Shy explorer’s adventurers recounted

Peter McKelvey

Mr Explorer Douglas


I can recall in my youth being enthralled by old books about early New Zealand exploration, especially A.P. Harper’s Pioneer Work in the Alps of New Zealand, which was published in 1896. The descriptions in it of his exploratory journeys with Charlie Douglas in the mountains of Westland under arduous conditions, which stretched both men, fired youthful imagination. Many years later John Pascoe, himself a noted climber and explorer, researched the life of Douglas and his work in the mountains of Westland and published Mr Explorer Douglas in 1957. This represented an important advance in New Zealand literature of this kind for it gave the first comprehensive account of Douglas’ career and explained the significance of his field work in Westland between 1868 and 1906, so establishing firmly his prominent place in the history of New Zealand exploration. The book was popular and was reprinted in that year and later in 1969. It has been out of print for a long time. Now Graham Langton, himself a seasoned trumper and climber as well as an historian, has revised Pascoe’s work, adding new material, correcting some errors and re-editing the text suitable for readers in the 21st century. There is a wider range of photographs too.

This new version follows the broad structure of the older one. About one third deals with the life and accomplishments of Douglas and two thirds with his writings. Douglas’ eccentricities of expression and spelling are all retained. In addition a fuller appreciation of the man has been provided which makes for a satisfying conclusion.

Douglas was employed for much of his working life by the Department of Lands and Survey to explore the Westland mountain catchments from Hokitika south to Martins Bay and the Hollyford Valley and map his findings. He was required also to report on any valuable minerals and possible tourist tracks. He developed a great enthusiasm for mapping and his maps were often embellished by sketches of the striking topography he encountered. Later he developed an interest in photography to help illustrate this. Much of his exploring was solo, a faithful dog being his only companion, with the obvious personal risks in such dangerous terrain. He would laboriously pack his supplies up major rivers to establish bases in the hinterland and then operate from these for weeks, sometimes for months. The wages he earned were modest and he never accumulated much money; indeed he was often in debt. However he was blest by having departmental supervisors who valued his work and who respected him professionally and personally.

His writings about the country he traversed and the wildlife he encountered make fascinating reading, revealing his acute powers of observation as well as his whimsical humour and philosophy. His account of the many species of birds he became familiar with - he had to eat a lot of birds to stay alive - has been likened to a substantial and valuable monograph in which due account was taken of ecological features, even though the treatment was unsystematic and often discursive. Unfortunately for the forester and botanist there is not a great deal included of his observations on the flora; the notable exception was on his Copland exploration. This is a feature that was pointed out by the late Dr Jack Holloway in his comment on the 1957 edition. Holloway took the trouble after the publication of Pascoe’s book, and with the ready assistance of the author, to go through the copious notes Douglas made on the vegetation and included some of these as examples in his published critical comment. It is a pity that more of Douglas’ observations on the vegetation were not included in the new edition.

The reader will come to the end of Langton’s revision with a good understanding of the sort of man that Douglas was, and that is one of the pleasing features of the book. He was born in Edinburgh in 1840. His first job was in a bank there where his father and three brothers worked or had worked. However Charlie preferred to march to an unconventional drum and soon took off on

Web Sites about Pine Wilt
Kansas State University
www.oznet.kasu.edu/hfrr/extensn/problems/pinewilt.htm
Missouri Botanical Garden
www.mobot.org/MOBOT/hort/ipm/pinewood.htm

Further Reading

Samples should be collected in a plastic bag and sent to:
Forest Research,
Private Bag 3020, Sala St, Rotorua
Attention: Forest Health

for books

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his own individualistic path to New Zealand. He explored in Westland because he was curious about what lay beyond the coastal plains and he enjoyed exploring. Indeed sometimes the book is redolent of Kipling’s poem *The Explorer* and its quests ‘beyond the ranges’. He was really less concerned about tourist routes or deposits of valuable minerals although, following instructions conscientiously, he looked for the former and collected many geological specimens related to the latter. In fact he did some geological mapping for the Department. He was shy with strangers, especially women, but he was not a loner. He knew people the length of southern Westland and had a small circle of close friends. He was well-mannered and responded politely to women who charmed him, usually the wives of his friends. From time to time he embarked on drinking binges when he got back to civilisation, though these were of short duration.

Charlie Douglas was one of this country’s most famous back-country characters and we owe a debt to Graham Langton for enhancing his story. The book is a great read.

Reference:

Proceedings of a symposium on sustainable management

The Symposium on Sustainable Management of Indigenous Forests was held in January 2000 as part of the Third Meeting of the Southern Connection Congress that aims to bring together people interested in biological and earth sciences from Southern Hemisphere countries.

The cost of the proceedings is $NZ30.00 (incl. postage) for overseas residents and $NZ25.00 (incl. postage) in New Zealand. For further information, Dr Glenn Stewart (phone (03) 325-2811, fax (03) 325 3844, email stewart@lincoln.ac.nz.

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The Editor, Dr. Hugh Bigsby,
Commerce Division,
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New Zealand.
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