

MOLESWORTH

STORIES FROM NEW ZEALAND'S LARGEST HIGH-COUNTRY STATION

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Light show on Molesworth as the cloud moves over the western ranges to Red Gate.



ABOVE Winter stock on Molesworth. With no supplements for the main herd, the cattle have to know where to sniff out feed to survive the winter.

OVERLEAF A characteristic summer panorama of Molesworth Station taken at an altitude of 1250 metres, with the Guide River and Barefell Pass on the left and the Half-Moon Valley to the right.

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INTRODUCTION The Mystique of Molesworth

‘The early morning start as dawn breaks; the sounds of the restless, ever-milling confined herd; the stamp of horses; the quicksilver darting of the dogs; the cursing comments of the men; the smells; and the extraordinary feeling of inner excitement which one never forgets.’¹ This is how Sir Thaddeus McCarthy described his time working on the Molesworth annual muster, and in many ways it typifies the spirit of this station hidden away in the high country of south Marlborough.

The mystique and the mana of Molesworth have many strands. The station isn't just big; it is truly massive, spreading over 180,470 hectares (larger than Stewart Island/Rakiura), and nearly 60 kilometres long and close to that at its widest point. In terms of land area, it is the single biggest farm in New Zealand. The overwhelming impression as you travel through it is one of hugely imposing landscapes that dwarf its rivers and dominate the horizons.

The landscape here has a sense of solitude and space that reflects its emptiness, and an ability to render human figures irrelevant. Of course the trappings of civilisation are there, the fence lines, gates, cattle and, most noticeably, the electricity pylons that stalk over parts of the property. But it is also possible to be alone in these hills and to appreciate them in isolation. One writer really went to town on this theme, describing Molesworth as a ‘sort of ghostly colossus, lurking in its mountain fastness’.²

The station is a really challenging place to manage, with its moody continental climate, searing hot one minute and blizzard-bound the next. Travelling through, the question is often asked: ‘What on earth do the stock find to eat here?’ There is tucker there if you know where to look for it, and the station's wily cattle certainly do.

A senior farming figure dismisses the interest in Molesworth as being mainly the ‘locked gate syndrome’, and says that once it was opened up to the public most people couldn't give ‘a rat's rear end’ about the place. It is true the locked gate added significantly to the mystery of Molesworth. For many years, the station was largely closed to the public except on its western flanks. Only poachers and trespassers stole in, so there was great fascination as to what went on behind the fences. Bill Chisholm, manager from 1942 to 1978, wasn't big

on public access; the station was largely hidden from view, and was sometimes referred to as the ‘kingdom in the hills’.

‘For me, this mystique was long associated with the station's remoteness and inaccessibility, and that it seemed to be a bit like some place out of *Gulliver's Travels*, which many have heard about but few have seen. The other things are that so much of it is above 1000 metres; so much of it seems from the air to be totally ungrazeable barren scree; and the severities of its climate,’ says Molesworth Steering Committee member Andy Dennis.³

Opening up the Acheron Road through summer gives people the opportunity to drive right through the heart of a huge high-country station, and to feel, very briefly, a part of it. The horseshoe trip is best, starting at Rainbow Station to the northwest, with its wetter climate, dramatic geology and regenerating beech forest, then heading to the foot of Jacks Pass and then east and north to the Acheron Road, which provides a real counterpoint with its drier landscapes.

Although visitor numbers have been modest since the Acheron Road was first opened to the public in 1987 (at the time of writing they are around 8000 per annum), many now feel a genuine sense of connection with the station, are pleased that it has stayed in public ownership and know they can visit if they wish. Fishermen are especially keen on greater access, as are mountain bikers and horse trekkers.

Molesworth has three main elements in terms of its mystique, these being distance and size, connections and timing.

It's a long haul up the Awatere Valley, being 100 kilometres from the Dashwood turn-off on State Highway 1 just to get to the front gate of Molesworth, two-thirds of it on gravel road and passing by other Marlborough stations with their own resonance: Blairich, Awapiri, Jordan, Camden, Upcot, Middlehurst and Muller, next to Molesworth. The road rises steeply and dips over deeply incised river gorges. On the left are the forbidding peaks of the Inland Kaikoura range, dominated by Tapuae-o-Uenuku and Mt Alarm, while the main feature on the right is the Black Birch Range. The road is easy compared to the original one, however, which followed the Awatere River and forded it many times.



As you drive along, it is worth thinking of the early Molesworth pioneers and appreciating their hardships. Of manager Bill Chisholm getting the car stuck in a flooded stream with his pregnant wife Rachel, mother-in-law and small son aboard. He couldn't move the vehicle, so struck out to get help while the others spent all night huddled in the car with the water streaming past. Or the time the tip of a sewing-machine needle broke off in Rachel's finger and she had to be driven by horse and dray, crossing the Awatere River 13 times, to Castle Creek, where the car was garaged, and then driven out for medical help in Blenheim.

Once you get to Molesworth Homestead, distances really do become dominant and size does matter. The great challenge for any manager is the logistics involved in getting men and supplies out to the far ends of the property. The introduction of aviation in the mid-1940s turned the tide on the rabbit problem, because poison and seed could be loaded and flown on in just a few hours.

Connections are another really important Molesworth element, with many visitors to the property coming to see where their relatives lived and worked. More directly, hundreds of people have been employed on the place in living memory. These include musterers, rabbiters, station cooks, stock agents, farm workers, herd testers, vets, pest control operators, and pilots and their loader drivers. They have probably contributed most to the mana of the station, because they have stories to tell and relish doing so.

Timing and patience form the third strand of the place, especially if you are looking to appreciate its conservation values, as botanist Jan Clayton-Greene points out: 'When you drive through down the Acheron Road you get a very one-sided point of view. You are driving in the most modified tunnel on the station. It's not till you go around the corners, look up high and see the shrublands and the alpine communities, that you start to appreciate what's there.'⁴

She is right, although if you are travelling along the road in midsummer you will see magnificent fields of waving white gentians (*Gentianella corymbifera*), one of the six gentian species that grow on Molesworth, staging their own spectacle. And as you drive over Island Saddle in the west there are snow tussocks on the tops, and natural areas of coprosmas, hebes and various types of *Celmisia* daisies growing together so convincingly you'd think they'd been staged for the Ellerslie Flower Show, but no, they're all self-sown. Heading on down the valley, there are impressive areas of regenerating tawny-red tussocks, revelling in their wet feet.

Colours and their contrast are a defining characteristic of Molesworth's moods. It really is one huge changing light show, varying according to the time and the season. In one day the landscape you travel through can pass from golden to green to grey, and then the mountains in evening light will assume a deep azure-blue as they fade off into the night.

To an older generation, Molesworth represented one of the great restoration achievements of New Zealand farming history when the legendary Bill Chisholm rebuilt the ruined landscapes during his tenure of nearly 40 years. There has been a tendency to see the successes of Molesworth as the triumph of state farming over private, an argument that drew it into political debates in the 1940s. It is fair to say that only the government had pockets deep enough to carry the rebuilding losses for 20 years, although all the investment was paid back with interest when Molesworth started making profits from 1960. But there were examples in the private sector of successful rabbit control and grass sowing to create the right conditions for stock. Indeed, next door to Molesworth at Bluff Station, thousands of hectares were successfully regenerated in the 1920s following rabbit control and grass reseeding of 8000 acres (3000 hectares) by hand.

There are two key elements that have always really mattered in high-country farming, regardless of whose name is on the gate. First, it is the ability of the manager to make it work – a huge task in itself; and, crucially, there has to be support from the owner. Fortunately for Molesworth, the Department of Lands and Survey was very staunch in its support of its managers and a great steward of the station when it took over in 1938.

'I think Molesworth has such mystique because it is the biggest cattle run in the country, and we like to own the biggest farm; we don't want a Pom or an American owning it. The other reason is the farming restoration success. Funnily enough, people don't see it as having been done by government, but by people they liked and trusted: the Chisholms, the Reids and the George McMillans of this world,' says Molesworth Steering Committee Chair Hamish Ensor.⁵

Molesworth is a place that can never be taken for granted and it demands respect from all who pass through its portals. Increasing public access has lessened the sense of mystery around the place but it hasn't diminished its status as the most famous farm in the country. With its size and space, history and connections, it retains a dominant hold on the imagination of those with an affinity for the high country, as well as the people who have worked and played hard on it. More recently, it has begun to gain increasing recognition for its intrinsic values and recreation opportunities.



It's an early start at 5am to bring the cattle in for calf marking.



ABOVE AND LEFT A summer and winter perspective on Molesworth from the northern (Awatere) end of the station, with the Molesworth cob cottage, the original homestead, peeking out from behind the trees.
OVERLEAF Morning light from Molesworth, with the Inland Kaikoura Range, (in particular Tapuae-O-Uenuku and Mt Alarm (far left)), forming a dramatic backdrop.

PART ONE 1850-1938



WHEN CAPITAL WAS KING 1850–1938

As with many high-country farms, it was always difficult to make money on Molesworth. Yearly returns varied widely depending on the vagaries of the weather and the wool markets, and so reserves of capital were crucial to the financial survival of those who farmed there, bolstering them through the lean seasons.

Early on in the pioneering years of the station there was a confusing picture of changing tenures, varying acreages and different landowners. Tarndale (which at the time was combined with Rainbow, although Rainbow never became part of Molesworth), Dillon, Molesworth and St Helens runs eventually came together as just Molesworth in 1949. Interestingly, the first surveyor's description had called the general locality Molesworth Moor.

Depasturing licence 1/42 was issued on New Year's Day 1854 for 14 years to Nelson doctor James Robertson. This allowed him to graze an area described as Barefells Run, possibly covering 90,000 acres (36,421 hectares). It is unlikely Robertson ever farmed there, however, because the lease transferred to Charles Elliott, a Nelson printer, in 1863, who had run cattle at the head of the Awatere Valley from 1855 and so may well have subleased the area.

In March 1864, Elliott transferred 16,520 acres (6685 hectares) of Barefells to Thomas Carter and sold the remaining 73,000 acres (29,542 hectares) to John Caton. It is generally thought Molesworth was named by Frederick Weld, an influential sheep farmer and later Premier of New Zealand who explored the area, in memory of his friend Francis Alexander Molesworth, a settler who had died young in 1846.

Caton brought in Cornelius (John) Murphy as a partner, who in 1882 testified to the Railway Commission: 'I formed the Molesworth Station on the 1st January, 1866... I resided there until April, 1869. I am the first who lived in that locality in the winter... I travelled to the West Coast and Christchurch with cattle several times a year... [In the winter] it was a sort of Esquimaux's [Eskimo's] life: we were shut up sometimes for four or five weeks.'¹ Caton himself was a colourful character who had been accused of selling land he didn't own, was convicted of assault, and was eventually jailed in 1869 for three years for stealing £3300 from the sale of a mob of cattle he had driven for the mayor of Christchurch. On his release he travelled to Sydney, where he later drowned.²

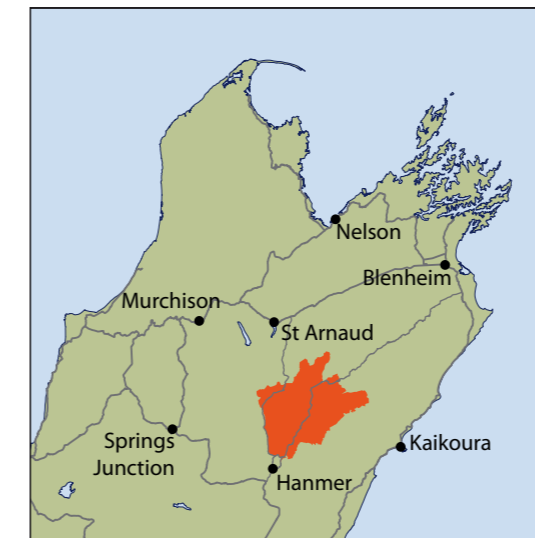
The run then went to William Atkinson, in 1870, who also farmed Burtergill in the lower Awatere. He introduced merinos on Molesworth and made a big capital gain on the property, paying £700 to the bankrupt owners for it and selling out for £10,500 (including sheep) to Herman Fuhrman and Charles Willis in 1877. The main achievement of these partners was hiring Thomas Fowler, who carried out the first major improvements on Molesworth, bringing in pollard (cereal-based) bait for rabbits, planting willows for firewood and putting a road over the Saxton Pass.

In 1884, the property changed hands again, when it was bought by W.S. Taylor of Dunedin in partnership with James MacNaughton, who became the manager. Their ownership ended in 1890 when Molesworth was taken over by William Acton-Adams, who had been farming the nearby Tarndale and Rainbow stations since 1880.

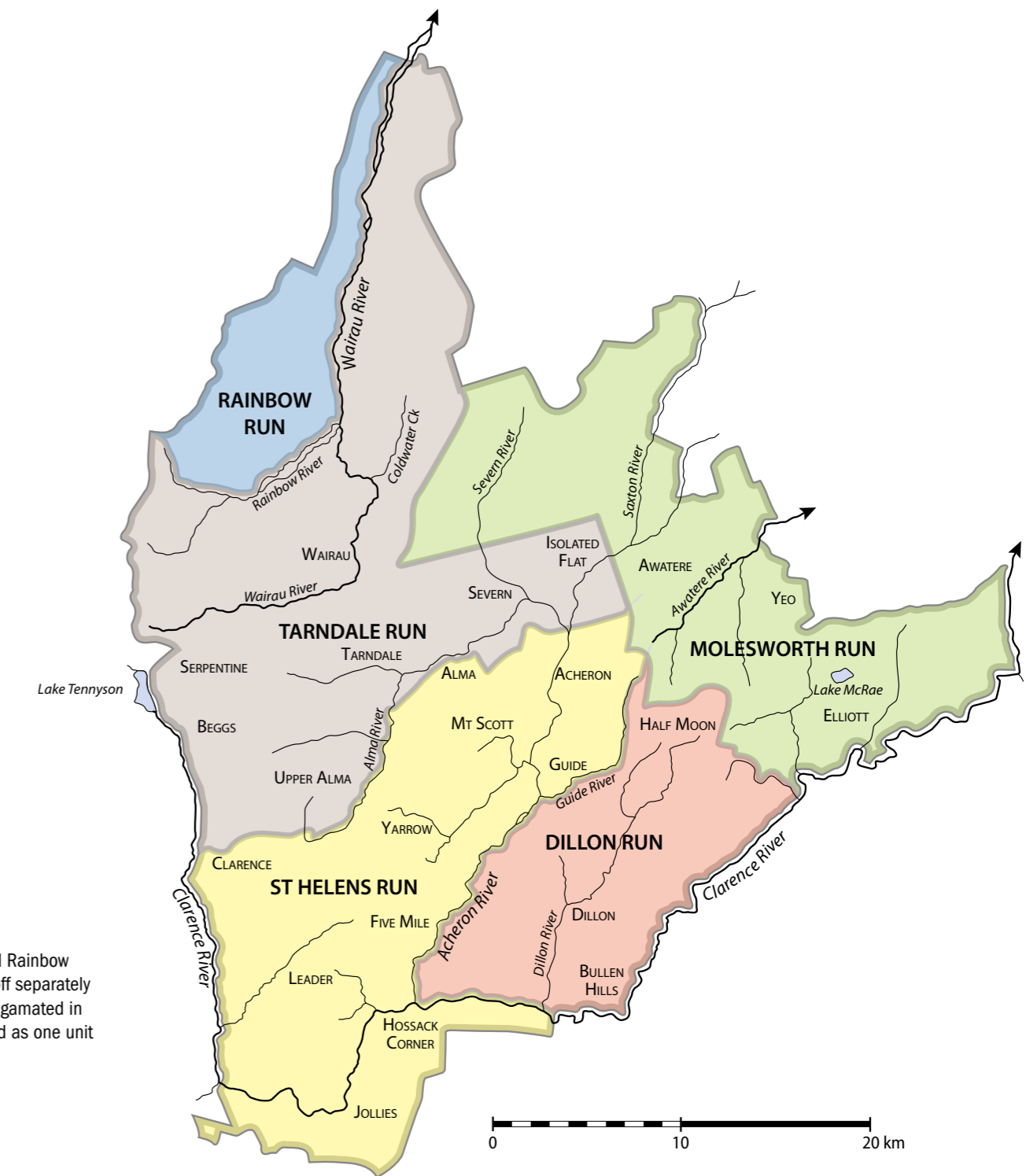
Rainbow Station, which lies between the upper reaches of the Wairau River, the Rainbow River and Tophouse, had originally been a public reserve of 12,000 acres (4856 hectares) set aside for an accommodation house that was built in the early 1870s. The house subsequently burnt down and a new one was built 3 kilometres down the valley; this still stands today. By the time the Rainbow block was leased out in 1939, it had grown to 76,200 acres (30,837 hectares). This was the first time it came onto the market as a stand-alone property, as previously it had always been worked in conjunction with Tarndale.³ Parts of it had the reputation of being one of the toughest muster-ing blocks in the high country.

One of the enduring myths around the Rainbow is how it got its name. Even Lance McCaskill, author of the landmark *Molesworth* (1969), subscribes to the fiction that it was possibly the name of one of the early shepherds. The truth of the matter is somewhat different according to Department of Conservation (DOC) historian Steve Bagley: 'In fact, the name of the valley in Maori is Kopi-o-Uenuku, or the valley of Uenuku, and Uenuku is both the Maori god of rainbows and his atmospheric manifestation, and this valley is mentioned in Travers's writings and presumably he got it from one of his Maori guides.'⁴

Tarndale was discovered by Frederick Weld in 1855. The run was settled



Location of Molesworth Station.



A map showing the original runs of the area. Tarndale and Rainbow were managed together but the Rainbow was auctioned off separately when Tarndale and the original Molesworth run were amalgamated in 1938. St Helens and the Dillon Run were mainly managed as one unit and joined with Molesworth in 1949.