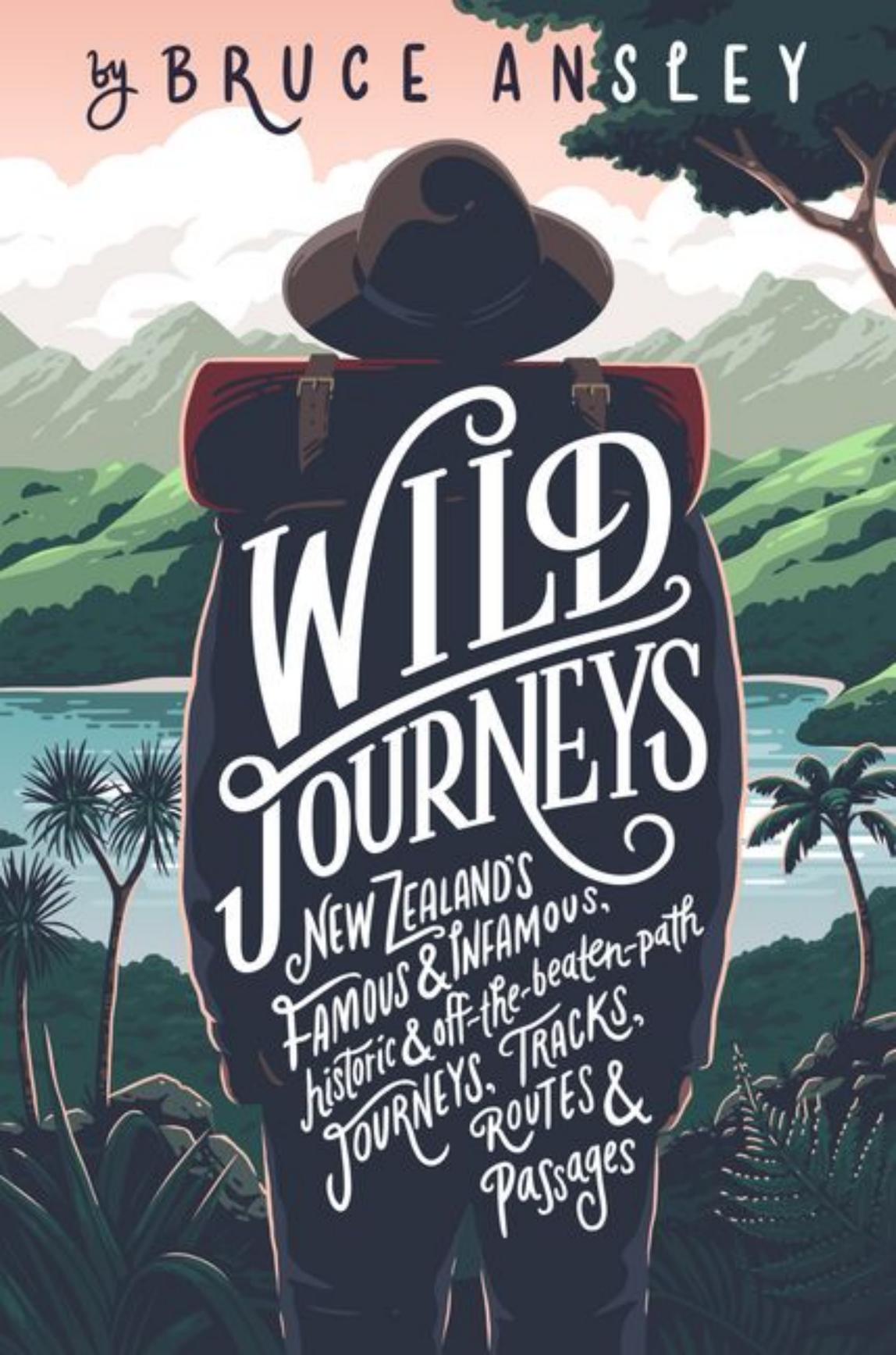


by BRUCE ANSLEY



WILD JOURNEYS

NEW ZEALAND'S
FAMOUS & INFAMOUS,
historic & off-the-beaten-path
JOURNEYS, TRACKS,
ROUTES &
PASSAGES

1

Chasing George

New Zealand in 1962 was a nation of just two and a half million people, who prided themselves on knowing everyone else by their first names.

Keith Holyoake was Prime Minister, Dove-Myer Robinson Mayor of Auckland. Peter Snell ran a world-record mile. Wilson Whineray captained the All Blacks. George Wilder escaped from prison.

George broke out of prison three times. He fooled the police. He lived in the bush. He swam rivers, crashed through roadblocks. He was polite and apologetic to people he stole from.

What else? Well, nothing really. He's like a frame that has lost its photograph. Only a murky background remains.

Yet George was once the most celebrated man in the country. People followed his tracks. They applauded his escapades. They diminished his crimes: oh, a few counts of burglary and car conversion. Nothing, really. Just a young man feeling his oats.

They even sang songs about him, or at least, sang along with Howard Morrison's 'George The Wild(er) NZ Boy'.

Even today he is elusive. He got away from the police dozens of times. Now he escapes the public. He lives near a tiny settlement at the bottom of Hawkes Bay. It is as much a bolthole as you could find in this country. Some people know where he lives, but not many. Oh, and he plays golf.

Half a century on from the days when every newspaper marvelled over the way he stayed out of sight, George Wilder is still lying low. He remains fleet. In fact, he seems to have got rather better at it over the years. His tracks remain on the land nonetheless.

George first escaped on 17 May 1962. He climbed a ten-metre wall to break out of New Plymouth prison. It was quite a feat; the hopelessness of the place must have lent him wings. New Plymouth prison was built around 1870 in an era of Victorian prisons. New Zealand favoured, then, dreadful stone dungeons, although at least this one didn't become a backpackers' hostel like Christchurch's Addington jail, or a tourist attraction like Napier's.

These prisons fascinate the public because of their meanness, their sense of bread and water. They are the deepest, darkest dungeons of fairy tales. People look at their barren cells and shiver deliciously. They ask to see the places where people were hanged.

Only two people were executed in the New Plymouth prison, both in the late nineteenth century, both Maori, one for killing a surveyor parcelling up his land for sale, the other for murdering his wife.

The jail stands on the corner of Downe and Robe streets, prime CBD real estate in New Plymouth, a sad place with its

blank stone walls broken by tiny windows. As with all the other relics of grim justice, no one wants to stay very long.

Neither did George Wilder. Hard-labour convicts were still breaking rocks there in the late 1950s, not long before George escaped. He was in for burglary, car conversion (a Jaguar, one of his favourites) and shop-breaking.

The cells were tiny, only 2.1 metres by 3 metres, the smallest in the land, too small to swing a cat or hold a man. So over the wall went George, and you only have to stand outside this stone pile to sympathise: he was a creature of bush and space.

He was said to have changed out of his prison clothes on the jail's roof, putting on a check shirt and air-force blue trousers, although there's no record of where he got them. A small car was reported to have broken through a police road checkpoint on the New Plymouth to Waitara highway shortly thereafter and, chased by a traffic officer, it disappeared. Police said it was a green 1935 Chevrolet Junior with primrose grille and wheels; George always liked his cars. Police said George was a tough man but not dangerous.

The legend began at that moment.

He might have been seen here, he was reported there, but essentially he disappeared.

At the time, Scott Carpenter was orbiting the earth and winning a reputation for disobeying orders. Adolf Eichmann, who stood trial for Holocaust atrocities inside a glass cage in Jerusalem, was on his way to the gallows.

George Wilder was creating his own reputation. A stolen Thames Trader he was believed to be driving crashed through a roadblock near Tokaanu. A policeman fired two shots at him.

They missed. ‘Crashing through roadblocks’ was to become the most-used phrase of his escapes.

Police gave chase at speeds of up to 75 miles an hour (120 kilometres per hour) — not too bad for an old Trader. They found the van abandoned. Wilder had ‘escaped into the bush’, the second most-used phrase of his escapes.

Police believed he’d doubled back to Tokaanu. They set up a roadblock at Moerangi, not far from Tokaanu. A light-blue Austin A50 slowed, almost stopped, then crashed through the roadblock and roared away. Next day the car was found bogged in mud some ten kilometres to the north. Police began searching the western shores of Lake Taupo.

Well, Moerangi is still named on the map, but on the ground it is no more than a sign pointing to a nearby station. I reach the top of the Waituhi Saddle, driving through bush, before realising I’ve gone too far, although the view is worth it. Then back, past Moerangi and through Karatau Junction, whose perfect old school is now the community hall, with the new school beside it.

But Tokaanu has seen better days. The petrol pumps have gone but the little church is well-cared-for, unlike in some small towns. If there are people here, they’re staying indoors.

Tokaanu was once a popular thermal resort but it is eclipsed by nearby Turangi now. The grand hotel still dominates the town, giving the empty streets an air of gravitas. When George Wilder was on the run, the Tongariro power scheme and the Tokaanu power station were in full swing and the area was thriving.

I begin to realise that half a century ago is light years away for New Zealanders. The country has changed so much in that time. This is a journey through a New Zealand that once was but no longer is, just as the George Wilder character could no longer exist.

CHASING GEORGE

George was a child of his time. I first heard of him at school. The teacher asked what we thought of him. One boy said he was a crook who should be back behind bars. Oh, the indignation. The world, or at least our world as contained in Room 13, rose up against the heretic.

George was a bit like the Lone Ranger, without his horse. He wasn't a crook, not really, he'd hardly done anything wrong, and what about all of those nice notes? On the other hand, look at his courage, his cunning, his great thirst for freedom. For life!

In those days an ability to live in and off the bush was one of the great New Zealand dreams. To go off on your own, to survive without help from anyone, to run rings round the cops, to be your own person absolutely. The cold? The loneliness? The almost complete lack of food? Nah. In that age of nuclear paranoia all of us believed that when the big one struck, why, we'd just strike out for the bush. Exactly as George Wilder had done. He was our hero.

By 18 July, when George had been on the run for two months, police speculated publicly that hunger could force him to give up. He had only roots and ferns for food, they said. They believed him to be somewhere along the western shores of Lake Taupo, in rough, scrub-covered country — 'Tough going all the way,' said the search controller. They'd placed cordons of men and dogs. Launches had joined the hunt, and an aircraft.

Essentially, they were right. George was ensconced in Waihaha, a bay on Taupo's western shore which still can only be reached by water or walking track.

Much later Antonios Papaspiropoulos, a writer and poet, moved into an old, derelict cottage in Waihaha with his wife,

Victoria, and their three children. He wanted a refuge, a sanctuary where he could recoup, recover, find a new direction in his life. The cottage had not been lived in for at least ten years. Its owner told him that George Wilder had hidden there.

As the family cleared and cleaned and painted, they found four pencil sketches by George Wilder inside a wardrobe. That find led them several ways. Antonios found his sanctuary there, and his new direction. And, he wrote, ‘simplicity, serenity, and large doses of reprieve’. He felt a resonance with George Wilder, whom he believed had found both refuge and his creative muse in the cottage. The poet grew ‘a thief’s eye for detail’. He dubbed his home the ‘George Wilder Cottage.’ He began writing.

When the local newspaper ran a story about Antonios’s interest in the famed escapee, people dropped in notes of their experiences. George’s reputation had flourished in the half-century since his escape. He’d been invested with strange powers.

One man wrote of him escaping police by faking his footprints: he put his boots on back to front, so his pursuers thought he was heading in the opposite direction. Those who want to test this theory should try it.

Those stories are part of the enduring Wilder legend. He is said to have stolen cars and performed amazing stunts in them, to have crashed through roadblocks and fled into wild country, to have lived off the land, to have hidden from searchers under their noses and even to have joined them in searches for himself, to have swum wild rivers and leapt over tall mountains, probably in a single bound.

Some of those stories are verifiable; at least, they were reported in the nation’s newspapers, which in those days took a sober view

of their responsibilities, named their sources and reported them accurately, if sometimes dully. (Though George Wilder was never dull: how could he be, on the run, police at his heels, for months at a time?)

An essential part of the narrative, and of his enduring popularity with the New Zealand public, was the notes he was said to have left in the houses and baches he broke into for food. They were said to be apologetic, humble, even sweet. Very sorry about the damage, sorry for taking your food, needs must etc.

But none of the newspaper accounts of the many episodes in his escapes reported these notes, none of those I read at least. I begin to wonder why he left them. They seem dangerous, for two reasons. First, they would alert the police to his whereabouts, and second, they would be, effectively, confessions to further crimes for which, sooner or later, he'd be called to account.

Did George leave those notes? Perhaps, perhaps not. Legends feed upon themselves and grow in the telling. The best I can say is that I haven't seen one, or found anyone who did, or read a contemporary newspaper account which mentions them.

Yet George's public insisted upon them. One of the tales related to Antonios came from a bride upset because George had stolen the bridegroom's suit off the line on their wedding day. (Who would *wash* a suit? On the day of the wedding?) Another came from a woman whose parents had been burgled by Wilder, who quaffed her mother's collection of miniature bottles of whisky, gin and so on, and left an apologetic note saying he'd been so hungry — and thirsty.

On the other hand, *something* had alerted the police and led them to his whereabouts, and what could be a better clue than the notes? Antonios felt there was an element of folklore in the

stories, but certainly, he believed, the notes existed: there were simply too many people talking about receiving them.

George could settle the account one way or the other, but he's not saying.

Another point in the story seems clear enough: the Waihaha house was his base, for quite a while. Antonios's account of finding drawings inside the wardrobe drew a rare, if indirect, response from the legend himself, holed up somewhere near Cape Turnagain: according to his sister, who contacted the poet, they weren't George's. Evidently he never drew inside wardrobes. Why this, of all the stories that circulate about George Wilder, should elicit a contact, even a denial, is anyone's guess. Perhaps he simply objected to the notion that he might be in the closet, in any sense.

Another point: she didn't dispute the fact that he had lived in the cottage for some time, marking off the days on the wall. Clearly he'd made the house in Waihaha his base.

Much later, I read a review by John Horrocks of Gerard Hindmarsh's book *Outsiders: Stories from the Fringe of New Zealand Society*. The book included a piece about George Wilder, an outsider if ever there was one. Horrocks included a story of his own in the review: one of the houses in Waihaha was owned by the Richwhite family, whose scion David went on to become a very public merchant banker. They kept a plywood dinghy there. George took it and rowed across the lake to Kinloch, where he was said to have broken into baches for supplies.

I go to Kinloch and think about that voyage across the lake.

Kinloch has that affluent, self-satisfied air of lakeside subdivisions, flush rather than flash, every lawn mowed, all hedges trimmed, the lake's Wanaka to Taupo's Queenstown, with not too much space for visitors.

Sir Keith Holyoake, then Minister of Agriculture and later Prime Minister, first made it famous when he bought a sheep station there in 1953. Perhaps as a result, Kinloch was subdivided in 1959, and one of its best pieces of architecture remains the relaxed mid-century house which Holyoake is said to have described on his deathbed as his pride and joy.

In 1962, when George came raiding, the settlement was still embryonic, a scattering of baches, but it had one relevant feature. It lay 17.5 kilometres in a direct line from Waihaha, a long voyage by dinghy.

Horrocks told me that his family had bought the dinghy from the Richwhites. It was a small, heavy, blunt-nosed vessel, not easy to row.

Taupo is as much inland sea as lake. It is huge, the biggest lake in New Zealand. Fierce winds can sweep across it, creating a chop very much like a stormy sea. In 1962 there'd have been few lights around it, apart from Taupo on the other side.

George would have shoved off into darkness. Much worse, he faced a round trip of thirty-five kilometres. He'd have wanted to go there and back in the dark; the trouble with isolated places is that someone intruding upon them is much more visible. They're difficult to hide in.

He'd have launched the dinghy from the beach at Waihaha, taken a fix on the odd light across the lake, and shoved off. Nothing in the legend says anything about seamanship — it's all about his skills in the bush.

Well, rowing a dinghy is easy enough. But rowing a blunt-nosed one, a heavy old thing, a very long way on a lake which might have been calm enough but quite possibly was not, is an astonishing feat.

I take my own dinghy for a row in Putiki Bay at Waiheke Island as a test. It is a light, fibreglass dinghy, perhaps a little short to make a decent rowing boat, but then the Horrocks's dinghy wasn't long either. As a rough estimate, I reckoned I could row at a walking pace, perhaps three knots. But not against a wind. And for how long? After just a couple of kilometres, out to the bay entrance and back, I am quite ready to go home for a rest.

Without stopping, the journey would have taken Wilder at least ten hours there and back. In the dark. With only a rest at half time, perhaps lying back in some bach's easy chair, opening a can from a kitchen cupboard. The thought of the row back certainly would have spoiled my appetite.

Perhaps, as John Horrocks suggested, he crept around the edge of the lake and hid in one of the many bays on the way. Either way the man wasn't just a fugitive. He was a miracle.

There are two ways of getting to Waihaha now. One of them wasn't there in George's day, for now tourists on foot or on bikes traipse past the bay on the Great Lake Trail.

The way George probably arrived there was along the Waihaha Road. It must have been a pretty safe bet then — remote, little used, rough. He could have sneaked along it in the dark unseen. Even these days the road starts well. I drive past farms and through an increasing number of gates, growing lumpier and bumpier all the way. Sheep and cattle take a close interest.

Eventually, after a final, indignant twitch of a bull's tail, I can go no further.

I abandon the car, go through one last gate, and find a few young Italians camped in a clearing.

Waihaha? They look puzzled. One of them thinks it is five hours' walk away. (A Department of Conservation worker had

told me the same thing, but it turned out she was talking about the Waihaha hut, which was in the opposite direction.) I don't bother asking if they know anything about George Wilder. They are here for the scenery, and there is plenty of that. The green land slopes gently before it dives through bush down to the lake.

Taupo, the resort city, glitters across the lake. It seems a very long way away. Half a century has created another world. The town has grown and grown. New subdivisions are everywhere. Is there anything more jarring than the accommodation industry en masse? The rule is, the more beautiful the place, the more dire the architecture, and Taupo does its best here.

George's side of the lake, though, would still be recognisable to him.

I take an unmarked track which seems to lead in the right direction, downwards, and find the Waihaha track not far away. The sign assures me Waihaha is only 15 minutes away, but it takes longer. The old track to the baches below is now used also by anglers, who are asked to first register with a local Maori trust board. It angles down the hill and dives into a stream bed. All around, bush birds tsk and chatter.

I shuffle over rocks and around boulders. The bed is dry, but must be a precipitous, dangerous route in the wet. More bush in George's day, more runoff, more water in the stream. As for doing it in the dark, you'd have to be a mug — or a prison escapee. Yet this is probably the path George used.

The track lands on a flat and threads through bush, emerging beside a simple, attractive house, the Richwhite place. A sign has that ring of patronage: it is private property. I am welcome to pass through but not to camp, light fires or leave litter, which seems fair enough.

Along the foreshore several other cottages poke their fronts through the bush. The George Wilder cottage is a simple affair down at the end. A few dinghies lie about. The lake is full of trout. Plenty of baches in other bays all nicely stocked. Would he have been living off roots and ferns, as the police suggested? Oh dear, no. Only a week after his escape police were confident that starvation would force him out of hiding and perhaps it did, baches and homes around Lake Taupo becoming his larder. But he was at large for another two months and no one ever grabbed him as he was pinching a feed.

Police complained of the rough country they were searching in. Fifty men were hunting for him, but on his side George had bushcraft, cunning and a degree of desperation too.

His hideout must have seemed safe enough. Waihaha is closed in by cliffy headlands on two sides. Anyone coming in from the lake by boat would be easily seen. It is a long noisy walk through the bush and along the foreshore. Plenty of time for a man on his guard to slip away.

George would have been very happy here. I wanted to escape to this place myself.

But the net was closing. Police had got wind of him. They were concentrating their search along Taupo's western shore, where Waihaha lay. Police cordons of men and dogs were joined by launches, even an aircraft. Residents were asked to search their houses and make sure their cars were locked.

The search became a national sport. All of the wild money was on George.

He broke cover next at Mangakino, in a stolen Land Rover, another favourite of George's. Brian Main, the policeman who

later arrested him, reckoned he kept a fleet of cars in the bush, and he would amuse himself doing wheelies.

This time newspapers reported he 'flashed past' a police checkpoint near Mangakino. Can you flash in a Land Rover?

The vehicle was found abandoned near the top of Titiraupenga, 1042 metres high. Police admitted that the task of finding him up there was formidable. The mountain was surrounded by a logging area and heavy bush. It was criss-crossed with bush tracks and hunters trails, gouged by creeks and gorges.

Millworkers, forestrymen, farmers and soldiers joined the hunt. This was becoming a national pastime, and oh, the drama of it.

George was said, again, to be exhausted and desperate for food. But, police said, the chances of him being caught while on the mountain were not high. This was Wilder country and George was at home in it.

Yet they *did* almost catch him. He was spotted near Whakamaru, a little way down the road from Mangakino, and quite close to the road leading up the mountain. 'Net closes', proclaimed the newspapers.

One moonlit, frosty, misty night he broke into a farmhouse. He smashed a back window of the house. The farmer thought the noise was his cat. 'But then I heard footsteps,' he told reporters. 'I grabbed my rifle from beside the bed, tiptoed out to the back room and kicked the door open. George must have heard me coming because he wasn't there.

'I moved outside meaning to fire a couple of shots in the air to alert the police and the Army men. But I'd forgotten to put the bolt in the rifle and load it.'

The farmer was sanguine enough. He went back inside and telephoned the police instead. He thought Wilder was probably starving but he wasn't going to get any more involved in the search: 'If he tries again tonight he can have it. I'm not going to stay here.'

Four Alsatian police dogs and a posse of more than thirty police, prison officers, soldiers and bushmen gave chase. George threw them off by doubling back on his tracks (possibly giving rise to the backwards boots story), leaping into the Huiarau Stream and swimming across it. The stream was perhaps ten metres wide, the very stuff of legend!

Next day George was back on the front page: 'Wilder tears through cordon on bicycle.' He'd pinched a bike and crashed a cordon, racing down a steep hill on the Whakamaru straight and onto the Mangakino Stream bridge. Cars formed a roadblock. He nipped through a gap between them, pedalling all the faster, flying like a bird, because a policeman fired a shot allegedly in the air to alert searchers, and George may have thought the rifle was pointed at him.

But a *bicycle*? For a man as keen on cars as George Wilder?

Perhaps the locals had obeyed police advice and locked their cars, every one of them, although a practised car converter should have had no trouble with that. More likely he was improvising. Cars can be heard from afar on quiet country roads. Bicycles are silent.

He threw police dogs off the scent by wading through a freezing, knee-deep stream and at 4.30 that morning broke into a farmhouse, again in nearby Valley Road.

The farmer heard him. 'At first I thought it was one of our three young sons in the bathroom,' he told reporters. 'I called

out something about getting back to bed, then heard Wilder bolt through the window.'

He tried to start the farmer's car but the canny cocky had removed the rotor, an old-fashioned device essential to cars of that era.

Again George escaped. This time he confounded the police dogs by walking through a mob of sheep to kill his scent.

My, it was cold. Frosts of minus eight to minus fourteen degrees had whitened the land for a week. How long could George stand it?

Not very much longer.

A day or so later, a Saturday afternoon, he was caught. Constables Hamilton and Gyde, with police dog Bruce, found him hiding in a hole ten metres from a logging road.

A famous newspaper photograph shows him in a police car, flanked by policemen, in irons, handcuffs being a lame term for the heavy steel bracelets on his wrists. He doesn't look worn-out, or cold, or at the end of his tether. He doesn't even look resentful, just resigned. The headline says, '*Got him!*'

One newspaper described him as hungry and tired, but lean, fit and far from exhaustion. He was clean-shaven and dressed in black jeans with a black jersey and boots with no soles (perhaps he'd ruined them by wearing them back to front). They took him to the Mangakino Police Station and fed him his first meal in two days. Then, back to the pokey he went.

More than half a century later he would still find his way around Whakamaru and Mangakino without any difficulty at all, even on a bicycle. The two small towns are in their own time capsules. Both began their later life as hydro villages, both of them bustling and busy when George was scooting around.

You get to Whakamaru across the top of the power station's dam, Lake Whakamaru quiet behind it. Black swans and blue herons poke about carefully. Grassy slopes run up to the inevitable pine forest. George could not have chosen a more dramatic backdrop, although having other things on his mind, probably he didn't give it much thought.

Unbelievably strong forces shaped this country. Whakamaru is the oldest of eight volcanic centres, some twenty-eight eruptions over thousands of years spraying the area with burning debris. Volcanic rock forms monuments, sculptures, cathedrals, cliffs, bluffs, all around it.

The last upheaval, a mere sixty or so years ago, shaped an entire village: the Whakamaru power scheme. State houses are laid out in curving streets of such beauty it is hard to believe now, in an age of geometrical subdivisions, how government planners could have been so derided. A little further on lies the village centre, with its store, café, takeaway, garage — everything a modern society needs.

The turnoff to Titiraupenga lies along the modern road the hydro workers built between Whakamaru and Mangakino. The mountain rises at the edge of the Pureora Forest Park, where fifteen years after it gave refuge to George Wilder protesters took to the treetops to save the ancient rainforest — podocarps which sheltered the rare northern kokako among other species. Unusually, they won. Trampers, mountain bikers and guided tours follow George's tracks now.

From the north the mountain looks like a child's sandcastle, sloping sides, flat top with a perfect cone sitting on it. Its reputation is more severe. Its points and planes glower over the land. Shadows lie across valleys and ravines, giving it a ravaged look.

The road leading towards it, Sandel Road, is a pleasant, storybook sort of road, not quite wide enough for a centre line, but tarsealed for much of its length and running through farmland and the remains of plantations until it ends quite suddenly and becomes the gravel Bush Road, the name hinting at what the country must once have been like up here.

The landscape changes at about the same time and starts to show its volcanic bones. Little bluffs, odd bumps and turrets begin poking out of the paddocks. The road ends in private property now.

Huiarau Stream flows through it. Frankly, it doesn't look much. It's early spring now. Perhaps the stream is quieter, but its banks show no sign of it running rampant.

George was said to have leapt into a raging torrent and swum to safety, but now, even at his age, he could wade across without getting his shorts wet. Sharp cliffs, gorge-like, show where the stream was in its heyday.

Farmers around here evidently take the view that any tree not a pine is taking up good grass space.

Valley Road, home to the farmhouses George broke into, is nowhere to be found.

I go down to Mangakino, a town of charming cottages where power-scheme workers once lived, now painted pink and yellow and pale blue and green, with verandas and trellises and flowers, the kind of place where people stop what they're doing and peer at your passing.

The town centre accommodates a big tavern, which locals boast has the first and largest island bar in the country. They might have mentioned something more important: it was one of two towns designed by the famed émigré, modernist architect

and town planner Ernst Plischke, making the town truly unique. The other town was Kaingaroa.

Mangakino has a café and store, and a real estate office where I pop in to ask about people with long memories. A nice woman there points me towards Robert Dwane, said to know a lot about the place.

Robert tells me his father lived in the town before him. Robert, though, was away during the George Wilder affair, returning a little while after and staying there ever since. But he remembers a lot, confirming the newspaper stories, and he says I couldn't find Valley Road because it is now McDonald Road and he knows of no one from Wilder's era still living there.

We stray from the subject. He tells me about his hair. He is seventy-two and it is still pure auburn without a trace of grey. Somehow, without any chemical help, he has reversed the ageing process. His hair was pure white until he got married. Then it took on its present hue, a pure, unflecked, dusky Titian. Unbelievable — but then, so is George.

I surreptitiously question his wife, Gwen. It is true, she says. If she ever discovers his secret, she'll patent it.

Somehow, this seems to fit. The town looks topsy-turvy, as if anything can happen here, and probably has. It exists in a bubble of its own. George could sneak in tomorrow and feel at home. Some, quite a few possibly, would recognise him immediately. Hello George. How've you been?

George's next escape lasted almost six months: 172 days. He was serving six and a half years for burglary, shop-breaking, theft and, of course, escaping.

In the early hours of 30 January 1963, prison officer R.H. Grubb was knocked unconscious as he was checking cells in the east-wing basement of Mount Eden prison, then bound and gagged. Grim Victorian piles evidently did not suit George at all well and this one was worse than New Plymouth. Thirty-six people had been executed there, latterly on a scaffold known as ‘the meccano’, its steel pieces bolted together in a thin space resembling a rocky gorge. The last was Walter Bolton, also the last person to be executed in New Zealand: the hanging in 1957 is said to have been botched so he was effectively strangled to death. That was only six years before George and his three companions, all of them seasoned prison escapees, made their break. No modern notions permeated the grey walls of ‘The Rock’: it was designed to intimidate. Its gaunt walls still rise above the motorway like a spectre. The prison might have cowed its inmates, but it also gave them a strong incentive to depart.

George and the others went over the wall on a rope made of sheets, of course: next to letting down their hair, which would have made it a short journey, sheets were the traditional way to immortality. The record is currently held by one Ahmad Shelton who, while awaiting trial in a Los Angeles jail, rappelled fourteen storeys down a rope made of sixty bedsheets, calling the *Los Angeles Times* to boast about the feat even before his escape was announced.

Two shots were fired at the Mount Eden desperadoes, one when a small green car failed to stop. Police warned that one of the escapees, Frank Matich, could be dangerous when cornered.

A prison officer told newspapers that Wilder must have worked all night, using a hacksaw to cut away steel facing around

the architrave of his cell door then patiently chipping through the wood around the lock with either a chisel or a steel knife. Clearly the New Zealand prison system gave him every reason to rehabilitate himself in society, if a little ahead of his time.

The prison's forensic description of the escape continued. George nailed a twenty-five-centimetre length of leather belt into the wood above the lock and used it as a lever for his knife or chisel. As soon as he got the cell door open he used an 'improvised key' to free the other three.

They ambushed Prison Officer Grubb, knocked him out, bound him with lengths of towelling and a leather belt, took his keys and opened the heavy wooden door to the detention block. They locked that door behind them and used a hacksaw to cut a padlock on the door leading to the exercise yard. Obviously they weren't short of tools. They dragged poor Officer Grubb into a lavatory in the exercise yard beside the prison wall.

'Standing on each others' shoulders', they threw the rope of sheets through the light steel mesh covering the top of the yard, forced a hole through it, climbed six metres up the sheets, through the hole and down a lesser drop on the other side.

When Prison Officer Grubb (who was later treated and discharged) failed to make his next routine phone call to the officer in charge, the break was discovered. The hunt began.

George was described as 1.8 metres tall, of sallow complexion, with fair hair, grey eyes and scars on both knees.

The scars were of no use, of course, for George seems never to have worn shorts, and the description was pretty useless too. All photographs of George show him with dark hair.

The *New Zealand Herald* published several pictures of him, all different, all looking little like the photographs taken after his

arrest. The newspaper suggested he might be hard to identify. His face in the later photographs seems to be made up of triangles: his nose, his ears, his countenance itself the face of a pixie rather than a gnome, always a hint of humour; heavy eyebrows; big, sharp eyes wide-spaced; anxious lines etched into his forehead beneath a mop of dark hair. Not a face you'd be scared of, more someone you used to know.

The four disappeared into the blue. The green car proved a false lead, as did a launch missing from its Hobson Bay mooring. The sure and certain sightings of George began, lots of them, many putting George in several different places at the same time.

A citizen was waiting in his car on Ponsonby Road when two men came along, spotted the car and its driver, put hands to their faces, muttered, 'We'd better get out of here,' turned around and headed off in the opposite direction. The man had time to observe that one of them was Wilder, 'beyond a doubt'. The other was said to be Rueben Awa, another of the escapees.

Obviously Ponsonby Road was different then. In today's eclectic crowd the pair would never be noticed.

Half an hour later 'an Islander' complained that two men had attacked him and stolen his car on Ponsonby Road. Police were looking for a 1954 green Ford Zephyr.

The escapees shared the front page with the Queen, who wrapped herself in furs and boarded an airliner with the Duke of Edinburgh, bound for Fiji at the start of her Royal Tour of Australia and New Zealand, an event which later was to eclipse even George.

On 2 February, the same day that gales across the Pacific forced the Queen and Duke back to Canada, Rueben Awa walked into

a Newmarket butcher's shop 'famished and unkempt' and said he wanted to give himself up.

He chose well. The butcher, a Mr N. Stratton, bought him a couple of bread rolls from the baker next door. The candlestick maker was not needed that day.

A couple of days later Frank Matich was recaptured in scrub at Whata Whata in the Waikato, 'hungry, barefoot and exhausted', but still defiant and 'prepared to fight' — until police dog Jon dissuaded him.

Now the royal visit was depleting the searchers' ranks as police concentrated on escort duties. The Queen knocked everything else off the front page. 'Fresh and cool as a summer breeze,' she was said to be, unlike George on the run. A 'triumphant tour' trumped the mad escape.

Until: drama in the Hunua Ranges. Near the little town of Kaiarau the fourth escapee, Patrick Wiwarena, was surprised on the road by two pig-hunters, who offered him a lift (of course). Another man with him dived off the road and down a steep bank. Police believed the diver was George. Several baches between Kawakawa and Kaiarau had been burgled in the previous few days, and food taken. Police were fair about that: they weren't sure the two escapees were responsible, they said.

Then, as a gale prevented the Royal Yacht *Britannia* from entering Wellington Harbour, police dog Duke gashed a leg climbing through a barbed-wire fence on the Wilder hunt. This was a quandary. Police dogs weren't as newsworthy as the Queen, but they weren't far behind. A disabled girl crawling on hands and knees to see the Duke carried the day for the royals.

As the royal couple left New Zealand, a crowd of 5000 roaring goodbye, Wiwarena was recaptured at a bach between

Lake Rotoehu and Lake Rotoma. It was not much more than a kilometre from search headquarters. He appeared in court with a black eye and his right arm in a sling. Police said he had injured himself eluding pursuers.

Pine forests now darken the land here, but bush still forms a tunnel as you drive from Lake Rotoiti to Rotoehu. Rotoma has more baches, many of them appearing more than fifty years old. Perhaps George looked them over. A beautiful, still place, very quiet, and I would have thought he'd have been exposed here.

I take a curly side road to the shadowed valleys on the northern side of Rotoehu. Secluded, with many classic Kiwi baches — pale green, the further back from the lake the older, waterfront property being a more recent maxim of real estate. The place would have suited George, I think.

Police next focused their search on Murupara, where police believed he and Wiwarena had arranged to meet. I go there.

Road workers are rebuilding the bypass, and I wonder why the town needs one. Surely there couldn't be great numbers of cars heading for the Ureweras, probably the wildest road in the country? Besides, Murupara never seemed prosperous enough to lose its through traffic. A roadman gestures furiously at the ground as I drive through. Slow down? Stop? Then why the bypass? Perhaps I'm being blamed for Murupara's woes.

This was Wilder country in the 1960s: remote, sparsely populated, a wild expanse of New Zealand sweeping into the all-but-impenetrable Ureweras.

Yet the police soon lost interest in the town. A car was stolen from Kawerau and later found at Whakatane. Nothing to connect the theft with Wilder, but it was their only fresh clue. They cast about. They searched on the Coromandel after a report that a

horse-float driver may have picked him up and dropped him near Paeroa. Another sighting placed him back at Lake Rotoma.

A bach-owner found her door jammed, and upon pushing it open, saw a man standing inside. In her fright she fell, hurting her arm. Police were 'almost certain' it was George.

By the end of February, George had disappeared altogether.

Frank Matich had another crack at freedom, trying to hacksaw his way out of his cell again. He made too much noise and was nabbed. George was better at it. Hacksaws seemed to be freely available in New Zealand jails then.

Around 10 April, when George had been at large for more than three months, police reported a positive sighting — in the Waitakeres. A car reported missing in Gisborne had passed a police patrol car on Scenic Drive near Swanson. Police gave chase. The car pulled up. A man hopped out. Wilder. Police were *certain*. They said he looked slim and was shaven. He dived into nearby bush (George always 'dived').

Police dog Duke gave chase, lost him. They found an apple core, so fresh 'it hadn't turned brown'. Had George stopped for a bite?

Then a man who had been seen looking into the garage of a Titirangi resident was tracked by police dogs until they lost his scent in a creek.

Over eight days, thirty police checked more than 400 houses in Karekare, Piha and all the way up to Anawhata. Whoops! A man looking Wilder-like bought milk and doughnuts from a Jervois Road dairy back in Herne Bay. A constable gave chase but the man ran into Shelly Beach Road and disappeared.

After a taxi driver saw a man dive (of course) into bush, police dog Duke was on the case again. He tracked down a fourteen-year-old boy.

Four months after the escape Mr Justice Gresson gave Matich and Wiwarena ‘an exemplary sentence which will demonstrate the futility of these escapes, and perhaps help strip them of the false sentimentality and even glamour with which they are sometimes imbued by foolish and irresponsible persons’.

Ah, too late. Sentimentality and glamour were limpet-like on George. People were humming along to the Howard Morrison Quartet’s ‘George, the Wild(er) N.Z. Boy’. It was sung to the tune of ‘The Wild Colonial Boy’, the traditional ballad which had the same outcome in both Australian and Irish versions: romantic Robin Hood bushranger hunted down and shot dead.

However, George was still very much alive, somewhere, for he’d vanished again.

At the end of May, newspapers reported that he had been at large for four months. The *New Zealand Herald* ran a photograph of him. It looked vaguely like George. ‘He could be anywhere,’ the newspaper said, wisely. He was reported to possess a good knowledge of bush craft — ‘but that did not mean he was sitting around in the bush’.

By then, he probably was.

In his absence, we had other things to read about. Gordon Cooper, the US astronaut, was rocketing around Earth in his space capsule, setting a new endurance record. The bodies of Dr Gilbert Boyle and Mrs Margaret Chandler were found on the banks of a Sydney waterway, cause of death unknown. The Profumo affair was in full light. A rise in Golden Kiwi prize money was front-page news.

That June, Wiwarena escaped from Mount Eden a third time.

In July a National Airways Corporation DC3 crashed in the Kaimai Ranges killing all twenty-three aboard. Aucklanders

were outraged by the proposed purchase of a Barbara Hepworth sculpture, *Torso II*, for 950 guineas, which, in terms of its current value, was next to nothing. City councillor Tom Pearce compared the sculpture with ‘the buttock of a dead cow’. It was eventually bought by businessman George Wooller and donated to the art gallery.

On 16 July Wiwarena was recaptured not far from Tokaanu. He was said to be ‘well-dressed, well-fed and clean-shaven’.

A day later, George Wilder was caught near his old haunt, Taupo. He was recaptured at 11 p.m. on a cold, showery night, almost exactly a year after his first escape ended at Mangakino.

He had last been seen on 9 April, when he abandoned the stolen car near Swanson; at least, police thought it was George. For more than three months, he’d vanished. The most common newspaper story had been along the lines of ‘nothing to report’.

He’d disappeared into the blue and that was his most remarkable feat. New Zealand was a much smaller country in the 1960s. We were a nosier place. Everyone knew not only their neighbour’s business, but the comings, goings, attitudes, ages, incomes, sports, politics, marital states and IQs of their entire suburb.

You didn’t get someone like George, bad photographs or not, wandering about without anyone noticing, especially when any poll (had there been one) would have shown that three quarters of the nation wanted to clap him on the back and the others to dob him in, without any ‘don’t knows’.

In the end he was nailed by — a bird. Well, the combination of a bird and a concerned citizen. A ranger, Don Main, employed by what, in those pre-Department of Conservation days, was the Department of Internal Affairs, knew that someone had been

killing kereru, native pigeons, in an area called Runanga. It lay beside the Napier highway, about fifty kilometres from Taupo. Up to then it was noted only for the Runanga stockade, built like a Maori pa, one of a chain of small fortresses thrown up by Pakeha troopers in 1869–70 against Te Kooti's dwindling forces, and abandoned in 1876. After that the area was given over to farming and logging.

Main inspected a rough old wooden hut, sagging, missing some of its weatherboards, evidently part of a defunct logging operation, but found no one there. (Wilder later said he saw the man approach and took to the bush until the coast was clear.) But he must have suspected something. Soon afterwards, at nine in the evening, he and three policemen, one of them his brother Brian, left Taupo. It was a cold, wet night. They turned off the Napier–Taupo highway a few kilometres south of Rangitaiki onto a rough pumice road leading to bush on the foothills of the Ahimanawa Range and sneaked along the track.

'We could see a light inside,' Main told reporters. 'Fortunately I know the track well and we were able to reach the hut without tripping over anything.'

As Brian Main described it later, they kicked down the door and charged into the hut. They found George inside, dozing beside a fire, a couple of candles burning on a shelf over the fireplace, his radio playing soft music.

In this romantic setting George must have been feeling warm and comfortable, his usual instincts snoozing with him, his sixth sense put away for the night. In Ranger Main's account, 'He tried to get up at first, but then he realised he was properly caught and he just lay there. He was sullen after his arrest, and did not have much to say.'

George's wildest journey had come to an end. The handcuffs went on 172 days after he escaped, the longest New Zealand escape on record, beating Trevor Nash's 158 days from two years before.

The officer in charge, Sergeant Marson of Taupo, said that George was in very good physical condition but uncommunicative. He offered no resistance. He denied being George Wilder at first but Marson knew him from his recapture at Mangakino.

He had three loaded rifles and a dozen rounds of ammunition with him. He had apparently been living in the hut for some time, trapping possums, living off the land, using the rifles to get his dinners, maybe the kereru which led to his downfall.

Compare his arrest with the twenty-first century version. Wilder was known to be armed. In a modern version, the Armed Offenders' Squad would go in with body armour and assault weapons and dogs and a helicopter or two. Here, a trio of cops and a wildlife ranger tiptoed up a bush track in the dark and rushed in, no shots fired, fair's fair, everything's jake, a testimonial from the arresting officers, Sergeant Marston declaring there was nothing sinister about Wilder's weapons and Constable Main averring that he wasn't a violent person.

That was more than half a century ago but worlds away, and now I am traipsing through the events — and the deeper into it I go, the more I am immersed in its essential decency.

Did I have the sense of following in his footsteps? Nah. He trod too lightly, too easily.

So I go to Rangitaiki. The road passes Opepe, another of the stockades built during the Te Kooti campaign, where on 7 June 1869 some of Te Kooti's force surprised a detachment of fourteen Bay of Plenty militia camped in the abandoned village. Nine

militia men were killed, but no Maori. I walk up through damp bush to their graves, heavy, cold, wet, even in summer.

The sky lowers over the landscape and it begins to rain. The road tracks through arid pine forests that would not have kept George in kereru for very long. In fact, it doesn't look the kind of place where anyone would worry about pigeons now. Is there any country more depressing than a place where pines have been? A formless landscape, without landmarks, and I am lost in it. No sign of anything that once was, and especially no trace of George.

I follow this track and that, to the place where I calculate, or guess, George had been caught, but the land has been turned over. The old mill has long gone and George's hut was already falling down when he was found in it. I float around in this modern wilderness and come to an oasis: the Rangitaiki Tavern, 'home of the famous bugger burger'.

A bloke there remembers George being caught 'on one of the blocks up the road'. Lots of bush mills were working then, all gone now. He has a sharper memory of coming home over a bridge after a session and, bugger, there was a roadblock on the other side and he was bound to be snapped. But the police just looked inside the car and waved him through. They were looking for George. George had saved his bacon.

It is 7.30 a.m. I sit in a long room with the TV on the wall going, eating poached eggs on big square pieces of white-bread toast with thick bacon. The cook tells me he'd thought George was OK. He remembers the Howard Morrison song and looks as if he might break out a line or two.

I put my dishes on the counter. 'Thanks, boss,' he says.

George escaped from jail once more, for a only a few hours, but this seems the place to end the quest, except for some postscripts. For a start, how did George survive so well for so long within easy reach of Taupo? Someone must have known he was there, someone must have given him a hand.

Someone did.

I encounter a woman I once worked with in Christchurch, June Peka. She spent her childhood in Taupo. Here is what she told me:

I was eleven, I reckon. We lived in Taupo. I had a horse and all the freedom in the world.

We were quite feral. We didn't get into trouble but we weren't overseen much.

I was riding my horse in the bush when I found this beautiful, shiny black Buick. I was mad about cars so I was sure of it. Flash cars like that were few and far between. Later I saw George had a liking for Buicks and Jaguars and I know this one was a Buick. I think it might have been owned by Henry Johnson, who had a milk bar/restaurant in Taupo. Mum and Dad had the pie shop, the Cindy Lou restaurant and later the Le Mans hamburger bar.

I rode my horse up to it, and there was a bloke sleeping in the front seat. I thought he'd been injured, and he needed help. I rode home and got Dad.

We went back in his old Fordson van. We parked it and had to walk into the bush a few hundred yards. Dad told me to stay back.

He opened the door, and the bloke woke up, and they talked for half an hour or so.

I didn't know who he was. But I think that was how George and Dad met. Dad was a bit of a wide boy; he was on the fringes, but he was never involved in anything seriously criminal.

Later, after George had been caught and was in jail, he made contact with Dad again. Dad was a cook up at The Terraces hotel out of Taupo. He told me about meeting up with George again after he escaped. He took a waitress called Luvvie with him.

George was hiding in a hut, a cabin way up in the bush. It was pretty bare, just somewhere to sleep in. On the walls he'd drawn light switches, a calendar, he'd even drawn a light hanging from the ceiling. It was very realistic.

Dad was taking out food from the Terraces for some time. He must have given George my mother's rifle.

My mother's name was Ngaire, my father's Sonny. We were a shooting family.

The cops gave it back to us. They said they found it when they caught George.

It has words carved into the stock. They're quite faint: 'George Wilder.' I never really examined it, but now, I can see, faintly, underneath, 'C/- Sonny.' Dad almost definitely would have given it to him. He went out there to the hut quite a lot.

I still have the rifle. I've never used it since. I put the bolt away many years ago. It's lost now, so it can't be fired.

My brother and I always wondered why Dad didn't get into trouble. They wouldn't have been surprised to know Dad was involved.

I remember Brian Main too. I was in awe of him. He threatened to kick my arse once or twice.

I probably went up to the hut where he was caught, but I can't remember it. Taupo was the wild west in those days. We lived in the bush, even in the town streets — we lived in Tamatea Avenue — and half the houses were holiday houses. Most were batten and board baches or two Ministry of Works huts joined. Most you couldn't see from the road. You'd follow a track and there'd be a holiday house at the end of it. George would have had no trouble getting into them. Some weren't even locked. At others the key would be under the mat.

My friend Raymond and I did things like that and we were only kids. No one would be there for six months, or a year, and they were very easy to get into in those days. We didn't vandalise them, but we'd quite often get into those places, cook up some rice, make some cocoa.

I think everyone thought George was harmless. He was certainly not someone you'd be afraid of.

I remember the talk around town, people saying George was out there searching with the buggers last night, it was raining like hell, everyone had parkas on and George was with them with a big grin on his face hunting for himself.

That's another story for the George Wilder file, and here's one more. George is said to have had his hair cut by a well-known Taupo barber. He had no money, so the two made a deal: George would pay for his haircut with the skins of animals he'd shot.

Brian Main later went much further. By his own account he got George a job at Poronui Station, now a glamorous sporting

lodge in the Taharua Valley, south-west of Taupo: ‘He was a bloody good worker, did earthworks, built bridges, did anything and enjoyed it. He was just a young fella sowing his oats.’

Main died in March 2017, a little after his brother Don. His widow, Anne, told me he’d always liked George: ‘If you’d asked him about George, you wouldn’t have been able to get away. He would have gone on and on. You get the nasty, vicious ones now, but George? He was just a ratbag.’

His story lies astride another one, of what makes a New Zealand hero, of the characteristics we most admire in ourselves: enterprise, self-sufficiency.

In the great New Zealand literary tradition he loved small towns, small places. Where he lives now is near one of the smallest, Herbertville, a tiny place on the border of Hawkes Bay and Wairarapa. It was once a much busier place, when steamers put into nearby Cape Turnagain and the big coastal sheep stations were in their prime, loading wool onto schooners beaching on the sand and refloating with the tide. Pub, shops, police station. The grand old pub down the road at Wimbledon was built in 1869.

Now Herbertville is a place people have left, for it’s more a holiday-home settlement, with a camping ground that was bought by its campers.

In his own fashion George reversed the trend and boosted the permanent population by one. *The Evening Post* reported that when he was finally freed from Paparua Prison in Christchurch on 20 June 1969, ‘Wilder disappeared after his release ... as silently and efficiently as he glided into the bush after his escapes.’

WILD JOURNEYS

He's still lying low. He's not looking for publicity, although publicity is looking for him. Journalists, writers and TV producers have tried to entice him out. I wrote him a letter care of the local golf club, where, in a photograph of a golf team, published some forty years after his final release from jail, he is instantly recognisable. It was returned unopened.

George's wild journey continues. He has made his greatest escape of all.