Polly Evans

About the Book

When Polly Evans read a survey claiming that the last bastion of masculinity, the real Kiwi bloke, was about to breathe his last, she was seized by a sense of foreboding. Abandoning the London winter she took off on a motorbike for the windswept beaches and golden plains of New Zealand, hoping to root out some examples of this endangered species for posterity. But her challenges didn't stop at the men.

Just weeks after passing her bike test, Polly rode from Auckland's glitzy Viaduct Basin to the vineyards of Hawkes Bay and on to the Southern Alps. She found wild kiwis in the dead of night, kayaked among dolphins at dawn, and spent an evening on a remote hillside with a sheep-shearing gang. As she travelled, Polly reflected on the Maori warriors who carved their enemies' bones into cutlery, the pioneer family who lived in a tree, and the flamboyant gold miners who lit their pipes with five-pound notes, and wondered how their descendents could have become pathologically obsessed with helpfulness and Coronation Street.

The author of the highly acclaimed *It's Not About the Tapas* reaches some unexpected conclusions about the new New Zealand man – and finds that evolution has taken an unlikely twist.

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KIWIS MIGHT FLY

Polly Evans

For my godson, Alistair and my nephew, Zac

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Tasman Sea
Paihia
Omapere
GOWER '04
Auckland
Waihi
Tauranga
NORTH ISLAND
Rotorua
Taupo
N
HAWKES BAY
Wanganui
Kapiti Coast
WELLINGTON
Karamea
Nelson
Miles
0 50 100
0 80 160
Kilometres
Punakaiki
Hokitika
Franz Josef
Christchurch
Haast
Lake Tekapo
SOUTH ISLAND
Wanaka
Queenstown
Miller's Flat
Te Anau
Lumsden
Dunedin
South Pacific Ocean
Invercargill
STEWART ISLAND

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Rocking the Cradle

'SO,' SIÂN, MY neurologist friend, asked brightly, 'are you going to wear one of those motorcycle helmets that covers the back of your head up to your fourth cervical vertebra, so that if you crash you're left tetraplegic, or are you going to get one of those higher-cut ones so that you're killed outright instead?'

My stomach lurched. I was deeply afraid.

It had all started a few months earlier, when I'd read a survey that claimed the ordinary Kiwi bloke was about to turn up the toes of his gumboots. He was, apparently, hanging up his sheep shears and moving to the city. A new masculinity was rearing its pretty, hair-gelled head. Men were waxing their backs. In ten years, said the survey, the traditional, hirsute New Zealand man would be dead.

The early New Zealanders had been virile and vigorous. The Maori were fearless warriors. Then the Europeans had arrived after arduous journeys across thousands of miles of treacherous ocean. The life that awaited them was hard.

New Zealand men grew up to be strong. They slaughtered whales, panned for gold and felled timber. They learned to play rugby. Fearlessly, they drank home-brewed beer. Then something went wrong. The environment changed; the species had to mutate. Volcanic eruptions? Tectonic shifts? An overboiling of the primordial soup? No. It was none of these things. It had more to do with washing machines from Japan.

With the arrival of aeroplanes and domestic appliances, the fences came unstuck for the traditional New Zealand man. What did it matter if he could mend a tractor using three bits of old wire and a pot of distilled sheep dung when spare parts were lined up at the local Kawasaki store? The real Kiwi bloke was fast becoming redundant.

The curious thing was that nobody seemed to be making much of a fuss about his demise. When other creatures have faced extinction – when the tiger threatened to roar no more, or the red-legged frog looked fit to croak – the conservationists beat their chests like gorillas whose trees just got the chop. But when the Kiwi bloke, an almost-human species, began to shuffle off to the big brewery in the sky, nobody seemed much bothered. One or two insensitive souls even breathed a quiet sigh of relief.

There was nothing else for it. Somebody was going to have to travel to the other side of the globe, to delve deep into the New Zealand countryside, to sniff around on sheep farms and poke about in rural pubs and ask the question: is the Kiwi bloke *really* about to breathe his last?

It was cold and raining at home in London; in New Zealand it was summer, the perfect time to hunt out a shy species on the verge of extinction from its spectacular alpine hideaways and wave-swept beachside lairs. It looked as though that somebody might have to be me.

I thought I'd tour New Zealand on a motorbike. Kiwi men were known to be fond of machinery; these were the guys who were meant to be able to strip down the engine of their truck on a Sunday afternoon and have it working again by Monday. If I rode a motorbike, I thought, and, better still, if I shoehorned myself into the tightest set of black motorcycling leathers I could find, I should stand a greater chance of luring these timid men from their hunting grounds and watering holes. If I was really lucky, I might even persuade one or two of them to speak.

I enrolled in motorcycling classes. Working on the basis that there are fewer maniacal cars out to kill a learner motorcyclist in the countryside than in the town, I decided to take lessons in the depths of rural Derbyshire.

I shared my first day's training with two sixteen-year-old boys who had just been given their first mopeds. We learned that cool kids ride safely. The two boys set off round the traffic cones on their gloriously gearless scooters. I got less than a metre before the 125cc training bike coughed, gave a little shudder, and stalled. I tried again.

'You gotta treat the clutch gently,' Oz, the instructor, admonished me. He was a big, grizzled man with stubbly grey facial hair and well-worn leathers. 'Handle it like, well' – now he looked embarrassed – 'we always say like you'd handle a woman.'

He shuffled and grinned. I raised an eyebrow. Not only was I expected to ride this piece of killer machinery, now I was meant to build a meaningful relationship with it as well. I tried again. The bike hiccuped, coughed, and stopped.

I hired a 125cc bike – the largest I was allowed to ride without actually passing a test – for a week. My relationship with my clutch still had some way to go. On the first day, I dropped the bike on a roundabout, where I created an outraged, horn-tooting traffic jam. Half an hour later, I had some problem selecting a suitable gear as I turned right on a steep hill. I stalled – again. The bike teetered, toppled, and crashed to the ground. An elderly couple in a little red Peugeot 106 stopped at the junction, he in his flat cap, she with a woollen neck scarf. They peered with some distaste out of their window at the helmeted figure lying on the tarmac in distress and, quickly concluding they wanted nothing to do with such a creature, shot off leaving me there all alone.

No, wait, it's only me, I wanted to shout after them from beneath my helmeted disguise. I don't have tattoos. I have no idea how to do a wheelie. I don't batter old women at bus stops or boil their bones into soup …

But they had disappeared as fast as third gear could carry them.

I went back to Two-Wheel Training for more lessons. Two characters called John, who was very round, and Kieran, who was very skinny despite consuming a remarkable number of pies, put me through my paces.

'What do you think you're doing you're going to get yourself killed *get out of the path of that oncoming lorry*,' Kieran would bellow with some excitement through the radio earpiece.

'Get up to speed get up to speed get up to speed if you wimp out like this *you'll fail your test*,' John would counter as the headwind buffeted my leather-clad limbs at a quite terrifying forty miles an hour.

One day, I accidentally missed the road and drove up onto the pavement instead; another day I dropped the bike and snapped off the brake lever twice in one hour.

Test day dawned. I hadn't slept. My palms were clammy. I could scarcely eat. I had entirely forgotten that taking driving tests was quite so terrifying.

The examiner's name was Simon. He was a small, mild-mannered man with blond hair. He looked like the type of person who would be kind to small children and cats. In normal circumstances, he would have seemed pleasant and unassuming. As it was, I viewed him with the same warm feelings I would entertain for a hungry grizzly bear.

Simon strapped a radio to me. He relayed instructions through my earpiece; I gingerly turned left out of the test centre. Simon came behind in pursuit on his vast white steed of an examiner's bike. We turned left, we turned right, we turned right and we turned left. I remembered to stop at the red traffic light. I managed the hill start without

sliding backwards into Simon's hulk of a machine. I U-turned without falling off the bike and executed a neat little emergency stop. We turned left and then, just when I had almost stopped shaking with fear, I noticed: my indicator was flashing. That last turn had been at least a minute or so back – and motorbike indicators don't cancel themselves when you turn as car ones do.

'Bugger bugger bugger bugger,' I muttered all the way back to the test centre.

I had failed.

I couldn't retake my test for three weeks and spent most of that time trying to come to terms with the horrible reality: I had to go through it all again. I started to have nightmares about the diminutive Simon, whose body took on grotesque, outlandish forms. His short limbs stretched to inhuman, entwining, entrapping proportions; his gentle blue eyes widened to become garish cobalt orbs with the piercing glare of a wolf who thinks you've eaten his elk. The Simon of my dreams stood and snarled, orange lights flashing left and right about his diabolical, distended head.

'Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha,' he cackled demonically through my anguished subconscious. 'You left your indicator flashing, indicator flashing, indicator flashing …'

The problem was that I had already bought my ticket for New Zealand. I *needed* to pass this next test. I considered bribes, threats, body doubles; but had to conclude that Simon hadn't looked terribly susceptible to corruption. There was nothing else for it: I had to try, once more, to do a U-turn without falling off the bike. I had to attempt to ride on the road and not on the pavement. I had to remember to turn the indicator off. It was a tough call. Vowing never again to undertake a project so high-risk that I needed to pass an exam before I could embark upon it, I returned to the test centre.

John the instructor, usually a garrulous character, was strangely quiet as we rode there. As we waited for my turn

to take to the tarmac, even he was looking faintly green. It was Simon's day off so another examiner took his place. We struck out for the country lanes, traffic-free. After ten minutes or so of winding, rural roads, I was almost enjoying myself. We came into the city, sat in a rush-hour traffic jam for a while, and then it was all over.

'I'm happy to tell you you've passed,' said the examiner.

John's entire, capacious body slumped with relief. I was so elated that I nearly – but not quite – hugged him.

To celebrate, I headed instead to the nearest Dainese kit shop and acquired a suitably fetching set of leathers and boots. I confirmed my rental of a 650cc Suzuki Freewind with Adventure New Zealand Motorcycle Tours on the other side of the globe. Clutching my licence, newly inscribed with a little picture of a motorbike, I packed my bags and boarded the plane.

* * *

Motorbikes are like twitchy, thoroughbred racehorses or large dogs with big teeth: it's not a good idea to let them know that you're scared. They can sniff out fear at a hundred paces. At the merest hint of adrenalin they become frisky, jumpy, and prone to bolt.

When I arrived at Adventure New Zealand Motorcycle's depot just outside Auckland to pick up my motorbike, I was therefore determined to disguise the fact that I was consumed by terror. It wasn't just the bike; I didn't really want Ian and John, the two brothers who owned the company, to know how frightened I was either. I hadn't thought it circumspect to admit to them exactly how inexperienced a motorcyclist I really was. There was something about the way their website proclaimed 'We are fiercely proud of our range of bikes … all of our bikes are in as-new, showroom condition' that stopped me letting on that the day I picked up their glorious, gleaming blue-and-

silver Suzuki was, well, the first day I'd ridden a motorbike without L-plates. It was the first time I'd been on the road without an instructor in radio contact telling me how to stay alive. It was the first time I'd ridden a bike anything approaching this big.

I arrived in a taxi; as the driver headed off down the road, I felt my last link with the safe world of four wheels disappear. A man called Paul wheeled out the bike I was to ride for the next few months. I blinked. I let out a tiny squeak. I breathed a little faster. This bike was *huge*. It was a monster. It looked like the kind of beast that might just take umbrage with a bumbling novice motorcyclist and buck her from this world into the next. How on earth was I meant to build a meaningful relationship with *that*? It didn't look like a bike that would like to have its clutch gently squeezed or lovingly massaged. It looked like a machine that would be more into wild animalistic pumping.

Paul looked happy, delighted to be handing this piece of killer machinery over. Paul had no idea of the lunacy in which he was unwittingly complicit. I did my best to look cool but underneath the tight black leathers I was pouring sweat.

Six hundred and fifty ccs hadn't sounded all that big when I was back home, safe and warm, sitting in front of my computer looking at online photographs of motorbikes and fantasizing about roaring along deserted roads past hillsides covered in swaying golden tussock, up winding mountain passes with panoramic views, alongside rugged white beaches thumped by wild, crashing waves. Six hundred and fifty ccs looked rather more frightening in the flesh.

I tried to delay the inevitable as long as I could. I spent a good while unpacking my luggage from its suitcases and loading it into the panniers. I found the bike wouldn't balance on its stand very well once it was loaded with luggage because it was on a slight slope. I tried to wheel it

over to a flat piece of tarmac. It was so heavy, I couldn't shift it. Paul blithely sauntered over to help. For some reason, he still didn't look concerned.

'That's it, you're on your way.' He grinned in a carefree manner. 'See ya.'

'See ya,' I squeaked back. I was trying hard to sound relaxed, but my voice came out high-pitched and strangled. I put the key in the ignition and turned the throttle gingerly. The bike gave a mighty, man-eating roar.

There was a little hill down the driveway onto the main road. I inched my way down, convinced that at any moment the bike was going to lunge into life and hurl me to my death under the wheels of a passing Volvo.

'Urrrrrrrrrr,' it purred, sounding frighteningly like a panther preparing to pounce.

Riding this bike was a ludicrous idea, it now occurred to me. It wasn't just averagely silly – people actually die when they fall off motorbikes. Forget the extinction of Kiwi blokes; right now it looked as though I myself might be about to bestow a favour on the human race by removing my own insane genes from the evolutionary pool, by finishing myself off before I'd got round to reproducing. I was horribly vulnerable. I was grossly incompetent. I ought to have taken the bus.

But there was no bus. The taxi had left half an hour ago.

'Come on, bike,' I muttered, trying to sound powerful. 'You're in my hands now.'

And with that, I opened the throttle, let out the clutch, and stuttered off down the road.

I was heading north to Paihia in the Bay of Islands. From there I was planning to visit Waitangi, the controversial birthplace of modern-day New Zealand and, therefore, the cradle of Kiwi man. Then I'd head back down to Auckland before heading south.

I puttered slowly for the first few kilometres. After twenty minutes or so, I was forced to accept that the bike was spinning along quite effortlessly. As long as I didn't have to do anything scary – such as stop at a red light – all was well. I started to look at the digital display in front of me in an attempt to figure out what the various gauges were trying to tell me. My speed was obviously that big number in the middle – a whopping seventy-five kilometres an hour at present. And that line down the side with notches on it seemed to be the petrol. Except that there wasn't any mark on it. The bike, surely, had petrol in it. It was moving, after all. I screwed up my eyes at the display. Then I noticed: the three notches at the bottom of the red 'empty' box had turned to two. The tank was nearly empty. Goodness, I thought, perhaps that purring noise had not been the bike preparing to pounce, but the anguished rumbling of its half-starved tummy. Clearly, the beast had to be fed – and soon.

I had just a minute or two earlier passed through a small township called Warkworth. I turned round, managed to execute a successful left turn at the traffic lights, and found a petrol station.

I stopped the bike. It didn't crash to the ground. I swung my leg over. Still no disasters. I filled up with petrol, paid at the kiosk, and left.

Things didn't run so smoothly for long. At the junction to get out onto the main highway, the traffic light was red. I stopped in the queue of traffic. The light turned green. I can't even remember what happened next: as tends to happen after traumatic events, such as when one witnesses the annihilation of one's entire family at the hands of a crazed gunman, my mind has obliterated the memory. But, somehow, the bike bunny-hopped, I let go of the handlebars, and the whole shebang crashed to the ground.

I stood and stared in horror at the vast machine lying prostrate on the tarmac. I'd had it for less than an hour and

already I'd managed to drop it. My terror, which had in the last fifteen minutes or so subsided to a small puddle somewhere in the region of my toes, now welled up again and washed over me with the force of a tsunami. I looked around in desperation. There was no way I could pick the bike up by myself. Let's face it, an hour ago I hadn't even been strong enough to wheel it across Adventure New Zealand Motorcycle's forecourt. There seemed little point in even trying. Surely one of these drivers would rush to my aid in a moment; they'd help me lift the bike so the traffic could move on. But the drivers just glared at me and waved their hands in flurried, impatient shrugs. There was a tooting of horns. I was entirely mortified. I felt physically sick. I willed the ground to swallow me whole.

Finally, after what was probably just seconds but seemed like about half an hour, a woman laden with carrier bags full of groceries ambled over.

'Can I help you with that?' she asked, dumping her plastic bags on the tarmac. A small bottle of Domestos toppled out onto the road.

I grabbed the handlebar; she heaved from behind. The bike didn't so much as budge. We tried again. We wheezed and we puffed. My sweat – a heady combination now of exertion, fear and abject humiliation – had given up oozing and dribbling and developed into a full-force flood. And then, as if by magic, the bike lifted itself. I looked round. A vast Maori man, whose tattooed biceps bulged from his singlet, stood behind me. His vest stretched taut over pulsating pectorals. He seemed to have lifted the bike with a tiny effort from just one finger.

'Er, thanks,' I said.

I looked up at him fearfully. What was he going to say? I braced myself for his brutal, scathing observation that I shouldn't be playing with dangerous boys' toys; that if I must play with something, I should be riding a nice little girl's scooter. I winced thinking of the way in which he

would growl that my incompetence was threatening the safety of everyone else on the road. I cowered and looked back down at the road.

'Nice bike,' he said, and laughed.

'Er, yes, well, I only just picked it up from the hire shop,' I stumbled, red-faced.

The man sauntered into the middle of the road. He was still beaming – he seemed to find the whole awful episode wildly entertaining. He held up his hand to the cars. The traffic stopped. And then, when it was completely safe, he waved me out onto the highway.

'Ride safely now!' he called as I wobbled away shamefaced and vowing that never, ever, however desperate the circumstances, not even if aliens dropped out of the sky and obliterated every other town on the planet, would I show my face in Warkworth again.

It took me five hours to ride the 250 kilometres to Paihia. Long lines of frustrated traffic strung out behind me as I puttered pathetically along, but I didn't care; I just wanted to stay alive. Just north of Whangarei, I stopped for bacon, eggs and coffee at a roadside café.

'You want mulk un thet?' asked the girl behind the counter.

'I'm sorry?'

'*Mulk?*'

I had no idea what she was talking about. The girl was of the plump, cheerful kind. Her hair was scraped back in a devil-may-care attitude, one that refused to be flustered by bobbly bits and wayward locks. Underneath the once-white apron, her clothes positively howled: *I am not a fashion victim!* The girl laughed at the strange foreigner, drew breath and gave it one last go.

'Would you like *mulk* in your *coffee*?'

So it looked as though it wasn't just the bike that would be giving me problems in this strange land twelve thousand miles from home. It wasn't just the men – who were so laid

back they wouldn't bat an eyelid if a tractor grew wings – that were a little bit odd. It looked as though I wasn't going to be able to speak to anyone in this peculiar aberration of English, either.

When, eventually, the tiny waterfront town of Paihia appeared, I was giddy with relief. I had survived day one. It wasn't until the next morning, when I woke up with astonishingly stiff buttocks, that I realized what kind of work-out five hours' terrified bottom-clenching can provide.

Paihia is the main township of the Bay of Islands, a remarkably pretty place whose warm climate and array of water-borne activities today draw the holiday crowds. I had been here once before, when I came on holiday to New Zealand to escape the chaos of the magazine publishing office where I worked in Hong Kong. On that trip, I had gone out into the ocean on a small boat owned by a Kiwi bloke named Captain Bucko; we had dived amid the rusting wreckage of a ship that had met its end in these waters many years before. We had swum through crumbling iron doorways into decrepit caverns where packed shoals of tiny, shimmering fish parted to allow us through. Back outside, as we moved slowly through the water along the length of the wreck, a huge, solitary stingray had undulated beneath us. From a crack in a rock, a moray eel had poked out its head and granted us a toothy grin.

Back on dry land, I had lain on the beach at the nearby township of Russell and strolled through the forest. I hadn't, however, troubled my head with historical detail – and history is something that this part of New Zealand has in just as rich abundance as its rippling, wriggling marine life.

It was in the Bay of Islands that Charles Darwin first set foot on New Zealand soil in December 1835. He stopped here on his five-year voyage aboard the *Beagle*, during which he also visited the Galapagos Islands whose fossils

were later to lead him to his theory of evolution. Darwin was less than enchanted with what he found.

'[New Zealand] is not a pleasant place,' he wrote in his journal. 'Amongst the natives there is absent that charming simplicity which is found in Tahiti; and the greater part of the English are the very refuse of society.'

He might have had a point. From the 1790s onwards, European and American sealers and whalers had been coming here for rest, booze and sex with the local Maori women. Their ships were often crewed by escaped convicts, thieves and thugs. Some of these stopped off in the Bay of Islands and opened shops and brothels. Drunkenness and debauchery pitched and rolled; the now-paradisiacal township of Russell became known as the 'hellhole of the Pacific'.

With so many of those Kiwi blokes in need of spiritual assistance, the early Kiwi missionaries set up their first base here, too. Samuel Marsden, the Anglican Chaplain of New South Wales, brought God to the Bay of Islands in 1814. He was frustrated by his failure to turn the Australian convicts and Aboriginals into good Christians, so decided to try his luck with the Maori instead. The gospel was first preached on New Zealand soil on Christmas Day of that year. 'Behold, I bring you tidings of great joy,' Marsden proclaimed before disappearing back off to Australia as fast as the wind would carry him and leaving his minions to sort out the mess. Marsden's legacy lasts to this day: the main street of Paihia is still named after him.

The missionaries did their best to spread the word, though sometimes the message was lost in translation. 'The chief was at this time rather notorious from having lately hung one of his wives and a slave for adultery. When one of the missionaries remonstrated with him he seemed surprised, and said he thought he was exactly following the English method,' Charles Darwin recounted in his journal,

The Voyage of the Beagle, after visiting a tribe at Waiomio with his religious friends.

In some unfortunate cases, grog got the better of God and sex won over souls. In less than twenty years, three missionaries had been given the sack, one for adultery, one for drunkenness, and the third for what Marsden, with delicious prudery, mysteriously labelled ‘a crime worse than either’.

But the Bay of Islands was not merely an early settlement for lusty whalers and fast-succumbing missionaries. It has a more notorious place in history, for this was where the Treaty of Waitangi was signed. Waitangi lies just up the road, a kilometre or two from Paihia. It was here that, on 6 February 1840, the British Resident, Captain William Hobson, convinced a number of Maori chiefs to cede to British sovereignty.

It was because of the Treaty House at Waitangi that I had come north at all. This was, albeit controversially, the site where the Maori and British peoples joined together as one nation, the place where their cultures merged and where the country ‘New Zealand’ was created.

The next morning, I was out of bed early and, after a fortifying coffee and muffin in a waterfront café, I wandered up the road to Waitangi. In contrast to the bitterness and bloodshed that the treaty has provoked over the years, the Waitangi Treaty House is well tended and squeaky-clean. At the visitors’ centre, an audio-visual display tells the story of the founding of New Zealand as we know it. It is a rose-tinted, sugar-coated tale. The narration theoretically comes from a Maori and goes something like this: *Once upon a time our people arrived in Aotearoa in a great big canoe. They had lots of nice sex and after a few generations the country was inhabited by many different tribes of happy, cuddly brown warriors.*

Then one day a big ship came along with pretty white goblins inside. It was like a dream. The white men brought

pottery and pigs and sheep and guns. But as more and more white men came to hunt the whales and seals around our shores, things started to get messy. The white men were frequently drunk and took a shine to our women. We needed protection.

Luckily for us, the missionaries came and taught us how to love each other. But we still yearned for the hand of good government. And so when William Hobson came to save us, not only from the randy whalers, but also from the garlic-breathing Frenchmen who were at that time eyeing up our land, we thanked our new-found God for our luck. Just think, if the British hadn't come along, we might all be mincing about in berets and saying 'bah' at the end of our sentences and that wouldn't do at all, eh.

On the 6th of February, 1840, the nice Captain Hobson put up a marquee in his garden and invited all his friends the tribal chiefs to come and sign the Treaty of Waitangi, which meant that the Maori people could be protected by the fair and just government of Great Britain. Our peoples were joined. Our nation was born. And everyone lived happily ever after.

Or something like that. I forget the exact words.

In practice, it wasn't quite so simple.

To start with the treaty wasn't signed by all the chiefs. Second, the Maori version of the treaty – which ostensibly granted British sovereignty and protection to the Maori people and guaranteed possession of their fisheries and resources in exchange for allowing the British Crown sole rights to buy their land – didn't say the same thing as the English version. The Maori had no concept of land ownership and often didn't realize what selling it really meant. They had no idea of the numbers of Europeans that would come: Te Whatrepouri, the tribal chief who sold Wellington, later complained that he had only expected nine or ten Pakeha (which is believed to derive from the

Maori word ‘pakepakeha’ meaning pale-skinned fairies) to come and live there. Oops.

After the treaty was signed, the British settlers frequently abused the agreement and took Maori lands by force even when the Maori didn’t want to sell them. The bitterness and disagreements continue to this day, with the Maori still fighting, now through the official channels of the Waitangi Tribunal, for compensation for the land that was taken from them.

So why did the British bother? New Zealand was a long way away, trade was flowing freely, and Britain was up to its eyes in troublesome colonies already.

One reason was that the French were sailing about New Zealand’s shores with a proprietary Gallic glint in their eyes. In 1837, the adventurer Baron Charles de Thierry had even been so bold as to plant his flag on eight hundred acres in Northland and to proclaim himself the ‘Sovereign Chief of New Zealand’ – and there was nothing more certain to inspire the British into action than the opportunity to outdo the French, especially after that irritating business just a few years earlier when Napoleon’s head had grown too big for his bicorn and he’d even dared dream of marching his cheese-fuelled armies into Britain itself.

The missionaries, too, were trying to persuade Britain to annex New Zealand. They didn’t like the French much either as they didn’t want their Anglican missions ousted by the Catholics. Their repeated prayers for a great big storm to come and sink the nasty papist French ships had come to naught. Maybe God was paying them back for their misdemeanours with other men’s wives. So, just to be on the safe side, the missionaries hedged their bets with God and teamed up with the money-minded men of the New Zealand Company as Plan B.

The New Zealand Company was created by a group of colonialist entrepreneurs in England. They reckoned that,

since the Industrial Revolution, when machines began to take over from manpower, Britain had too many people. Profits were declining and poverty was increasing. What better solution, then, than to create another Britain, a 'Britain of the South', and ship some of the excess bodies over there to a better life … oh yes, and to make lots of nice money for their very own coffers by establishing that 'the Crown' alone was allowed to buy land from the Maori. Having purchased the land at a favourable rate, they could then sell it on to the new European settlers at a profit.

The powers of London's great Colonial Office were unconvinced. All those arguments hadn't brought New Zealand any nearer. So the pro-annexation brains brought out their trump card.

The British traders, whalers and grog-sellers had effectively turned the place into a British colony already, they said, but one fuelled by booze and corruption. The local people were being raped, pillaged, oppressed, subordinated. Britain had a moral duty to step in and restore order.

The ancient sages of the Colonial Office shuddered into wakefulness. *Moral duty?* 'Well, if you put it like that, I suppose, we'd better colonize the poor souls,' they said. And so they did.

I left the fantastical World of Waitangi and walked the short distance back to Paihia, over the little bridge where the Waitangi River meets the sea. This part of New Zealand, way up in the north, is subtropical in climate. The summer isn't too hot, the winter scarcely happens at all and the vegetation shoots, sprouts and spawns. To my right the river wound through mangrove swamps and lush forests to the thundering, tumbling Haruru Falls beyond. To my left lay the clear, turquoise ocean, scattered with scores of islands deep green with foliage and lined by golden-yellow beaches. Among them fishing boats bobbed on the wake of

ferries that motored along the path between the red and green buoys. Dive boats, sailing boats and brightly coloured kayaks puttered between the islands.

Coming into Paihia, I walked along the packed wet sand by the water's edge. The beach here wasn't littered with bodies. It was a narrow stretch of saffron-yellow at the back of which a small, grassy hump rose up and gave way to a tree-lined strip of lawn. The occasional sun-bather lay on a towel on the grass and read, a couple of children made sandcastles in the sand, but most of Paihia's visitors were an active crowd who preferred to play on the waves than to lie about and watch them. A lean teenager strolled along the sand, throwing a ball into the sea for a dripping, delirious black-and-white border collie that shook itself vigorously each time it emerged from the ocean. The boy's long blue board shorts, hanging low beneath his tapered waist, were drenched by the dog's spray and clung to his thighs.

The restaurants and cafés lining the Marsden Road were half full. Chilled-out holidaymakers sipped a coffee to energize them for that afternoon's boat trip, or grabbed a bite to eat to replace any calories they'd inadvertently lost while kayaking that morning. Others looked as though they had settled themselves in for the day. They worked their way gently through a few bottles of chilled New Zealand wine and slurped oysters fresh from the ocean.

I went back to my motel, plugged my laptop into the phone socket, and checked my mail.

'I assume you have by now tamed the beast, and have started work on the men,' wrote my friend Sarah.

I stared at the screen sadly and sighed. I hadn't tamed anything at all. The bike was still sitting abandoned in the car park, its headlight glaring at me menacingly through the window.

Back home my friends were safe and warm in their offices, earning money the comfortable way. They had

visions of me sweeping along New Zealand's winding roads, an indefatigable Amazonian roaring with adventure and derring-do. They knew nothing of the pitiful reality. They didn't know that I was sitting in a cheap motel with flowery wallpaper and a threadbare carpet, drinking complimentary tea with too much tannin from the only cup I could find that wasn't chipped, gingerly boiling water in a yellow-plastic, limescale-encrusted kettle.

I dug deep for grit, courage and a tiny white lie.

'Currently engaged in a bit of a power struggle, but victory imminent,' I e-mailed back. I looked through the window and fixed the bike with a steely glare.

'Tomorrow,' I told it in my most commanding tone, 'you and I are hitting the road.'

2

Size Matters

NEW ZEALAND IS a small country with a tiny population yet it's obsessed with doing everything big. It's not just the motorbikes; the flora and fauna, too, are fixated by that most masculine of concerns: size.

Take the moa, the now extinct, flightless fowl that were indigenous to New Zealand and roamed the forests quite happily until the Maori came along and ate them all. The moa were huge. Because, prior to European contact, New Zealand had no mammals except for a couple of indigenous bats, and the rats and dogs that the Maori had brought from Polynesia, the moa was hunted by nobody other than the Haast eagle. While we're talking size, the Haast eagle – which itself died out five hundred years ago – weighed ten kilos and had a wing span of three metres. When it spotted prey in the form of a tasty moa, it would dive from trees at eighty kilometres an hour. The bone-splintering impact as it smashed into its target was such that even the largest moa were felled. The eagle would then use its powerful talons, the same size as lions' claws, to crush and pierce the necks of its victims.

But even the Haast eagle and its mate would take several days to peck their way through a moa. Shaped like an outsized ostrich, with flecked brownish feathers and a slender, arcing neck, this behemoth of a bird could grow to heights of nearly four metres. Its eggs weighed a hundred kilograms. A moa's legs alone would have risen high above

the heads of the men who hunted it. One can only imagine the barbecue they would have needed to build to roast the drumsticks.

The kiwi bird is little better. The female – a brown bird about the same size as a chicken but with thin, spindly legs, a long foraging beak and useless, stubby wings that don't fly – insists on laying an egg so big that her tummy sometimes drags along the ground. She has to stand in cold water to relieve the pain; in the final days before laying she can't eat at all because so much of her belly is taken up by her egg, which grows to *six times* the size of eggs of other birds the kiwi's size. Big may be beautiful, but this is ridiculous.

No sooner had they set foot on New Zealand soil than the early Kiwi blokes, too, became obsessed by size. Everything needed to be not just better, but bigger than its equivalent back home. Settlers in nineteenth-century Christchurch grew four-kilogram carrots.

'The carrots were not like ordinary carrots, they out-carroted carrots,' Edward Gibbon Wakefield, founder of the New Zealand Company, apparently commented when he first arrived on fertile New Zealand soil, winning at once the world record for the number of times you can fit the word 'carrot' into a single sentence.

Down in Dunedin they managed to produce a 9.5 kilogram beetroot and a 25 kilogram cabbage. And all without GM.

People grew bigger too. In the late nineteenth century New Zealand children, growing up on farms, tended to eat more protein than their European counterparts – and their hair apparently grew longer. 'After two years in Auckland,' wrote one woman, 'my hair, from being thin and weak, is now so thick that I can scarcely bear its weight.'

And then there are the kauri trees. These soaring giants can live for thousands of years and grow upwards of fifty metres tall. The rest of the forest – the abundant tree ferns,