

SOUTHERN DIARY

By Don Binney



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Bluff, 11th March 2005

Clean, tube-lit, prefab, the Stewart Island Experience waiting room smells of carpet adhesive. A compact, crew-cut worker makes his way between repairs and a stepladder out in the street. He has a worn work-apron and those old Reckitt's Blue regulation overalls. This prompts an awareness of having seen not a single hazard-orange jerkin since leaving Auckland. Also in deep azure are the two youngish women behind the ticket counter. Outside the air is moist; the mood within, one of phlegmatic expectation – without (joy!) piped music. The padded stacking-chairs, too, run to that same bluebag colour.

'Where' (presumably, in New Zealand) 'are you from?' seems to be a question one receives more frequently in Southland. Doubtless well meant; often coupled with an assumption of a first-time to Stewart Island. Ah, well: the very first (early 1964) Binney painting of Rakiura has hung, all this summer past, in the *Representation and Reaction* curated show at Auckland Art Gallery. Had I settled at Half Moon Bay just after that work was completed, I'd be almost accepted as a local by now.

Half Moon Bay, pm.

Hull-crackingly choppy swell calmed with the Mutton Bird Island and big clusters of just those birds, on water or shearing it: darting, satin-sooty. Then a sunless, but clear, passage to portside Oban – only in forty years I've never heard anyone call it that. The first koreru are visible before we disembark; in the hour following I'd have lost count, even if I'd intended it. And with no other guests at the Lodge just now, its verandah becomes jumped-over by several kaka. Armchair ornithology, this.

Rakiura, 12th March.

Stewart Island locals indeed, are Ron and Elspeth. He, a former ranger and a rich source of Island natural history and heritage lore; she, once based in the old Turnbull Library in Bowen Street, owns a gallery/craft shop in Half Moon Bay. The 300-odd population here needs as many such folk as it can retain. Yet at tea-and-biscuits after the first Island Fest '05 function, I'm left with the idea of their possible shift. Recent, unobtrusive, challenges to local ways, especially in the area of tourist initiatives – not to mention escalating property prices crossing even Foveaux Strait – can leave the sturdiest feeling unrest.

13th March

The still, moist day doesn't promise too much but Michael and Jane arrive on time and we say good morning to Mill Creek. Then, through Horseshoe Bay to evidence of recent, relentless bulldozer-widening of Lee Bay Road, to the Rakiura National Park entrance. Tree-fern, native fuchsia, scuttled: the sort of undertakings many city-dwellers come here to get away from. We go back to Mill Creek and I begin a new, small, study. The mid-afternoon return ferry crossing is still, achromatic. Back at Bluff, the Maori shuttle driver says 'What country are you from, Sir?' I rapid-reply 'Auckland' and we both have a good laugh.

14th March, Southland Museum

A display of Greer Twiss albatross maquettes, Craig

Potton mollymawk photographs and Binney Rakiura 2000 drawings marks this museum's hosting *Dancing Star Island Fest 2005*. This environmental/wildlife foundation, Los Angeles-based, has secured a predator-proofed block on Rakiura alongside the Lee Bay Road, where the trust's founder Michael took me yesterday. Three of this year's speakers have just made their address on the Island – which they'll re-run here; while Greer and I get repeat slots today, tomorrow. Greer opens this Invercargill round, discussing his substantial albatross-based metal works. Next up is Department of Conservation's Kevin O'Connor. His presentation – location-shots, scrolled-up titles and bullet-points – is strong on the substance of subantarctic recovery though short on his own adventures, observations and insights, of which he must have many. By contrast Michael Stedman in this evening's slot is unabashedly first-person. NZTV's production energy behind 'Wild South' is all there: critical, politically uncowed, yet ultimately hopeful. Between these two, I'm scheduled for later afternoon. My abstract:

Conservation, spirituality and art usually conjoin in societies living indigenous to natural habitat. Such oneness, however, becomes superseded by international interference on a global scale. The role of any artist – in the fullest definition – can aid other specialist initiatives in habitat recovery, not just as a recorder but also as a celebrant. Manual and intellectual work can conjoin with mediative social ritual. Bringing creativity to the world's stewardship, the artist might find a renewed role, beyond today's commodifications and hyper-theorising. As Emile Nolde's *God, the Great Gardener* proposes, we should all become 'gardeners' of a kind.

15th March

After an early, convivially-cramped, lunch it's good to walk out into the Queen's Gardens alongside the Museum. These are beautifully-planted, spacious and varied (a bellbird, somewhere) though, the vast lawns sometimes give way to boggy sinkholes within the grass, revealing one-time swamp origins of the site. I avail myself of a fully automated unisex loo: in a Jacques Tati-ish way re-pressing the green button to retrieve my walking stick. But, sobering are the suggested associations with McCahon's short stop in the Sydney Botanic Gardens in 1984 – not to rejoin his company and, somehow, end the day wandering and confused in quite another part of the city... never to fully recover. I am the same age now as Colin was, then.

... forgotten like a dead man, out of mind:

I am as useless as a broken pot

(Psalm 31:12)

But the show must go on and it does. My second address is better attended and proceeds more easily than yesterday's. Attendance throughout Island Fest '05 has been steady: not huge but engaged. I conclude, as I did the day before, with the plea: 'We need workshops – many, many more of them...' Conservation, like the arts, permits a holistic view, a making-anew. These few days have been an opportunity. They've made a difference.



Mill Creek, Rakiura, Don Binney, 2005, Pencil on paper, 14.8 x 21 cm.