

# Year Away

Wartime Coastwatching on the Auckland Islands, 1944

Graham Turbott



Department of Conservation  
*Te Papa Atawhai*

The cover incorporates observer charts for ships and aircraft used by the coastwatchers (from the author's files); photo and outline map are from *Coastwatchers* by D.O.W. Hall, War History Branch, Department of Internal Affairs, Wellington, 1951.

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In loving memory of my wife

Olwyn

The journal upon which the book is based was written for her.

*How like a winter bath my absence been  
From thee, the pleasure of the fleeting year!  
What freezings have I felt, what dark days seen!  
What old December's bareness everywhere!*

William Shakespeare, *Sonnet 97*

# Foreword

Lake Turbott, named for the author of this book, is among the most distinctive landscape features of the Auckland Islands. Occupying an elongated, sheer-sided bowl (known to geology as a cirque), the lake is a successor to a large glacier—one of many that carved the spectacular fiord-like topography of the islands. During wartime coastwatching duties at the islands in 1944, Graham Turbott accompanied the first survey parties to map these islands, so he knows the place as well as anyone. He describes the discovery of the lake as a highlight of his year-long sojourn there.

Time spent apart from coastwatching duties afforded Graham, and other eminent scientists including Robert Falla and Charles Fleming, a unique opportunity for field research. Their studies, published as scientific papers, are fundamentally important for our understanding of the biology of the New Zealand subantarctic realm. The present memoir by Graham serves a different purpose. First, as an account of the daily life of a coastwatcher, it is a rare insight into a fascinating period of human contact with these remote island outposts. Secondly, his insightful, first-hand observations of plant and animal life open the natural world of the Auckland Islands to a general readership in a way that has never been done before. The fact that Graham has retained an interest in the islands since his time there, and has interwoven new information into his narrative, signifies the hold that these islands can have on the visitor, whether scientist, professional conservationist or modern-day tourist.

Since Graham's stay on the islands, they have continued to be protected as nature reserves by the New Zealand Government, and their elevation to World Heritage status in 1998 recognises their global significance for science and conservation.

The biology of these internationally important island ecosystems is now well-documented. Publication of this memoir will reveal more of the human dimension of our subantarctic islands—a story that is still only partly told. The Department of Conservation, therefore, welcomes the opportunity to publish Graham Turbott's memoirs in its series of publications on the subantarctic.

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# Preface

The journals kept by servicemen during World War I and World War II and subsequently brought home must number many thousands. A natural response to stress and isolation—as the poet C. Day Lewis puts it, to ‘war’s long midwinter’—most have found resting-places in war archives and libraries. Many others remain among treasured family papers.

The New Zealand subantarctic coastwatching stations were initially front-line operations owing to the activities of German raiders; but at a later stage they could have been little more than an exercise in relieving boredom and a monotonous routine. Their role as meteorological reporting stations was, of course, very important to the war effort; but once coastwatching requirements had become minimal the maintenance of all three stations for weather reporting alone could hardly have been justified. (The value of subantarctic weather reporting was recognized in 1945 by the retention of Campbell Island as a permanent station.) As it proved, no member of the Cape Expedition found the year’s isolation intolerably boring and unrewarding: for all of them, the fascination of a place so scenically dramatic and rich in wildlife brought daily interest to even the most mundane and repetitive tasks.

The idea of reviving my coastwatching journal is based partly on a belief that information on a comparatively little-known wartime activity would be of some interest. Another consideration was the growing general awareness of subantarctic wildlife and ecology.

Natural history recording and collecting was considered important enough, both for scientific purposes and to boost the expedition’s morale, to form a recognised activity, and to justify the inclusion if possible of experienced naturalists at each station. In addition to my post as meteorological observer, I was responsible for co-ordinating my party’s natural history observations and collections. For the final four months I was relieved of station duties and accompanied the survey party, giving me the chance to spend much time in the field and visit most of the high points in the southern islands in the group.

The records from my journal and additional natural history notes recorded here should contribute usefully to the extensive body of information now available on New Zealand subantarctic wildlife. While much of the natural history research material obtained during the expedition has been described in specialist reports or been incorporated in general works, some field observations including many in this account have remained unpublished; and these, it is hoped, may prove to be of value.

Since Cape Expedition days, research on the wildlife and ecology of the area has expanded greatly. It is to be hoped that in due course a comprehensive account of the region’s wildlife will be prepared: this would be a major task quite beyond the scope of this book.

The New Zealand subantarctic has recently become widely recognised as one of the world’s outstanding wildlife and conservation regions. Areas familiar to us as coastwatchers are now being visited regularly, too, by enthusiastic ecotourists; although only limited land access is possible, the organised visits now offered in suitable vessels are highly popular. All this has emphasised the need for close attention to conservation issues affecting the area, a need fortunately fully recognised since World War II by New Zealand governments. The efforts of all concerned were finally recognised with the declaration of all the islands as National Nature Reserves. More recently the region achieved international distinction when it was named a World Heritage Area—a fitting climax to a lengthy period of successful conservation.

E.G.Turbott  
Auckland 2001

# Acknowledgements

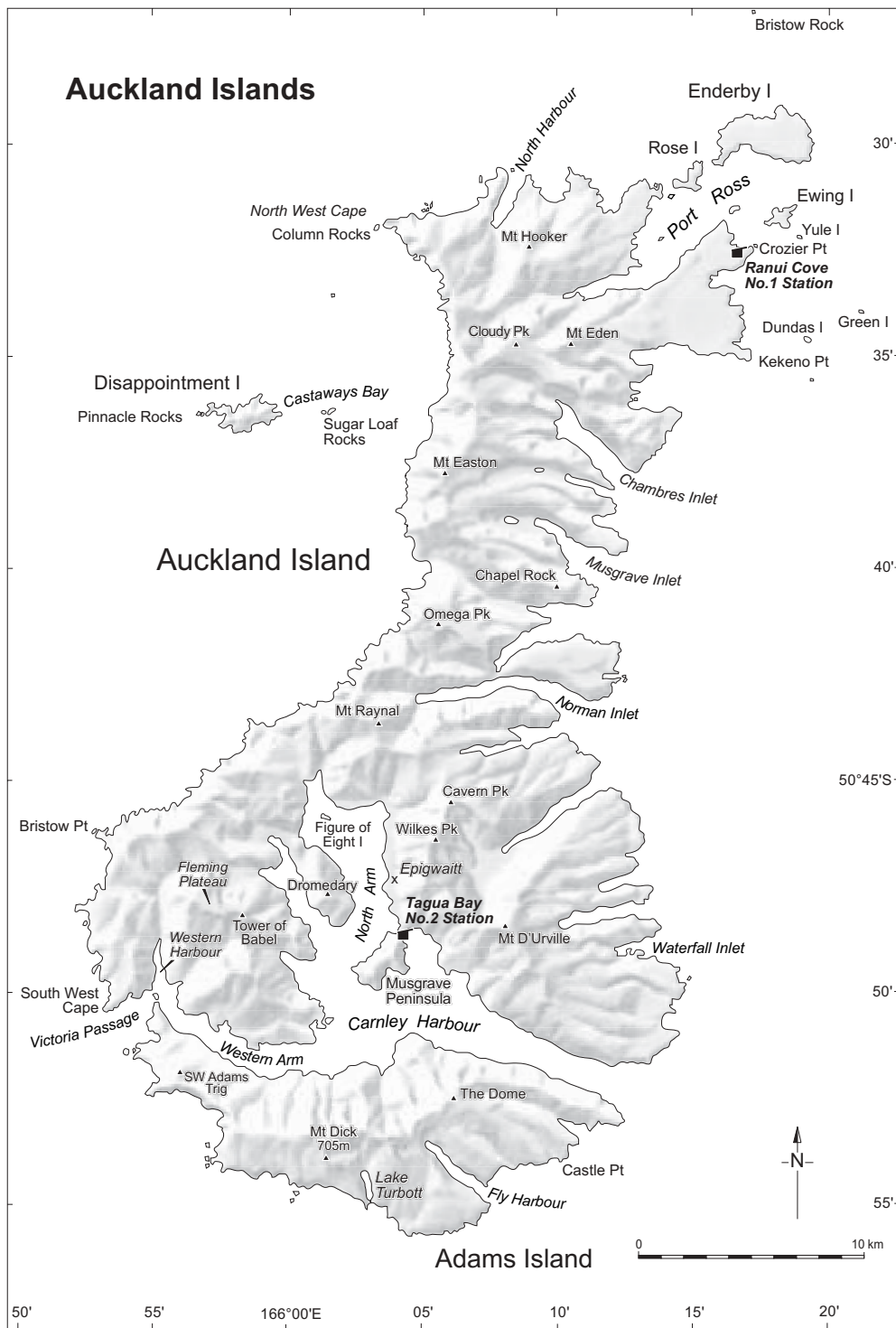
My thanks are due to three of the last few Cape Expeditioners—George Easton, John Jones and Geoff Prichard; their patience in answering questions and providing helpful comments has been much appreciated.

I am greatly indebted to Dr Eric Godley, leader of the 1966 research party on Adams Island, for reading through the natural history and some additional sections and for numerous comments. Keith Wise and Ian McLellan assisted with the entomological, and Jim Waygood with the meteorological sections respectively. Dr Janet Davidson provided information on the preservation of the boat from the Adams Island castaway depot.

That my often illegible handwritten draft was translated into faultless typescript by Patricia Kessler, of Remuera Secretarial Services, could be regarded as almost a miracle. For advice on the arrangement of chapters and for his work in editing the draft at an early stage I am indebted to Christopher Paxton.

I am grateful to the Department of Conservation, for their decision to provide funding and for the contribution made by Paul Dingwall and Jaap Jasperse of Science & Research Unit. The suggestion that I should write up my Cape Expedition journals came originally from Graeme Taylor, of the Department's Biodiversity Recovery Unit. Copy-editor Janet Hughes has made a major contribution in putting the book into its final form.

Finally, I am grateful to Myra McLachlan who read the original draft and provided helpful criticism, and to Garth my brother whose encouragement throughout and suggestions especially as regards war history have contributed materially to a lengthy project.



Note: Altitudes given in this work have been updated from Infomap 260 Auckland Islands, edition 1, 1991, 1:50 000; metres were back-converted to feet where appropriate.



# The Cape Expedition

The 'Cape Expedition', code name for the World War II coastwatching operations on New Zealand's subantarctic Auckland and Campbell Islands, began in 1941. German raiders were in action off the New Zealand coast, and there were reports of German warships heading south in the western Pacific; it had become clear that the good anchorages at these islands were likely to be put to enemy use. Prisoners from the *Turakina*, sunk by a German raider in the Tasman, were later released and reported being taken to a harbour in a colder climate with snow and tussock-clad slopes.

Coastwatching was already fully operational in the Pacific to the north, where stations had been established by the Aerodrome Branch of the New Zealand Public Works Department. The obvious sites for subantarctic stations were the large, sheltered harbours in the Auckland Islands—Port Ross at the northern tip and Carnley Harbour in the south, and Perseverance Harbour on Campbell Island.



Above: Port Ross from the Hooker Hills; Erebus cove in the foreground, Ewing Island in the background.  
Photo: A.W. Eden.



Right: Carnley Harbour from Mt Raynal; Circular Head on the right, Musgrave Peninsula in the middle, and Adams Island in the far distance.  
Photo: A.W. Eden.

As soon as the New Zealand War Cabinet authorised the expedition, D.O. ('Doc') Haskell of the Aerodrome Branch and Dr R.A. Falla (later Sir Robert), the curator of Canterbury Museum, were asked to help choose station sites and find suitable personnel. Haskell was an exceptional leader who took a close personal interest in establishing and manning the stations. Falla was well known for his interest in New Zealand's outlying islands and expertise in organising island camps and exploration. They realised that the basic requirement was to provide living quarters suitable for an indefinite stay in a rigorous climate, from which radio contact with New Zealand could be maintained. The stations needed to be carefully sited for maximum concealment, yet near lookout points from which a watch could be kept from dawn to dusk. It was decided that an expedition vessel should be included, both to extend coastwatching coverage and to provide an emergency link with New Zealand. A small 'emergency hut' would be set up at a hidden site a reasonable distance from each station, to provide shelter and cover for radio transmission should an enemy landing make it necessary to evacuate the main stations.

The choice of personnel for this venture was carefully considered: isolation and long spells of monotonous routine were clearly of the essence of coastwatching. Parties of four men (later increased to five) were decided on. While isolation for up to three years was provided for, each party was scheduled for relief after one year. Personnel would come from the armed forces or reserved occupation manpower.

The move to set up the stations was made in March 1941, transport being provided by the auxiliary schooner *Tagua*. The *Tagua* made a second trip in June 1941 to deliver bulky materials, and on this visit the three shore stations were established. Each comprised a well-designed pre-fabricated hut with double plywood walls and an exterior fabric coating. The huts had efficient wood- and coal-burning cooking stoves and 'hot dog' space heaters, capacious storerooms and generator-charged batteries for lighting and radio transmission.

It was decided that the expedition's permanent vessel would be the Public Works Department's 57-ton auxiliary ketch *Ranui*, with a complement of four. She was to be based in the secure Waterfall Inlet anchorage on the east coast of Auckland Island, from which she could regularly visit the two Auckland Island stations and the station on Campbell Island. For the first three years of the expedition the *Ranui's* captain was in overall charge of the year's 'relief', as each group of replacement personnel was called.

Until the second relief in 1943, the expedition members wore civilian dress, and if captured were simply to say they were fishermen. Then, with the war with Japan at its height, a change in policy became necessary: a group of civilians, including New Zealand radio operators on coastwatching duty, was summarily executed on Tarawa in the Gilbert Islands in October 1942. So from December 1942 Cape Expedition parties were enrolled as military personnel; we were each given the nominal rank of private, but stations were organised on the same democratic basis as they had been in previous years, with one member appointed as leader. For our own protection, we were also issued with full army kit from December 1942 onwards.



*Ranui and New Golden Hind* in Port Ross, January 1944.  
Photo R.A. Falla.

The auxiliary ketch *New Golden Hind* was requisitioned in early 1943 as the supply vessel for Aerodrome Branch stations in the Pacific. In 1944, the year of my own relief, she replaced the *Tagua* as expedition transport vessel. That year the Aerodrome Branch wanted to produce a current map of the Auckland Islands, so a survey party of three joined the expedition. At this stage of the war coastwatching was considered much less urgent, and the two Auckland Islands stations were reduced to four men, freeing up facilities and accommodation for the surveyors. The survey party, under Flying Officer Allan Eden, based itself mainly at the Port Ross (No. 1) Station but used the Carnley Harbour (No. 2) station as required. As well as heading the survey, Flying Officer Eden was in overall charge of our relief.

## The Roaring Forties

When I saw her at Wellington's Queen's Wharf, I thought the *New Golden Hind* looked too small and elegant to carry us safely to the far edge of the Roaring Forties. I went aboard with the others in my relief. We found our bunks and stowed our gear, then spent the early afternoon helping load supplies for the coming year.

The *Hind* was less a utility workhorse than a graceful luxury yacht. She was built for an Auckland businessman and deepwater yachtsman by the Deeming brothers of Opuā; nevertheless with her 91-foot [28-metre] length and 100-tonne capacity, she was well suited to the task of transporting gear and personnel to the Pacific wartime outposts. Her tall, slender masts and light rigging worried the old-timers on board, who more than once were heard to wonder aloud what a blow down south would do to those tall 'sticks'. Her auxiliaries were powerful diesels, one British and the other American, referred to affectionately in the engine room as Mr Churchill and Mr Roosevelt.



*New Golden Hind*  
at Auckland Island.  
Photo A.W. Eden.

Captain W.R. Webling, the skipper of the *Hind*, was an old Cape Expeditionier with long experience in southern New Zealand waters. He had previously captained the *Ranui* and had been officer-in-charge when the expedition was established in 1941. My relief party companions on board were the leader and head surveyor Allan Eden; the assistant surveyors, Les Clifton and George Easton; and four station personnel—Norm Hart, Len Hoskin, Robin Oliver and Bob Pollard. Four further party members were to come south in a few days time in the *Ranui*.

Ours was an unostentatious departure from Wellington, because wartime security—especially for our expedition—was tight. The *Hind* pulled out at 4.30 p.m. on Monday, 20 December 1943, and outside Pencarrow Head quickly struck a lively breeze. Next morning we were off the Kaikoura coast. The light on Tapuaenuku and its surrounding peaks was pale and clear. We had two days in Dunedin, and at daylight on Christmas Day were at sea off Otago's rugged east coast. By the evening of 26 December we were at anchor in Port Pegasus, Stewart Island's southernmost harbour. This was to be our taking-off point for a dash through the Roaring Forties.

We were relieved to reach the calm of Port Pegasus after two boisterous days at sea. We had been driving into a strong wind all day on the 26th without sail, and my head was full of the beat of the two powerful engines. The seas increased with the westerly, to the point where the helmsman often needed help to hold the wheel. Now tuis and bellbirds sang in the stillness of Acheron anchorage. The forest came down to the water's edge on both sides of us. The ratas were red with flowers and russet-tipped young leaves. Further back, forested slopes led up to the bare granite of the two peaks, Gog and Magog, which gleamed in the sun.

For most of Monday 27 December we lay anchored at Acheron, waiting until evening to begin our run south. The crew tested the engines, and rested up in preparation for a hard trip ahead. We made a huge catch of blue and red cod, tarakihi, and gurnard, plus one shark. Towards evening kakas flew screeching overhead and we could hear yellow-eyed penguins, hidden in the bush at the water's edge, crying shrilly.

At 7.30 p.m. the *Hind* weighed anchor and we soon felt the lift of the ocean swell. We passed through the narrow entrance of the sound between Anchorage and Noble Islands, then swung south to follow the rugged coast of Stewart Island. Familiar oceanic birds—black-and-white cape pigeons and big mollymawks—quickly joined us. Further out there were big flocks of muttonbirds (sooty shearwaters) swooping and wheeling against the horizon. By 8.50 p.m. we were off South Cape and on course for the Auckland Islands.

Our only full day at sea, 28 December, began with a subantarctic landfall; by daybreak the main island of the Snares group was full ahead. We had made 56 miles [104 km] from Stewart Island, and were close enough to distinguish the main valley of the flat-topped island. Its mantle of the Snares tree daisy *Olearia lyallii* showed whitish-green in the sun. The group, with its remarkable twisted forest of this tree daisy, and dense populations of Snares crested penguins and sooty shearwaters, is one of the most interesting of the New Zealand subantarctic and fortunately very little modified. Quite close to the main island the first penguins appeared, their massive orange-red beaks and bright yellow eyebrow-tufts vivid as they rose and fell on the powerful coastal surge. Just a little later another group passed us, 'porpoising' at high speed in graceful curves.

Our brief view of the Snares over, I settled to a day of seabird watching. The weather was calm, but the progress of the *Hind* was always lively as she responded to the open ocean's lift and surge. The seas around us were confused and sometimes towering. Albatrosses and petrels swooped into the troughs, then climbed away. Species typical of colder waters began to predominate; the most distinctive was the white-chinned petrel, large and dark brown, and differing from the more abundant sooty shearwater in having a wholly dark instead of silvery-white mottled underwing. Fragile-looking black-bellied storm petrels performed their dance on the water, tipping the surface lightly with their feet. They breed on the Auckland Islands. Pale grey prions (or whalebirds) began to appear; they were probably of several species, although they are hard to distinguish at sea. There were always 50 or so cape pigeons about the *Hind*, clustering on the water if food was thrown overboard. Large species—white-capped and black-browed mollymawks and giant petrels—followed the ship constantly and swooped down to join the cape pigeons in battle for the scraps.

We continued south all day under full auxiliary power with reefed main and mizzen sails and a staysail; at 8 p.m. we were 160 miles [300 km] south of Stewart Island. High cloud was increasing and the wind and seas were building up from the southwest; by 9 p.m. we had begun to look out for the high peaks of the Auckland Islands. As darkness fell we reduced speed and kept a close watch.

I came on deck at 4 a.m. on Wednesday 29th to learn that land had been sighted several hours earlier. The *Hind* stayed out from the coast, cruising at low speed and waiting for daylight and improved visibility. As I looked south a low dark outline of land appeared out of the mist; unmistakably Enderby Island, at the northern entrance to Port Ross.

At this moment the full force of a southern squall struck the *Hind*. Rocked by rain, high wind and pounding seas, we were soon plunging into the storm, keeping well out from the Enderby coast. We could see that the land here was clothed in wind-moulded, sombre scrub; on a projecting point sea lions reared their massive heads—a vivid first impression of our new surroundings. Captain Webling decided that until the worst of the storm was over it would be best to go up Port Ross to shelter, rather than attempt to reach the station anchorage in Ranui Cove. At 5.58 a.m. we anchored in Laurie Harbour, the narrow inlet at the head of Port Ross. A welcome breakfast included rum and coffee for all hands.

From the anchorage we absorbed our first impressions of the main island in the Auckland group. High land rose steeply from the shore, with dense rata forest on the lower slopes. The rata was in bloom, and the scene was altogether less sombre than we had expected. Higher up the tops were in deep mist, which sometimes lifted to reveal scrub-covered, tussocky slopes. In many places open tussock lanes ('clears') made a striking pattern, running down through the scrub into the low-level forest.

No. 1 party on arrival at Ranui Cove: (from left) Graham Turbott, Alan Paine, Geoff Prichard, Len Hoskin (January 1944). Photo A.W. Eden.



We thought we were safely sheltered below the high western Hooker Hills, but during breakfast the wind swung south, blowing directly along the inlet towards us. The anchor began to drag; it was clearly time to move and we hastily motored to Terror Cove, a little to the north down Port Ross. Even here it was necessary to double anchor; in Port Ross out past Shoe Island there was a considerable sea and the *Hind* was rocked at intervals by fierce williwaws (whirlwind squalls). It was now distinctly cooler; later patches of blue sky showed through but the wind stayed high all day. The same conditions persisted for most of the following day, as we waited in Terror Cove to move round to Ranui Cove to our intended anchorage. By dusk (about 10 p.m. at this season and latitude) the wind began to drop and the storm was almost over.

Early on Friday, 31 December we moved round and anchored off the station. The No. 1 party leader, Bob Falla, accompanied by two other members of the outgoing party, Ron Balham and Johnny Jones, rowed out in the station's small green dinghy to have breakfast on board. Later we went ashore to inspect the station and made a start on landing our gear, ready to settle in and learn about of our centre of operations for the coming year.