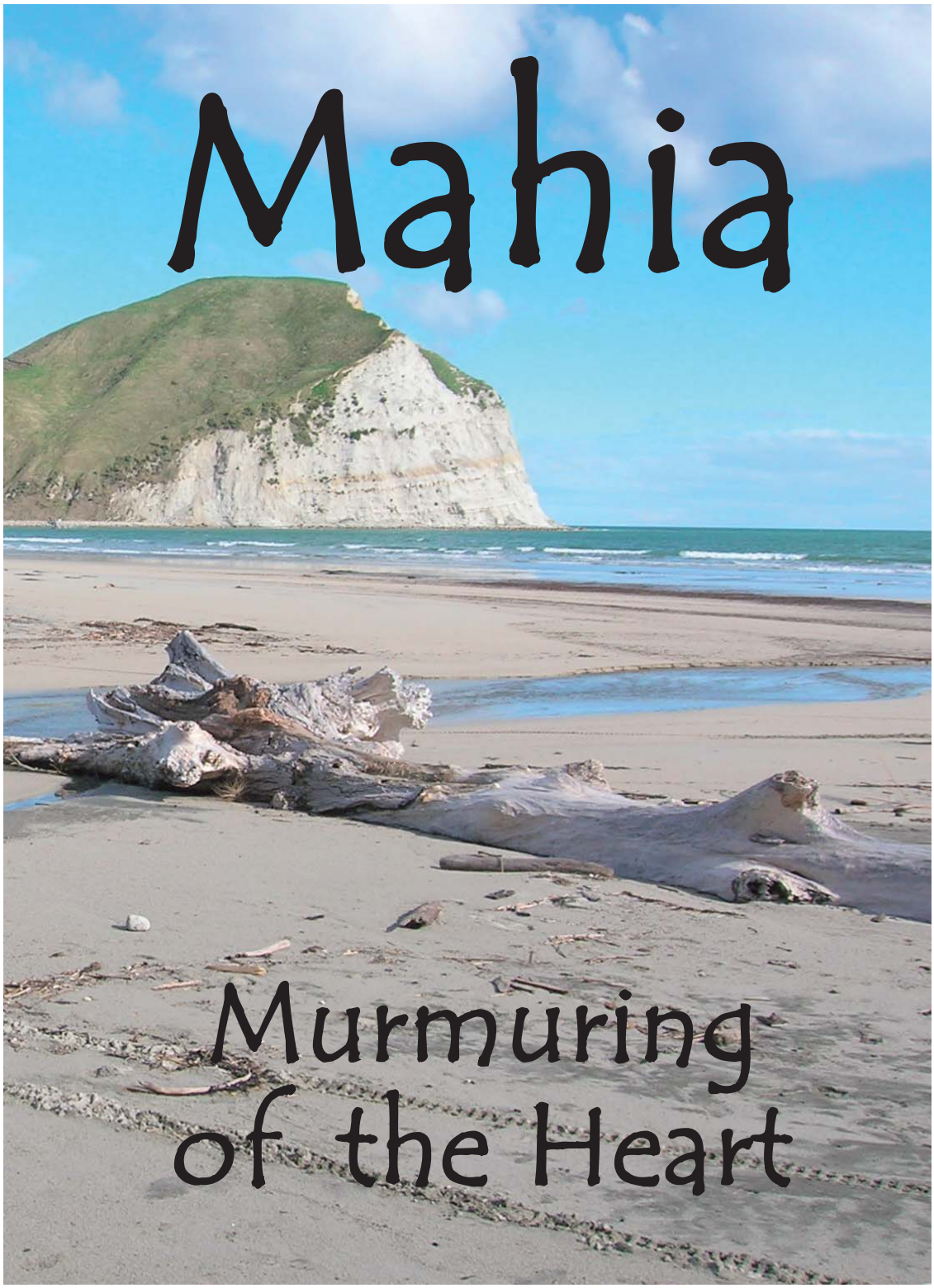

Mahia
Murmuring
of the Heart

## Contents:



**Preface:** Mahia remains, for me, as it always has been, a special place. It is not my home, although for many intermittent months of my life, it has been more than that. I am one of those most plasticine of inhabitants, a bach dweller in temporary residence, passing weeks away from the outer world, building sandcastles on an ebbing shore until the days are washed away and the world reclaims me. I walk the beach as I have done for over forty years now, tripping over driftwood disguised with seaweed, sidetracking the papa and pebbles and pumice that punctuate the sand that in the middle of summer is red-element hot and sole-searing. The stream, dammed into a hundred tributaries, still malingers, trapped in festering pools; the wind, when it blows, cajoles and bites; the sun, half-eaten by clouds, is still capable of scarring.

The memory of one day, (or could it be the blending of many different moments, filtered and compressed into a single day), visits me, lifted from the box-file of memories. Amidst the last slivers of a lingering January afternoon we sail, gloriously, along the crumbling flanks of Kinikini, hurried by a falling sea, heading home with our meagre catch of prickly catfish, stunted shark and tangled lines. The sun falls over our shoulders (always those last rays as I remember), the bay draws us into its calm as we ride omnipotent into another memory, of family carved in time and place.

What follows hereafter is a mixture of personal recollection filtered through the sieve of an ever more selective memory embellished, as always, by the passing of time. The personal pieces are interspersed with loosely informative chapters, derivative in nature, to give the reader an historical and geographic context by which to work and the very occasional uninvited poem that somehow inveigled its way in. I hope it serves as a beacon to stir the beachcomber's memory in us all.

## Chapter 1

There is a compartment in my heart that is my Mahia, stamp album of dreams. I do not think of it as it appears in the burnt cradle of summer, dry-veined and tremulous, but as a restroom in this busy life, an Arcadia of another imagining. It is in residence now, here, behind my eyes, with its ruffled sands and scar-scraped hillsides, rocky shelves and brooding ocean. It is the gallery of my youth and now my middle age. On its walls lie the images of days past: faces, time warped and carefree, bubbled foam and tortured driftwood, sheep tracks and kumara pits, rocks and papa, grasses matted with seaweed, neatly bunched in salt-licked posies. It is in my heart and in my head, this Mahia.

And I can hear it now. Its own symphony, discordant, fragmentary, music of the oceans. In the stormy heart of a clumsy winter, on the back of an on-shore wind, you can hear the heavy seas thrash against Waikokapu, leaving the shores bruised and buffeted. And in late summer, you can make out the murmur of soft easterlies cuffing the coastline while the sounds of fishing boats returning to Mokotahi carry across the water, seagulls squawking in their wake – noises that break the monotony of evenings that go on and on until the sun and moon collide. And at the end, as in the beginning, the quiet purr of the turning tide soothes the cooling sands and whispers to those lost souls who live on the shoreline, beneath a volley of stars hanging limpet-like in a firework sky.

Taste it. It is forever on your tongue. The sea air, pregnant with salt, creeps over your shoulder from the bay and floods your lungs. Smell the fragrances of the seaweed, dank and rotting, iodine-breathed; the sweaty and pungent humus of the Norfolk pines; the dump, like all seaside dumps, full of the carcasses of sea-eggs and rotting fish-heads, patrolled by hordes of angel gulls, as the scents waft and wallow in the changing blankets of air.

Underfoot, the acupuncture of marram grass and the bubble of tar sharpens your perilous journeys, especially on those days when the air is crisp and the sea boils in landlocked puddles. On such days, days wrought in the furnace, the heat climbs into your skin and drives you mad, but nobody notices for they are all mad too. You dream of pipis and crayfish and lemonade iceblocks, treats of long-past summers, now burnt up in the furnace of sunrises and sunsets.

I have always lived here, some part of me. But I am not tangata whenua. I am a visitor, a man with a head full of parts and longing for a quiet peace. This place is my family, my mother, my father, my brothers and sisters and our children and soon our children's children. And so on. Visitors clinging to a reef. We have our own places like this inside our heads and we hold onto them like crazy. They are a paid up part of our psyche, a compartment in our hearts.

## Chapter 2: The Journey In

When you reach Nuhaka, driving past the Mormon Temple that doubles as the town limits, you arrive at a T-junction where the main road branches north to Gisborne. The shells of three or four shops are still there, more or less as I remember them. The emporium, a few doors down from father's Tuesday afternoon surgery, though is the only one I remember well, having wiled away odd hours there, scuffling amongst the fabric and thread, while another patient was trussed, dressed, injected and disinfected. Nuhaka was where you could buy double-headed ice-creams, so large they would drip and run down your arms onto the seat before they could be properly licked to death, such was their size and the accompanying furnace of the car. The Nuhaka river divides the town like a 1950s hair-part and local children, fearless and grinning, always, leap off the bridge to escape the hot and blistering days, never mind the eels. Here, driving past Bluck's Transport, and the old Post Office, you set out on the last ten miles to Mahia Beach.

From the thirty mile an hour sign the countryside changes, imperceptibly at first, as pastures sheltered from the coast, poplared and willow-treed flax-fern gold-green thin out, like a man's hair in middle-age. As the windbreak deserts them, and the grasses, stunted now, but robustly so, cling instead onto khaki-buttered hills with their crumbling, crusty faces. On this journey, past the farm we nearly bought, but didn't, you hold your breathe for the first glimpse of ocean as you turn under the railway bridge. It never disappointed, never does. One sweeping corner and you are on the coast road, the East Coast Pacific Highway, sealed now, but still, in so many of my journeys, shifting corrugated screes of metal. You skirt the edges of Black's Beach, with its board riders, iron-sands and punishing seas. Huge carcasses of trees are embedded on the tide line. Across the bay, the north-western cliffs of the peninsula are now visible; at the southern tip, Portland Island, Hardy's Isle of Slingers, transported from its mooring twelve thousand miles away, sits uneasily. The road drifts inland, meanders briefly, past the oil-wells that were going to save the district from a lingering decline some thirty years ago, but didn't; under another railway bridge, past the side road into the once flourishing port of Waikokopu, now a half-faint fishing village, barricaded from the sea by gravel-filled railway wagons stacked in rows, coffin-like and premonitory, full of cold rocks. From the top of the hill, you can see the broad golden sweep of beach that links the three miles from Blue Bay to Mokotahi. At the foot of the hill you wind into the small linear settlement of Opoutama. Do others remember it as I do, its bush-clad limestone hillsides, falling down to squat timber and iron houses, a perambulating stream and the old school house where we stayed, those many years ago? The railway bridge cradled in the very corner of Blue Bay became our talisman, our destination on countless walks, housing the railway line to Gisborne. Now we have a choice: Through the pines forest, full of campers in summer and tinder-dry, and along the coast, Mahia beach is only five minutes away on past the Mahia Beach Golf Course, strong on sand traps and bunkers. There was, of course, no choice in our day. We would leave the little settlement, heading first towards Mahanga, desolate once, barrelled with waves of endlessly corrugated ocean, where Bill once tangled with a hungry riptide, and won, but not by much. Packed into the Pontiac, all seven of us, we surfed the high-ridged metal road like a skier in an avalanche, across the narrow trombolo of fixed dunes, past the lagoon and over the hill into the township of Mahia Beach.

Mahia was an island once, some thirteen million years ago, so the geological story goes. Triangular in shape, it is a chalk-laden promontory nearly 21 kilometres long and 12 kilometres at its widest point and, at its pinnacle, Te Kapu, some 397 metres high. The south and west of the peninsula are dominated by low sedimentary hills while the north-east is dominated by a plateau on which sheep and goats, gorse and blackberry share the living space more or less agreeably. The steep hill country, once cleared and without its comfort blanket, crumbles and erodes, as much already has. The soils, birthed from siltstones are not good for anything much. On the rolling folds and terrace land are volcanic ash soils, on the dunes, sand soils. Even the flats can only provide poorly drained alluvial soils although these, rightly, offer some hope. In the north-west, near KiniKini, there is the remnant of a broadleaf-nikau forest, where you can lose yourself in abundance;

elsewhere, the peninsula is farmed by those who have long-lived here although there are an increasing number of holiday makers, super-annuitants and recidivists, refugees from the 21st century and spiritual tangata whenua for whom Mahia has become their turangawaewae. As it has for me, a half-world away.

We disembark, unpack, lay claim to our bunks, run down onto the beach, stake our claims, put up our flags, pace out the boundaries of our world. Yet the journey in, as we all know, is more than roads and corners; the geography more than soil types and elevations. The journey I have made is in my head, as it will be in yours also. A bach is made of memories, not timber. A place is a juxtaposition of reality and perception, today, yesterday and tomorrow. As is true of all things and all places.

## Chapter 3: In the Early Days

Where else to start, but with what one reads or gleans from what has written before, the scraps of information that, when pieced together, unite at the seams to tell a common story. We begin when the canoe Kurahaupo first makes landfall on Mahia with three principal chiefs on board, Ruatea, Whatonga and Popoto. Whatonga was one of the great 12th century navigators and had sailed from Hawaiiki in search of his grandfather, Toi, before settling at Nukutaurua. For many centuries after, Mahia was known by that name. It was from Mahia that Whatonga's sons, Tara and Tautoki are said to have left to pioneer settlements in Wellington and the Wairarapa (and from whence their people returned in the early 19th century, seeking refuge from the onslaughts of the musket, yet another of Pakeha's barbed gifts to the Maori).

The next significant event in the history of Mahia took place with the arrival of the Takitimu, the last of the great seafaring fleet from eastern Polynesia. On its arrival in Aotearoa, in the 14th century, the sacred waka made its way from its first landing spot at Awanui (near Ninety Mile Beach) down the East Coast of the North Island. Eventually the waka arrived at the place called Te Papa near Kaiuku Marae. It was there that the Tohunga, Ruawharo, left the waka and decided to settle overlooking Mahia Beach. He built a Pa called Wahatoa near Oraka on the north side of the peninsula. Here, Ruawharo proceeded to plant the mauri (life spirit) of the whales and the fish of the sea which is said to have brought the whales to the bay. Ruawharo also built another Pa near Mahia called Titotirokauika. The meeting house at Opoutama is named Ruawharo as a monument to this renowned tipuna.

Kahungunu and Rongomaiwahine: It was stories of the beautiful Rongomaiwahine that lured Kahungunu to Mahia and when he finally reached here, he was delighted to find that the stories were not exaggerated. Kahungunu and Rongomaiwahine were eventually married, after Kahungunu had tricked and then drowned her husband. This marriage is described as unique not only because of the intrigue surrounding it, but because of how it changed the whole history of the East Coast. This union has brought about the current Ngati Kahungunu and Rongomaiwahine iwi of Nuhaka and Mahia.

For centuries, their descendants lived more or less peacefully in the area until the arrival of the musket and the resultant upset in the balance of power. By the 1830s, the Mahia had became a refuge for the people of Hawkes Bay and the Wairarapa under the leadership of Te Wera, who, because of earlier notoriety, acted as lightning rod, attracting the enmity of most North Island tribes. An expedition was mounted against him, reputedly the largest up to that time against a common enemy and it laid siege to the Mahia stronghold at Kaiuku in 1834. While unsuccessful, before retreating, the enemy had humbled the local people into eating mud to survive (hence, kaiuku = to eat mud) and it took another

expedition north for the Hawkes Bay tribes to restore their mana and for peace to be restored. This allowed many of the displaced Maoris to return home some decades after the initial diaspora . Meanwhile, in 1829, the first pakeha trader had settled on the Peninsula followed by the flotsam and jetsam of pakeha society. In 1837 shore whalers arrived establishing two whaling stations and a culture of drunkenness and lawlessness. By 1850 there were reputed to be 150 Europeans at Whangawehi alone, mostly rough and unsavoury individuals who did little for the reputation of the settlement. All this must have contrasted with the gentle urgings of William Williams some ten years earlier that culminated in the mass baptism of some 245 Maori at Whanagwehi.

For many years, Mahia served as the principal whaling base in the North Island although both sheep farming, from the 1840s and fishing became major sources of employment and livelihood as the peninsula adapted to the new markets and opportunities of the new century. The other significant event in the history of Mahia in the 19th century and one that was to have a profound effect on the future of the peninsula was the union between one of the leading settler families of Hawkes Bay, the Ormonds and the local Maori. In 1885, George Canning Ormond, son of J.D. Ormond, Superintendent of Hawkes Bay ('the Master') settled on the Onenui block recently purchased by the family where he met and married Maraea Kiwi te Ratihi with whom he had 11 sons and 4 daughters. George purchased more land, necessary, no doubt, to provide for his growing family and by 1900 had aggregated some 33,000 acres in all. Although educated at Edinburgh University, George had settled well to his isolated life on the Mahia and, with his imported hounds, became very much the local squire as master of the Mahia Hunt Club. But he was as one with his adopted hapu. Three of his sons went off to serve in the Great War and one never returned. His memorial at the Marae near Mahia town is dedicated to 'Alexander Ormond Second Lieutenant 1st Manchester Regiment and seven boys of the Mahia who made the supreme sacrifice in the Great War 1914-1918. All members of the one family and of the Rongomai Wahine tribe.'

## Wet Mahia in February

The rain has been falling all day, inconstant
But not inconsequential.
Impounding each and all along the beachfront
Bach to bach -
Mahia in February should
Not be grey and cold
Like this –
But it is

Leg-clamped by the damp air
I want to walk that wispy rim of beach,
bisect the rainbow cake layers of mock-gold,
white-hot, armour-grey sand
Before I, too, am old and far from land
And out of reach
But (eyeing up the rain)
not at any price – methinks,
Tomorrow will suffice



## Chapter 4: Alsatia and The Whale

It was Ruawharo, tohunga of the canoe Takitimu who gave the bay its wealth when he settled near Oraka on the north side of the peninsula. He built the pa Whatatoa nearby and there planted the mauri (or life spirit) of the whale.

In the 19th century, whaling was to become an important source of revenue for the area, attracting a significant resident European population quite early on in the process of settlement. The reason for the area being such a prolific hunting ground for the early whalers was very much linked with its geography. In effect, Mahia serves as a natural whale-trap being shaped like a fish-hook with a promontory curving out to sea and back towards the beach, creating a natural whale trap. By closing off the head of Hawkes Bay, the Mahia creates a blind alley into which the whales swim and become stranded. This strange shape confused the echo-location of whales, who head mistakenly for land, believing it to be the sea and, instead, find themselves trapped in the shallow waters.

Whales featured prominently in Maori legend and were hunted from shore. The capture or beaching of a whale was a cause of celebration and the delicate eco-balance was maintained and whales were frequent visitors until the arrival of the European.

Soon after the area had been identified as being an important whaling ground, the whaling boats made their presence felt. In the 1830s, extensive commercial shore-station whaling commenced at Mahia and the peninsula became the principal whaling station on the east coast of the North Island.

By the 1850s, there were between eight and eleven shore-based whaling stations on Mahia, each holding three or four five-oared boats scattered along the coastline from Waikokupu to Portland Island. Major bases were at Table Cap, Mahanga, Whangawehi, Kinikini and at Mokotahi, where an old whale blubber rending

pot still stands as a memorial of sorts. Some stations were very busy in the early years – at KiniKini in 1845 alone, 26 sperm whales were captured, one reputedly measuring some 22 metres in length.

Despite its success, by the 1840s, it was Whangawehi that had become the major whaling station with some 150 resident Europeans. The whalers were not a particularly salubrious or

savoury lot and Whangawehi was disparagingly (but probably accurately) labelled 'the Alsatia of the colony whither all the disorderly and desperate characters resort to be out of reach of the law'.

In 1855, in an attempt to regulate the industry, a code of rules was drawn up on board the RMS Pandora, but it had little effect. While about 300 Maori and 140 pakeha still lived entirely by whaling in the 1880s, the number of whales was declining rapidly. It had always been a tenuous existence. The uncertainty of markets, the poaching of the Americans and the tariff barriers of



the English markets all mitigated against the industry before another more telling factor came into play: the near extermination of the whale itself. The decline in the numbers of whale, as the result of both shore-based vessels and whaleboats scouring the coast from London, Nantucket and Hobart led to bases being abandoned and whalers either moving on, or settling on the peninsula and turning to farming. In recent years there have been a number of strandings, unusually of more than one species at a time. In 1962, seven false killer whales came ashore with three pygmy whales; in 1972, four pygmy sperm whales and a pilot whale were beached and in 1980, a pygmy sperm whale together with a beaked whale were stranded in the bay.

The whale survives, albeit in hugely reduced numbers and the wealth garnered by their presence has long since gone, but their legacy can still be seen around the peninsula today.

## Chapter 5: Saltaire

Saltaire came into the family in the early sixties. Originally, it consisted of three bedrooms, totalling six single beds, three sets of bunks and a double bed in a room in which it touched three walls and into which you walked sideways. All the beds were covered in quilts made up of woollen squares. Later, the veranda was extended and the area beneath converted into two more bedrooms, one a double room and the other with two single beds. While the veranda acted like a bass drum on those below, the rooms represented a new luxury before the cockroaches moved down the coast and spoilt everything. Inside the bach, there was a green bench seat in the corner, a painted chimney that often seemed to harvest a nest of wasps come summer, dried purple flowers in a brown vase, a yellow Formica table, old orange / brown rockers recently retired from Queen Street, a

kitset bookcase full of Agatha Christie, Ellery Queen, Readers Digests and condensed books, copies of Argosy, and later the occasional Harold Robbins, John le Carre and Barbara Taylor Bradford. In the corner, in what looked like a painted fruit box standing on its end was the magazine collection, with years-old copies of the Australian Post and Pix, Footrot Flats, Women's Weekly (New Zealand and otherwise), old copies of Punch, Saturday Evening Post and the London Illustrated News, all sand-gritted and sun-curled. A height-chart, mangled and torn and linking generations, climbed the kitchen wall. The shower arrived in the sixties, as did more elaborate plumbing banishing the long drop, but little else changed. It was, after all, a bach by breeding as well as belonging.

In front of the bach was a playground of sandhills and marram grass with a sentinel hut mid-section housed by katipos I used to think although I never found one. This guarded the path that wandered down to the stream, past another fortress built under the yoke of the Parker Empire, two sons of a one-armed teacher from Napier, but long since abandoned. And so to get to the beach, one meandered through a jungle of sandhills filled with snipers and wild horses and driftwood forts before arriving at the butt end of a stagnant stream, caked and cracked for most of the long months of middle summer, and giving off the familiar stench of trapped water.

And then later, the Council moved in and established a reserve and in so doing, with their bulldozers and trucks destroyed a whole civilization in a matter of days. We wept, and moved out, as exiled peoples do, to inhabit instead the coastal band of sandhills where our control was diluted and our empire made tenuous. Later, the section was also flattened and planted in grass, edged by ornamental trees and bushes, hydrangeas, a rata,

some flaxes, a small pohutakawa. Some of these survived the dry summers and sang with the cicadas, but a number, alas, died intermittently over the years, slaked by thirst and battered to death by enthusiastic fielders in a backyard cricket pitch that appeared by way of compensation. The pump, by far the most obtuse piece of machinery on the property, fielded at short-leg in many a test match, chugging on relentlessly until, at the crucial moment cutting out and needing bleeding or water or both.

Saltaire grew with us, around us, gave us shelter from the storm, was an oasis in the desert. It was our holiday haven and when we arrived and unclipped the double doors and walked out onto the deck, we knew we were home.



## Saltaire

Is the poor bach in the neighbourhood
(The type you should buy, so they say,
Either to pull down, or else make good)
The outside loo (a feature of the place)
Is all decay, its unpainted struts housing
Communities of spiders, stills the bladder
On dark nights even after much carousing
Bunk rooms, where we were stacked
Sardine-like, two up and two down
Are rarely full now; the memory of
The singing of cicadas wafting in through
The frayed mesh and half-open louvers
Lingers in our seaside memory
As cicadas everywhere are wont to do.
- As does the falling from bunks, the patchwork quilts
Of horse haired woollen squares, designed to
Scratch you to sleep, if sand-flies and mosquitoes fail you.
On the wall, a painting of a beached fishing boat
From the old country hangs beside the cardboard giraffe
Used for measuring sibling height, a cause of
Infantile dispute even into adulthood; a map
Of the peninsula thumb-tacked onto the pinex fireguard
(Pinex being that most combustible of materials)
Downstairs, two bedrooms, cockroaches in each
Domiciled since coming down the coast some years ago;
And always, beyond, the sea licking into the corners of the bay,
Grinding its way up the beach
Murmuring as the tide retreats taking the world backwards
In its pull; it all matters, all lingers, all resonates still.

## Chapter 6: The Family in Residence

When did they start, those first day trips out to Mahia, setting out for the beach in the old grey Vanguard? I cannot remember. I have a memory of being packed into the Holden, like lemmings, stomach swaying by Whakaki from the combination of smoke and urgent cornering, through Nuhaka and onto the ten miles of metal road until we arrived and were disgorged paste-like from a tube onto the broken grass verges under the shoulder of Mokotahi and from there, into the armpit of ocean. After the day trips, after the summer spent in the school house at Opoutama, after a glorious fortnight at another bach rented or borrowed for part of the summer, at last Saltaire was bought from, I think, the Hammonds, a Hastings family who somehow were able to jettison Mahia and not die broken-hearted.

Mahia Beach was a quiet settlement in those early years. For most of the sixties, there were days in mid-summer when the beach was ours alone. Mahia Store was the only shop, with its mix of emergency rations, ice-creams, fish-bait, bread and milk, enough for sustenance if not decent nourishment. The walk there was a short one, but long enough to drive us, past LazeDaze to the considerably closer shop at the new camping ground when it opened some years later, despite fatherly protestations of loyalty (the whole camping ground was viewed with hostility by surrounding bach owners for many years and certainly by father). A movie theatre operated in the local hall where we watched some gripping war movie (either that or slapstick) on the bench seats. Later still, a fish and chip shop opened, a sensible diversion for a local fisherman, and years later again, a tavern. But in truth, little changed. There were various set routines to life at the beach. The walk to Opoutama was a popular pastime and always the need to touch the piers of the railway bridge before returning, sunburnt, often, wind-whipped and salt-caked. To climb the hill at the back of the bach was another escape, along the ridge topped with its old fortifications and kumara pits and where, on one glorious evening in 1964, I heard on the long-wave of my new radio, the Beatles singing Day Tripper, all the way from Tokyo.

The third traditional family trek was to walk around the rocks, under the crumbling papa brim of Mokotahi, an exercise that had to be done at low-tide and, preferably, not in a gale which could bring screes of shingle rolling down the flanks. On arriving at Taylor's Bay, one would then walk back again, often, it seemed, to the accompaniment of the returning boats laden with fish, as they sailed around the point and into the safety of Mokotahi, waving and holding their catches high.

At times, the bach bulged with people, particularly before the new bedrooms were built, and tents were used to mop up the overflow. They were, in many ways, preferable, and allowed easy escape if required, and the company of school friends to share the beach with, and the nightlife.

What else do I remember? A smorgasbord of faces and moments: McNeill, old tar down to his white beard, repairing his nets; the vagaries of the stream, variously dammed and diverted; the intricate huts and tunnels, none better, I concede now than those built by the Parkers in the very heart of the sand dunes to the south; the large tree trunk beached for the summer in 1968 just below the tideline; kites, soaring and escaping out to sea; a school of dolphins just off-shore; the stingray at Opoutama its barbed tail cutting deep into a man's thigh and into our memory; collecting pipis and mussels; crayfish; beach cricket with bent wickets for the hopeful off-break; later, frisbees skimming the dunes on way from hand to hand; fires of beachwood, sizzling with the damp; endless games of five hundred and pontoon and yahtzee; horses galloping along the beach; sunsets over the sea, being one of the only places on the East Coast one could see such things; walking barefoot always.

It was not always idyllic. The wind could sometimes spoil a perfectly fine day. Often when the sun baked, the wind cooled and when the sun was muted, the wind chilled, propelling sand like shotgun pellets. The arrival of father (whose affection for Mahia was cool at best and severely dampened if boating was not possible) usually coincided with a change in the weather, never for the best, alas. But it was always a special place, and the first breathe of sea air and the sounds of waves crashing always worked their magic – and still do.



## To the Bridge then

To the bridge then, before the incoming tide pushes us
Up the saucer-side of beach, into the burning rim of
Fired grey sand, scalding our feet, sinking into its hot belly,
Scouring our toes, sucking us down, tugging at our heels

Now, now while the sweeping speckled sheen of gold and
White and black is firm and wet, like half-set cement, down that
Fine corridor, across the cloying grasping obsidian-sea edge,
Punctuated by the bubbles of subterranean pipis and mussels
Gasping for air; run, run, as close to the breakers as you can,
Skipping over the beached tree plucked from an inland forest,
Avoiding the sharp edge of seashells, the eyes of stranded
Dolphins, the abrasion of pumice, the puncture of twigs, the
Harvests of seaweed full of bluebottles and other sea monsters,
Run, run, into the window-wiper wash of spray.

Sweeping round the curvature of the bay, we dare not pause
For fear the sun will catch us and scorch our skins; for fear that
The tide will be extraordinarily high for last night the moon
Exploded overhead; for fear too that a troop of horses will come
Over the sand-hills to rescue stranded creatures and we will be in
Their path. Quick, quicker for there is the danger that we will not
Reach the bridge before the stream fed by the mist over Morere
Sweeps it away; quick, quicker, because there is food waiting back
Home and drink too; quick, Quicker still, because arriving there
Is only half the journey done, the touch, the turn , return
Beneath a cock-eyed sun; And last, because it is pure, visceral
Joy, boy against boy against the waiting sandstorm, and then,
Having rested for a minute, to the hut carved out in dunes to
Plan the same again, tomorrow, logbook scratched in sand.

## Chapter 7: Around the Peninsula

When the sand had whipped our skin raw and the sun had baked our familial humour we would sometimes venture away from our precipitous ledge on the thumb of the isthmus to explore the hinterland. This was a trip of great moment, an odyssey of heroic proportions, taken on a papa slipway that gave the devil every chance. The metal road to the East Coast of the peninsula led past Mangawhio Lagoon, past Oraka beach and the Old Man's hat into Mahia township and the Marae where my father would come on April 25th to stand beside other veterans for the Dawn Parade at the point where the sea and sand merged to kick-start the world into a new day, as had always happened. What did they think, here, so far from the theatre of war, Maori and Pakeha, seduced away from this land to fight an incomprehensible war in a world civilised to death and unable to cope with it all. Those Ngati Kahananganui, what did it mean to them, blood spilt like seed amongst the rocks and olives on those sharp ribs of the Pelaponnese. For what? No utu there, just a little mana, just because it happened to be the time they were roaming the earth and there was little else to do. And the sun was so damned hot.

And on further to Whangawehi, the only refuge for fishing boats on the east coast of the peninsula, a small tidal inlet where the cross-generational we used to play in the glubaneous mud beside the few boats moored there. In 1850, it had been a whaling station with more than 150 Europeans, although few signs of that inglorious time remained. Over the bridge, a side road curls up the hill to where Kay (nee Rangi) and George Ormond lived high on the plateau. On the other side was the Whangawehi Coronation Reserve where the Anglican Archdeacon, William Williams reputedly baptized 245 Maori converts in 1845, with the hollow rock on the apex of the point doubling as a font. In recent years, an anchor has been mounted into the rocks, a memorial to the 18 lives lost when the SS Tasmania sank off-shore more than a century ago. It is a strange, conscripted, intangible place.

And further on, past the cactuses (never cacti in our book!), past Wainuiorangi beach, past the natural shower path resulting from a small stream that flattens over a ledge and spits at you in fine droplets of spray. And further still, if you are still brave and adventurous, you leave the coast and go into the fractured and plunging interior, along the aptly named Burma Road until, after a journey of high drama, you come to Tawapata, a wide grassy terrace stretching some 5 or 6 kilometres. And further on, beyond all else, Portland Island, named by Captain Cook on account of its very great resemblance to Portland in the English Channel, a sentinel, guarding the entrances to both Poverty Bay and Hawke Bay.

On the other side of the peninsula is a short road that heads south-west towards Kinikini and the reserve of native bush, an oasis of lush green. Much is unseen, unvisited still, as the roads become private, guarded by cattle-stops and imaginary menace. The one or two houses and outbuildings can be seen only from off-shore, when one sails the coast. One hears, in recent years, that visitors bearing cargo have descended and bought up huge tracts of the peninsula, but without the memory and inherent sense of belonging, they will find they own very little indeed and, in time, their titles will desert them and goats and gypsum will overrun them and shingle-screes wash them into the sea.

## Chapter 8: Boats and Fishing

First memories are timeless. The new boat, plywood ribbed and skeletally skinned in white and orange (primer – did it ever get that extra coat), drifting out past Mokotahi as the motor, as was its wont, failing to kick into life. Father, no mechanic, but lucid in adversity, abusing Neptune while accepting defeat and brother John, plunging over the side (with a rope?) to effect the rescue.

It was often thus. Boating was a special time, with uneven starts and endings, but glorious middles, out in the bay, drifting in gentle rolling motion, while fish skirted our temptress lines, baited and loaded with ill-intent. We sat there, but not for too long. If the fish would not come to Father, then he would go to the fish. Which would be logical if one knew where to go. So the lines came up, some tangled, full of seaweed, but fishless and we would go hunting. River mouths, ledges, sandbars, lining up the peaks on KiniKini to find the feeding grounds that would bankroll us until our fingers, tired from the rapture of line, gathered up the thread and surrendered to the schools of mocking kawhai. And then back, always as the clouds had gathered and the wind awakened, into a returning sea.

It was always a journey without compromise. The ocean, like a gun battery, demanded concessions, but none came and we rode the waves imperiously, a great wall of percussion, waiting always for the plywood to explode and for all of us to plunge to the bottom in a whirlpool of foam. But it never happened.

And so other boats followed, the longest serving a yellow and white 14 footer sporting a 75 hp Mercury (but with the humble 5 hp seagull waiting in reserve). Other diversions occurred as well as fishing and sight-seeing. Water skiing became a fashion in the shadow of the bay although a restricted one for the driver and therefore never really serving the greater goal of boating according to father which was to go as far and fast as possible. Mother, of course, usually watched from shore for she distrusted boats, (for had not one brought her here to this strange land), distrusted weekend sailors, distrusted too the entreaties of father who said that he would not rush headlong into the on-coming sea, but did anyway. She was right to do so.

For those less ambitious, we had a white dingy, made of aluminium with three wooden seats that we used to row parallel to the shore towards Mokatahi or to relay passengers out to the boat. Mostly, though, we used it to surf with, oars thrashing, occasionally upturning in the surf. The stream, alas, was always too small to row up and the row-boat too heavy to manhandle to the lagoon and river on the other side. It was a very sedentary mode of transport, but lasted well the passing of years.

We fished also off the rocks, either round the other side or from the rocks at Waikokopu where we seldom caught a thing. More interesting by far was watching the deep sea fisherman return each evening and disgorge their catch. Often, a shark was hung from the gaff, a warning to others, but also to us as to what and who was out there, waiting.

Of all the families, we were less boat-minded than most. Our fishing, likewise, lacked the serious intent required and we were seldom gifted our share of the sea's abundant harvest. We benefited most, in fact, not from our own aimless meanderings across the river mouth at Nuhaka or off KiniKini, but from gifts of seafood caught by others, patients I suspect, and given to us in the overflow of abundance. Often it was crayfish, which, as a child, I did not appreciate, and now, in the river plain of middle age, I am left to rue the lost gastronomic opportunities of youth.



## Chapter 9: Shipwreck

*"We cannot think of time that is oceanless*
*Or of an ocean that is not littered with wastage*
*Or of a future that is not liable*
*Like the past to have no destination . . .*
*There is no end of it, the joyless wailing*
*No end to the withering of withered flowers*
*To the movement of pain that is painless and motionless*
*To the drift of the sea and the drifting wreckage"*
*TS Eliot The Four Quartets*

The coastal waters around the Mahia have claimed their share of victims over the years. Captain Cook was the first foreign navigator to find sailing around Portland Island difficult. Rounding the tip he recorded "we fell into shoal water and broken ground which however we soon got clear of.' The other, more pressing problem, was the hostile reception he met with five canoes of armed people sailing out to meet them. As Banks wrote in his diary, 'the almost certainty of being eaten as soon as you come ashore adds not a little to the terrors of shipwreck'

The first recorded shipwreck around the Mahia coast was that of the Lord Byron which, in 1832, was boarded and stripped by Maoris when she dragged her anchor while sheltering from a gale near Table Cape. The ship was then burned to the water-line although, thankfully, the crew were saved. The next significant visitor was the brig New Zealander, reputed to be one of the fastest sailing ships out of Sydney. In 1836 she was driven onto rocks and totally wrecked. The crew had everything, including their clothing, taken from them when they reached shore. Many ships had the same fate

over the ensuing years, with 21 significant shipwrecks being recorded between 1832 and the turn of the century.

In July 1845, an American brig, Falco, outward-bound from Boston to New Zealand was ship-wrecked and plundered by local settlers and Maori near Whangawehi. The presence of the newly appointed US Consul on board caused a great deal of consternation, and over the next few years the bounty was rounded up and returned. It was the start, alas, of local anti-American sentiment in the area and for the reputation of Whangawehi as an area of lawlessness.

Other ships shared the same damp end, either through the foibles of the weather or human error. In 1854, the Eliza Ann, a new clipper vessel on her maiden voyage, ran aground near Long Point; before the end of the decade, the Adah, the Antelope (1856) and Saint Martin (1858) joined her on the ocean floor. After a lull in the 1860s, the 1870s saw some major shipwrecks, the most significant of which was the Clyde, a schooner of forty tons that ran aground neat Te Hoe in 1877 and resulted in the court-marshal of the Captain. In 1878, Portland Lighthouse, (now bizarrely used to dazzle motorists on Wairoa's Marine Parade) was built to help provide assistance to shipping. In the 1890s, there were more shipwrecks with even more tragic consequences. In 1894 the barque Alexander Newton was dashed to bits on Portland Island with the loss of three crew. The most costly of shipwrecks happened in 1897, however, with the sinking of the Tasmania, a steel screw steamer of 1265 tons, resulting in the loss of 18 lives. A passenger on this ship was a jeweller Isadore Jonah Rothschild, who carried with him a suit-case of jewels, which was recovered from the wreck by Kelly Tarton in 1975. The anchor at Whangawehi stands as a memorial to those drowned. Other shipwrecks followed in the new century with the most significant loss being that of the steel Steamer Tongariro in 1916.



The steamer sank after striking Bull Rock off Portland Island to the embarrassment of the New Zealand Shipping Company, particularly as she was fitted out as a troop ship and required for the war effort. More calamitous, however, was the fact that she carried a cargo of kegs of whiskey and brandy that had not been insured. While some was rescued, when the ship finally broke up under the pounding of the southern swell, a glorious cargo was dispatched as far away as East Coast and beachcombing became a popular pastime, not for the first, or last, time.

In recent years, apart from the loss of the Tempest in 1950, there have been no comparable disasters although occasionally a fishing boat or day tripper is lost as they are caught by sudden changes in weather or when they fail to show due respect to the moods of a mighty ocean. With its steep bluffs and little shelter, particularly on the west coast of the peninsula, the Mahia is not as hospitable as it may seem from land and, throughout its history, the possibility of shipwreck has been an ever-present danger to early sailors and coastal traders.

## Chapter 10: Epilogue

In 1891, the Captain of the schooner Glencairn reported seeing a slate-coloured serpent near the lighthouse on Portland Island. He claimed that it was longer than his ship, five metres across and had a small head and a fin running down its back. It would not surprise me if it still swims the beat. Mahia, as described in the Lonely Planet Travel Survival Guide for New Zealand remains "a magical, atmospheric place, majestic in either in sun or storm". Today, in France, 12,000 miles away Mahia resides in my

memory. In my mind it was / is a quiet, soothing, timeless place where you can hear the sea murmuring. I am not blinded by it for, at times, it has too much wind or is pancake flat when you want to hear the crashing of waves. It does not have the luxuriant backdrop of, for instance, the Coromandel or the Abel Tasman National Park nor the pounding surf of Piha or Mahanga. Not much grows in the dry soil. The buildings are cobbled together. Sand and cockroaches infiltrate at will. But it is a special place. I am grateful for having spent so many holidays there, winter and summer and for it being my turangawaewae.

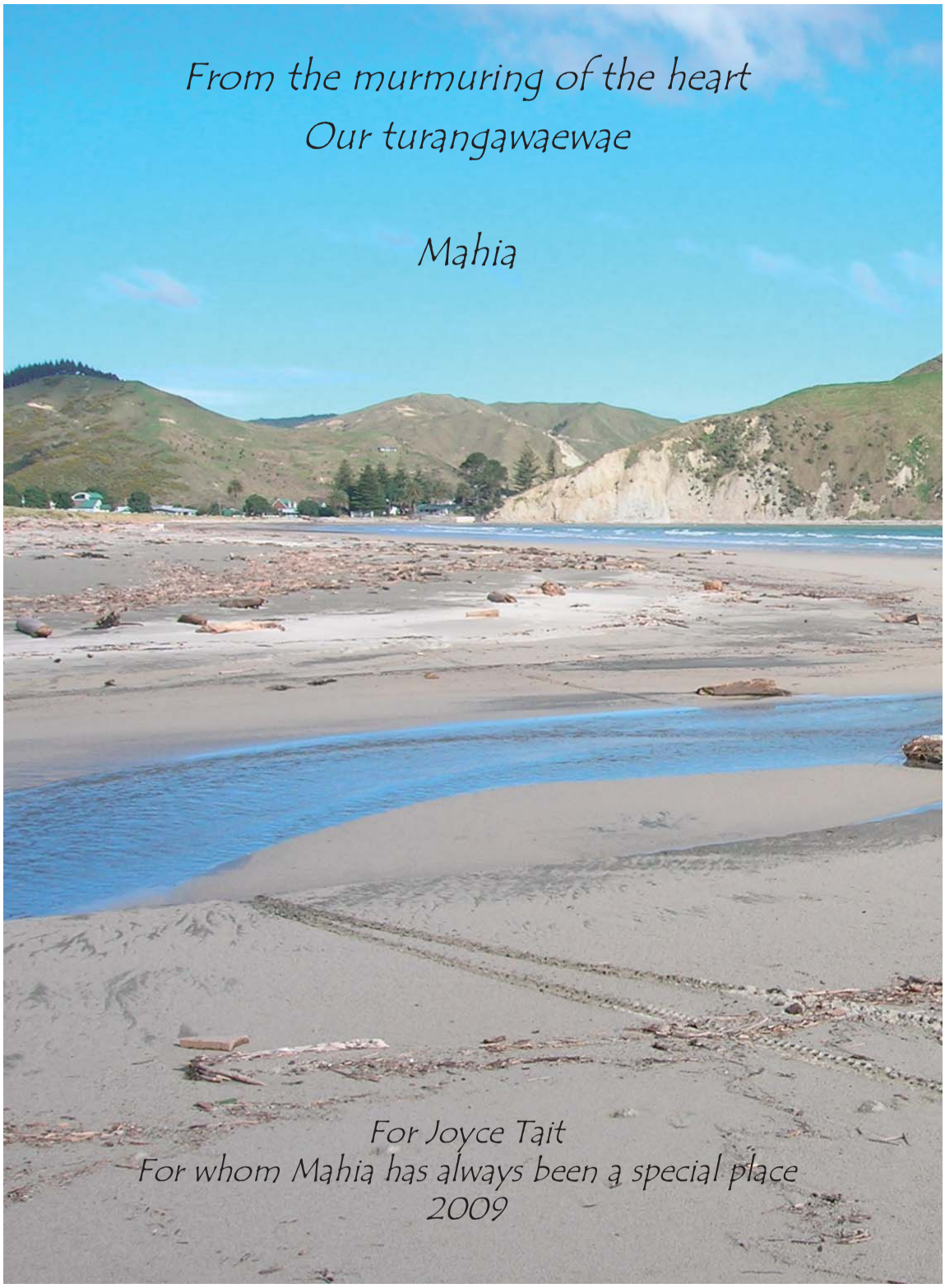


## Mokotahi

Around the rocks we ran, ragged and unkempt,
Three sea urchins on parole,
Bare-footed, ruddy skinned, deft-toed
We slipped along scorched sand,
Dipping into the sea edge as occasion
Demanded of us, skipping in and around the crock of the bay
And onto shelves of skewed papa,
And thereupon, a moon landscape of
Lunar rock pools,

Pausing from our flight
We looked for crabs that sensibly hid
In crevices, crabs that could devour, crab potentates
With power and presence, sniffing out each others' brooding
Menace, before setting out again
Along the footloose shingle path that skirts the shy-faced,
Sky-paste flanks of Mokotahi, feet and hands a'tingle.

Above, like uplifted flight decks, the
The bluff's buff walls grumble and rattle
Loose deserters warn of shingle screes cocked
Ready to engulf us, but we are not deterred.
We leave the comfortable boulders,
Hug the cliff face as the rim narrows and the tide turns.
Hurrying now, clambering over the last fall's fall
Until the nether point, in sight of Kinikini, knowing
That Taylor's Bay is in the sailor's reach;
This is the awkward part – we may get caught, trapped by tide or
Landslide, be buried by water or rock, lost at sea or thereabouts
With no-one to find us for who knows our journey's map;
Pace and pulses rise, a final tenuous arm of greywacke, a leap
Across a ravenous gulf as sand, sea, sky applaud the heroes' feat.


From the murmuring of the heart
Our turangawaewae
Mahia
For Joyce Tait
For whom Mahia has always been a special place
2009