Fields Act 1858*) preceded the discovery of gold and, with subsequent modifications (1860–67), provided a less contentious legislative framework.<sup>30</sup>

If the West Coast's founding fathers were (in comparison with the bulk of New Zealand's colonists) seasoned colonists, there remained some ambiguity about the label. Their very occupation was synonymous with transience and impermanence. Whether they became settlers or disappeared into the history books as sojourners was determined in one way or another by what they made of their circumstances. As we have already seen, attachment to place developed firstly as an offshoot of commercial and mercantile calculation. Among the diggers the sense of a West Coast goldfield community was moulded by the exigencies of time and place. To newcomers it seemed 'queer country for a gold rush'.<sup>31</sup> Everywhere the thick bush complicated assessment of the gold-bearing potential of the place: would a few creek-finds a gold rush make? Many did not ponder the question long and in any given week departures might outnumber arrivals. The rush to the Waimea, in March 1865, transformed expectations as 3,500 miners crammed into a maze of creeks and side gullies. By July there were 3,000 on the flats and terraces of the Kanieri district. And 100 wood and iron businesses serviced a more technologically diverse goldfield with tunnels into the sides of terraces and

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30 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 256.

31 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 153.

shafts 20 feet into the low-lying paddocks. Together with the rush to the Totara (Ross), where cradling, shallow-sinking and deep-lead mining all prevailed, these southern rushes were to establish Hokitika as a goldfields capital. Between 1864 and 1867, it was the great West Coast entrepôt for the entire goldfields from Ōkārito to Westport.

Grey Valley developments were more gradual and less spectacular. The initial discoveries had suggested that Greymouth would become the predominant entry port. It struggled, as we have noted, to become anything more than a staging post on the road to Hokitika. The shallow creek workings that developed along the lateral tributaries of the Grey River did not produce significant goldtowns but gave rise to separate camps—such as Blackball, Moonlight, Red Jacks, No Town and Twelve Mile Creek—of typically between 100 and 500 miners and reliant upon Greymouth as their service centre. The exploitation of beach-sand gold at South Beach and Cobden redressed the balance, but it was not until the advent of ‘King Coal’ in the first two decades of the twentieth century that the economic and political centre of gravity shifted north.<sup>32</sup> In comparison with the southern port, Greymouth struggled to throw off the image of impermanence.<sup>33</sup>

A more hazardous river port than Hokitika, Greymouth developed a substantial coastal and Australian trade: its custom’s revenue was the sixth largest in the colony; its imports ranked seventh in value; and more vessels called there than at Lyttelton.<sup>34</sup> To its geographical disadvantage was added the complication of land tenure. Greymouth was not one town, but two. Boundary Street marked the divide between the ‘Maori Township’ and the ‘Government Township’, the one occupied on Māori lease, the other on business licence (and after 1866 on freehold as well). It was a divide that was to shape the early development of the town and, by discouraging commitment to the place by storekeepers and merchants, lent a greater impermanence to the townscape. To add to the hesitations caused by land tenure was the complication of a provincial boundary that took the Grey River as its marker and produced a brief jostling for dominance as the Nelson Provincial Government sought to develop Cobden as a port.

32 T.E.Y. Seddon, *The Seddons: An Autobiography*, Auckland, Collins, 1968, pp. 185–86.

33 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 354.

34 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 353.

In less than three years, Hokitika had shrugged off the appearance of a calico and canvas settlement and become a significant colonial town. With a population of 4,688 in 1867, it was New Zealand's sixth largest. May chronicles the transformation and demonstrates that the power of gold and the ingenuity of the gold seekers brought instant civilisation to a scarcely encouraging setting. With a 'capricious river at the front door, the stormy sea at the back, and a forested swamp at the side', Hokitika's natural boundaries were formidable and suggested 'a strong probability of the whole fabric going some day out to sea'.<sup>35</sup> Incessant rain could quickly convert the town into 'an unmitigated swamp'. So flimsy were many of the buildings that storms frequently tore sheets of corrugated iron from their side walls, stripped the more substantial wooden facades from frontages and drove them into the mud. The tents and shanties of new arrivals stood alongside 'pigsties, slaughterhouses, and stables' that produced an 'indescribably disgusting stench',<sup>36</sup> which 'wafted over the whole of Hokitika'.<sup>37</sup>

The speed and flimsiness of instant Hokitika was in part a product of the tenuous leasehold that business licences bestowed on the owners of the original town allotments. In 1866, however, the Canterbury Government withdrew Hokitika from the Gold Fields Act and licence holders were able to convert their leases to freehold; as they did so, the townscape gradually took on a more substantial look. Shanties became hotels and stores, the bigger ones adorned with verandahs and plate glass windows. Nearer the river a residential quarter emerged with 'pleasant villas and pretty flower gardens'. And, as May noted, with obvious pleasure, by 1866 Hokitika was dismissing Christchurch as 'that delectable cluster of nondescript buildings'.<sup>38</sup> In such irony did the germ of civic pride or sense of place begin to take root.

Important as Hokitika and Greymouth were as markers of civilisation and as the visible sign of an emergent West Coast, it is 'the miners' in the camps and settlements of the goldfields who take centre stage. By placing the miners firmly against the particularities of the West Coast goldfields, May creates a distinctively Antipodean digger. In doing so, he worked an important shift in the way historians thought about the gold rushes.

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35 May, *Hokitika: Goldfields Capital*, pp. 28–29.

36 May, *Hokitika: Goldfields Capital*, p. 31.

37 May, *Hokitika: Goldfields Capital*, p. 31.

38 May, *Hokitika: Goldfields Capital*, p. 35.

In 1940 W.P. Morrell had produced *The Gold Rushes*, an ambitious survey that traced the quest for gold from ancient times to those of Spanish America, through Siberia to California, to British Columbia and the Rocky Mountain states, to Ballarat and Bendigo, across the Tasman to New Zealand and back to Western Australia and South Africa before heading to Alaska and the Klondike. His context was a European one:

it was upon the gold-seekers that there descended most of the spirit of the Conquistadores and the Elizabethans—not their zest for the unknown, their carelessness of consequence. They were as typical of the nineteenth century as those other adventurers of the sixteenth, though they plundered Mother nature rather than their fellow-men.<sup>39</sup>

Yet whereas ‘only a few hundred could conquer with Cortes and Pizarro or sail with Drake’, tens of thousands of men took part in the nineteenth-century rushes and made them ‘adventures of the common man’.<sup>40</sup> As Morrell saw it, the best of them were transformed by the experience and became ‘a new type of self-reliant character’ who created a ‘new free, careless social life’.<sup>41</sup>

May’s picture of the gold seekers is a more subtle one. Similar in social background to the greater majority of colonists in the planned settlements of Nelson, Otago and Canterbury, the West Coast gold seekers, by virtue of the experiences gleaned along the goldfields of the Pacific borderlands, were seasoned hands rather than new chums. They brought with them the rudiments of practical geology and mining lore and, as practical men, sought to apply their experience to a goldfield that presented its own peculiar set of problems. Their reading of the land they passed over drew upon the peculiar mix of experience they could call upon. The first wave of diggers who trudged along the beaches between Hokitika and Greymouth would, May reminds us, have been unaware of Californian beach-workings. Any ‘forty-niners’ among them would have moved out from California long before sea-beach claims there had proved payable. But, by August 1865, when a lump of gold and mercury amalgam weighing more than a hundredweight and yielding more than 100 pounds was discovered, forty-niners were thicker on the ground. Taking their lead from the ‘Californians’, the diggers familiarised themselves quickly with

39 W.P. Morrell, *The Gold Rushes*, 2nd edn, London, Black, 1968, p. 415.

40 Morrell, *Gold Rushes*, p. 415.

41 Morrell, *Gold Rushes*, p. 415.

the methods of fine-gold saving using mercury.<sup>42</sup> A new form of cradle using copper plates covered with mercury film, introduced by 'an old Brazilian and Californian miner',<sup>43</sup> soon became the preferred option.

Similarly, May's discussion of the introduction of hydraulic sluicing (directing a jet of water under pressure against a terrace face) further illustrates the constant interplay between the practical diggers' collective Pacific borderland experience and their new mining environment. In *The West Coast Gold Rushes*, May suggests that the origin of hydraulic mining lay in California (a suggestion he was later to develop in a monograph, *Origins of Hydraulic Mining in California* (1970)).<sup>44</sup> The West Coast's much-terraced landscape, high rainfall and dense bush that yielded the timber for boxing and fluming needed for sluicing provided an ideal environment for hydraulic mining. Its widespread adoption came slowly. Only as defined leads were exhausted and the miners confronted great blocks of relatively poor auriferous country did the advantages of hydraulicking become obvious. As in the case of beach-sand deposits, the miners pooled their cumulative experiences. Diggers, familiar only with the water-scarce goldfields of Victoria, followed the leads of those with experience of the water-rich Californian and Otago goldfields.

May's closely textured narrative follows the miners as they adjust and adapt techniques and procedures to fit the realities of the West Coast mining environment. Water dominated all else. Its abundance made hydraulic mining possible but also created insuperable drainage problems. Storm channels, underground adits, giant waterwheels and a range of pumping devices necessarily became a distinctive feature of West Coast goldmining. Ground-sluicing, whose significance, May shrewdly observes, had been underrated by gold rush historians because it was a technique that lacked any distinctive piece of equipment, became the universal mode of working the inland diggings. The plentiful supply of timber meant that steam engines were soon a common sight driving pumps and circular saws, and the larger communities began to take on a heightened industrial appearance;<sup>45</sup> the more complex and diverse pattern of mining marked the end of the diggings as a small man's frontier.<sup>46</sup>

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42 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, pp. 176–77.

43 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 177.

44 Philip Ross May, *Origins of Hydraulic Mining in California*, Oakland, California, The Holmes Book Company, 1970.

45 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 200.

46 May, *Origins of Hydraulic Mining in California*, p. 29.

The story of how a rush became an industry presented in *The West Coast Gold Rushes* is further developed in *Gold Town*,<sup>47</sup> May's history of Ross. Here, extensive terraces deeply trenched by gullies demanded greater capital investment and spoke of a future in which individual diggers pooled their resources and, increasingly, waged men became a feature of the goldfields. The transformation is best observed as attention turned to the deep leads of Ross. Aptly christened the 'Ballarat of Westland', it was here that the most imposing mining complex emerged, as progressively more sophisticated methods were needed to lift water and gravel from the deeper shafts. May chronicles the transformation with enthusiasm. Beyond 45 feet hand-windlasses were ineffective and horse whims (a wooden drum, mounted near the mouth of a shaft, with a horse harnessed beneath walking in a circle and revolving the drum) were soon in evidence. To open up the even deeper leads, a 20-horsepower steam engine was driving a 17-hundredweight flywheel on a 42-foot poppet-head of heavy unhewn spars above a 125-foot shaft divided into three compartments—two for winding and one for pumping. Each 24-hour day the Scandinavian Company brought 400–500 loads to the surface and employed some 50 wage labourers. Half a dozen similar industrial plants followed and they gave the district a greater permanence than was the norm for an alluvial field. May sketches the scene at Jones's Flat: 'at the mouth of the gully, hand-windlasses; beyond them, thirty-three whimshafts and an occasional whip of waterwheel claim; beyond these, the poppet-heads of the companies dwarfing the stores and shanties'.<sup>48</sup> Such was the face of Ross, the product of a combination of capital and labour unique on the West Coast goldfields.

Behind this transformation lay a hardheaded practicality, a single-minded concentration upon the immediate environment and the quest for gold. If these preoccupations appeared at first so narrowly conceived as to be devoid of any attachment to place, such attitudes were a necessary component of permanent settlement. The greater sense of permanence that followed industrial consolidation ultimately moderated the improvisation and haste that had made the West Coast goldfields a raw and dangerous place. 'Rushing' was a risky enterprise, and May speculates that accidental deaths on the Otago and West Coast goldfields 'probably exceeded European casualties' in the New Zealand wars.<sup>49</sup> On the West

47 Philip Ross May, *Gold Town, Ross, Westland*, Christchurch, Pegasus, 1970.

48 May, *Gold Town*, p. 37.

49 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 292.

Coast, death by drowning was predictably the most common cause of sudden death. The rush to be rich created a recklessness that made every river a 'likely grave'. In the three years from November 1864, rivers and streams accounted for nearly half (47 per cent) of the 239 deaths, and a further 20 per cent perished in mining accidents.<sup>50</sup> The high mortality rate reflected, in May's view, the spirit of the times. As mining moved beyond the simple creek and gully stage, the West Coast goldfields had become more rather than less dangerous. On the deep ground at Ross, tunnel collapses and shaft cave-ins were at first frequent. The more stable communities of the 1870s imposed new standards and gradually expunged the mentality of rushing, but improvisation remained at the heart of West Coast life.

The combination of harsh conditions and hardheaded, practical men produced a peculiar political landscape. As noted earlier, unlike the Victorian political motherlode, the West Coast goldfields produced no Peter Lalor, no republican charter, no Eureka rebellion, and generated no flag under which a powerful and myth-sustaining legend might flourish. By May's account, several things worked against this: New Zealand benefited from bringing up the tail of the gold rush that rippled through the Pacific borderlands (California, Australia and New Zealand); and New Zealand had legislation (Gold Duty Act, Gold Fields Act) in place before the major rushes occurred. After 1860, all who possessed the miners' right, provided they met a residential requirement of three months, were eligible to vote. With a few subsequent modifications throughout the 1860s, this was a framework that proved workable. Such friction as occurred in hammering out the details of licence fees, size and tenure of claim and water rights was minimal. Where such matters were concerned the miners were a litigious lot but not a riotous one. Political activity on the Coast was less dramatic, couched in milder terms and directed at more immediate ends.

The democracy of the diggings was that of the small, independent capitalist. A part of both the Nelson and Canterbury provinces, the 'West Coast' was a hybrid political being. Boundary lines bore no relation to the pattern of gold discoveries, created additional costs for the miners, led to law enforcement difficulties and produced squabbles over the collection of customs duties. The heartland of May's gold rush saga, however, was

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50 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 292.

‘West Canterbury’—that bit of the ‘West Coast’ south of the Arnold and Grey River junction—and its political history was inevitably bound up with the expectations of the landowning elite that determined Canterbury provincial politics. Fearful at first that a rush ‘over the Hill’ might upset the social and economic balance of their province, Canterbury’s political leaders were ambivalent in their attitude to their remote goldfields and created a goldfields administration that maintained order without becoming a drain on provincial finances.

Criticism of the remote provincial administration was the stuff of emergent goldfields politics. George Sale, the resident Commissioner, was the immediate target. As ‘King’ Sale, he became the butt of caricature and was compared unfavourably, by the diggers, with his counterpart on the Nelson South-West goldfields, the flamboyant and democratically inclined T.A.S. Kynnersley. Sale was, in many respects, the archetypal imperial administrator. Born at Rugby in the English Midlands, he had attended the middle-ranking public school that took its name from the town and was to pass it on to a form of football. A day boy in 1845 when the rules of the rugby code were first written down, he was among the game’s founding fathers in Dunedin, where, in 1870, his firsts in classics from Cambridge had provided his passage to the inaugural chair of classics at Otago University.<sup>51</sup> As a loyal Rugbeian and Cambridge man, he was keen to head off the rival code of Victorian Rules that had crossed the Tasman with the thousands of diggers who had learned the Australian game in Melbourne or on the goldfields at Ballarat and Bendigo. With this pedigree, Sale moved more easily among the political leaders of the Canterbury establishment than among the bulk of the diggers, or so it seemed to many on the diggings. Whatever his dictatorial inclinations, as Commissioner of the West Canterbury goldfields, ‘King’ Sale was the representative of a political system that could not last. He had been given wide powers but lacked the resources to meet the myriad demands of a rapidly expanding and mobile population and was, as May put it, a ‘powerless servant of a distant and alien Government’.<sup>52</sup>

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51 Sean O’Hagan, *The Pride of Southern Rebels: On the Occasion of the Otago Rugby Football Union Centenary, 1881–1981*, Dunedin, Pilgrims South Press, 1981, pp. 14–15.

52 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 268.

Whatever the level of digger unrest on the West Coast goldfields, it was not, as the Canterbury establishment suggested, the work of a 'big Irish minority'.<sup>53</sup> In dismissing this view, May cites, with approval, the judgement of a Roman Catholic priest: 'the Irish miners in Westland came from well-to-do classes at home ... sons of well-to-do farmers'.<sup>54</sup> He presents evidence that the number of Irish to appear before the courts was in keeping with their proportion of the population. In the years of the rush the West Coast Irish were, as May points out, 'less evident in business circles, except as small storekeepers and publicans'.<sup>55</sup> Over time, as a recent historian explains, their greater numerical strength among the earliest arrivals allowed them to become part of a 'diverse "charter group"' that exercised 'a powerful role in defining the nature of local community life'.<sup>56</sup> When revisiting West Coast history in *Vanished Kingdoms* (1990), Pat O'Farrell puts it more bluntly; in many ways, the West Coast Irish Catholics became the establishment.<sup>57</sup> As such, they found their place in all sections of the economy in a manner that 'matched regional patterns of occupational attainment and general prosperity' elsewhere.<sup>58</sup>

As diggers, the Irish were unremarkable. Their sheer number, however, created a visibility and produced, as we have seen, fertile ground for the perpetuation of old-world prejudices. The same concentration provided the critical mass necessary for the public display of political and sectarian loyalties to Irish causes. As May put it, 'Trouble in Ireland rather than trouble on the West Coast' provided the fuel for a spate of 'polemico-mining'<sup>59</sup> disputes and donnybrooks. In 1867, a Fenian uprising in Ireland that sought an Irish Republic totally separated from England was the catalyst for a brief surge of sectarianism. Fenian sympathies had been in evidence at Ōkārīto in 1866 when £243 8s was sent to Dublin to assist the families of Irish prisoners in the hands of the English. And, in November 1867, John Manning, an adventurous and literary Irishman whose articles in the *Ballarat Times* had led to a charge of high treason,<sup>60</sup> commenced publishing the *New Zealand Celt* 'apparently with the intention of

53 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 307.

54 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 285.

55 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 311.

56 Lyndon Fraser, *Castles of Gold: A History of New Zealand's West Coast Irish*, Dunedin, Otago University Press, 2007, p. 51.

57 O'Farrell, *Vanished Kingdoms*, pp. 260–72.

58 Fraser, *Castles of Gold*, p. 54.

59 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 308.

60 Richard P. Davis, *Irish Issues in New Zealand Politics 1868–1922*, Dunedin, University of Otago Press, 1974, p. 12.

setting things right in Ireland from Hokitika'.<sup>61</sup> Its spiritual 'godfather' was Father William Larkin, a missionary priest from Queensland, who made much of Irish grievances in building his congregations at Waimea and Staffortown. In William Shaw, the politically ambitious, Irish-born Orange Protestant proprietor of the *West Coast Times*, the *Celt* found a rival also prepared to cast moderation aside.

Local sectarian skirmishes fed off grievances generated in the old world. In 1868 three Fenians were executed in Manchester for the accidental killing of a police sergeant, and in Sydney one Henry James O'Farrell attempted to assassinate the Duke of Edinburgh while visiting Australia. On the West Coast the two events were to provoke what came to be called, rather grandiosely, the 'Fenian Uprising'. The Hokitika Town Council refused the local Irish community permission to place a wooden Celtic Cross in the local cemetery as a memorial to the 'Manchester Martyrs'. During a subsequent mass demonstration, the protesters removed the locked cemetery gates from their hinges, entered the cemetery and, after a service conducted by Father Larkin, planted the cross. As more details of O'Farrell's abortive assassination reached the Coast, tensions grew; the inflammatory outbursts by the *West Coast Times* and the *New Zealand Celt*, and a procession of loyalists, led to civilian military units being formed and hundreds of special constables enrolled. Manning and Larkin were arrested along with five others on charges of 'riot' and subsequently charged also with seditious libel. On the first charge they were fined £20, and on the second, imprisoned for a month.

May's prime interest in the Irish was as a part, and a significant part, of the gold rush community and only secondarily in their future role in the consolidation of that community. The ramifications of 'Fenianism' lay beyond the scope of his study.<sup>62</sup> He does not see episodes of sectarian conflict as indicative of deep-seated animosities likely to reverberate through West Coast history. Rather, he endorses the description of Thomas Kynnersley, the Commissioner of the Nelson South-West goldfields, that on his patch at least the 'Fenian riots' were little more than 'a miserable street row'. To May, the origins of the Hokitika affair lay in:

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61 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 533.

62 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 309.

An odd conjunction of circumstance, some irresponsible newspaper reporting, and too much ready liquor [that] brought the threatened troubles to the West Coast in 1868 when the boom days were over and people had time to discover grievances.<sup>63</sup>

The historian of the years immediately after the gold rush subsided thought that the 'Fenian' affair revealed underlying 'social and economic cleavages': the creditor/debtor relationship between the big wholesale merchants and commission agents of Hokitika (who were generally of English, Scots or German extraction) and the small shopkeepers and miners of the Waimea diggings, many of whom were Irish Catholics, 'exacerbated' 'religious differences'.<sup>64</sup> The 'suppression' of the 'Fenian' movement added to the ingrained hostility of the goldfields towards Hokitika and ensured that the Irish vote and sectarian differences maintained a persistent presence in the politics of county and province (1868–76) and beyond.

Put simply, the West Coast defied the neat categories of the systematic colonisers. Gold populated the wilderness and defined attitudes to the land itself. Mineral rights belonged to the Crown; the right to exploit them was parcelled out in a system of licences that categorised 'claims' by those who paid £1 a year for a miners' right, according to the type of deposit—alluvial, river, creek, beach or quartz. Defining non-auriferous land and assigning values to it was, from the beginning, contentious. The land regulations of the Canterbury settlement had imposed a uniform price of £2 per acre on rural land and the cost of town lots reckoned on clear land. The first was designed to encourage agriculture and prevent the dispersal implicit in pastoralism, the latter to encourage concentration of settlement and thus provide the nucleus of civilised urban culture. As a blueprint for development, the regulations matched West Coast realities even less than they did the sheep lands of Canterbury. A cluster of buildings was giving shape to Hokitika before the regulations had been framed, and the price of rural land took no account of clearing bush, estimated to cost between £30 and £40 per acre. To prospective West Coast landowners the land price was seen as a revenue-raising device to offset the cost of running the goldfields and especially the building of the Otira Road.<sup>65</sup>

63 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, pp. 308–9.

64 Bernard Conradson, 'Politics and Penury: County and Province, 1868–1876', in Philip Ross May, ed., *Miners and Militants: Politics in Westland 1865–1918*, Christchurch, Whitcoulls for the University of Canterbury, 1975, p. 32.

65 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 402.

May's interest in the dilemmas that surrounded land is primarily related to the unfolding of the gold rush. His narrative also provides a glimpse of the future as it explores how the germ of a West Coast community emerged, as it were, from within the tide of events that collectively comprised the gold rush. Agriculture developed slowly, with 540 acres under crop by 1868.<sup>66</sup> Small market gardens on land leased for five shillings per acre and subject to cancellation if gold was subsequently discovered near the main townships. Cattle made an early appearance on a few river flats, but pastoralism was equally slow to take root. By 1867 some 5,000 acres had been freeholded, predominantly to the north of Greymouth and most promisingly on the elevated tableland of Ahaura and Totara Flat, and only 215 acres taken up south of the confluence of the Grey and Arnold rivers. Within a decade, pioneer farmers had taken up land along the most fertile river flats between Arahura and Jackson Bay. By the end of the nineteenth century these farming pockets had developed sufficiently for a cluster of dairy factories, firstly in Totara Flat (1895) and subsequently at Kokatahi, Arahura, Kumara, Whataroa, Waitaha and Hokitika. Only after the opening of the Otira tunnel in 1923 was dairying able to expand beyond its local market.

The reliance upon shipping, as a means of provisioning and providing a source of income, was long to hamper development. Not even timber proved capable of overcoming isolation. The early timber industry catered for a purely local market and profited from some creative responses to the dilemmas of shifting heavy or bulky merchandise through dense bush. Among the most inventive was the wooden tramway. Quickly built, they made relatively poor auriferous land rich by reducing the costs of provisions, provided employment for luckless diggers, a foundation for later permanent roads and quick profits for the merchant-dominated companies that financed their construction. As May put it, the 'tramway fever was as active as the gold-bug'.<sup>67</sup> Fifty per cent annually was considered a fair return for a pathway to a gold deposit that might be worked out in a few years. Cradles, sluice-boxes, fluming, waterwheels fashioned from rimu and kahikatea trunks provided the basis of a less speculative sawmilling industry. By 1866, local 'sawn' timber was competing with the imported product for local construction. Timber continued to be logged,

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66 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 498.

67 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 372.

however, at a faster rate by goldminers clearing land than by sawmilling operators, and more timber was consigned to the flames, or simply left to rot, than was converted by axe or saw.

In 1868 the first four cargoes of white pine were despatched to Melbourne. It was the Australian market that by the mid-1890s allowed the West Coast to become a net exporter of rough sawn timber and New Zealand's leading sawmilling region, producing 20 per cent of national production in 1916. Only after the completion of the Otira tunnel in 1923 did Canterbury surpass Australia as the largest single market for West Coast timber. The tale of the timber merchants underlined the fundamental West Coast dilemma. The riches produced by gold were not used to lay the foundation for the future. There were, as contemporaries were quick to point out, other more promising and safer avenues of investment and most of them in Australia. Looking back from the vantage point of 1960, May traces how the ownership of the timber industry was quickly dominated by merchants from elsewhere in New Zealand. In that year, just under three-quarters of West Coast timber mills were owned by outside interests, some 38 per cent in Canterbury hands and the rest distributed between Auckland, Dunedin and Wellington (16, 14 and 5 per cent respectively).<sup>68</sup> It was a pattern repeated in the early development of coalmining where it ultimately required the intrusion of the state in the 1940s to overcome the difficulties of maintaining the industry.

Gold had peopled the place but did not provide the impetus for future development. 'No other part of New Zealand', May suggests, 'exported its substance, its pioneers and the sons of its pioneers so freely.'<sup>69</sup> Too many rush merchants and professional men, who had prospered during the expansionary years, moved on as the rush receded, taking with them their capital and experience. Those who remained had to find a way to sustain the place. Around them, already visible as they faced the future, were the familiar signs of exploitation and decay that set mining regions apart. In 1962 as May completed *The West Coast Gold Rushes*, it seemed that the coalmining townships of the Grey Valley were beginning to resemble the fading goldtowns they had replaced.<sup>70</sup> It was precisely this juxtaposition of vigorous exploitation and gradual decay that lies at the heart of the 'West Coasts' that Pat O'Farrell and Bill Pearson created.

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68 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 501.

69 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 501.

70 May, *West Coast Gold Rushes*, p. 501.

In 1969 May returned to this theme in *Gold Town*, a lovingly sketched and illustrated history of Ross, his hometown. Here, May traces the post-gold rush experience of a single mining community. The deep leads of Ross had made it the 'Ballarat of Westland' and gave it a permanence unusual for an alluvial goldfield. Until the 1870s it was one of New Zealand's most stable and productive fields, but a long and steady decline set in after 1872. Seasoned hands reckoned that the influx of more Chinese miners on old alluvial ground reworking tailings and leaner gravels abandoned by European miners was a sign of a goldfield entering its death throes.<sup>71</sup> Water was the problem: pumping it out of the deep leads had become increasingly costly and the transition to hydraulic mining even more so. But, in May's words, it was 'time to abandon the essentially Victorian technique for the more efficient and appropriate Californian'.<sup>72</sup> In this way, the high gravel deposits resting upon 'Old-man bottom' could be flushed out by heavy and uninterrupted floods of water.

The advent of hydraulic mining brought in its wake something of an industrial revolution and transformed the physical environment. Within 30 years Jones's Flat, at the heart of the Ross diggings, had become a huge amphitheatre worked to a depth of nearly 100 feet by hydraulic nozzles, bucket elevator and incline tram and underground drainage adit. By 1885 more than 110 miles of water race took water to 320 sluice heads, and the hills were pocked with 49 dams and 29 reservoirs.<sup>73</sup> Twenty years later, the industry employed fewer than 30 in Ross and the town was casting about for a new economic base. Goldmining had stimulated a local market for timber. But, in a region where bush was everywhere, Ross was poorly placed to compete. Until a rail link to Hokitika was established in 1909, sawmilling found its natural home along the Hokitika–Greymouth railway and between the northern town and Lake Brunner as the Midland line was pushed eastwards. With the completion of the Otira tunnel in 1923, Ross was better able to find a place in the West Coast timber industry. Thus, as May wrote in 1969, 'Old gold town was converted to young timber town and miners' sons to millers',<sup>74</sup> who now made up more than 50 per cent of the male workforce. Something of the hardrock mining tradition persisted in the quarrying of limestone from the terraces beyond the town by a farmers' cooperative. One historian has characterised this

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71 May, *Gold Town*, p. 47.

72 May, *Gold Town*, p. 49.

73 May, *Gold Town*, p. 57.

74 May, *Gold Town*, p. 97.

process of adaptation as evidence that in regions where runholders and merinos did not dominate, the 'stayers' among the miners of the 1860s provided the basis of a property-owning democracy of independent artisans and miners. By easing their way onto small subsistence farms and grazing a cow and maybe a horse, they provided the core of a lasting community.<sup>75</sup> The difficulty for Ross, as for the region as a whole, as May was well aware, lay in two related aspects of the West Coast experience: more diversified as the local economy might be, its future depended upon wasting assets. Few writing in the 1960s would have been brave enough to predict a future economy built on farming and tourism.

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75 Erik Olssen, 'Lands of Sheep and Gold: The Australian Dimension to the New Zealand Past, 1840–1900', in Keith Sinclair, ed., *Tasman Relations: New Zealand and Australia 1788–1988*, Auckland, Auckland University Press, 1987, p. 46.

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