

ST. MARTIN ISLAND

(QUARANTINE ISLAND)
LYNDALL HANCOCK

Between Port Chalmers and Portobello lie two islands : Goat Island small, steep and bush-covered and St. Martin Island which is three times as large (34 acres), with most of its original bush long since cleared for grazing. A narrow part of the main harbour channel lies between the two, and this section, Nicol's Passage, has been widened by the removal of Goat Island's tip.

Captain Stokes first charted these islands in 1848 and named them the Half-Way or Mid-Way Islands. Later, however, the local names of Goat Island and Rabbit Island became more popular, and then in the 1860's Rabbit Island gave way to Quarantine Island, a name that was in use for about 90 years. Nowadays, Quarantine Island has a new and more hopeful-sounding name—St. Martin Island.

As a quarantine station, its first recorded use was in July, 1863, when the clipper ship *Victory* arrived at Port Chalmers with one case of smallpox among the steerage passengers. Two little buildings already in a clearing on the north side of the Island were quite inadequate accommodation, but nevertheless about 400 steerage passengers were crammed into these buildings and into hastily-borrowed tents and an off-shore hulk—and in the mid-winter cold, this was described by the *Daily Telegraph* as "a comfortable reception". Some of the passengers who were carpenters helped in the speedy erection of a 16-bed hospital, uphill from the main camp and completed just in time to cope with the rapid spread of smallpox.

During the 51 weeks the *Victory* was in quarantine, there occurred an incident which had consequences out of all proportion : the Senior Medical Officer on the Island, angered by the non-arrival of drugs he had repeatedly ordered from the Board of Health, was about to take a boat and fetch the drugs himself when he was stopped by the constable stationed on the Island to prevent escapes. The two men argued on the landing-beach, and the doctor was supported by John Thomson, recently appointed Keeper in charge of the Island. Apparently the constable lost the argument, for he later made an adverse report that caused the Keeper's dismissal. John Thomson petitioned the Provincial Council, and after due investigation a Committee decided he had been unfairly dismissed; inexplicably, however, this decision was not supported by the members of the Council, and so no more was heard of the unfortunate Mr. Thomson.

A direct result of the *Victory's* quarantine was the offer of free vaccination to Dunedin children, and a newspaper campaign for compulsory vaccination for everyone. Another result was that the Island (and also Goat Island) was officially declared a Quarantine Station, and as such it came under the direct control of Colin Allan, the Immigration Agent. During the next few years this capable and far-seeing man pressed for extensions and improvements to the Island buildings, but the authorities were strangely reluctant to spend money. Any large groups of quarantined passengers still found conditions extremely cramped, and on several occasions when the actual need for quarantine was hotly debated, the privations seemed the worse for being unnecessary.

However, newcomers to the Island from 1865 onwards were at least assured of well-kept buildings and a friendly reception, for in that year John Dougall was appointed as Keeper and he fulfilled his duties most efficiently for many years.

A small house was built for the Dougall family, and later the Immigration Department erected one or two minor buildings such as a fumigation chamber—but still there was no expenditure for badly-needed major improvements.

And then, at long last, Colin Allan's years of persuasion bore fruit. For in 1872 and 1873 a "village" of new buildings arose : a dining-room, a kitchen, a two-storied block for single women and an identical block divided into cubicles for family groups. All these were linked in a T-shape, facing north above the landing-beach. A new 24-bed hospital was also built at a distance, facing Portobello, and in 1874 a large barracks for single men was built on the least-steep slope of Goat Island, on the Port Chalmers side. (It is ironical that all these fine new buildings were no sooner erected than the need for quarantine slackened greatly).

How did people react to life in quarantine ? Records seem to be scarce, but it is clear that some people chafed at this extra delay when the goal was already in sight, some were desperately worried about further illness and death, and some were so relieved to be on solid ground again that little else mattered. A good "community spirit" could greatly ease the frustrations and fears ; it was said of one group that "the people used to sing from morning till night", but unfortunately Island life was not always so cheerful. A very different time is described in a diary kept by an Immigration Official, Charles Duke, who was sent to the Island in December, 1872, to take charge of the stores and to prevent their theft by the *Christian McAusland* passengers. These people were so troublesome that they required a resident constable. Many of the men were assisted immigrants destined to be railway labourers, and the language and daily fights of both men and women shocked Mr. Duke. However, most of the passengers departed after three weeks, and he then spent a peaceful month helping John Dougall

with various jobs, including a major spring-cleaning. His diary records many small details of Island life—the food consumed, the daily condition of several patients in the hospital, the progress made by the carpenters working on the new buildings, and so on.

In June, 1874, the *Otago Witness* published a long description of these same buildings, by then completed and in use. The account was written by an anonymous official who, with a medical friend, made an inspection while the Island was occupied. Normally, this would have been illegal, but on this occasion the residents were *Atrato* passengers who were recovering from nothing more infectious than much seasickness and epidemics of measles and colds. They seemed a pleasant, orderly group, the visitors noted. On that sunny day many of the women were taking the chance to wash clothes after the long voyage, and John Dougall mentioned that this was not always possible because of the uncertain water supply. The visitors were suitably impressed with the size and appearance of the main buildings : they estimated room measurements and wrote down the capacity of every water-tank, they inspected the hospital and convalescent ward, they talked with the parents of a child awaiting burial, and finally they were taken along a track through the bush to the small cemetery with its graves marked by slips of board. At that time 41 people were buried there, the majority being children.

As early as 1873 it was suggested by Dunedin residents that the Island, when not in use, might be made available for picnic parties, and permission was later granted for this. And so for nearly 40 years it was a rare Dunedin church or club which did not hold summer excursions to the Island. During those years the buildings were not maintained except by John Dougall, and they slowly sank into shabbiness.

John Dougall died in 1890 after 26 years as Keeper, and he was buried beside three of his children in the Island cemetery. His wife was appointed Keeper, but later this was transferred to her son, Will, after he married and his mother left the Island.

Life was quiet around the turn of the century. Smallpox was under control and quarantine was hardly ever required. The Island was only in the news when occasional ships struck the treacherous reef that was then in Nicol's Passage, or when in 1896 there occurred the only drowning around the Island's shores. This happened when a dinghy capsized while bringing back the Port Chalmers parish priest from Mass at Portobello, and although the boatman and two boys who were acolytes managed to reach the Island, Father Newport was drowned in saving the life of the younger boy.

At the beginning of the first World War, the farming and bush-clearing and gay days of summer picnics ended abruptly. And the Island reverted to its serious purpose of quarantine.

Will Dougall and his family were temporarily transferred, the Army took charge, and the new Island occupants were soldiers sent from all over New Zealand with venereal disease. They were harshly treated as social outcasts, and living conditions were harsh too : by that time the buildings were in disrepair and most of the water tanks were rusted, but the Army was not fussy about such details. Later, still during war years, there was another upheaval when a hospital ship returned to Port Chalmers with smallpox on board, and, because smallpox took precedence over any other disease, the few remaining soldiers on the Island were hastily transferred to the old prison at Taiaroa Head so that the buildings were available for a new set of soldier-patients.

The end of the War saw the return of the Dougalls—but not for long. For in the early 1920's the Island was officially closed as a Quarantine Station and its lease was sold.

Since then the lease has changed hands several times, and most owners have tried various means of making some profit from the Island, without any outstanding success. The present owner is the St. Martin Island Community, an interdenominational group formed in 1958 for bringing people together in Christian fellowship while working at the task of improving and beautifying the Island. (So far, this work has been done only in weekends and holidays, but it is hoped that some day part of the Community will be resident on the Island). The new name of St. Martin Island was chosen in honour of St. Martin of Tours, a 4th-century French bishop who taught by example that work and worship are quite indivisible.

Today, the main building on the Island is an old house which was built in the 1920's around the Dougall's original little cottage, using timbers taken from the hospital. All the quarantine buildings have now been demolished, except for the married quarters block which still stands, a gaunt ruin, because the rain-water is needed from its roof. The only other obvious reminder of the quarantine years is the small cemetery : of the 78 people buried there, only the four Dougall names are recorded.

The Island in its heyday—the mid 1870's—was described as an attractive-looking place with its handsome new buildings and with a few fields cleared among the sheltering bush. Today, the "village" site has been tidied, a small chapel is being built, trees are being added to the remnant of native bush, and there are plans for some new living quarters. Progress has been slow and fitful when judged by "worldly" standards, but nevertheless seven years of voluntary work have made an observable difference. Some day St. Martin Island will again be a place of quiet beauty.