

Molesworth Station

Lake Tennyson Shelter Interpretation Panel 1

"To come around a spur quietly and then make a sudden noise was a pastime I always enjoyed... ..when a shout rang out the whole hillside moved. It was a sight to gladden a rabbit's eye – and to break a station owner's heart."

Muster on Molesworth, Bruce Stronach, 1953.



Romanticism is a photographer's licence but the reality of a rabbiters camp on Molesworth in winter would not have looked as cosy as this image suggests. Freezing cold temperatures, rain, hail and snow challenged the most hardy men who would awake to sleeping bags frozen with the moisture of their breath, water buckets of solid ice and damp wood to be coaxed into fire to cook breakfast. Corrugated iron huts offered little more protection than canvas but a dry cob cottage was a welcome relief.

THE RABBIT PEST

The European rabbit is thought to have been first introduced into New Zealand as a game animal in the 1830s. However it was in the dry grasslands of the South Island that they really found a niche. They were introduced into the Marlborough district about 1858 and in 1861 the Keene Brothers of Swyncombe, Kaikoura, introduced a special breed of 'silver greys', unaware of the pestilence they had inflicted on themselves and their district.

Rabbits can increase in population tenfold in a single year and within ten years the Kaikoura, Wairau and Awatere runs were being seriously affected and there were concerns at their spread south. By 1882 the rabbit had ruined the Keene's who were forced to leave Swyncombe, and was beginning to have an impact as far inland as Molesworth and Tardale. William Acton-Adams of Molesworth used every weapon at his disposal including dogs, poisoning and shooting. He introduced wagonloads of cats purchased in Christchurch and also stoats and weasels in the hope that the release of these natural enemies would stop their increase.



Historic rabbit-proof fence.



Banded dotterel.



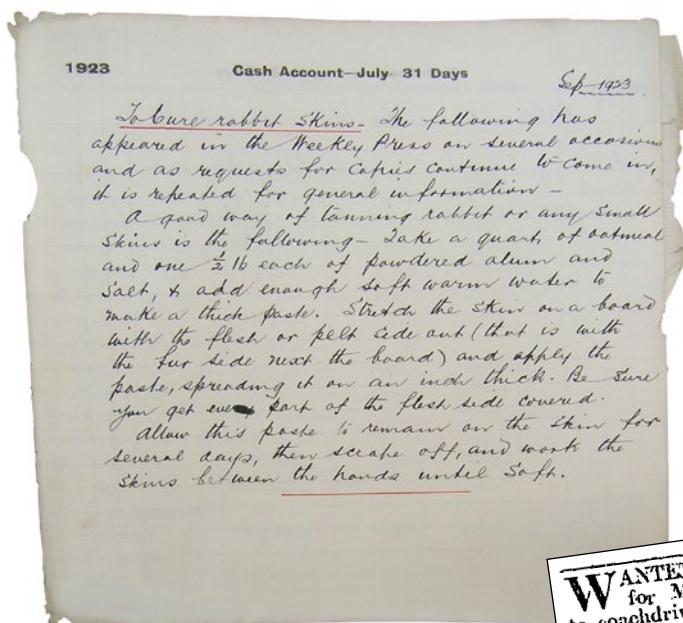
Catch of the day.

Controlling the rabbit pest has been a continuous operation around these parts, providing work, sport, anguish, amusement, business and high-country farming challenge, since the 1860s.



Stretched rabbit skins drying on a fence at a rabbiters camp.

Killing rabbits was a simple business, according to Bruce Stronach who mustered on Molesworth in the 1930s, but skinning was back-breaking work. In summer the skins came off easily but their quality was inferior. In winter when fur was top grade the piles awaiting skinning would become frozen. One hundred per hour was good going. It was hard. The bucks were the toughest. The most unpleasant part was 'fatting' – removing the fat and tossing the sticky substance from the knife with a skilled flick of the hand. Skins were a good price then and rabbiting lucrative. It was said a rabbitier could earn more than ten times that of a musterer, but rabbitiers rarely disclosed their incomes. "I wish I had been a rabbitier", stated Bruce Stronach.



WANTED. Five or six poisoners for Molesworth station. Apply to coachdriver, care Gosling's.
Marlborough Express 23 April 1919



Fishing on Molesworth.



Native aquatic plant *Myriophyllum triphyllum*.



Native aquatic plants pillwort *Pilularia novae hollandiae* & blunt pondweed *Potamogeton ochreatus*.



Trapped In the 1940s Molesworth was still infested with rabbits. Traps, strychnine poisoning and shooting were the means of control. Norma Gibson and husband Mike lived at the Acheron Accommodation House, employed as a married couple. Norma had her own .22 and recalled that it was possible to shoot a hundred in a day... ..and occasionally three with one shot. The skins of poisoned rabbits were sold and the bodies buried. The carcasses of trapped or head-shot animals were sold to a cannery for two shillings and sixpence a pair. Rabbiting was “very good money in those days”.

THE RUSH TO AMURI

(CONTRIBUTED)

The rabbits came down like fierce wolves on the fold,
And their track lay as bare as the fresh turned up mould;
And their numbers were great as the lands of the lea,
As they spread in their myriads o'er mountain and sea.

There is terror and rage on each station and farm;
From squatters and cockies come cries of alarm;
There is gathering of clans, and enrolling recruits,
To stem the fierce rush of the silver-grey brutes.

First and foremost to fight comes R. Foster the brave,
Who swears he will conquer, or else fill a grave.
He is known as a good 'un in battle or sport,
And he bears a fell weapon – his rabbit report.

Next D. Rutherford comes, for the conflict prepared;
The green hills of Leslie own him for their laird.
His motto defence is; he fears not attack
With the Waiau in front and wire netting at back.

Bold Corbett of Highfield, a chieftan of might,
With Campbell impetuous, rush swift to the fight.
These battle alone, for Inspectors, they say,
Are traitors, and leagued with the vile silver-grey.

Pricking fast to the front, on his bold hobby-horse,
See the brave Lord of Mendip, a warrior of force;
His steed is night Rabbit Board; none like him, they say,
To dash through the ranks of the foreman in grey.

But who is the chieftan who leads the array?
From the bank of Waitohi he comes to the fray.
Fly, fly, you bold bunnies, not ashamed to retreat,
For he's sworn the last rabbit to lay at his feet!

Turn your backs on the Waiau, and hasten your flight;
Think not, foolish wretches, to meet him in fight,
He has warriors unnumbered, and treasure galore;
He deals not with thousands, but millions and more.

Star 08 June 1866.



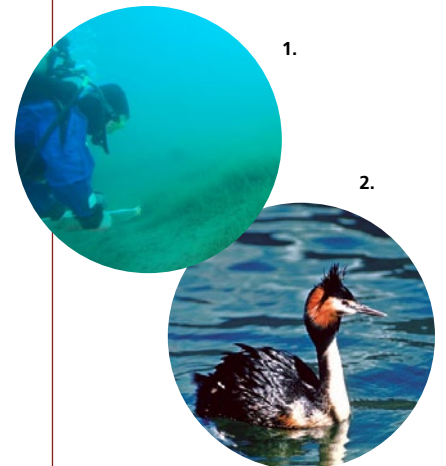
WITHIN AN AMPHI-THEATRE OF LOFTY PEAKS

Lake Tennyson lies on an old Māori route to the West Coast via Maling Pass, the upper Waiau, and Cannibal Gorge. Evidence of a Māori camp site has been found at the outlet of Lake Tennyson.

The lake was named by Frederick Weld in 1853 when he saw it in the distance from a mountain top further down the Clarence. He visited the Lake in April 1855 with a man named Knight while exploring for stock routes in the upper Wairau and Clarence.

“It now first burst upon my view from the point of the hill west of the confluence of the branches... ..Lake Tennyson, in beauty, far surpasses any thing I have ever seen in New Zealand.”

Weld also named 'Mt Princess' on the western side of the lake.



Deep water native *Charophyte Nitella claytonii*. Lake Tennyson is the only Canterbury high country lake that does not include the introduced weed *Elodea Canadensis* (1). Crested grebe (2).

Historical information obtained from many sources including *Molesworth*, L. W. McCaskill, 1969; *Remembered Trails*, J. E. Tomlinson, 1968 and *Musterer on Molesworth*, Bruce Stronach, 1953. Photographs – Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, NZ; Marlborough Museum and Historical Society; Department of Conservation; Rohan Wells; Rob Suisted www.naturespic.com

Molesworth Station

Lake Tennyson Shelter Interpretation Panel 2

Battling the rabbits on Molesworth Station reached creative proportions in the 1890s with runholder William Acton-Adams introducing wagonloads of cats purchased in Christchurch and also stoats and weasels in the hope that the release of these natural enemies would stop the pest increase. Despite this and the subsequent diverse control methods, Molesworth was described as an 'abomination of desolation' by the 1930s.

Over the years, especially after 1920, the impact of the rabbits – through removal of vegetation leading to major soil loss and erosion – had greatly reduced sheep-carrying capacity and led directly to the return of the Station to the Crown in 1938. Since then the war on rabbits has continued with a variety of poisoning techniques and it currently remains the responsibility of the lessee to keep numbers in hand.



Rabbiter Snowy Redgrave with a saddle full of rabbit traps.

POISONS

Poisons used over the years include strychnine, arsenic and phosphorous mixed with a variety of palatable substances such as wheat, oats, pollard (wheat bran), apples, carrots and jam. More recently gas fumigation, 1080 and biological controls such as the rabbit haemorrhagic disease (RHD) have been used. While these efforts have periodically reduced populations the rapid gestation rate of rabbits facilitates genetic resistance and unless controls are continued there will be further cycles of population increase.

**MOLESWORTH
STATION**

1933



Rabbit gang with nibbies (walking sticks) and sacks of poisoned pollard.

1950



Rabbit skins stretched on the fence at Red Gate Hut, drying in the sun and wind.

1900



Rabbiters pose with deer heads; upper Acheron Valley.

SEMI-NOMADIC RABBITERS

Rabbiters, including those employed by Rabbit Boards, have been a distinctive part of the station workforce since the 1880s and led a semi-nomadic life working from temporary and semi-permanent camps and huts. The Acheron Hut near Isolated Flat was a camp used by a contract rabbitier Dan Brosnahan from County Kerry in Ireland and it is still sometimes called 'Kerrytown'. The traditional tools of the rabbitier were dogs, gin traps, a mattock and a single furrow plough. This last was used to cut a shallow plough line through the ground in which the poison was laid. Freshly exposed earth attracts rabbits.



ABOVE Tent camp in the upper Wairau Valley, typical of a rabbitiers' or musters' base camp. Even in summer nights were often cold and in winter they were almost unbearable. Snow found its way into flea bags (sleeping bags) and clothing and the weight of it toppled tents overnight. Boots were often kept in the bottom of a bag to ensure they did not freeze overnight. Stories tell of careless men who left boots outside and woke to frozen leather that fell apart at the seams when the boots were knocked to free the ice.

LEFT Rabbitiers hut 1940s, Cow Creek, Alma Valley.

MODERN CONTROL

The Rabbit Calicivirus Disease (RCD) was introduced illegally in the southern South Island in 1997. It rapidly spread through rabbit populations. While it had an initial dramatic effect in decimating rabbit numbers, a developing immunity has seen rabbit numbers in the arid parts of the South Island, including Molesworth, increase significantly again in recent years. Properties throughout Marlborough are monitored annually by the Marlborough District Council and data is collected using the "McLean standard scale". When numbers reach a predetermined threshold, a poisoning operation using baits is set in motion, with all the necessary consents. Operations are targeted in late winter/early spring, prior to fresh grass growth to enable maximum uptake of baits. In addition, a small group of pest operators work permanently on targeted areas to maintain a constant vigil. Their methods include night shooting, hand sowing of baits and fumigation of rabbit warrens.



Floodgate upper Clarence.



Wire knot.

WAI AU RABBIT FENCE

'One of the most perfect rabbit fences in the world'

Driving or cycling between here and Fowlers Hut, you follow a remaining section of this once-perfect fence. Look for it beside the road.

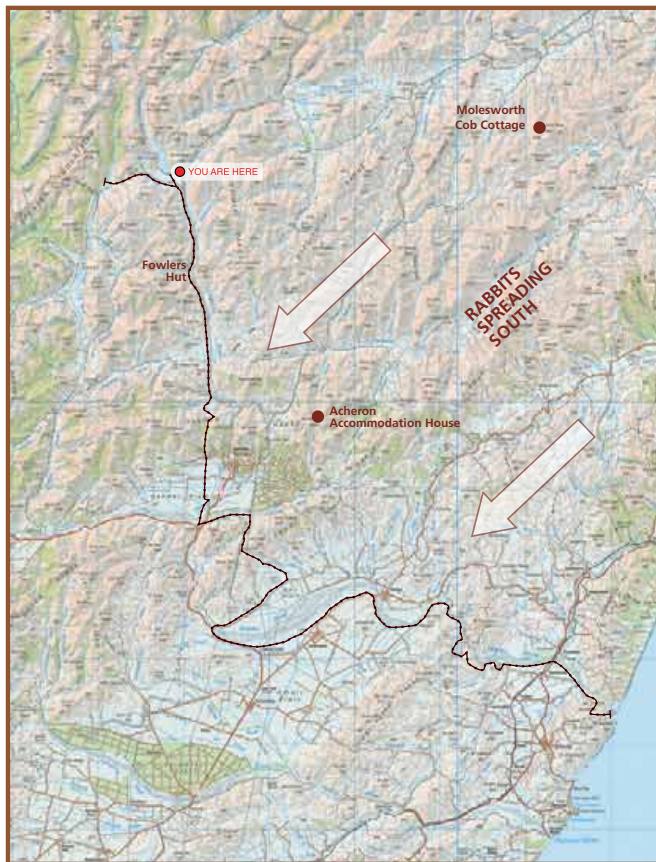
In the 1880s the Amuri sheep runs south of the Clarence River were still largely free from rabbits. Rabbits were such a destructive pest that a strategy to stop an invasion into the Amuri motivated the building of the fence. The Hurunui Rabbit Board was formed in 1887 and raised £12,000. It commissioned the building of an 80 mile (128 kilometre) high-quality rabbit-proof fence.

My paper would also be incomplete without special reference being made to the Hurunui Rabbit Board, who, with the assistance of the Government, have erected one of the most perfect rabbit fences in the world, commencing as it does a few miles out of Culverden, and intersecting the whole of the Amuri, Waiau and Hanmer districts.

Ohinemuri Gazette 19 February 1898



The section between the St James woolshed and Lake Tennyson still forms the boundary fence between Molesworth Station and St James Station.



MOLESWORTH STATION



Rabbit fence barb.



T-iron post.



Fowlers Hut gate and rabbit fence.

The Rabbit Board had ten rabbiters resident along the fence, each responsible for maintaining his section and killing any rabbits along it. The upper Clarence 'beat' was patrolled from Fowlers Hut on St James Station.

Despite the efforts of the Hurunui Rabbit Board and the building of other fences, rabbits found their way through weakness such as the floodgates across streams, outflanked it to the west or simply hopped over when it was covered with snow. By the early 1900s it was clear that the fences had not stopped the influx and resources were put to other methods of containment particularly poisoning. In 1928 The Hurunui Rabbit Board decided it could no longer maintain the fences and sold them to respective landowners.

TOP QUALITY FENCE

The Hurunui Rabbit Board obtained quality materials. The iron posts and standards were all imported from England. Floodgates were built across every stream and wire netting iron gates were hung at every access point. Contracts were let for building each section of the fence. John Pilcher built the section of fence from Fowlers Hut to Lake Tennyson; you can see some remaining parts of this fence from this shelter (a wing fence extended to the Lake Tennyson outlet) and also when driving along the road. The main fence, which is still in excellent condition, runs over Maling Pass to the Upper Wairau River.



Standards 5 ft long, 8ft 3in apart driven 18in into the ground; T iron strainers at distances of about 6 to 8 chains, T iron intermediates 5 ft and 6ft 5in long, at distances of about 1 chain apart, or more frequently if required; surface plates or high and bottom plates in hollow ground to keep fence either sinking or rising when wires strained; a two strand galvanised barb wire with barbs 4in apart on top of fence; 6in below barb is a plain No.6 wire, 16 in lower is another, and 14in lower or 6in above the ground surface is the third wire. On to this skeleton as it is called, No.16 wire netting, 1 5/8in mesh 3ft 6in wide, and put 6in into the ground, tightly strained and laced in three places to the standards. The trench filled up and the fence is complete.

The Press 17 June 1889.



MOUNTAINS & WETLANDS

This area of mountains is the source of four major river systems: the Wairau; the Clarence; the Waiau; and the Maruia, Matakītaki, D'Urville and Sabine flowing into the Buller.

Wild Spaniards *Aciphylla aurea* are obvious beside the road to the lake and in late summer the white flowers of gentians are scattered throughout.

The wetlands downstream from Lake Tennyson are diverse containing a wide array of plants from the small purple flowered bladderwort *Utricularia monanthos* (1), to the larger shrubs of *Hebe salicornioides*. Each wet patch has its own distinctive mix of plants.

The beech stands around the lake contain the threatened plants *Pittosporum patulum* (2) and *Peraxilla tetrapetala*.



1.



2.

Historical information obtained from many sources including DOC archives and material prepared by writer Harry Broad. Photographs – Marlborough Museum and Historical Society; Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, NZ; Don and Ann Reid Collection; *Molesworth*, L. W. McCaskill, 1969; Cathy Jones; Jan Clayton-Greene; Department of Conservation; National Archives; *Papers Past*, Alexander Turnbull Library, Wellington, NZ; Rob Suisted www.naturespic.com