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Atholl John Anderson: No ordinary archaeologist

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Atholl Anderson first ventured into serious archaeological research in 1966, when he carried out an extensive survey of archaeological sites in the Tasman Bay area at the northern end of the South Island of New Zealand. The main objective was ‘a complete coverage of all the sites of prehistoric settlement, including mapping, stratigraphical analysis, and sampling of contents’. The completed study was submitted to the Geography Department at Canterbury University as a thesis for the MA degree in 1966 (*Maori occupation sites in back beach deposits around Tasman Bay*). This was a bold initiative for a budding archaeologist, aged 23, working alone, with no formal training in archaeology – that came later. The degree was awarded with Honours. Like many other young students of the time, he had a Teachers Training College studentship. This was a scheme which provided financial assistance for those bent on a teaching career to attend university. After being awarded the MA degree, he was obliged to attend Training College for a year to complete the requirements for a Diploma in Teaching and thereafter to be placed in a school somewhere in New Zealand. So in 1968, Atholl became the assistant headmaster at the small rural school of Karamea, from time to time doubling as the publican of the local hotel. Karamea, at the northernmost end of the West Coast of the South Island, is famous for its forest and fishing, and provided ample opportunities for his great love of the outdoors. He was married by this time to Sandy, with a daughter Rachel.

In spite of the wonderful attractions of West Coast life, Atholl’s burning ambition in life was professional archaeology, and a career in teaching was not leading in the right direction. I first met Atholl late in 1969, when he walked into the Anthropology Department at Otago University to seek advice on how to obtain the necessary qualifications to join mainstream professional archaeology. I was a junior lecturer at the time. He was accepted into the MA course in Anthropology in 1970 and became part of a group of young students the like of which had never been seen before at Otago, and arguably has not been seen since. There was a strong spirit of friendship, collaboration and healthy competition between them, and several have excelled

academically, with international reputations. Atholl joined a small team of research students in the Palliser Bay archaeological project 1969–1972 and carried out groundbreaking research combining the analysis of a rocky-shore marine environment with high-quality excavation of nearby midden sites and detailed laboratory analysis (1979e, 1981c). This set a standard of maritime economic archaeology which has not been matched in New Zealand since. During this research, he first ventured into archaeometry, greatly improving a novel method of conchiolin dating, which clarified the chronology of the midden sites he excavated (1973b). At this time, he also took his first steps in what was to become one of his strongest academic attributes, archaeological theory, publishing an insightful reappraisal of sampling theory relating to midden excavations. He strongly rejected concepts of cluster, random and column sampling as having fundamental misconceptions. He commented ‘leaving the choice of excavation areas to chance is clearly likely to produce results of the same status as those obtained by mixing chemicals at random: A puzzling if not dangerous mess’ (1973a:123). He argued that a ‘more sensible approach is to ... excavate on the basis of research objectives rather than chance, and to restrict interpretations, in the main, to the results of a full and careful analysis of everything excavated’ (1973a:124). Throughout his career, Atholl has been exemplary in this regard. He was awarded his second MA degree in 1973 with First Class Honours (*Archaeology and behaviour: Prehistoric subsistence behaviour at Black Rocks peninsula, Palliser Bay*).

Following the end of the Palliser Bay project, Atholl applied for a Commonwealth scholarship at Cambridge University with a proposal for doctoral research based in the Chatham Islands, and began fieldwork there early in 1973. During the site survey, a letter from Cambridge University was delivered on horseback during torrential rain while he was digging an underground sauna at the field camp. This contained welcome news of acceptance at Cambridge. After returning to mainland New Zealand, he travelled to England and took up residence in Cambridge with his family. Carrying out further research in the Chatham Islands, on the other side of the world, without research grants was impossible, so he decided to focus on archaeological problems closer at hand. He initially carried out fieldwork in France, before turning attention to northern Sweden. He became sufficiently competent in Swedish to do detailed library research, as well



Figure 1. A whimsical portrayal of Atholl as the bow-piece of a canoe (courtesy of Murray Webb, 1987).

as intensive fieldwork. This was not without the usual calamities which accompany archaeological fieldwork. On one occasion, out in the mountains in South Lapland on a very hot day, he took a short cut through a large swamp. When he was half way across, the thick layer of sphagnum moss gave way and he very nearly disappeared in deep liquid mud underneath. In one of the wonderful newsy letters which he frequently wrote from abroad, he described this close encounter thus:

I was waist deep in less than a second then slowed to a sinking rate of about 3 inches a second as I frantically clawed moss under my chest and arms. This stopped me going entirely under, but I would not have lasted more than a few hours. What saved me was the fact that I had by the greatest good fortune gone through by a small raft of peat and moss with several small willows growing on it. I managed to very gingerly work my way close enough to it and ease myself out, which was very difficult, and then crawled, like the monster from the black lagoon, back to the edge of the swamp. I was very lucky; if I had gone through several yards either way of that little patch of willows I would never have been able to hold on long enough to be found, especially since I was nearly two hours from the end of the nearest logging track.

When he returned to the closest township, he learned that a man had gone missing in the same general area three weeks earlier. Atholl is a person with a strong sense of adventure, brimming with self-confidence and with good survival instincts, and his career has continued to be punctuated with occasional close shaves.

Following the research in Lapland, he submitted his doctoral dissertation in 1976 (*Prehistoric competition and economic change in northern Sweden*). This helped him to obtain his first academic post, at Auckland University during the 1977 academic year. At this time, he took his first steps into the tropical Pacific, to the southern Tongan island of 'Ata, as a member of the Royal Society of New Zealand's Southwest Pacific Expedition (1979b).

In 1978, he took up an appointment in the Anthropology Department, University of Otago, where he remained until 1993, progressing from assistant lecturer to a personal chair. He remarried soon after returning to Dunedin and Rosanne has been a staunch supporter of his research ever since, often accompanying him to remote parts of the Pacific. He and Rosanne have two children (Kirsten and John). He is a strong family man, devoted to his wife, three children and grandchildren.

The Otago period was an extremely productive one, not only as a researcher, but also as a teacher, supervising many thesis students and taking them on his own fieldwork expeditions. A great deal of Atholl's energy during this period was devoted to the Southern Hunters Project, which was focused on archaeological research in southern New Zealand, an area occupied by hunter-gatherers. However, he continued his Pacific interests with an expedition to the Kermadec Islands in 1978 (1981i). He later commented that this was his first experience of leading a team to a Pacific Island. His account of the crisis which arose when one of his assistants ate a poisonous plant makes hilarious reading, despite the gravity of the event (2004a:56–57).

The Southern Hunters Project involved excavations in no fewer than 20 archaeological



Figure 2. Atholl in the foreground at Shag River Mouth discussing strategy for excavation of the high-dune sequence, 1988–1989 (courtesy of Angela Boocock).

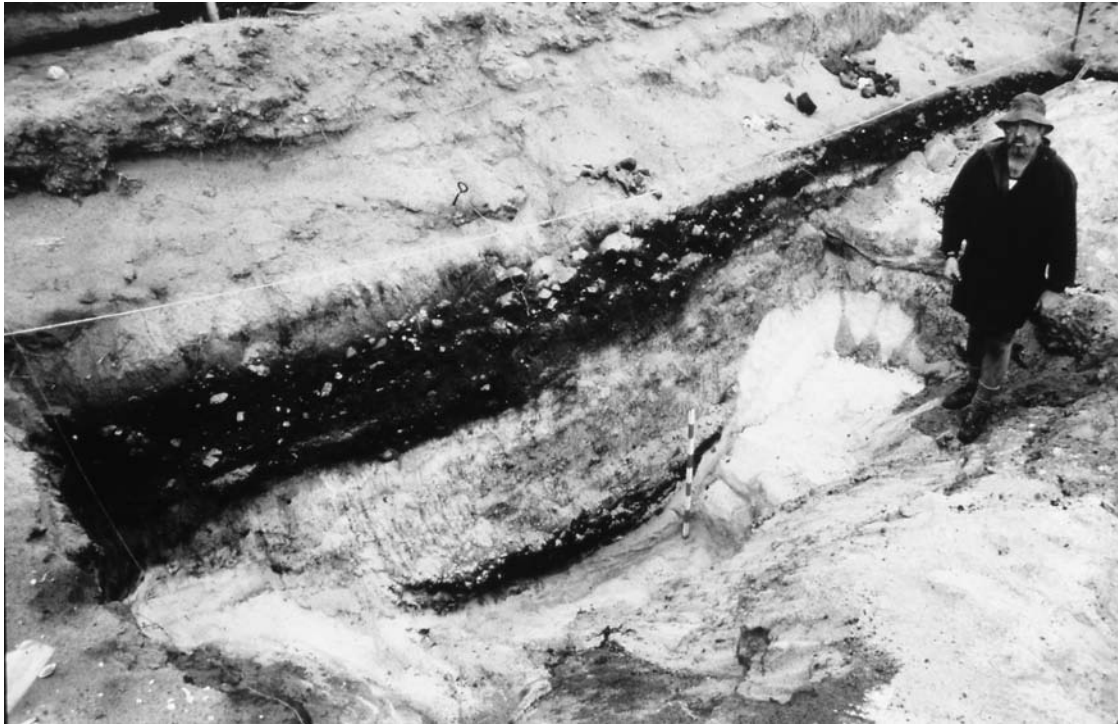


Figure 3. Atholl during excavation of the high dune at Shag River Mouth 1988–1989 (courtesy of Ian Smith).

sites, revisiting places which had earlier seen excavation, and in many cases fossicking, as well as previously untouched sites. Arguably the most significant of these were Purakanui, Lee Island and Shag River Mouth, but they all contributed to a far better understanding of prehistoric life in southern New Zealand. The Purakanui excavations (1981a) took place close to his seaside home at the time. This research built on his interests in economic prehistory and the exploitation of the marine environment, begun earlier at Palliser Bay.

The three rock shelters on Lee Island in Lake Te Anau in Fiordland were newly discovered and contained a wealth of bird bones, fibre artefacts and other perishable remains. His analysis of the fibre remains involved a pioneering study of cordage and knots (Anderson *et al.* 1991b). The publication that resulted from the Lee Island excavations was his first major multi-authored work representing collaborative research (Anderson and McGovern-Wilson eds 1991), something that characterises much of his subsequent work. Atholl has always been a great team leader, inspiring others with the depth of his knowledge, good humour and personal charisma.

The excavations at Shag River Mouth, spread over four years, and subsequent analyses were once again collaborative, involving large numbers of students. Numerous uncontrolled excavations had been carried out at this site for more than a century, producing large quantities of artefacts and moa bones. It is a great credit to Atholl that he managed to find untouched stratigraphy, establish a chronology for this major southern site, and produce a substantive monograph (Anderson *et al.* eds 1996).

The Southern Hunters Project explored many aspects of prehistoric economics, but a major focus was inevitably on moa. During this period, Atholl produced his classic book *Prodigious Birds: Moas and moa-hunting in prehistoric New Zealand* (1989a), which has been reprinted as a paperback. This was a masterly and much-needed synthesis, covering historical, biological, chronological and cultural aspects of this famous New Zealand megafauna. It was a start to Atholl's ongoing interest in Pacific megafauna and extinctions. This work covered the whole of New Zealand and required a careful reappraisal of evidence from radiocarbon dating. The



Figure 4. Atholl pondering the complexities of the high-dune excavation at Shag River Mouth 1988–1989 (courtesy of Ian Smith).

deficiencies which were uncovered led him to review the chronology of colonisation in New Zealand and later to undertake re-dating of major moa-hunting sites, such as Houhora (Anderson and Wallace 1993) and Wairau Bar (Higham *et al.* 1999). Issues of chronology and dating have been of interest to him ever since.

Archaeology and polemics are no strangers to each other, and Atholl has never shied away from reasoned debate on controversial issues. His first major encounter arose when a colleague published an argument that New Zealand had been occupied at least twice the length of time of current orthodoxy. Atholl responded to this with a well-reasoned argument to the effect that if anything, the New Zealand chronology should be shortened, not lengthened (1991c). He carefully re-examined the entire history of radiocarbon dating in New Zealand, and re-evaluated the dating of many archaeological sites, not only for New Zealand, but for East Polynesia (Spriggs and Anderson 1993).

In all this, Atholl has displayed a dogged determination to get to the truth of any issue by focusing on quality of evidence and interpretation. Since the initial foray with moa chronology, refinement in dating has become a major preoccupation in Atholl's research. Probably the best-known example of this is the controversy over radiocarbon dates of the small Polynesian rat, *Rattus exulans*, in New Zealand. Suggestions that this rat came to New Zealand with or without humans 2000 years ago have seen intensive research both for and against. Atholl has left no stone unturned to get to the truth and has been responsible for uncovering serious deficiencies in the initial accelerator dates. His publications on this topic have spanned eight years (1996h, 1997c, 1998d, 2000b, 2004h; Smith and Anderson 1998; Anderson and Higham 2004; Higham *et al.* 2004), again showing his determination to resolve this matter. The issue of short and long chronology is one which frequently arises in archaeology, most famously perhaps with the problem of Glozel in France, but the Pacific region has had its fair share of similar debate. In stressing the need for the highest quality of dating throughout the process, from sample selection from secure provenance and close documentation, to the finest laboratory methodology, Atholl

has set aside the spectacular and been the champion of good scholarship. Throughout his career, he has steadfastly stressed the importance of interpretations arising from primary high-quality data and vigorously opposed speculative scenario building.

He has always been careful to distinguish what can and cannot be established by archaeological methods and by other disciplines which contribute to prehistory. A good example is his insistence that hypotheses based on one line of evidence must be tested against all available archaeological information. A typical case of this arose when it was proposed on the basis of pollen evidence that humans had arrived on Mangaia in the Cook Islands by the surprisingly early date of 2500 BP. Atholl showed that the pollen evidence alone could be interpreted in a number of ways, but was insufficient to overturn existing unambiguous archaeological evidence for a much shorter time scale (1994e).

Atholl has Scottish ancestry from his father, and through his mother he is descended from a branch of Ngai Tahu Maori from Rakiura (Stewart Island). When the Ngai Tahu placed a claim before the Waitangi Tribunal about historical grievances endured by their people from actions and inactions by the Crown, Atholl became a key researcher for the Ngai Tahu iwi (tribe). He gave a great deal of important evidence to the Waitangi Tribunal, clarifying difficult, highly contentious, historical issues. He has earned the greatest respect from both the Crown and Maori tribal authorities, not just for the depth of scholarship he brought to these hearings, but also for his balance and scrupulous honesty, even at times when his evidence ran counter to some tribal submissions. As a result, he has become a foremost authority on the ethnohistory of southern Maori, marshalling diverse historical documents into publishable form. An excellent example of this is *Traditional lifeways of the southern Maori* (1994 ed), an enormous task of



Figure 5. Atholl taking notes during the excavations at Emily Bay, Norfolk Island, 1996 (courtesy of Ian Smith).

editorial work definitely not for the faint hearted. In these endeavours, Atholl also managed to bridge the gap between deep scholarship and publications for a wider audience, such as *When all the moa ovens grew cold* (1983a), *Te Puoho's last raid: the battle of Tukurau, 1836–1837* (1986d), and *The welcome of strangers* (1998a). The Ngai Tahu settlement with the Crown following the Waitangi Tribunal hearings has been among the most successful of recent times, and Atholl made an important contribution towards this outcome. He also contributed a number of biographies of southern Maori to the *Dictionary of New Zealand Biography*, including one on his ancestress Anne Wharetutu Newton (1990f).

In 1993, Atholl and his family moved to Canberra, where he took up the Establishment Chair of Prehistory at the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies, Australian National University. This post offered new opportunities for research throughout the Pacific basin and rim, both for himself and for students under his supervision. His numerous fieldwork expeditions have taken him to Niue, Fiji, Norfolk, Lord Howe, Tuvalu, Maupiti, Kiritimati Island (Kiribati), Palau, Taiwan, Philippines, Juan Fernandez, Mangareva, Rapa, Christmas Island (Indian Ocean), New Caledonia, Yaeyama Islands (Japan), Galapagos Islands, Mocha Island (Chile), and Huahine. Some of these are extremely isolated places and reflect Atholl's desire to investigate the remotest limits of prehistoric exploration of the Pacific.

These expeditions took place within the framework of two major projects: the Indo-Pacific Colonisation Project, and the Asian Fore-Arc Project, and have resulted in many scholarly publications and lecture series. Collaborative monographs have been produced on Norfolk Island (Anderson and White eds 2001), Niue (Walter and Anderson 2002) and Kiritimati (Anderson *et al.* 2000c). Volumes on Rapa (Anderson and Kennett eds nd) and Fiji (Clark and Anderson eds nd) are forthcoming.

This period of research in Canberra has been immensely productive. Besides carrying out and publishing fundamental archaeological research in various parts of the Pacific, Atholl has pursued a number of interrelated themes centering on colonisation and the sustainability of settlement on small islands. Island sequences and the chronology of initial settlement of islands have been continuing concerns (2000e, 2005a; Spriggs and Anderson 1993; Anderson and Clark 1999; Anderson and Sinoto 2002; Anderson *et al.* 2003a; Phear *et al.* 2004). He has made major contributions not just towards the facts of migration and dispersal, but towards suggestions of causes for these events (1995a, 2001a, 2003b, 2004b, 2006b), and has highlighted issues of isolation, remoteness and abandonment (2001b, 2005b).

Atholl's interest in birds, megafauna and extinctions has resulted in reports of fossil fauna and new bird species from Niue (Steadman *et al.* 2000; Worthy *et al.* 2002), and the important discovery of extinct megafauna in Fiji (Worthy *et al.* 1999; Anderson *et al.* 2001a). His excavations in the Volivoli caves inland from Sigatoka in 1998 uncovered a previously unknown extinct crocodile, which was named after him – *Volia athollandersoni* – and features on the Fijian 50c stamp. He has also considered wider issues of faunal collapse and landscape change on Pacific islands (2002b, 2007a).

A keen yachtsman himself, Atholl has contributed significantly to discussion of voyaging strategies (1996a) and the development and capabilities of Pacific voyaging canoes (2000d, 2001d), and considered the effects of La Niña and El Niño on Pacific migrations (Anderson *et al.* 2006a).

Throughout this period in Canberra, he has continued to publish extensively on New Zealand archaeological topics. In 1998, he launched the Southern Margins Project, organising expeditions to Rakiura (Stewart Island), New Zealand's Subantarctic Islands, and Whenua Hou (Codfish Island) off Stewart Island. This project built on Atholl's earlier research in the



Figure 6. Atholl wet sieving during excavations in Palau, 2000 (courtesy of Geoffrey Clark).

Kermadecs and Norfolk Island, as well as New Zealand, and showed that Polynesian voyaging had extended into the sub-polar region some 700 years ago (Anderson and O'Regan 2000; Anderson 2005d). Atholl was thus able to extend his definition of 'South Polynesia' to include not only Norfolk, the Kermadecs, the two main islands of New Zealand, the Chatham Islands and Rakiura, but also the Auckland Islands.

One might think that someone who has devoted so much energy to his own personal research and publications would have had little time for advancing the careers of others. The opposite is the case with Atholl. He has been a dedicated teacher throughout his career, supervising many thesis students at both the University of Otago and Australian National University, and has helped students from other countries too. But his generosity towards others does not stop there – over the years, he has also accepted the thankless task of serving on a variety of university committees, the New Zealand Historic Places Trust, and many editorial boards, and acted as advisor to Te Runanga o Ngai Tahu, and as a referee for diverse granting agencies. He has always been a prompt and insightful referee of manuscripts submitted for publication in journals and books. He has helped numerous colleagues over the difficult hurdles of promotion in academic institutions by giving personal and professional assistance, and has gone out of his way to promote people for awards, honorary positions and degrees.

A typical example of his generosity towards others was the festschrift for Ron Scarlett, which he initiated in 1976 before his doctorate was completed. Ron was a person whose contribution behind the scenes, identifying bird bones from archaeological sites, might otherwise have gone unnoticed (ed 1979). Not all those he approached for contributions felt that such an accolade was justified, but Atholl correctly recognised that people like Ron provided extremely important

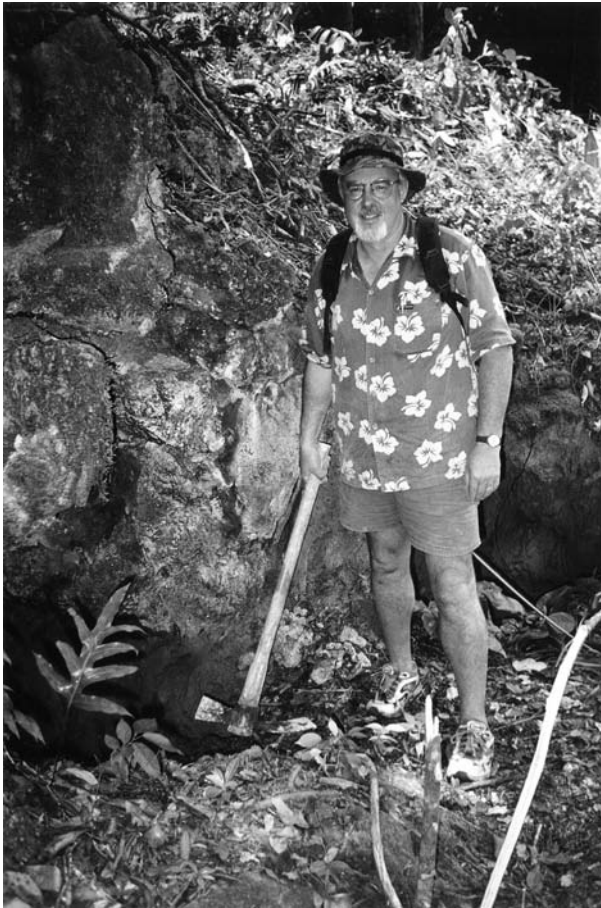


Figure 7. Atholl during fieldwork in Palau 2000
(courtesy of Geoffrey Clark).

basic data, without which archaeology would be the poorer. The volume was well supported and a valuable contribution to knowledge resulted. This was the first of several festschrifts of which he was an invaluable organiser, and was followed by those for Jim Allen (Anderson and Murray eds 2000), Rhys Jones (Anderson *et al.* eds 2001), and Janet Davidson (Anderson *et al.* eds 2007).

Not surprisingly, his own contributions to knowledge have been widely recognised. His awards include Fellow of the Royal Society of New Zealand (1991), Fellow of the Australian Academy of the Humanities (1996), Fellow of the Society of Antiquaries of London (2002), Doctorate of Science University of Cambridge (2002), Federation Medal of Australia for services to archaeology (2001), and Companion of the New Zealand Order of Merit for services to archaeology and anthropology (2005). He has often been invited to give keynote addresses and has held visiting fellowships at numerous academic institutions around the world.

From a very young age, Atholl displayed enthusiasm for many outdoor pursuits: tramping in the forests of New Zealand, hunting deer, skiing, sailing and mountaineering. On one spectacular occasion, he had a near miss on Mount Windward at 2000 m, slithering 500 m down a near-vertical ice slope in winter before coming to a halt on the brink of a bluff. He was 17 years old at the time, but this event did not put him off mountaineering. He went on to conquer some quite demanding peaks as an adult. He also developed an abiding interest in diverse fishing activities: scuba diving, spear fishing, dragging nets for flounders, whitebaiting, surf casting and fly fishing. Not all of his professional colleagues may fully appreciate just how strong the 'call of the wild' is for him, so this sketch of 'Atholl the academic' should be rounded off with some comments on this other side to his character.



Figure 8. Atholl has been a keen mountaineer since school days. Here, he is with Barry Clark on the summit of Mt Cupola, Nelson Lakes National Park, 1998 (courtesy of Barry Clark).

In whatever part of the world he travels, he characteristically seeks out every opportunity to explore the nearby environment, whether mountain, forest, river or sea: fly fishing for grayling in the ice lakes of Alaska, long-line fishing in the cold Subantarctic waters of the Auckland Islands, catching halibut in the seas around Kachemak Bay (Alaska), sailing chartered yachts around the Stockholm archipelago in the Baltic Sea, the inner Hebrides of Scotland, or Tuvalu in the tropical Pacific, and sailing his own yacht *Cepheus* in the Marlborough Sounds in New Zealand. When he lived in Dunedin, he was often seen windsurfing on the harbour, especially when high winds forced all but the bravest off the water. This lifestyle has not been without its mix of adventures, including breaking an arm skiing in Japan, and breaking a foot site-surveying at Murdering Beach in Otago. In another life, Atholl may well have been an explorer. As it is, he has combined the best things of two worlds, academic and outdoors, equally at home in both.

Atholl is due to retire in 2008 and take up residence in a property right in the centre of the richest vineyards of the Wairau Valley in New Zealand, surrounded on all sides by grapes of one of his favourite wines, Marlborough sauvignon blanc. One corner of his property adjoins the icy cold waters of Spring Creek, famous for prize-winning brown trout. What better way to fill out the years ahead than by writing books close to the very best things of life – mountains, forest, clear rivers, and the sea.



Figure 9. Atholl's deep knowledge of all aspects of fishing follows a lifetime's interest in fly fishing in remote parts of the world. Maruia River, New Zealand, 2002 (courtesy of Barry Clark).



Figure 10. For Atholl, one of the great pleasures of life is unwinding by the camp fire at the end of a day's tramping. Taken at Downie's hut, Matakaitaki River, Nelson Lakes National Park, 1993 (courtesy of Barry Clark).

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