

INCH CLUTHA

ALMA M. RUTHERFORD.

Immediately below the Balclutha Railway Bridge the Clutha River, rolling on its turbulent way towards the sea, divides to form the (northern) Matau and the (southern) Koau branches. These rivers meet again at the sea coast, and thus enclose a long, narrow Island about eight miles by two, with an area of approximately 7,000 acres. The points and "balloons" formed by the marked convolutions of the Matau Branch (the older of the two rivers) were originally covered in magnificent totara, pine, and kowhai forest ; but of these there remain now only two stands. The larger of these two areas of native bush is to be found on the adjoining properties of the cousins L. G. and A. D. Bell, near the Head of the Island ; the other, about three miles below Stirling Bridge, is the remnant of that Mosley's Bush which in 1876 supplied most of the timber for that bridge.

Known to the Maoris as Tauhinu, this delta island was, in 1846, renamed INCH CLUTHA, a Gaelic name meaning "Island in the Clyde". As far as we know, there had been no permanent Maori homes on Tauhinu ; the settlement had been on the Sandspit, and from this village the Maoris are reputed to have travelled periodically up the river to the Kaitangata Lakes to catch eels, breaking their journey at a whare built in a clearing on Kemra Bank, on lower Inch Clutha, or else at the lower end of the present Kaitangata Borough, where they are said to have built several whares for their seasonal camping. It has been recorded that they grew potatoes in clearings on the Balloon (lower Inch Clutha) and in the Kaitangata district ; Francis Pillans bought a ton of potatoes from the Maoris in 1850, obtaining these from both Kaitangata and the Balloon.

Apart from the shouts of an occasional Maori party, the cry of the kaka, the song of the tui, and the churr and ripple of the dreaming river, Tauhinu lived in a world made from thousands of years of quiet. The few early visitors were charmed with its peace and beauty. In 1844 Surveyor Tuckett, looking for a site for the prospective Dunedin, wrote with enthusiasm—"The great plain of the Matau . . . suitable for tillage . . . rich and warm enough for maize." And early in 1849 James Barr, just "looking about", visited the Island, being paddled from the mouth of the river in a canoe manned by four stalwart Maoris. "It may be guessed," he says, "how solitary was the feeling. It was solitude its very self ; caw-caws and tooies in entire possession of the land. . . ." The visit, he remarked, formed one of his most beautiful, yet wild and eerie, recollections. "There was no solitary Robinson Crusoe then in the whole wide district."

But if not already in residence the Island's Crusoe, complete with Man Friday, was on the way. By cutter from Dunedin to the river mouth, thence up the river in his own boat or in one belonging to the Maoris, came orphaned seventeen-year-old Tom Redpath, with his housekeeper, Mrs. Shepherd, and their prospective neighbour John Ramage. His man, John Shepherd, may have been in the party, or he may have walked overland from Dunedin, perhaps driving one or two cows for young Redpath. The Shepherds themselves later became landowners on the Island.

They arrived at Redpath's section, and set to work to build a temporary dwelling beside a lagoon whose beauty would appeal to most visitors for the next thirty years, until it was ravaged by the 1878 flood. It was almost a year later that the next settlers arrived on Inch Clutha; these were thirty-eight-year-old Francis Pillans and a younger friend, William Ferguson, who settled on sections adjoining each other about half-way down the Island. In

1853 and 1854 they were followed by three families whose descendants still own farms and occupy an honoured place in the community.

These were the families of Archibald Anderson, William A. Mosley and William Willocks. By 1856 enough settlers had moved into the area to justify the building of a church on Anderson's property at the Head of the Island, while by 1858 a school, complete with schoolmaster, was established in the church, the schoolhouse being completed the following year on a section half-way down the Island. It is interesting to note that the corresponding dates for Balclutha and Kaitangata were—Balclutha School, 1865 ; Church, 1866. Kaitangata Church, 1863; School, 1866.

Inch Clutha was a little world on its own, isolated between the two dangerous rivers except for the boats of the settlers and, after 1864, the ponderous, clanking punt, its lease renewed each six months to ferrymen of varying degrees of capability. Organised community life, beginning thus early with the establishment of Church and school, was taken a step further with the opening of a store and Post Office at the Island terminus of the ferry in 1864, followed by the building of a smithy in which G. H. Gilroy carried on the business of blacksmith and farrier for many years. Within a year or so George Townsend, in the intervals between ferrying, had bought a section, obtained a liquor license, felled some of his own totaras, and built his own "pub" near the store. (His son George, a mere boy of 91, still enjoys working with wood at his home in Waimate, where he set up, in earlier years, as a cabinetmaker.) Round this nucleus there grew a close-built, busy township, to which were added St. Mary's Anglican Church in 1869, the Volunteers' Drill Hall in 1873, and the second Presbyterian Church building in 1877—this being the present Church. Throughout the rest of the Island, the settlers cultivated the higher rim of soil along the river banks, and upon that higher land built their homes of local heart totara. Many of these houses are still in use, the hard, brittle totara being quite borer-proof.

Why did prospective settlers flock first to the Island, and to a parallel and equally thriving settlement on the Puerua stream? To Inch Clutha, set between broad swirling waters which menaced the unskilled or unlucky traveller, and to Puerua whose cluster of public buildings has been decimated with the passing of the years ? Why have these, the first considerable settlements in South Otago, become in modern times merely farming districts, their social and business centres now removed to Balclutha, Stirling, Kaitangata?

Partly, the popularity of the Island (the 226 persons enumerated in the 1865 census compare favourably with around 240 today) was due to the comparative ease with which the settlers could cultivate its fertile alluvial soil. Even the earliest observers, in 1844, recognised this quality. "If it is possible to drain it," wrote David Monro, "it will be found very rich soil, but in its present state it is too wet to be available. On the banks of the river the soil is firmer ; and here are some fine groves of trees." A similar observation was recorded by Dr. J. A. R. Menzies when in 1854 he remarked, "The Island is an admirable agricultural district the alluvial soil is deep rich and productive, the vegetation is very rank in the wild land, strong grass, Tutu, and fern, there are many patches of excellent timber, in which for the sake of shelter the houses are generally placed, it consists principally of Totara which for building or fencing is the most valuable wood in this Island." And did not James Macandrew refer to it, with monotonous regularity, as "The Garden of Otago"?

The main reason, however, for the choice of Inch Clutha and Puerua for settlement seems to have been based on transport. Until the late 1850's the road from Dunedin to the Clutha was merely a track ; almost invariably the immigrants would carry what they could on their backs as they walked overland, packing the most essential of their household goods into containers which could be loaded on to a dray or sledge in Dunedin, transferred to a boat for carriage up Lake Waihola, then changed to a dray or a sledge again for the final stage to South Otago. Meanwhile, all bulky furniture and plant would have to be shipped down the

coast to Port Molyneux, where it had often to be unloaded into small boats to be taken across the bar and up-river, although on occasion the coaster would be lucky enough to cross the bar and proceed some distance up the Island—sometimes even sailing as far upstream as Koaubank, opposite Finegand. Similarly, the local produce such as wheat, oats and potatoes was shipped to Dunedin—and a frustrating business it proved to be. Not only was the expense of such transport out of all proportion to the value of the produce carried, but there was also a considerable delay in delivery at times. Incredible as it may seem, this delay is said to have been as long as three months in at least one instance. No wonder ever the local M.P. found it advisable to carry a fifty-pound bag of flour on his back on his three-days' journey from Dunedin!

Since, then, the main carriage was by sea and river, it is easier to understand why the Island and Puerua were the first districts to be settled; the Puerua River being at that time a navigable stream, far different from the present weed-choked, silted-up waterway. Reliance on the paddle-steamers which plied up and down the river explains, too, the significant fact that practically all the early homesteads on the Island faced the river ; so that there is still the occasional early homestead whose present day approach is to the back door, the front door being relatively inaccessible and therefore seldom used.

Although the internal roading system of the Island was developed steadily throughout the 1860's and early 1870's, the settlers during that period continued to depend on the river steamers and the ferry for transport to and from the outside world. Even after the establishment of the Government ferry in June 1864 at a point just below the present Stirling Bridge, quite a number of the more isolated settlers must have continued the dangerous but necessary practice of swimming cattle and horses, and of floating drayloads of produce, across the swiftly-eddying river. At last, however, after years of quiet but steady pressure by the Islanders in "the right quarter", they were promised a bridge—a vital link to bring them into touch with the world outside their boundary. Simultaneously with the preparations for the bridge came the advance of the Dunedin-Clutha Railway. The Islanders turned out, en masse, to celebrate the opening of the railway in September 1875 and of the bridge in December 1876.

Where did they gather for these celebrations ? Not within the Island itself but across the river. This proved to be an omen.

Until this time, the Stirling flat had been a nameless, swampy waste, used by its owner, Archibald Anderson, for grazing only. But that practical, far-seeing colonist had already seized upon opportunity. Having offered, in 1871, some ten acres of land free to the Provincial Government in return for the promise of a railway station which was to be built at the point on the railway nearest to the exit from Inch Clutha, and which was to be named after his birthplace in Scotland, Mr. Anderson proceeded, in 1874, to cut up and sell, as township sections, the ten acres of land between the Island ferry and the site of the new railway station. With the steady advance of the railway in full view before them, people flocked to the sale and paid as much as £30 and £36 for a section. Within a remarkably short time the dismal swamp was drained and a street full of thriving business premises was established, these including a store, draper's shop, bookseller and stationer's shop, a boot and shoe repair establishment, a butchery, two smithies, and two licensed hotels. To one of the hotels was later added a hall large enough for meetings and dances.

Over the new bridge the Islanders flocked to this township which had grown so quickly beside the new railway. In Stirling they shopped, attended the post office, trucked stock and produce from the station, held meetings and dances. On the Island the only public buildings now in use were the school and the two churches. It was not long before the school was removed, bodily, by the '78 flood, and a new school was opened in the following year on the obvious site—a Stirling hill section.

So the longed-for bridge and railway, which had been expected to bring new life to Inch Clutha, paradoxically enough sounded the death-knell to much of the organised social and business life within the Island itself. In 1886 the dairy factory was built beside the railway, in Stirling. The farmers in the middle and lower regions of the Island opened a dairy factory the same day, more than halfway down the Island, but after a few years it had to be closed through lack of support. When the Presbyterian congregation decided that a church hall was needed, it was built in Stirling, across the river from the church. In 1904 the Anglican community decided that the time had come to remove St. Mary's to a more convenient spot ; and it, too, now occupies a section in Stirling. When the first Athenaeum building was erected in 1892, it was sited next the store in Stirling.

This story, however, cannot be provided with a tidy ending. On the map, Inch Clutha does not look a tidy Island. It is long and narrow. Although most of the settlers throughout the Island, and in the adjacent districts of Stirling and the Crescent, know one another fairly well, it is impossible, even in these days of fast travel and communication, for each and every one to maintain intimate ties with all others in such a considerable district. The shifting of social and business concentration to Stirling in the 1870's suited, well enough, those living on the upper half of the Island. Residents of lower Inch Clutha, however, found themselves at a disadvantage. Not only were they at an inconvenient distance, over indifferent roads, from the new township ; they were also conscious that on many occasions they had little affinity with the nearer, industrial town of Kaitangata. By 1888 the number of children in this locality justified the erection of a sole-charge school on the Centre Road at a spot a little over a mile from the lower extremity of the Island. Hardly had the school opened when the residents requested the use of it for church services, socials, dances, and concerts. In fact, it became a much-needed community centre for this district. So inadequate in size was the building for this purpose that in 1911, with the help of a subsidy from the Government, the residents built a Coronation Hall, which became noted for its good dance floor. Many and varied were the functions held in this hall ; and although there was a temporary lull during the second world war, an extra fillip was given to district activities in 1946 by the formation of a branch of the W.D.F.F., attended by members from the Island and the Crescent. That this community or neighbourhood feeling has retained its strength is shown by the fact that in May 1959 the men of the district sacrificed much of their time to transfer the now disused school building across the road to join it to the hall, which has thereby been considerably enlarged and improved.

Despite this evidence of "a community within a community", however, the fact remains that all business concerns are now situated outside the confines of Inch Clutha, which for the past eighty years has been purely a farming area. Nor has this trend been away from the Island only ; for the coming of the motor car, combined with the damage wrought by the 1917 and 1919 floods, has almost cleared the Stirling flat of the closely-built shops once flourishing there. Modern transport has brought Balclutha businesses conveniently near to the whole area. Will it one day come to pass that "Rural mirth and manners are no more"?