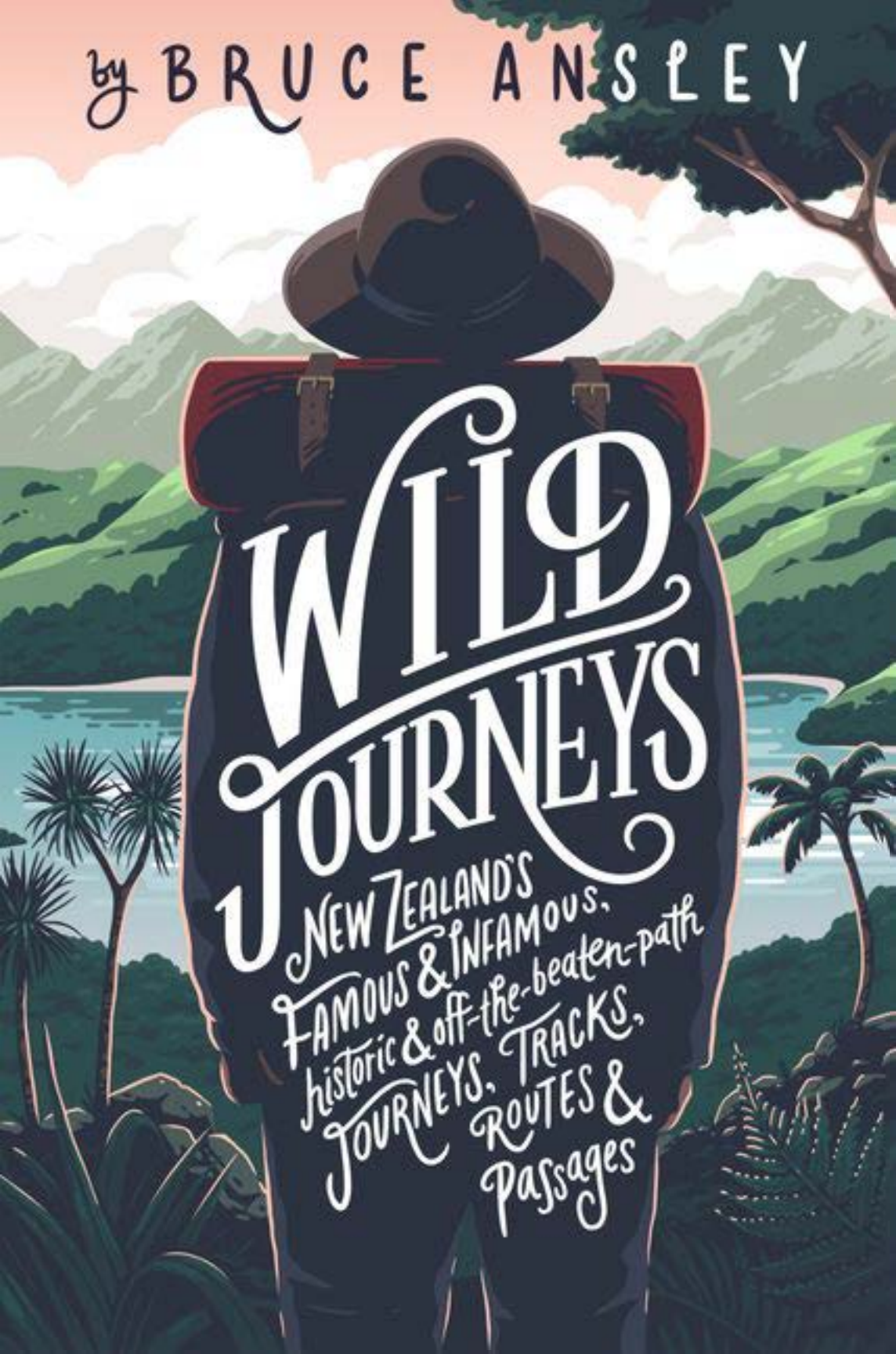


by BRUCE ANSLEY



# WILD JOURNEYS

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

14

# Keeping count

Motuihe lies in the Hauraki Gulf not far from Auckland, looking from above rather like a ham bone. A long thin island spreading into lumps at each end, it is 179 hectares of subtropical paradise. It was once covered in bush and will be again, one day, when the trees being planted by an army of volunteers grow into a mature ecosystem. In the meantime it is one of the most popular islands in the Gulf.

Sandy beaches grace its flanks. When the southerly wind blows the eastern side is sheltered, and in a northerly the western side remains calm, so that on any fine weekend one side of the island or the other is crammed with boats.

You can float in clear, pale-green water tinted with gold and think, How wonderful, what a place to live, just above the beach there, or on that cliff, or among the trees on that gentle sunny slope.

Yet this island's history is all about people seeking to get *off* the island rather than onto it, and one of the strangest episodes in New Zealand's modern history occurred here.

Count Felix von Luckner, German raider and scourge of the South Seas in World War I, was imprisoned on Motuihe after his capture in 1917. The island became the setting for his escape, among the most daring ever seen.

A few years later, von Luckner was transformed into a romantic hero, an international star. He'd won the attention of a man called Lowell Thomas, who would now be termed a creative. Thomas was an American journalist and adventurer in the early twentieth century, a period Hunter S. Thompson. He started with print, starred on radio, and became a hit on television. One of his two best-known creations was Lawrence of Arabia, a little-known soldier until war correspondent Thomas recreated him as a war hero and made him an international celebrity.

The other was Count Felix von Luckner, the Sea Devil. Thomas may not have coined the name, but he made it world-famous. He was smitten with von Luckner from the moment he first saw him at Stuttgart airport in the 1920s. The Count had stepped off an arriving aeroplane. Thomas, who never used one adjective when half a dozen would do, described him as tall, massively built, saluting in all directions in the perfunctory manner of the Prince of Wales. He was with a small blonde woman, his countess, 'like a fairy who had arrived on a sunbeam'.

Thomas found himself flying through Germany on von Luckner's tail and watching the couple being greeted and idolised by cheering crowds at every aerodrome. And when they eventually met, Thomas joined the adoring throng. Von Luckner, he said, was one of the most powerful-looking men he'd ever seen, a rollicking buccaneer of the good old 'Yo-ho-ho and a bottle of rum type'.

Well, possibly. Photographs taken of the Count in New Zealand usually show him as languid, elegant and always good-humoured even when captured.

By von Luckner's own account he rose from the ranks, joined the Salvation Army in Australia, hunted kangaroos, boxed, wrestled, became a Mexican soldier, blistered through the Pacific in his windjammer sinking millions of dollars of shipping without killing a soul (history records one death) and roaming the oceans under sail.

Now, his was a truly great story but any modern journalist would suspect that the Count was a romancer or, in today's terms, a champion bullshitter.

Not Thomas, which might explain why he still occupies a place in history after his fellow hacks have turned to dust: people love a good story, and a good story-teller, and the devil take the sceptic.

Von Luckner was as much pirate as 'raider'. His ship was the *Seeadler*, 'Sea Eagle', even then a remarkable vessel: she was a square-rigged ship, the last ever to be commissioned as a warship. She set sail in December 1916, sneaked through the British blockade in Norwegian disguise, and set about dispatching as many merchant vessels as von Luckner could find. Eleven were sent to the bottom with the loss of just one life, a seaman killed when a steam pipe was ruptured by a shell.

The German raider captured so many sailors, almost 300, that von Luckner was running out of food to feed them. He cornered a French barque, slowed it down by removing some of its spars, loaded the prisoners aboard, appointed a captured British captain her commander, and wished the vessel bon voyage.

The *Seeadler* then rounded Cape Horn and entered the Pacific, escaping a British ambush when a storm pushed her well south

of the waiting ships. Von Luckner had added another three ships to his tally when he came to Maupihaa, also known as Maupelia or Mopelia, a tiny, lonely atoll in the Society Islands. On 31 July 1917 he anchored outside the coral reef and went ashore, apparently for a picnic. But the wind and sea rose and, as many ships before her had been, the *Seeadler* was swept onto the reef and wrecked. Von Luckner later insisted it wasn't poor seamanship that cost him his ship, substituting the unlikely story that he'd been the victim of a tidal wave. The captain, crew and some forty-six prisoners were marooned.

The resourceful Count took an eight-metre ship's longboat and six of his men, intending to hijack another ship and return for his fellows. The heavily loaded boat sailed more than 3000 kilometres, its crew constantly bailing. They first reached Atiu in the Cook Islands, where they tricked the New Zealand Resident into giving them enough supplies to reach Aitutaki. The New Zealand Resident there was suspicious but powerless to detain them, and von Luckner sailed on to Fiji.

There they were captured by what von Luckner later insisted was a heavily armed vessel but was in fact a cattle steamer. Either way, the game was up. He was taken prisoner along with his crew.

Meanwhile, back at Maupelia the remaining crew, led by Lieutenant Alfred Kling, had done rather well. They had captured the French schooner *Lutece*, loaded with goods for sale around the islands: it was a floating supermarket whose cargo included Canterbury cake, plum pudding and loads of New Zealand butter. Off they went on a gourmet tour, leaving the unfortunate French crew on Maupelia. But the *Lutece* proved to be carrying some extra stock: scorpions, cockroaches and a nice range of vermin.

Pumping constantly, they reached Easter Island where Chilean authorities allowed them to put in for repairs. But the ship hit a rock and sank and the crew discovered her secret: she was so rotten she couldn't be fixed. They were interned for the rest of the war.

The remaining *Maupelia* castaways were rescued at about the same time von Luckner arrived in Auckland.

The New Zealand public was outraged by the German at first. Von Luckner was suspected of having sunk the passenger steamer *Wairuna*, along with her passengers and crew. It was untrue, and it would have been ironic if the German had been undone by a falsehood not of his own making. But he was tucked away in the Devonport naval base for safekeeping and later moved to Motuihe, together with government officials from Samoa, which, until 1914, had been a German protectorate. They included the pompous German governor of Samoa, Dr Erich Schultz.

The Germans by then must have become accustomed to paradise: South Pacific atolls, Fiji, and now an idyllic island in the Hauraki Gulf. Von Luckner described it as 'a beautiful strip of land'. They were trusted, especially by the good-natured camp commandant, Lieutenant-Colonel Charles Harcourt Turner. Turner had been beguiled by von Luckner, although according to the German's account the New Zealander had reservations: 'He apparently expected us to go breaking out of his camp breathing fire from my nostrils'.

If this was true rather than self-serving, then Turner clearly put his suspicions aside. Photographs and records of the Germans' lives on Motuihe show a gentle utopia: bushwalks, warm sea, a tolerant and kindly regime which even allowed shopping trips on Queen Street. The best of the South Seas for them. After all, who'd want to return to the carnage that was World War I?

In fact, some of the German population of Motuihe did. They included Walter von Zatorski, a German merchant navy cadet, who was intent on escape even before von Luckner's arrival. He and three other internees began building a boat in a cave on Motuihe, finishing its hull in mid-1916. He even devised a sextant to navigate with, painstakingly constructed from bits and pieces he found around the island — a brass hinge here, a mirror there, the frame fabricated from the brass of an old Primus stove, an adjusting screw from a safety razor — all of it so finely made it still lies in Te Papa in Wellington. Then a rainstorm struck. The cave collapsed, the boat was wrecked and that was that.

The Germans helped the canteen manager build a second boat but in true Kiwi fashion it was no sooner finished than it was sold.

Von Zatorski turned to a new plan. Lieutenant-Colonel Turner had acquired a launch. The Logan-built *Pearl* was his pride and joy. The prisoners and internees helped him with it. All the while they were collecting material for an escape: sails, munitions, food, navigation gear.

Von Luckner arrived. He found that the stage had been set, literally, for a Christmas show. Props were made. They became a useful cover for their escape equipment. Von Luckner claimed he built a radio set out of items he said were for the show, which he called the *Grosses Schauspielhaus* (after a theatre in Berlin). He said bombs were made in tin cans, pistols stolen from the camp arsenal, a fake machine-gun fabricated, a sail disguised as a stage curtain, a German naval ensign painted on a bed sheet.

Some of this was certainly true. The flag later flew on the scow they hijacked, the *Moa*. It is still on display at the Auckland Museum. The Count claimed to have stolen Turner's best dress



uniform and even his sword and scabbard. If this were so, one imagines Turner must have noticed.

Von Luckner appointed himself star of von Zatorski's show. A photograph in the Auckland Museum shows him happily at the launch's helm. His account of the escape included setting a fire in a barracks, which he helped fight, as a diversion. That was untrue, but trying to untangle truth from fiction in his tales is a waste of time. Who wants to let facts get in the way of a story so good that a century later it is still being told?

On the night of the escape, Turner sailed the *Pearl* back from Devonport, leaving two of the Germans to moor his boat near the jetty while he walked up the hill. As soon as he was out of sight, von Luckner, von Zatorski and nine others cut telephone wires, boarded the launch and off they went, eleven of them. It was 6.15 on a December night. Broad daylight.

At a brisk seven knots they rounded Cape Colville on the tip of the Coromandel Peninsula at dawn, anchored off either Great Mercury Island or Red Mercury (accounts differ) and hid out until they saw two vessels approaching. They captured one of them, the scow *Moa*, threatening the crew with home-made grenades. The captain protested: the vessel was designed for New Zealand's shallow waterways, not the high seas. 'We are sailing for our lives, by Joe,' von Luckner responded, and raised all the canvas the vessel could carry.

They pointed her towards the Kermadecs with the *Pearl* in tow. The fine old launch was lost on the first night. It was a second disaster for Turner: although von Luckner's story had him vacillating between stupid and blind, he was merely kindly. But the theft of his launch was another matter. He was sacked, court-martialled and dismissed from the defence force altogether.



The Germans were intent on raiding the Government stores hut on the Kermadecs for enough supplies to reach South America and thence Germany, or possibly to rendezvous with the German raider *Wolf*, which at the time was busy sinking two ships near the Kermadecs and laying mines off the North Island coast which claimed two more, one of them the trans-Tasman liner *Wimmera*. It sank with the loss of twenty-six lives.

The *Moa* reached the Kermadecs all right, and successfully burgled the government store on Curtis Island. Von Luckner proclaimed the islands German territory and became the only German sailor to capture British territory in that war, however short-lived. Then they saw smoke from a steamer and made off as fast as the old scow could go, which was not very fast at all.

The ship was the government cable steamer *Iris*, for the authorities had guessed the Germans' intentions. It caught up with them, fired a shot across their bow and the Germans surrendered.

Back to New Zealand they went, this time amid a great deal of favourable publicity. New Zealanders loved von Luckner's daring escape, and he came with a character reference from the *Iris*'s captain: 'He was a good sport'.

They were locked up Mount Eden prison. Von Luckner claimed the inmates gave them a hero's welcome on the promise that if the Germans were victorious he'd be made Governor and pardon the lot of them. He and his second-in-command Karl Kircheiss, a smaller and rather portly man, were then carted off to the tiny Victorian fortress of Ripapa Island in Lyttelton Harbour. Most of the others went to Somes Island in Wellington Harbour.

\*\*\*

One summer's day I begin following their trail, searching for traces of this amazing tale. I drop my anchor in the greeny-gold water of Horahia, the western beach on Motuihe where the ham bone is at its thinnest, so that you can go from one side of the island to the other in a minute.

On the edge of this bay is the old stone quay and the jetty, which in one form or another was there in von Luckner's time. It was perhaps twice as long then as it is now. From where I sit in my boat, which he'd have been far too smart a seaman to hijack for his getaway, he'd have been able to see Rangitoto still recovering from its last eruption, for its scoria surface was a good deal more bare a century ago than it is now. The young Auckland lay behind him. Now Auckland's skyline juts upward, the Skytower beyond even the Sea Raider's imagination. Motuihe, though, is intent on going back to what it once was, untouched by human hand.

I haul my dinghy up the beach and walk the easy slope onto the island. The day is blue, the sea warm, the island alluring.

The odd thing is that many people, Europeans at least, who lived on Motuihe for any length of time had to be dragged here, sometimes literally. Maori lived here once, but the evidence indicates there weren't many of them. They left remarkably few traces, a couple of pa, one large, one smaller. They preferred Motutapu just across the water, or the much bigger Waiheke nearby, where historians have counted dozens of pa.

Motuihe was covered in forest when Rangitoto erupted in the fourteenth century. It blew red-hot scoria and ash over its near neighbours, Motutapu and Motuihe, destroying the bush on those islands and probably on the western end of Waiheke Island too.

It's hard to see where Maori lived and cultivated their soil on Motuihe because in the early days of European settlement it was

farmed. The farmers felled the remaining forest and cleared the land. Sheep and cattle efficiently disposed of the rest.

When economics and common sense put an end to it all, a wider public took over, cleared out the rats and ferrets, got rid of the weeds and began the long job of regenerating the native cover. On some nearby islands such as Motutapu and Rotoroa the shift back to past glories is working remarkably well.

Only eighteen hectares of coastal forest remain here, but the Motuihe Trust is planting much more, and kiwi now run in the undergrowth.

A Pakeha farmer bought Motuihe in 1839, paying its Maori owners one cow, twenty blankets, ten axes, ten hoes, ten spades, six gowns, two red blankets, twelve Dutch pipes, six pots and one shawl. It was a bargain, all right: Pakatoa, a small island nearby, just out of sight beyond Waiheke, was for sale recently for \$40 million.

When the government bought Motuihe in 1872 they had a quarantine station in mind. One end was for animals. The other, the northern end, was intended for a possible smallpox epidemic. They built two big barracks buildings, a hospital, a brick fumigation structure with a high chimney and stables. One young girl died there of scarlet fever, and may lie in one of the unmarked graves in the cemetery.

But smallpox was overtaken in 1918 by a much greater tragedy. The SS *Niagara* had sailed from Vancouver via Hawaii and Suva to Auckland and picked up a highly contagious influenza on the way. Nothing, not even World War I, killed as many New Zealanders in such a short time as the 1918 influenza epidemic. Influenza was an even greater and certainly more immediate menace than Germans, who by then had signed the Armistice.

Some 9000 people died between October and December that year.

Auckland's death toll eventually reached 1100 and the city was in no mood for risks: thirty-nine men, twenty-four women and twelve children, all passengers and crew aboard the passenger liner RMS *Makura*, were landed on Motuihe in December 1918 and quarantined. One was dangerously ill, eight were seriously sick and the rest showed symptoms.

The ship proceeded to Auckland, to the dismay of Aucklanders. They suspected, probably rightly, that politics had overtaken caution. Two of the passengers were the Prime Minister, William Massey, and the pompous Joseph Ward, who fancied himself as co-prime minister. Aucklanders saw them as a toxic mixture, literally: they did not believe doctors' assurances that the remaining passengers were disease-free. They preferred conspiracy theory: politicians had prevailed.

The *Makura* berthed in the city under cover of darkness, over the protests of some passengers who objected to any suggestion of surreptitious entry, and sent everyone off to homes and hotels. She then left for Sydney, with Auckland's mayor, James Gunson, wailing in her wake: 'The whole business is reprehensible in the extreme.'

Some of those quarantined on Motuihe never left, and are buried on the island. The small cemetery there has seven marked graves. One is the final resting place of poor, brave Ethel Browning, wife of the *Makura*'s captain, who rushed to the island to help the sick and died nursing them. Another of the graves might contain the remains of a smallpox victim from the previous century. They all lie here, in a sheltered spot on Motuihe, where the wind sings a sad song in the pines. Little flax sculptures sit on the graves.

Oh, the view from this cliff-top eyrie: Motutapu to the left, then Rakino, and the Noises, and the eastern end of Waiheke, and other islands peeking from behind, and the blue sea all the way to Great Barrier.

Maybe von Luckner and his fellow Germans sat here and dreamed of home and saw the Gulf as their pathway. But what an unimaginative view of this paradise.

Old fortifications lie nearby, a gun emplacement which once commanded the approaches to Auckland harbour. A great deal more effort went into its concrete than ever went Ethel's way. But the military are quite used to graves, and their constructions last longer.

The internment camp on Motuihe for Germans and Austrians classed as enemy aliens was designed, in keeping with the stratified society of the day, for a better class of person: German and Austrian businessmen and government officials, the governor of Samoa and a bevy of bureaucrats. They might have counted themselves lucky.

Less fortunate 'aliens' went to Somes Island, that weather-beaten pile in Wellington Harbour, and shivered their way through the war. On Motuihe they swam, fished, lived in quality accommodation.

The former governor did his time in a new house of six to eight rooms, flashier than the camp commandant's house behind it, and much, much better than the barracks for soldiers and guards. Motuihe boasted quite a little village then, buildings spreading down the hillside, a fine view from every one of them.

A century on, the question, to me, is why anyone would want to leave. New Zealand prisoners of war who had endured the horrors of Gallipoli and the Western Front and were imprisoned

in a cold, dark land would have found this a paradise. It is, of course.

Passing by on the Waiheke ferry you can see only two buildings remaining on Motuihe. One is an angular structure on the north-west headland which I always believed must have been a barracks building but turns out to be nothing more than an old Ministry of Works shed, which, built of concrete, may simply have been too hard to remove with the rest. The other is the ancient water tower, too expensive to demolish but shaky: some worry that it is a risk to the public. A nearby concrete pad was the base for the navy's flagpole.

I walk up to the remains of the old pa on Te Raeokahu Point, and follow the angled trenches and ramparts. They run across the base of a small peninsula whose sides and bottom drop sheer to the sea. They're now guarded by Department of Conservation warning signs: 'Steep Drop-offs', 'Danger of Falling' and so on.

The earthworks are testimony to the pa architects' skill, for this is a perfect site: beaches for waka on either side, sheltered terraces.

Did von Luckner pause here to wonder? I doubt it. He was too immersed in notions of European aristocracy to consider traditional peoples. In 1918 he regarded himself as among barbarians born of a 'convict colony'. Yet the remains of Maori civilisation still lie on this island long after most traces of the Pakeha one have been obliterated.

In 1929, the quarantine station became a children's health camp. Hunger and disease, notably tuberculosis, were rampaging through the children of the poor and, on the threshold of the Great Depression, there were plenty of those. Health camps set out to give them good food, sunshine, exercise and structure.

Even when I was growing up they still had a fearsome reputation among children; you were ‘sent’ to health camp, which sat darkly in our minds as some kind of prison.

Whatever their regimes, they protected and healed vulnerable children, and still do. Children evacuated from the Napier earthquake in 1931 swelled Motuihe’s numbers.

In World War II gun emplacements were built on the island to protect Auckland against a possible Japanese invasion. Meanwhile Motuihe became home to a naval training base, HMNZS *Tamaki*. Jolly jack tars, no doubt celebrating their good fortune, were accommodated in the old quarantine buildings, twenty-two of them then. Another fifteen were built, including food and clothing stores, canteen, gymnasium, chapel, school, hospital, dental clinic, dormitories — enough for 517 people.

The village had become a town. Photographs from the era show streets, lamp-posts, two-storey buildings, a town square which the Navy called a parade ground. The rest of the island was farmed. When the Navy left in the 1960s the island went back to farming and eventually became part of the Hauraki Gulf Marine Park.

So a slice, a cross-section of New Zealand history, is contained in an island of 179 hectares: drama, disease, war, adventure, pestilence, plague and disaster. If Motuihe itself has not been through the fire, the fire has certainly been through *it*.

What is left of all this? The enterprise, the history, the drama of von Luckner and his famous escape? Nothing, really. A few graves in the cemetery, some remnants of the wartime gun emplacements.

I tramp around the northern end of the island, past the old Ministry of Works shed and the water tower, stop at the cemetery,



admire the view from the gun emplacements, stroll back down to the isthmus. For all of its history, a walk around this part of the island doesn't take very long.

Everything has disappeared: the governor's house, the camp commandant's, barracks, village buildings, the twenty-two quarantine buildings, guns, the naval training establishment. It's hard even to see where they've been, for the Navy's parade ground, roads, and building sites flattened the land. Some roads remain.

Only the derelict navy surgeon's cottage still stands, an old yellow-ish weatherboard house with a chimney and boarded-up windows. I rest beside it, in the quiet, beside the fallen remains of a giant tree.

\*\*\*

Somewhere on this island artefacts from von Luckner's time are said to be hidden. Some of them are in the boat-builder's cave used by von Zatorski and his companions to build the craft for their intended escape before von Luckner arrived. The cave collapsed in a storm, burying the boat and, presumably, all the heavier gear that went with it mast, oars and so on.

Some are in another cave. The Count's tale of his time on Motuihe says that after their capture in the Kermadecs the Germans planned another escape from the island, and hid supplies, pistols, even a folding boat, in a cave. The Count said the cave was dug into the side of a dry riverbed and disguised. The plan was to hide in it while giving searchers the impression that they'd escaped over a cliff and been picked up by a boat. They would wait until the hue and cry had died down then hijack a passing sailing ship. The plan, von Luckner claimed, was an

excellent one but was interrupted by the Armistice, when the Germans were released and repatriated to Germany in May 1919: 'If it had been delayed a week, there would have been another escape at Motuihe.'

Can this be true, so close to the end of the war? None of his fellow Germans ever mentioned the cave. Still, the Motuihe Trust believes that it exists, that it has collapsed and buried the Germans' gear inside it.

When von Luckner returned to New Zealand and cheering crowds in 1938, the *New Zealand Herald* accompanied him back to Motuihe to search for his cave. Von Luckner wanted to recover his supplies, including, he said, a kerosene stove, bottles of rice and beans and other items, all stolen from the camp storehouse.

A 1927 report in the *Herald* claimed that a rifle and two flame werfers, shields and a collapsible boat all manufactured on the island, along with a stolen automatic pistol and ammunition, were also hidden in the cave.

The 1938 article had von Luckner and his party climbing into a bush-clad gully then up a small hill. For some time, the newspaper reported, the Count was at a loss, but then he saw two trees which had been growing at the cave's entrance lying on the ground, beside a deep, overgrown hole. Eureka! The Count asserted that this was what was left of his cave, and a Mr Hill, the city council caretaker on the island, said he knew of the hole as sheep often fell into it and he'd had to pull them out. He'd never suspected a German cave lay below. Neither had anyone else, and the stage was set for a fascinating treasure hunt. But no one excavated it or found the other, the boat-builders' cave.

Many years later David Veart, a former Department of Conservation archaeologist and historian, and a fellow

archaeologist spent a lot of time scrambling around the island searching for any trace of either cave, unsuccessfully. Were there two caves? Or was von Luckner simply cashing in on a good story, von Zatorski's?

I go looking for the boat-builders' cave, 'Bootshohle' on a map drawn by von Zatorski. It seems to me the more reliable of the two stories. Von Zatorski certainly planned an escape, and the evidence survives in Te Papa. According to the map the cave should be on the south-eastern side of the island, in a gully, but I can find no trace of it by land.

From the sea there are two places in the area shown by von Zatorski where you might build an illicit boat. They're both in gullies beside the coast, well out of sight of the settled area, within easy reach of the water. I row ashore and rummage around. Not a sign.

Well, the plan is now a century old. There've been plenty of floods and slips and erosion since — and gullies, after all, are carved by water.

I take the 1938 *Herald* report and search for the alleged second cave. I reason that it would be on the eastern side, within carrying distance of the coast and well away from the built-up area. No fallen trees, of course; they'd have rotted away or been chopped up. No overgrown hole either.

The island has no sign of von Luckner and his fellows. Except for a few artefacts in museums, they've left no trace.

\*\*\*

Ripapa was once a tiny island of rock in Lyttelton Harbour, joined to the mainland by a reef exposed at low tide. Its pedigree

is similar to Motuihe's, although the Maori pa here was much stronger, a bastion covering the entire island. It became a quarantine station for immigrants (renamed Humanity Island) and an internment camp for some of Te Whiti's people after their passive resistance at Parihaka. Conscientious objectors were jailed there in 1913.

During the Russian scare of 1885 the young New Zealand nation grew paranoid after a fake newspaper report of Russians invading Auckland and taking the mayor hostage. In 1886 Ripapa was turned into a fortress called Fort Jervis, a medieval construction right down to a drawbridge to the mainland. Stone walls were thrown up where the pa palisades once stood, tunnels and emplacements were built, and huge guns pointed towards the harbour entrance. They were never fired in anger, which was just as well, for the authorities feared that firing them all at once would shake the fort to pieces.

The most warlike figures to emerge from the grey Southern Ocean here were the recaptured von Luckner and Kircheiss, who seemed to fit perfectly into this melodrama. Von Luckner was placed in an old hut, the former battery hut, and for the 109 days he was there moaned about his bitter quarters.

He didn't need to exaggerate. Ripapa is beaten up by the easterly wind from one direction and bullied by the southerly from the other. Even on a good day it is cheerless.

The island was open to the public by sea until the Christchurch earthquakes. I clambered over it as a boy, scrambling over the reef at low tide and scaling the stone walls, breaking in rather than out as von Luckner longed to do, and so easily!

The island was worth the trouble. Its greatest prizes, for boys, were the two surviving guns, one of which is very rare, one of

only a dozen left in the world. The remnants of two further guns lay around too. Mysterious barred tunnels vanished into the rock below. Altogether it was a perfect playground, although the two Germans didn't see it that way.

When he returned to tour New Zealand in 1938 von Luckner wanted to revisit Ripapa. The authorities wouldn't let him: it was a military installation, no Germans allowed.

'By Joe [his favourite exclamation], what a pleasure it was to see that old weary Ripa island again,' he wrote in the visitor's book of the launch *Awatea*, which had taken him to the island. 'But there certain fools wouldn't let me land for fear I didn't know it well enough!'

A pleasure? He lied. All the time they were there he and Kircheiss complained of the cage-like barbed-wire net over their heads. Kircheiss inscribed his sentiments on the wall of his room: '109 weary days held in this dreary place ... We are fed up with this monotony and off we go to Motuihi [*sic*]. Thank God.'

My memory says I saw this inscription. But the hut is no longer there. The inscribed wood was later kept in the sea cadet base in Redcliffs, Christchurch, not far from where I lived. But when I went to check, that had disappeared too. I kept a grip on myself lest I vanished with them.

Now that chunk of wall, grey tongue-and-groove wood, lies behind glass in the Torpedo Bay Navy Museum in Devonport, alongside a room key with a wooden tag carved with the name 'von Luckner'. The Navy says his 'cell' had a concrete floor to prevent him tunnelling out. Tunnelling was unlikely, for Ripapa Island is a rock fortress built on rock.

The Count's fellow Germans on Somes Island in Wellington Harbour were no better off. The island is the final resting place

of dozens of immigrants quarantined here who died of typhoid and other diseases. Kim Lee, a Chinese man was suspected of having leprosy (probably wrongly), thrown onto a nearby rock and left to die in a cave.

Not a proud history, although the Germans fared better: I visited the single remaining barracks building on the island, which must have held some sixty men. It was lined with wood and had wooden floors and must have been an icebox in a Wellington southerly.

Von Luckner's men may have left a ghostly residue. Three German prisoners twice attempted to escape from Somes in World War II, first by stealing the lighthouse keeper's dinghy, then later by sailing on a raft of empty oil drums using — shades of von Zatorski! — a beautifully made sextant of scrap wood. This fine instrument is now under glass in the island's visitors' centre.

While on Ripapa von Luckner grizzled to Sir James Allen, Minister of Defence, whom he saw as his social equal among lowly Kiwis. He complained that he and Kircheiss shivered in the easterly and covered in the southerly and slept under newspapers padding their bedclothes. 'This is scarcely imaginable for educated men,' he wrote to Allen, who agreed. The Germans got the woolly underwear they asked for and in May 1918 were sent back to balmy Motuihe as a bonus, although they lived in considerably more straitened conditions than before. On their way back they spent a night locked up in the Chippy's Shop, the carpenter's room in the Torpedo Bay base. It is there still, now kitted out as a wardroom and much more to the Germans' taste.

\*\*\*

Von Luckner returned to New Zealand in 1938 to mixed reviews. Some thought him a spy for a government intent on conquering much of the world. Many others cheered him. The Australian military later claimed they knew all along the Count was a Nazi agent, although he'd been feted by that nation's social elites.

New Zealanders were sometimes suspicious, more often cordial and frequently rapturous. Historians, notably James Bade, have produced evidence proving that his Pacific voyage was a propaganda journey not only encouraged but also financed by the Third Reich, in particular by Hitler's propaganda head, Joseph Goebbels.

In return von Luckner praised Hitler's policies while denying he was doing so. He had had nothing to do with politics, he claimed, and had not spread any Nazi propaganda. In the same breath he said he had not favoured the Nazis at first, but had changed his mind. In New Zealand he publicly applauded the invasion of a 'corrupt' Austria as 'a powerful factor toward the peace of Europe'.

Von Luckner was greeted with rather more scepticism when he returned to Germany. Hitler's government accused him of damning them with faint praise. He was told to shut up for the rest of the war, to go inside and close the door.

On balance, New Zealanders liked him. We were at the outer edge of our age of innocence. He was a gentleman raider. He hadn't hurt anyone except for that lone sailor, and we were inclined to accept the view that the death was accidental. He was gallant and handsome. He'd made the authorities look like fools then starred in a 'daring escape' from Motuihe and that made him a hero to many.

They loved the aristocrat with the common touch.



A retrospective article by 'A Local Lad' in the *Auckland Star* in 1941 gave an account of one of the Count's pub crawls: 'I believe that New Zealanders ... would not be so prone to regard him as a romantic character, a glamorous German, if they could have seen him setting forth ... Poor Felix! When he went on the scoot (which was pretty often) he was worse off than the average husband making the most of a meagre allowance for beer. The Countess, who controlled the exchequer, usually handed him a florin.' ("He drinks like a horse water [*sic*]," she would scream in moments of anger.)

Often he would auction his cap in bars for funds. The Local Lad accompanied the Count on a tour of the country, reporting that Auckland businessmen fawned over him but also that, after being in close contact with him, 'I cannot now believe he was the clever adventurer that he would have us believe.'

Newspapers also reported that the Count, who was sailing to New Zealand in his own yacht, the *Seeteufal*, 'Sea Devil', had called at Maupelia on the way. He claimed to have dug up money, gold, uncut diamonds and pearls he'd hidden there twenty-one years before, and sent perhaps £10,000 worth of buried treasure (he had no knowledge of the value of such things, he said) back to Germany. He would give no details to the avid reporters, whose bullshit detectors must have been stowed away that day. Desert island? Buried treasure? The essentials of any good South Seas romance. The evidence is that von Luckner did not land on Maupelia, much less dig up his loot.

The chief postal censor, who had read and translated many of von Luckner's letters, responded to the Count's claim that he'd been made a Maori chief by a Maori princess. The censor dubbed him 'Baron Munchausen the Second', the Baron being a fictional

character who claimed to have ridden on a cannonball, fought a twelve-metre crocodile and flown to the moon. Officials seem to have been more direct and colourful then.

Apart from newspaper accounts and a lingering scepticism not very much else remains of that great adventure: a few relics in museums. Practical New Zealanders have eliminated the rest, pulled it down, grown it over, thrown it out and cleaned up.

Von Luckner died in Sweden, his wife's home country, on 13 April 1966, aged eighty-four. His body was returned to Germany.

Oh, and what happened to the staunch old *Moa*, the captured scow that took the escaping Germans to the Kermadecs? She's long gone too. A Greymouth newspaper in 1935 carried a small advertisement for the sale of a wreck: the *Moa*, carrying a cargo of timber-mill machinery, had become stranded while trying to cross the bar of the Wanganui River near Hari Hari south of Greymouth. It is a wild river on a dangerous coast. The bar was seldom used. It had silted up and the *Moa*'s crew realised, too late, that it was too shallow to cross. The ship stuck fast and was pounded by heavy seas. People came from Hari Hari and saved what they could but the *Moa* was lost. Her remains were sold at auction.

From this distance, what are we to make of von Luckner? Oh yes, he was a character, an entertainer, a great storyteller and a romancer. He was a Nazi sympathiser, at least. Perhaps he was a fool who rushed in. But there's no doubting his courage, his abilities, his skill. His was a huge adventure.

A century on Aucklanders still recall him. I asked a dozen or so people at random what they remembered about him. 'Romantic,' they said. 'Cavalier.' The gentleman pirate.

There may be few physical reminders, but he left his mark.