

Molesworth Station

Severn / Acheron Shelter

Interpretation Panel 1

From the 1850s until the late 1930s a well-used network of travel routes traversed the back country, the main ones forming the first overland route between Nelson and Canterbury. Many tracks followed earlier Māori trails. A chain of seven accommodation houses was established between Tophouse and Hurunui to serve the travelling public.

NORTH-SOUTH MAIN ROUTES

The main horse tracks were commercially significant in the early days and were the primary overland routes between Nelson, Blenheim and Christchurch. The Nelson and Canterbury Provincial Governments established accommodation houses along these routes in the 1860s and these houses (and their successors) continued to function until the 1930s. The trip from Nelson to Christchurch on horseback took at least six days.



Pack-horse team on the Robinson Saddle (1400 metres). Travel over the higher saddles and passes required self-sufficiency to deal with the extremes of summer drought or winter snow.

SECONDARY ROUTES

These served as alternative entry points to the main north-south tracks and lateral connections between them. They opened up access to the stations for stockmen and rabbiters and accessed routes to the west and east.



1880



Horse and carts crossing a river on Muller Station. Main tracks were increasingly upgraded to a standard where runholders could get their wagons of wool to Hanmer (south) and later down the Awatere to Blenheim (north), but river crossings remained a challenge. That challenge remains today for off-road station work.

1938



Acheron Hut was typical of the small huts built to serve rabbiters and stockmen. This hut was named Kerrytown after County Kerry man Dan Brosnahan who based his rabbiting gang there. Huts were often used as a musters' base camp. The huts had a fireplace for cooking and heating but finding enough wood to stay warm within the thin corrugated-iron walls during a Molesworth night was difficult. Thomas Fowler was one of the first Molesworth managers to plant trees for firewood. He planted a wagon load of willows from Altimarloch Station and later planted cork elms at Molesworth homestead. Over the years trees were planted near all the station huts, especially by manager Bill Chisholm.

ACCOMMODATION

The station homesteads and purpose-built accommodation houses gave shelter and hospitality to travellers along the north–south tracks. The Provincial Government paid an annual allowance to all accommodation leaseholders to provide food, beds and stabling. Travellers were charged a small fee for the service.



Tarndale Station homestead at Cat Creek. It also served as an accommodation house, being strategically placed between the Rainbow and the Acheron accommodation houses. This was the second Tarndale house, the first was sited at Horse Gully.



Richmond Dale where a cob hut and sheep dip comprised a base for the Richmond Dale Run, once part of Molesworth in the 1890s but now in Muller Station. Molesworth musters working nearby once used the place to dry out as it had “rained all day”. Jack Tomlinson recalled that they mustered 23,000 ewes and lambs for weaning and dipping off the Severn, Saxton and Isolated Flat blocks and while one gang held the stock on Isolated Hill all night as the rivers raged, the other gang whose clothes and swags had become totally saturated upon their first attempt to get the sheep out went to the “mud hut at Richmond Dale” to dry out. The sheep were put across the Severn Bridge the next day, 1000 per hour, before being driven on to Tarndale.



Driving sheep over the Saxton Bridge, one of several bridges built to avoid the loss of stock and men in the freezing cold and often raging rivers of Molesworth.



Horse team and wagon on Molesworth 1933, possibly on the Saxton Pass road that was first opened as an alternative to the Barefell Pass route. Saxton Pass became a major route when a dray road was formed in 1879.



Cameron's Bluff (near the Richmond Dale shelter on left), early 1960s, with the Rachel Range in the background.

NEIGHBOURS AND RELATIONSHIPS

Many names and incidents are associated with the high-country runs that were formed, amalgamated, developed and lost as fates and fortunes dipped and soared during the second half of the 1800s. The neighbouring runholders generally worked co-operatively but occasionally these relationships were strained over matters such as scabby sheep, failure to effectively combat rabbits, and access. One confrontation over access through the Acheron Valley and St Helens Run became notorious following a very public court case.

BATTLE OF THE ACHERON

The Nelson Provincial Government commissioned the cutting of the first stock track down the Acheron River. Various runholders took stock and packhorses along the route, which was greatly improved under Thomas Carter of the Clarence Run who constructed two cuttings on his private land.

William Anderson Low took over the land in 1877 and further improved the cuttings. Along with the completion of the Saxton Pass track by Thomas Fowler in 1879 and the upgrading of the Acheron Road, runholders now had few difficulties in getting to Hanmer provided they used Low's cuttings. They made donations to Low, and to the Amuri and Awatere Road boards to maintain the road and therefore viewed their use of the cuttings "*as of right*".

Upon his return from overseas in 1882, Low contended that the road boards were not making sufficient contributions towards maintenance; he closed his portion of the road.

William Acton-Adams of Tarndale and Herman Fuhrmann of Molesworth continued to use the road. On January 8 1884, Acton-Adams was returning from Hanmer when fences placed across the two cuttings prevented access. He by-passed them via the riverbed but further up the road met Thomas Fowler, manager of Molesworth, heading for Hanmer with his wool clip. The two men rode down to the cuttings and found seven men from St Helens camped on the road. The travellers asked if they could exchange loads to ensure the wool got through but the men refused, saying Low had instructed them to use force if necessary to stop all traffic.

Fowler sent his men and horses back to Molesworth, leaving the wool clip beside the road. He was unable to return for some weeks when he found the tarpaulins perished and the wool damp and discoloured. The cost to the runholder for additional wool cartage and subsequent essential wool scouring, coupled with having to now get stores from Blenheim, was considerable. Fuhrmann took a court case against Low, claiming that an open Acheron Road was integral to his Molesworth operation. After the road closure he had sold his run at a much-reduced price. The jury concluded that previous public use of the private road had been established and that obstruction had taken place. Fuhrmann was awarded compensation. Other runholders, including Acton-Adams, planned a further case against Low but matters were finally settled out of court.

Information obtained from *Molesworth* by L. W. McCaskill.



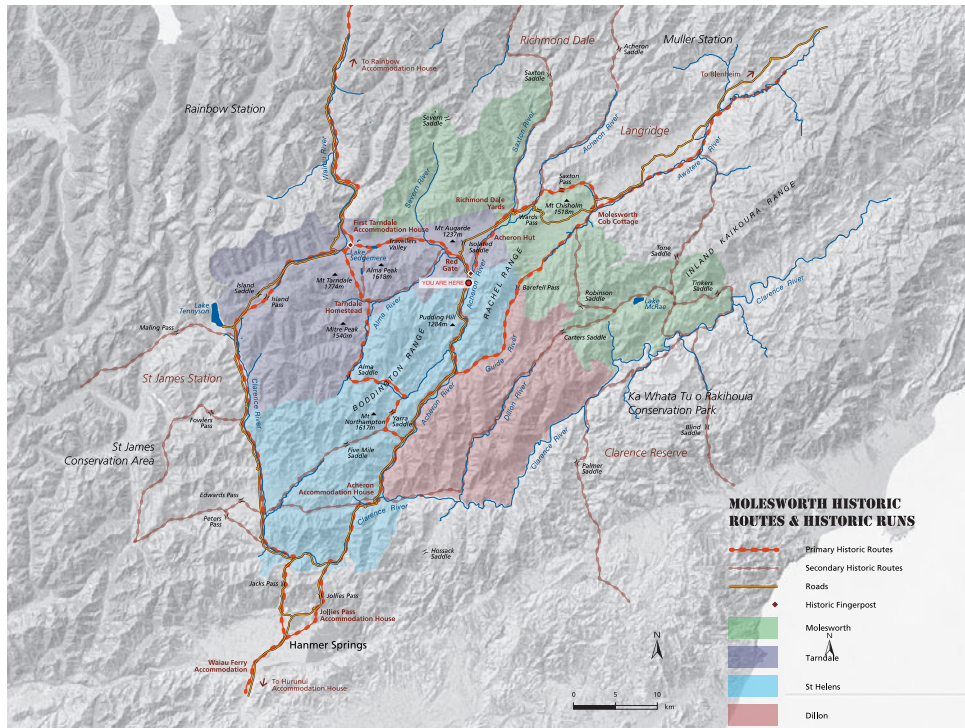
William Anderson Low.



William Acton-Adams.

Following the opening of the Lewis Pass Road in 1938, vehicles superseded horses. Although many of the formed roads through Molesworth today follow old horse tracks, other tracks and routes have not been developed and remain in similar condition to the days of horse and foot travellers. They are an important part of the story of communications in New Zealand.

MOLESWORTH HISTORIC ROUTES & HISTORIC RUNS



Red Gate Hut.



Working dogs.



Half Moon Hut.

Historical information obtained from many sources including Department of Conservation archives, *Molesworth*, L. W. McCaskill, 1969 and *Remembered Trails* J. E. Tomlinson, 1968. Photographs – Marlborough Museum and Historical Society; National Archives; A. D. R. Russell Collection; Don and Ann Reid Collection; Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, NZ; Department of Conservation; Rob Suisted www.naturespic.com

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Interpretation Panel 2

Although there are some significant differences between stock work today and that of the merino era – such as plane spotting, 4WD vehicles and warmer station huts – the basics remain the same: a successful muster on Molesworth, whatever the stock, has always required good keen men, sound planning, well-bred horses and smart dogs.

THE PACKMAN

A packman never rests, according to Bruce Stronach's Musterers on Molesworth (recollections of 1939). Not only responsible for shoeing and feeding the horses, a packman carried all the musterers' supplies including swags, tents, firewood and cooking utensils. He set up camp, prepared all the food, washed up and then packed up everything and reloaded each time a move was needed; sometimes every day. When the men came down from the hills a strong brew of tea would be ready with bread, butter (introduced to the menu in 1907) and jam. The evening meal was prepared, cleaned up, the chops cut for breakfast and after a six hour sleep the men were woken with the clang of spoon and tin plate about 3 am each morning.

Mutton, potatoes (only after 1909), bread and butter were the staple fare of a tent camp. Scurvy amongst the men was frequent. Bread came from the station ovens at Molesworth or Tarndale. Tobacco, painkiller, soap, toothpaste, spare boot nails and the ability to spin a good yarn were the other essentials. Musterers got to rest, but idle men are always hungry. Every packman had his grizzle about musterers. This is understandable as most had their gear defiled by dogs, had to light fires with sodden wood, had sleep interrupted by snoring and once back at the station had to help the cook or the blacksmith.



ABOVE Donald McLean and Ernie Steven crossing the Acheron River; McLean was drowned on Molesworth.



Pack-horses leaving Molesworth.

1909



Watty Tudhope, packman, sets up his camp kitchen under a tent fly. According to Jack Tomlinson, Watty was a good cook, very tidy and handy with the horses; all essential qualities for a packman. He guarded his galley from the dogs with a stick. He could make a delicious brownie if the eggs of the black-backed gulls which nested up the Wairau were found and he supplemented the grim diet of merino with venison, pork, rainbow trout or kea pie if the men had the energy left after a day's muster to go hunting and gathering. Apparently the men 'disdained to eat rabbit'.

CASUALTIES.
A MAN MISSING
 Yesterday Constable Smither (Kaia-poi), Constable Lewin (Amberley), and a constable from Christchurch, were despatched by the morning express to assist Constable Bird and the party who are out searching for Donald McLean, believed to have been lost in the snow between Jollie's Pass and the Acheron. McLean was an employee at Molesworth Station, and was returning to it on Monday, when his riderless horse returned to the accommodation house at the Clarence.

Press 21 August 1909

THE TENT

According to Bruce Stronach, a musterer on Molesworth in the 1930s, this was the musterers morning routine – dress, wash, curse the day, roll up the gear, eat two chops and down a billy of tea, take ‘two draws and a spit’ of the cigarette, prepare lunch, fill sugar and tea tins, pull the nibbie ‘stake’ out of the ground and release the dogs who snap up the left-over chop bones – off before daybreak. The packman was left to clean up and clear out to the next camp.

Firewood was scarce in the early days of Molesworth. Trees were planted at huts and campsites, particularly poplar, cork elm and willow, to provide much needed firewood for cooking and warmth. At regularly-used campsites, durable wooden posts or metal standards to secure the tents were driven into the ground and left there. Over the years the wood shortage led to a special design of tent. The ridge ‘pole’ was rope and the uprights were two pieces of iron that fitted together. The rope was spliced at each end and this fitted through a ring at the top of the upright. A pack strap was the stay and a boulder used for an anchor. Tussock was used as bedding and sleeping bags were called ‘fleabags’. The musterers generally put their own tent up if they arrived at camp before sundown and collected their own bedding. Playing a sharp hand of cards came in handy on snow-bound or stormy days and many a sleep was lost when snow caved in the tent.



Molesworth shepherds June 1908; note the nails on the soles of their boots: A.G. (Lex) Mowat at back; next row left–right Bert Stewwer, Angus Livingston, W. Sansom (packman) and O. Sloss; front row left-right E. Crowe, H.E. Vivian, Ernie Chisnall. Lex Mowat took many photographs between 1907–1914 with his half-plate camera and some were kept by Bob Boddington in an album held by the Marlborough Museum. Mowat also kept a diary.



Setting up at Junction Camp on the neighbouring Muller Run including musterers Jim Dyer, Tom Whittell, Alan McLean, Laurie Watson and Ted Waller behind the pole.



Jim Hall (left) and Wilf Osgood on Molesworth Station.

“Fences were few and far between, with rivers, creeks or mountain ridges marking the boundaries of the runs. In this high country vastness, the straight huntaway and the heading dog were a must in every man’s team. These dogs would head for miles. The dog that headed and just held his sheep – sometimes for an hour, waiting patiently for his master to appear – and did not put the sheep over a bluff, was a valuable asset and did not ask for wages or much else.”

From a Tony Orman interview with Lionel Winstanley : *The Saturday Express* March 14 1998

THE BEAT

“Walking for miles in the dark after a 2 am breakfast seemed the only way to catch those merinos before they became a distant cloud of dust. They could run, even on rocks and running shingle.” According to Bruce Stronach, Molesworth was strenuous work and on no other station was there so much walking. On some parts of the station mustering was done on the spurs. In places these required ‘sidling’ as they were so large and needed up to ten men on a face, about half a mile apart. The man on the ‘top beat’ kept a little in front of the one below, and so on, so that the men spread out down the face in steps. When sheep ran down the hill they were unlikely to get behind the man on the ‘bottom beat’. The longest beat was always the ‘outside beat’. To keep in contact with the line, the musterers used signals – fires, barking of dogs, ‘hootin’ and ‘yellin’ of voices – and there was nothing more annoying than a man who did not know when to yell or when to stay silent.

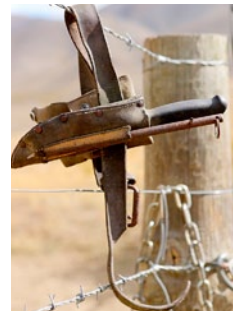
The Rainbow was also mustered in spurs but was very rough and dangerous in the autumn when sheep, dogs and even men could get ‘bluffed’ – stuck on a cliff with an extremely difficult retreat. Whichever station the musterers were covering, be it Molesworth or one of the neighbouring runs, sore feet, sore dogs, thirsty days, hard beds, cold nights and skimpy rations attracted only a certain steel-bred character to put their hand up for a high-country season.



Molesworth shepherds (Lex Mowat photograph): back row left–right unknown, Bishop, unknown, Ernie Chisnall, unknown; front row left–right unknown, Bert Stewwer, Angus Livingston, O Sloss, Mickey Cameron.



Muster dust at Tardale.



Old knife and pouch on a Molesworth fence.



Interior Half Moon Hut.

Back when Molesworth ran merino sheep the debate as to who was the toughest – the sheep or the men – was never settled. Merino were a tough breed suited to the harsh, high country environment; but so were the men. The vastness of the country, its isolation and the scale of Molesworth farming has made it renowned throughout New Zealand.

SHEEP, MEN & HIGH COUNTRY

“The men sweated and toiled and froze and clung with strong boots and the aid of a shepherd’s stick to those barren crags where the slipping of a foot might prove fatal... .. driving sheep across the rivers was tough work, especially with 4000–5000 sheep. Men were often up to their waists in ice-cold water for hours at a time, pushing and helping the swimming sheep across.” O C Wilkinson as reported in a Tony Orman interview: *The Saturday Express* 24 September 2000



A shepherd rests with his nibbie, saddle bag and dogs on Black Hill in the Wairau Valley tops.
Lex Mowat Photograph



MOLESWORTH MUSTERERS

1. That musterers' and packmen's wages be £4, with rations, per week, Sunday worked, with the exception of packmen whose week consists of seven days.
2. Musterers in snow on high country to be paid extra at the rate of 10s. per day over and above the weekly wage.
3. Where musterers' horses are used at the request of the manager for station work, such musterers' horses to be fed on hard feed and to be shod and kept shod at the expense of the station.
4. Firewood sufficient to last the mustering season to be placed at every mustering camp or hut which it is intended to use during the mustering season previous to the start thereof.
5. A hut for musterers and packmen. Accommodation including sufficient room where only they may keep any extra gear they may have, be provided by the station.

By 1916 Molesworth musterers were starting to make demands for better working conditions.



Farm book entries for 1922.
Marlborough Museum Archives

Historical information obtained from many sources including *Molesworth*, L. W. McCaskill, 1969; *Remembered Trails*, J. E. Tomlinson, 1968 and *Musterer on Molesworth*, Bruce Stronach, 1953. Photographs – *Remembered Trails*, J. E. Tomlinson, 1968; Marlborough Museum and Historical Society; Rob Suisted www.naturespic.com

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Interpretation Panel 3

“A really good group of guys is what makes a muster work. The key thing is that they want to be there... ..you need good horses, good planning, good dogs and you have to do a lot of plane spotting. It is crucial because there are a lot of places you can ride and not see cattle from the back of a horse... ..if you had to check every nook and cranny you could be there for weeks on end.”

STOCKMEN ON MOLESWORTH

The scale of today’s Molesworth cattle operation is not matched anywhere else in New Zealand. Stockmen on Molesworth spend most of their time on horseback. They move the cattle to ensure the animals are getting fresh feed, rotate them between summer and winter pastures and drive them into yards for calf marking or TB control. Stockmen also provoke the bulls into mating which is called “bulling up”. There’s not much rest for a bull that needs to keep 25 cows in calf.

The really big musters on Molesworth ended in the 1960s when rail was superseded by road transport. Cattle were once driven through Hanmer to the Culverden yards. From there the stock was railed to the Addington sale yards. The nearest equivalent event these days would be driving cattle to lower pastures for fattening before sale. Trucks are rarely used on Molesworth itself for transporting cattle, with the exception of bringing the bulls in; trucks are sometimes used for transporting working horses.

MUSTER OVER THE SADDLE

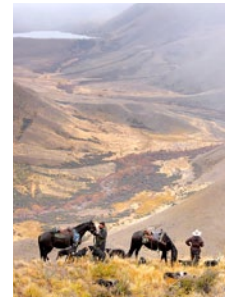
Molesworth has one of the highest passes in the southern hemisphere over which cattle are mustered – Robinson Saddle. At 1700 metres it can challenge even today’s well-clad and telecommunications-wired men. Generally the muster around the eastern ranges takes place in September. The weather at that time can still take an unexpected plunge into snow, sleet or hail. Spending three to four days away from the homestead requires planning to ensure the pack-horses are well stocked and shod, the dogs fit and all ready to depart before daybreak to make Lake McRae by mid afternoon. The river crossings are hard on the horses and unexpected delays can occur such as having to fix a shoe or reposition a pack.

Once the cattle have been rounded up and are back at the homestead the feeling of satisfaction is good, as is a hearty meal, a shower and a change into fresh clothes. Whether the muster was last week or last century, that feeling has probably not changed.

Material obtained from an interview between former Molesworth head stockman 2010–2012 Dan Jury and writer Harry Broad.



Stockmen on horseback.



View of Lake McRae from Driving Spur.



Acheron River and distant Isolated Flat.

The Rachel Range

GEOGRAPHIC CHALLENGES

To the east of here and hidden behind the Rachel Range is Barefell Pass, sited at the head of the Awatere River. In 1850, following the footsteps of Māori travellers but unaware of the exact routes covered by those before him, Frederick Weld reached a pass (Barefell) which led him down the Guide River. Upon reaching the Acheron River he climbed a nearby hill and mistakenly thought he saw the Waiau River. On his return he ordered 700 sheep to be driven over Barefell Pass to Canterbury. This was a costly exercise. The sheep had to be abandoned when no way out of the Clarence was found, despite a previous party of explorers having found their way out to Hanmer. The country was physically difficult to travel through and its convoluted ranges and mountains were an orientation challenge. Explorers strode out with little help except the descriptions of fellow explorers or better still, being accompanied by one who had gone before. In 1852 Jollie and Lee found a pass to Hanmer. The Barefell and Jollies Passes became the recognised stock route from the Awatere and Marlborough to Canterbury; by 1854 flocks of 4000 were being driven over the route.



Painting by Frederick Weld of the Upper Wairau Valley 1855.



Frederick Weld.

Frederick Weld came to New Zealand from England at the age of 20. With cousin Charles Clifford he established three stations, Wharekaka in the Wairarapa, Flaxbourne near Cape Campbell and Stonyhurst in North Canterbury. He enjoyed farming! Despite his "delicate" health he had a spirit of adventure and a tolerance for physical hardship. In addition to farming, Weld contributed significantly to national politics during his 23 years in New Zealand, including a period as Premier, and also to art through his paintings and drawings. His involvement in community affairs was also considerable. After leaving New Zealand for Britain in 1867 age 43 he began a career as a colonial governor and died in 1891 after contracting a fever in the Straits Settlements of Malaya.



SCREE SLOPE & ROCK REFUGE

Across the Acheron rises the scree-covered landform of the Rachel Range (named after Rachel Chisholm). These scree slopes are home to a range of threatened plants, including the distinctive *Rachelia glaria* (1) which is also named after Rachel. This member of the daisy family is a South Marlborough endemic. Rock outcrops such as the one beside this shelter provide a refuge for lizards such as the long-toed skink *Oligosoma longipes* (2), insects and plants such as *Coprosma intertexta* (3).



1.



2.



3.

A FRONTIER WOMAN

Turn around to face north and the Rachel Range stretches to your right. It was named in honour of Rachel Chisholm, wife of Molesworth's manager Bill Chisholm. At the northern end of the range overlooking Molesworth homestead lies Mt Chisholm, named after the manager himself. In the relative isolation of this part of your Molesworth road trip it is possible, perhaps, to imagine the isolation of station life as experienced by Rachel Chisholm.

Rachel Chisholm's early life prepared her reasonably well for high-country life. By age 14 when Rachel left school to become a "land girl" she could milk cows, sew clothes, knit, cook, write and record, keep books, manage a house and vegetable garden and carry out first aid. Like many of her peers she met her future husband at a local dance and was courted in a world where the standard transport for young people was horse or bicycle. When Rachel arrived at Molesworth in 1942 and was confronted with a ramshackle homestead in the middle of nowhere, she combined her skills and can-do attitude with those of her husband to get on with the job of running a backcountry station. That arrival was the fifth move Rachel and Bill had made in three years of married life and despite her husband's reassurance that they would stay five years they actually stayed 36 years.

In 1979, six months after the Chisholms left Molesworth for the last time, Rachel was awarded the Queens Service Medal. It was a fitting award for a woman who had helped create a financially successful cattle farm from an impoverished sheep station. Rachel adapted well to the severe isolation of Molesworth – a place in 1942 without vehicle roads, electricity, telephone or reliable running water. The Molesworth homestead did not get road access until 1950, a diesel generator until the 1960s (and even then only one appliance could be run at a time) and mains power until 1977.

Rachel home-schooled their two children while running the house, used the radio transmitter to the outstations, maintained a vegetable garden and provided meals to a constant stream of station visitors. It is said Rachel Chisholm's visitors book reads like the roll call at an international agriculture seminar. But doing without handy household appliances and a nearby supermarket, and having to work physically hard most days was not, perhaps, the greatest challenge. Possibly dealing on a personal level with the isolation was.

The Molesworth homestead did not see another female for six months after Rachel moved in, and then when Mrs Roberts did arrive on the mail truck late one evening, she had to leave early the next morning to beat an approaching storm that threatened to raise river levels. One incident that could raise the anxiety levels of many to frenzied proportions was when Rachel accidentally drove a needle into her finger and the needle snapped off. Her arm began to swell. Bill and Rachel had to get to a doctor, fast. Fate was on their side and the rivers were low. They travelled by horse and dray to Castle River where they kept the car but on arriving Bill discovered he had left the keys behind. There was no time to return so Bill tinkered with the starter motor and they were soon on their way. They reached Blenheim where the needle was successfully removed. It is possible that Rachel could have lost her arm.

Material obtained from a personal account 'Granny Rachel' by Jill Reid 1996; now (2012) Jill De Bettencor of Te Anau.

Historical information obtained from many sources including *Molesworth*, L. W. McCaskill, 1969; 'Granny Rachel' by Jill Reid, 1996; and material prepared by writer Harry Broad. Photographs – Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, NZ; Marlborough Museum and Historical Society; Don and Ann Reid Collection; Gillian Crowcroft, NZPCN; Bruce Thomas; Jan Clayton-Greene; DOC; Rob Suisted www.naturespic.com



Mrs Chisholm speaking by radio from Molesworth homestead to her husband at Tardale, 26 miles away.



Rachel Chisholm, wife of Molesworth manager Bill Chisholm.