DEDICATION

To two proud Nelsonians: Sonja Davies, feet up on your parliamentary desk in the midst of Rogernomics, yarning about these old gold seekers, and Jim Henderson, for your handwritten pages with scrawled sideways notes in the margins. 'Put it through a sluice box,' you said of your stream of advice. 'A colour may emerge.' Not only did you both encourage me to write this, you said I must.

Most of all to 'The Boss', Mervyn Heath, who started this story.

Hokia ki o maunga kia purea koe e nga hau a Tawhiri-Matea.

Return to your mountains to be cleansed by the Weather God.

LOST GOLD

THE 100-YEAR SEARCH FOR THE GOLD REEF OF NORTHWEST NELSON

PAUL BENSEMANN

craig potton publishing

F.G. Gibbs' guides, Karamea River, 1932. From left, Archie Manson, Trevor McNabb, Noel Jenkins and Stan Simkin are pictured on what may be a 1929 earthquake slip. Note the recently-felled bush around them.
PHOTO NELSON PROVINCIAL MUSEUM.

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Jim Sweeny at his Mangarakau hut in 1980. A miner most of his life, he made a study of northwest Nelson gold reefs, was a field worker for the Mines Department and collected papers by government head geologist James Bell.
PHOTO PAUL BENSEMANN

INTRODUCTION

Gold. The richest word. Yet-to-be-discovered Spanish galleons, kilometres-deep African mines, American Indian nations wiped out. For prospectors, instant wealth but, at times, also a mandate to sink, enslave and slaughter.

Mankind's international currency performs best as legend, not only in fictional accounts such as *The Treasure of the Sierra Madre* and *King Solomon's Mines*, but also in those based on fact, like Arizona's Lost Dutchman Mine, South America's El Dorado and Australia's Lasseter's Reef. It is surprising, therefore, that New Zealand's most intense and sustained search, for a mother-lode in its South Island mountains, somewhere near Mt Domett in north-west Nelson, has not been the subject of a book before, especially as the names of those involved are signposted on maps – Lake Elmer, McNabb Creek, the Marshall Range, for example, and Mt Gibbs.

The tale has stayed hidden, not because it is unworthy, but owing to cultural cringe, a feeling that legends, for the Pakeha population, are imported as old literary classics or on television networks, perhaps the *Discovery Channel* and *National Geographic*, that focus on Europe, the Middle East and North America. And lost gold is generally cloaked in secrecy and uninformed exaggeration as thick as the fog or blizzards that so often turned back South Island prospectors. New Zealand's reef pursuit has all the uncertainty and false leads of the better known tales from California, the home of hyperbole, such as the Lost Cement Mine of the Sierra Nevada and Scotty's Secret Mine in Death Valley.

Unlike some searches, there is no doubt, however, this one really happened and, most poignantly for a New Zealand researcher, it has long been recorded in an antipodean way – cardboard boxes of old diaries and letters handed to a museum's backroom archive, a little cigarette tin storing sepia-toned and serrated-edged prints in a bedroom cupboard, a grunted one-sentence answer by an old bushman to an enquiring child.

Although the evidence has been shut away, the actual search for the lost reef was intense, dangerous and, at times, desperate, and the main characters just as eccentric, complex and convinced as any others. Also, I suggest, local searchers were far more at home in our wilderness environment than overseas equivalents in theirs. Early last century, self-taught survival techniques, ill described until now, came without GPS (Global Positioning System) devices or proper waterproof clothing.

My bushcraft is pathetic in comparison, but I have experienced the stumbling drowsiness of advanced hypothermia, boots that have fallen to bits days from home and long cold nights caught out minus sleeping bag or tent. It means I am all the more in awe of these characters and although the book sticks closely to details from interviews, diaries and letters, there are short passages of speculation where I feel I can relate to what the searchers may have been feeling, and try to describe it. An essential truth of all lost gold stories, fictional or non-fictional, is an interaction between man and nature, a celebration of both the best and worst times; a relationship approaching romance.

In 1971 my parents returned from Levin to the Bensemann home province of Nelson, and bought a 300-hectare grass-, scrub- and bush-covered farm in the Motueka Valley, on the foothills of what is now Kahurangi National Park. As teenagers, my brothers, sister and I felt unshackled, free to enjoy a wealth of new experiences including night-spotlighting for wild pigs, exploring cave passages and, of course, we were going to find gold. A few years before, on a Nelson/Marlborough holiday, we had watched in wonder as Dad dug his pocket knife into a crevice on a track down to the Wakamarina River and flicked out several small nuggets.

That first summer back in Nelson, I walked up the road to ask neighbour Mervyn Heath for work and, after squinting at me as minutes seemed to go by, he said, of tobacco picking, 'It's a man's job.' He was right. Over the next few back-breaking seasons of hand picking and hard partying during those halcyon days of tobacco, as well as becoming fitter and stronger, I learnt that gold prospecting was in the Bensemann blood. In 1976 Mervyn, grandson of my distant cousin Florence Bensemann, told me a stereotypical gold story during an afternoon tea break as we lay under the shade of mature tobacco plants in adjacent rows. An old prospector found a reef so rich it could be seen from hundreds of metres away, shining in the sun and, of course, as happens in such stories, just before the prospector died in Nelson Hospital, he talked to his doctor and drew a map.

In the evening Mervyn led me to a bench in his workshop, dug down through a drawer full of tools and pulled out an old brown envelope that contained a real treasure map: old, tatty and hand-drawn and, better still, with a

spot marked 'X'. Somehow it was the more exotic because it was not the stuff of overseas books but of the mountains around me which, I knew already, hid gold-rich watercourses like the Roaring Lion, the Doom and Glass Eye Creek. As the map also involved unknown and distant relatives, I was intrigued, not only about *what* I might find, but *who*.

Plastic-covered to protect against rain, the map Mervyn gave me to keep was small enough to fit into a pocket. It included the words '42 years ago', and directions that said, 'Ridge. Do not take this. Put you 2 days out on your right.' It came with some old black and white photographs, mostly of mountains, on which were handwritten notes such as 'Mt Domett. 6 day walk from Cobb. Far enough for any men.'

I have been amazed, during research since, how many other people had passed the tale and maps quietly from generation to generation. In other versions this reef 'must have been' the source of gold in rivers all around it, for example the Wangapeka and Baton near Motueka, the Karamea and Anatori on the West Coast and the Aorere and Anatoki in Golden Bay. Organised and regular reef-hunting parties continued for so many years because there was a lot at stake: this, they believed, was New Zealand's El Dorado.

Tracking down and interviewing these former prospectors and their families has not been easy, either because of vows of secrecy made years ago or because the reef was finally thought a myth, and an old searcher might be embarrassed by a quest he had wasted so much time on. I had to return several times to encourage a few to really talk but others were thrilled to slot their small piece of knowledge into a fuller picture. Mervyn was given the story by his father; in some cases people long dead had left only tiny photographs showing mountains, which meant nothing to their children – until I told them.

At times, however, the past was wonderfully close. Eighty-three-year-old Levis Johnson, with his windjammer accordion and the songs he sang with sisters Elaine and Laurel, transformed the old Johnson home, above the Karamea River, into one of the wooden dance halls of their youth, and at times, it seemed, their grandparents' windswept stone cottage on the Shetland Islands. Over a pot of tea and a spread of maps on his verandah, reef-hunter Ash Heath, aged 77, led me through what he called 'one of the roughest trips that ever I took', onto the eastern Domett Range and then, when he was exhausted and short of water, up and down each jagged peak.

Who first saw the reef? And why, if it was so valuable and obvious – 'thirty feet wide and…running for a considerable distance', judging from one account – hasn't it been rediscovered? That is what this book explores. And yet, neither gold nor maps is the main topic when the story has characters like Frederick Giles (usually called 'F.G.') Gibbs, a Nelson identity who was so sure of the reef he paid parties of young bushmen in a quixotic quest to find it

Cyril Heath, one of F.G. Gibbs' guides, is believed to have drawn this map in 1961 for his son Mervyn, who gave it to the author. The words '42 years ago' probably incorrectly refers to 1919 when Cyril recalled making the trip which was actually in 1928. The words above '42 years ago' are 'Branch Roaring Lion River'. The top right says 'M D', which could mean 'Mt Domett'. Above the line it says 'Ridge' and below the line: 'Do not take this. Put you 2 days out on your right'.

and, as a way of keeping telegrams secret from post office staff, even devised codes.

Whatever the truth about the reef, writing the book has often felt like tilting at windmills. At various times I quit full-time work to take months off for research, including short voluntary cataloguing stints at Nelson Provincial Museum, before throwing my research into boxes as I started paid employment again. Although I am grateful for government support in the summer of 1979–80 for my initial oral history research, as a student job project, there have been knockbacks since from those who argued against 'backblocks' research. 'Don't you have retired MPs or mayors in the area you interview?' someone with a say over oral history funding told me.

The main discouragement, however, has come from within. This work is set in one of New Zealand's wilderness areas – the Karamea River headwaters – a key part of Kahurangi National Park, which has suffered enough from

humans and especially our introduced predators. An unnamed writer, but probably Motueka Valley pioneer John Salisbury,[1] described following the Karamea River in 1878: 'This valley… abounds in kakapos, a bird fast becoming extinct; we killed seven…' Thirty years later Geological Survey director James Bell wrote about this wilderness: 'The air was filled with the cries of birds; kakapos murmured from beneath the spreading beeches which grew around the camp; kiwis called shrilly to their mates.'[2] There was still abundant birdlife in 1918, when F.G. Gibbs walked down the Flora Valley from the saddle to the clearing, where he would later build a hut: he said the setting was beautiful, with so many birds about: 'woodhens, kiwis, kakas & parakeets'.[3]

But the depredation continued. In the early 1970s, the New Zealand Forest Service started bulldozing a road through virgin beech in the Flora Valley and I was young and cheeky enough to lobby the Royal Forest and Bird Protection Society and the Native Forest Action Council, urging a campaign to turn the mountains between Motueka Valley and the West Coast into a national park, a designation which came, finally, after more effective efforts from other lobbyists, in 1996. I have mixed feelings about mining. Small-scale prospectors like me know the joy of gold; I have two claims in the Wakamarina River and remain a keen member of a prospectors' group in the Coromandel, but I have seen the madness of gold mining, especially where it has wrecked and poisoned large areas of Malaysia. A few of the new mining companies seem models of environmental care, while recent government proposals to open parts of the conservation estate exclude Kahurangi National Park and appear to prove it well protected. It is all the more so, I suggest, by the huge size of the reef search area. This book should do no harm.

There is another major setting for *Lost Gold*, however, and that is the early twentieth century and especially the Great Depression. The following account proudly pursues and promotes names from that time which are now little heard outside the old wooden hotels and whitebait baches of the West Coast and provincial Nelson, where they figure in often fanciful and sketchy yarns. Whether or not the reef exists, the real story about these men, in their pursuit of it, is the bigger treasure.

The Karamea River. Photo by F.G. Gibbs of Stan Simkin (with hat) and (possibly) Noel Jenkins on a reef search, January 1932 **COURTESY** LEWIS SIMKIN

Trevor McNabb in his last years
PHOTO KEN WRIGHT

PROLOGUE

Might go for a walk…

The day of the funeral, 10 June 1980, was like so many times in his life. 'There was snow,' said his youngest child, Dulcie McNabb. 'It was one of those horrible black days when no one could get warm.'[4]

Karamea celebrated bushcraft when it marked Trevor McNabb's passing, and in doing so, honoured itself. The community of just 650 is one of New Zealand's most remote and self-contained, reached by an hour and a half's winding, scenic drive north from its nearest neighbour, Westport. These two towns, together with Reefton, are the only sizable settlements in the 8600 square kilometres of the Buller District in the South Island's top left corner, of which 90 per cent is public land and largely native forest.

In the interdenominational Holy Trinity Church, which Trevor's father Francis had built in 1908, between Karamea town and Market Cross, the congregation sang 'Home on the Range'. It was a poignant choice, not least because many in the district, proud of their ancestry, knew they were paying homage to their history, and geography, in that song. Trevor was in some respects the most authentic son of Karamea's bush-bashing and pioneering McNabbs and Johnsons.[5]

And so on Trevor's coffin sat a felt beret of the type he had worn for decades in the dense and dripping kahikatea, rimu, nikau and beech that surround the settlement. According to some, the black hat was a fixture during the last years because he was ashamed of a balding head, but others saw it as a yearning for the kind of expedition he had often made, and which he kept planning inside his little bach on the east side of town, facing the mountains. The 'building', a kitchen stripped from an old house with a lean-to added, looked like a backblocks hut, in ruins.

Hanging by his bed was an old, brass English police whistle, which was a great help when his mates became separated at night or if he needed to keep

them close on a fog-enclosed, knife-edged ridge. Yet he carried it also on many trips he made alone, sometimes three or four days' walk from home, where no one could have heard him.

'Might go for a walk next week, if the weather clears,' he would say to his few visitors. Dulcie visited several times a day and her children biked up with his tucker in a carrier. After a stroke paralysed one side of his body and made him incontinent, the kind of walks Trevor made during his last six years were between bed, chair and toilet. 'It was really cruel,' said Dulcie. 'He should have died out in the bush.' In the second to last year, staff at the post office saw smoke billowing out of the bach after Trevor's electric blanket caught fire but reached him before the flames did. Dulcie sought the help of a doctor friend, who sent him to Nelson Hospital, where he was visited by the Lowes of Karamea. 'He was in this little, dark, narrow room and a nurse yelled at him, 'Put that light on!" Merle Lowe remembered. According to her husband Jock, 'The nurse said, "Take your cap off – you've got visitors".' The couple were shocked that one of the hardest men they knew broke down and cried. 'You don't know what goes on inside a man,' said Jock Lowe. But he did know. For years the two enjoyed joint trips into the Heaphy hinterland and, when Trevor was fighting through thick supplejack vine and kiekie, he was never lost or cowed.[6]

On that dark afternoon of the funeral, however, there was a secret still hidden from close stalking mates like Jock. Trevor's hunting skills and long trips were legendary, but deer alone did not draw him into the wilderness of north-west Nelson. For 40 years, Trevor had carried a hand-drawn map which he folded and unfolded so many times, usually when alone, that it had to be held together with Sellotape. The map became his main obsession and yet he hid it from mates around campfires or when huddled for days inside storm-battered tents. It now belongs to the eldest McNabb son, Elmer, but Trevor tried to keep it even from his children.

Compared with today's satellite photos, the map is pathetic. Yet Trevor had good reason to cherish the half-dozen squiggly lines – these were routes up rivers and over ridges into a remote and little-known area – but, more importantly, the map did not come from a simpleton. It was a close copy of one drawn by mineralogy professor Dr Patrick Marshall, who had an international reputation in the early twentieth century for geological discoveries and who wrote textbooks about the country's rocks. Trevor's map showed a quartz reef Marshall thought was rich with gold.

The most amazing feature of the map, however, was not what it showed, but who it was not shown to. It came from an official minerals expedition in 1908 but it seems neither the map nor the reef it depicted was ever reported to the government.

Well-used and much-repaired map drawn by F.G. Gibbs in 1929 which Trevor McNabb often carried on his trips. The words in the centre left are 'Ridge to Cobb V?' (ie Cobb Valley). Note that Trevor has changed 'Roaring Lion' to 'Ugly R' which would put the reef on a ridge south of Mt Centre, rather than the eastern Domett Range. COURTESY ELMER MCNABB

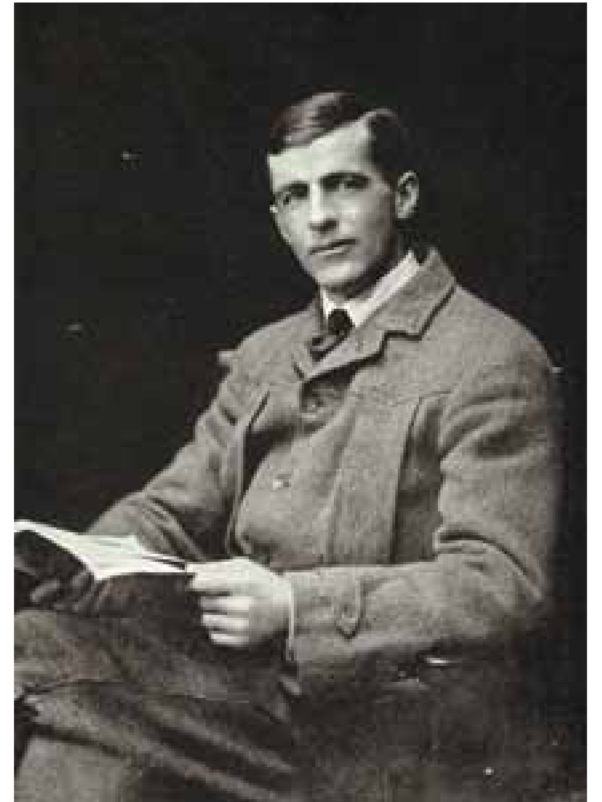
CHAPTER ONE 1907–1908

That stage of fatigue and hunger when no one spoke

It was a perfect morning in April 1907 as the country's youngest ever head geologist, James Abbott Mackintosh Bell, aged 30, bounced on horseback along the empty beaches north of Karamea. He was filled with enthusiasm because ahead lay a surveyor's wonderland – one of New Zealand's last unmapped wildernesses – and this was more than a single field trip. Bell was hoping, with the help of mountain guide Jack Clarke and camp organiser Arthur Wilson, to find an exploration base that would allow him regular escapes from his Wellington office.

An early ride along the West Coast is unique. Mountains on one side seem dark and distant, with only their tops outlined by the sunrise behind. A mist of seaspray softens the dawn light and obscures the way ahead, half-hiding piles of driftwood, including remains of whole trees, to make fantastic forms. Short, upright lengths of branches and roots can appear as warriors in a beached canoe, or sentries behind a barricade. Sea and forest smells combine, but overwhelming all other senses is the noise. Often, rather than running up over sand, the waves crash onto beaches, with a constant roar that allows even the most jarring performer to sing at the top of his voice, and not be heard.

The first 14 kilometres north of Karamea was mostly sandy and easy, by what Bell called 'joggy pony', but the afternoon meant some 19 kilometres leading horses in the hot sun and 'jumping from boulder to boulder'. By late afternoon the party could leave the rocks, walk through subtropical forest and then along a beach towards a river mouth, where Bell fell in love with their destination. 'Everything seemed to welcome us,' he wrote. 'Beneath tall nikaus which grew close to a beach of yellow sand shelving steeply to the brown waters of the Heaphy, we found a camping-ground of royal splendour. Never had I seen a place which seemed more peaceful, more meant to be left untamed, unspoiled by man…'[7] His happiness was untarnished by guilt, as cabinet ministers had sanctioned this flight from Wellington. At the dawn of the twentieth century the government hoped remote mineral lodes would make New Zealand one of the richest countries in the world; and rather than hire a learned scholar, cabinet was keen to find a young and educated bush-basher, more concerned with finds than theory. Bell had originally been appointed to succeed Alexander McKay as geologist to the New Zealand Mines Department but on reaching New Zealand early in 1905 he became, in fact, director of the Geological Survey of New Zealand, succeeding James Hector. When Bell stepped into his new role he was 28; his predecessors,[8] McKay and Hector, were 64 and 71 respectively.[9]


James Abbott Mackintosh Bell
COURTESY WELLINGTON CITY LIBRARIES

The young man was well qualified. With his uncle, Robert Bell, described in the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* as Canada's greatest exploring scientist, Bell had spent an adventurous youth cutting tracks into Arctic Canada for the Canadian Geological Survey.[10] Then, between 1901 and 1903, he had combined official Canadian government duties with fieldwork for private companies in the Hudson Bay area, employed by the Lake Superior Power Company, the Ontario Bureau of Mines and the Algoma Commercial Company, which had iron ore and gold interests.

Bell brought to the job both a passion for seeking remote riches and the drive and sense of romance of a pioneer. This was the heroic age of Antarctic exploration, and the main players were the rock stars of their time. When the young Canadian, at the Heaphy River mouth, 'marvelled at the beauty of the great cliffs of limestone looming dark and creeper-clad on the north bank', he was writing in the same spirit as Robert Falcon Scott, who had recorded, on 18 July 1902, during his first voyage, 'For countless ages the great sombre mountains about us have loomed through the gloomy polar night with never an eye to mark their grandeur, and for countless ages the wind-swept snow has drifted over these great deserts with never a footprint to break its white surface…'[11] Because of his snow and ice experience, in 1901 Bell was invited

to be the official geologist on that expedition but was still working in Canada. Scott would ask Bell again in 1910 but the New Zealand government refused to let him go.

In New Zealand, easy gold was running out. Decades before, on 20 May 1861, Australian prospector Gabriel Read had scraped away shingle where a road crossed a creek on Otago tussock land and 'saw the gold shining like the stars in Orion on a dark frosty night'.[12] On 14 October 1864 Haimona Tuakau picked up a 4-ounce nugget in the Hohonu or Greenstone River, which West Coast Maori had known for years was a source of gold.[13] Another prospector, William Hunt, found a reef sparkling in the sun under a waterfall on a coastal stream just north of Thames on 10 August 1867.[14]

From 1861 to 1870 gold made up more than half of New Zealand's total exports and some settler politicians forecast a brave new country to outdo Britain.[15] Instead came the Long Depression of the 1880s, alleviated by the introduction of refrigerated ships that could export frozen meat.[16] In 1908 the North Island main trunk railway was completed and shortly afterwards gross annual revenue doubled, but there were doubts this new pastoral economy was enough. A boost from farming allowed the government to reinvest in minerals.[17]

The Heaphy rivermouth may have been 'meant to be left untamed, unspoiled by man', but it was Bell's aim to tame and perhaps spoil it. He wanted to cut the bush to provide a base for years of exploration, with a garden, horse paddock and large log cabin, made from timber cut on site by his men, similar to dwellings in his native land. Back in Wellington after this first foray to the Heaphy, Bell wrote to Mines Under-Secretary Thomas Hamer seeking £50 for the hut, but since little could be built for that, local staff talked him into a smaller structure using pit-sawn planks, suited to New Zealand podocarps.[18] By October the rough shell was completed and christened Whakapoai House after the Heaphy's Maori name, referring to a female kiwi call, or the mimicking of it. Kiwi were common in the area.

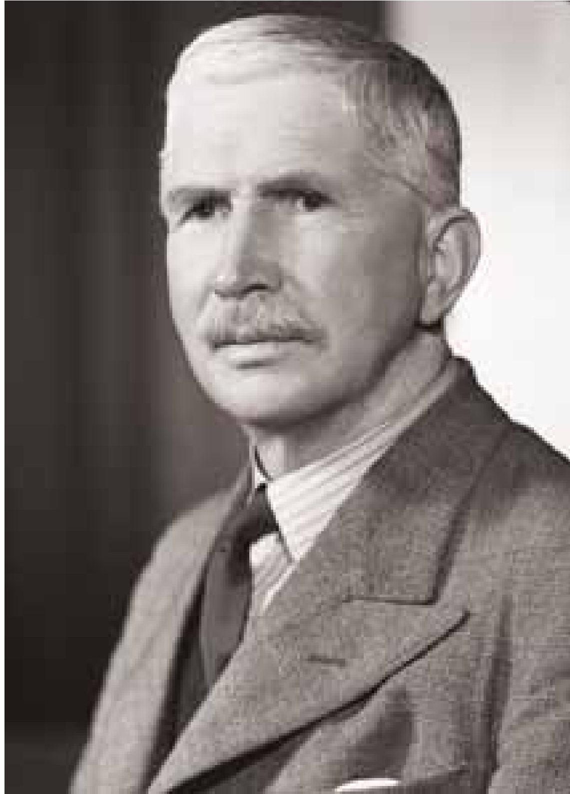
As Bell became an occasional resident, from early 1908, his love affair with the Heaphy continued. 'Many a time… did I leave this refuge… with that joyous feeling of expectation with which one plunges into the unknown… and as often did I return to it with that calm feeling of contentment which comes to the weary and footsore after a long journey is over and he is back once more to a place which he can call home.'

What he described as his 'most memorable trip' came in February 1908 when he set out to traverse the wilderness with fellow geologist and Otago School of Mines lecturer Patrick Marshall. Although Bell had found no record of prospectors venturing into western areas, the eastern, Motueka Valley side was quite well known, and he was confident the trip would be straightforward. 'The rough maps available showed that our course lay a little

First Heaphy Hut: guide Jack Clarke at left and Bell's cook and manservant Arthur Pitt second left. Others unknown, although it is possible the man on the far right is Bell. This photo is believed to have been taken in the summer of 1907-08 shortly after the hut was built. COURTESY GNS SCIENCE PHOTO-LIBRARY

south of east for some 12 miles to Mt Domett and thence almost straight easterly to Mt Arthur… We had heard stories of old diggers who had travelled from the plateau of Mt Arthur to Mt Domett in a day's journey…' It was fitting that 1646-metre Mt Domett, their initial goal, was named after a man who had dreamt of building a better Britain. In 1863, when gold comprised 70 per cent of the colony's income, Premier Alfred Domett described New Zealand as 'an estate so rich in undeveloped resources, and so easily and rapidly improvable'.[19]

But Marshall and Bell were more familiar with predictions of eminent German geologist, Dr Ferdinand von Hochstetter, who had made an extended visit to New Zealand from 1858 and in 1859 had forecast gold reefs east of Karamea and west of Nelson 'hidden under the dense forests'. He believed rivers flowing north into Golden Bay were evidence for these. 'The rounded nature of the gold particles shows that the gold has been brought down by water; and the fact that the heaviest gold is found in the upper parts of the streams, points clearly to the mountains as the source of the metal.'[20] More recently, in 1906, English mining engineer Joseph Taylor, who founded


Patrick Marshall COURTESY ALEXANDER TURNBULL LIBRARY

Puponga's coal mine, had prophesied in a series of lectures that undiscovered reefs in the region's mineral belt 'were certain… to transform Nelson Province into the most active industrial centre in New Zealand'.[21]

Primed with these predictions, the two geologists set out on what Bell described as 'one of those dark, gloomy days which come in a spell of drought, when nature intends it should rain but when none falls' and the experience was made more dismal by a long, tedious climb through forest and scrub to the 1200-metre-high Gunner Downs. This ascent was, however, little challenge to the party. When younger, Marshall had been one of New Zealand's best tennis players, winning the national doubles championship in 1893, and had also represented Canterbury in rugby;[22] since then he had kept himself active. Three months before the trip, he had joined an official subantarctic expedition, reporting afterwards, 'I have no doubt Campbell Island and the Aucklands were once joined to, and formed a part of, New Zealand.'[23] But neither Bell nor Marshall, the gentlemen of the journey, carried the heavy packs. This was the job of camp organiser Jim Cadigan and guide Jack Clarke, who were both extremely fit.

The gradient changed, later that first day, to the more pleasant low, rolling, tussock-covered terraces of the downs, where they found a campsite 'beneath spreading beeches and amid great granite boulders'. When the clouds cleared it seemed just a few kilometres to Mt Domett, which added to Bell's optimism. 'We went cheerfully to bed feeling our course onward was easy.'

Next day, however, after the party had almost crossed the downs by about 9 a.m., a dense fog rolled in from the north, forcing them to stop for the rest of the day to avoid getting lost. Their third day was brilliantly fine, but again progress was 'wretchedly slow' because of an area of limestone 'deeply cut by immense chasms, often difficult to cross'. From there the four fought their way up a long steep slope covered with mountain scrub so matted and impenetrable they had to roll over it.

The dense, subtropical West Coast forest was nothing like the open woodlands of Canada, full of animal tracks, but it seems Bell was counting on these further inland. He had predicted crossing from the Heaphy mouth to the Motueka Valley in just three days, with 'ample time to look about' for minerals on the way. A man had been sent from Nelson to Mt Arthur to light signal fires, and Bell's party had food for just four days.

By the end of the third day they were not much closer to Mt Domett, and already Cadigan, little more than a manservant on the trip, was playing a larger role. Bell described him as 'the inimitable Irish-Colonial, whose bursts of unexpected humour saved us from many a contretemps such as arrive alas even among the best of friends, under trying circumstances'. These included tension between Bell and Marshall, who were not really the 'best of friends'. Marshall did not share Bell's optimism about reaching Mt Arthur. It is tempting to imagine the pair, exhausted and frustrated about progress, collapsing at night into the one tent they carried, Bell still full of self-belief and Marshall, bitter, cynical and cautious and urging a return to the Heaphy; Cadigan and Clarke lying outside, on each side of the fire, listening in.

Bell, as director of the Geological Survey, was clearly leader of the party, although Marshall was eight years older, with a better knowledge of New Zealand geology and its backcountry. More importantly, perhaps, Marshall was one of 55 applicants worldwide for Bell's position in 1904 and was on the shortlist of nine reviewed by cabinet. Had Marshall been successful, his salary would have doubled from £300 to £600.[24] In the antipodean manner, Marshall was apt to argue an opinion, no matter the company or consequences and would take part, in 1909, in passionate public debates with Otago School of Mines director Professor James Park at Otago Museum in front of packed audiences. (The subject was the extent to which New Zealand was glaciated in ages past.)[25]

Although also assertive, Bell was more measured. He was described as a brilliant conversationalist, with 'carefully enunciated speech',[26] and despite his indigenous Canadian, Scottish and French Huguenot ancestry, was heralded in Wellington high society as the model polite English gentleman. Bell would marry Vera Beauchamp, the sister of New Zealand most famous writer Katherine Mansfield, in one of the social events of 1909, with all the ships in Wellington Harbour decked out in flags to mark the occasion.[27] In her story, *A Dill Pickle*, published in 1917, Mansfield would write about a woman called Vera being courted by 'a man who has found his place in life, and fills it with a confidence and an assurance which was, to say the least, impressive'.

> He who said: 'What a marvellous listener you are. When you look at me with those wild eyes I feel that I could tell you things that I would never breathe to another human being.' Was there just a hint of mockery in his voice… she could not be sure…

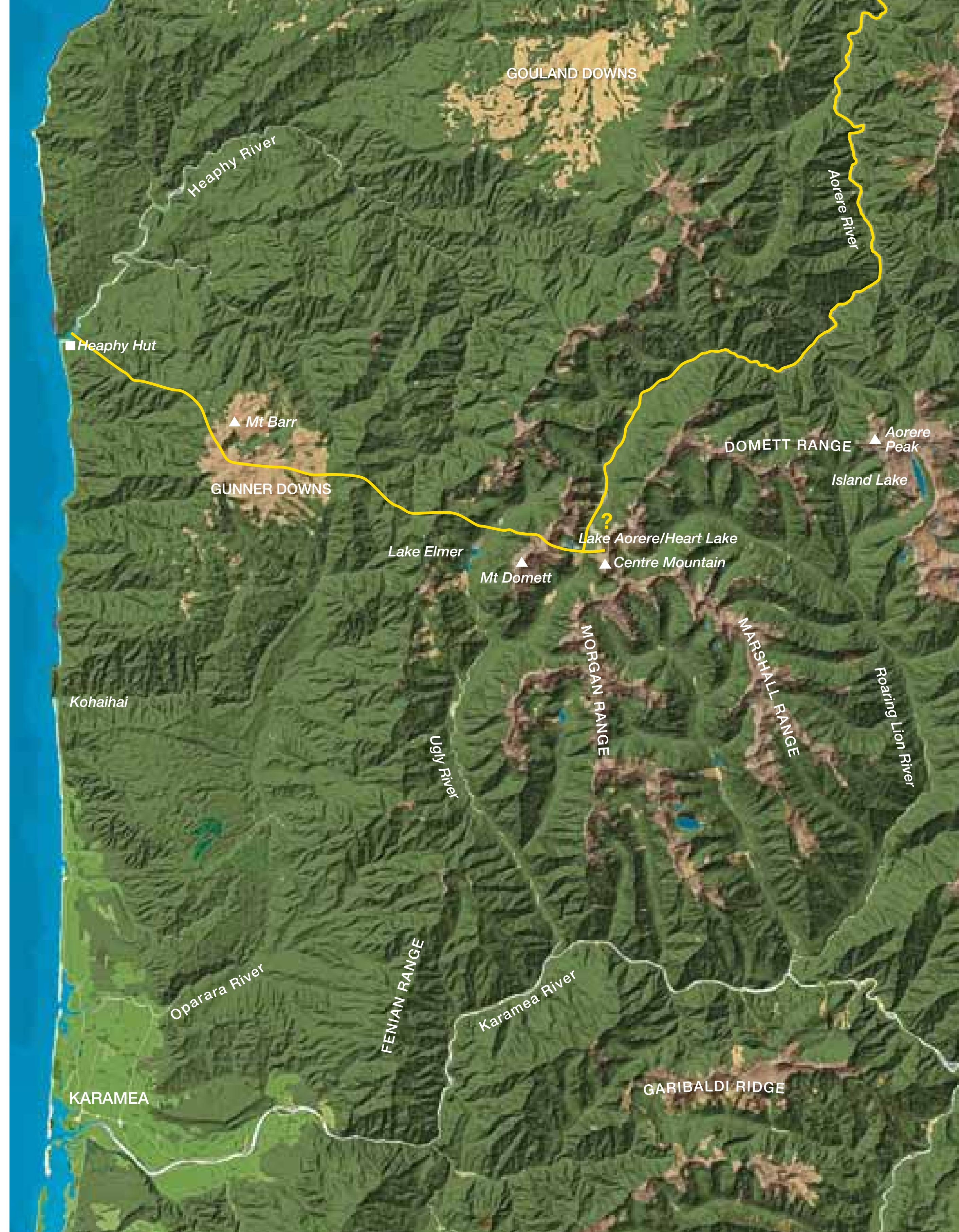
> She used to feel then as though he, quite suddenly, in the middle of what she was saying, put his hand over her lips, turned from her, attended to something different, and then took his hand away, and with just the same slightly too broad smile, gave her his attention again… Now we are ready. That is settled.[28]

On a Coromandel survey in 1910, Bell would set up his base camp in two sections. Field workers, who referred to Bell as 'The Doctor', did all camp duties, including cooking, and had to set up their camp on one side of a creek, with Bell on the other. The exception came on Christmas morning when he crossed the water to wish compliments of the season and pull crackers with his young assistants.[29] Whakapoai Hut had a cook, Arthur Pitt, who often travelled with Bell around New Zealand. 'Pitt is a very good cook… and very respectful,' Bell told his senior staff. 'But you will understand he is an English servant and is not supposed to be treated with any familiarity by the men, and is always called Pitt. Of course, he does not have meals with us.'[30]

In his writings, Bell praised Marshall, saying, for example, he was 'well known for his knowledge of New Zealand's geology and geography, and for his travels into the wildest part of wild New Zealand – the fiord region', but on the Domett trip, Bell's peculiar courtesy may have branded all three companions as belonging to a lower class.[31]

Continued tough going added to the tension. 'When at mid-day we did reach the open ridge top, it was only to climb down again,' Bell wrote. 'Thus, up and down, we travelled till we had rounded the headwaters of the Heaphy…' Just before the third night out, they crossed a ridge, which allowed them a look into one of the major catchments en route, the Ugly River. The sight was a great disappointment. They had hoped to arrive at the valley headwaters and walk around gentle ridges to Mt Domett, but instead the Ugly's deep belly barred their way and. some distance to the north, so did its head, 'a long irregular line of bold stacks and sharp aiguilles'.

Facing such a row of pinnacles, Bell gave Jack Clarke a lead role and perhaps no one in New Zealand was better qualified. By 1906, when Clarke stepped down as chief guide at the Mt Cook Hermitage, after the offer of work from Bell, his climbing career had already included first ascents of some of New Zealand's highest alps – the Tasman (3497 metres), the Silberhorn (3279 metres),the Haidinger (3066 metres) and the Sealy (2637 metres). Clarke was the first New Zealand-trained climber to reach European peaks, including Mont Blanc (4810 metres) and the Breithorn (4164 metres), the latter at night to see a summit sunrise.[32] The highlight had come on Christmas Day 1894, when he and two other young locals, Tom Fyfe, a plumber from Timaru, and George Graham, a labourer from Waimate, were the first to reach the top of the 3754-metre Aoraki/Mt Cook, New Zealand's highest



Approximate route of February 1908 search: James Bell, Patrick Marshall, Jack Clarke, Jim Cadigan