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Voyagers

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I met Francis Mackenzie at the National Library.

I'd spent the morning poring over the accounts of Jules Dumont d'Urville, following the corvette *Astrolabe* along the coast of New Zealand in 1827. Voyages of scientific exploration were a prominent theme of my book project. The Katherine Mansfield reading room was empty, save two librarians behind their desks. I was able to spread out the large volumes, quite at ease in this hushed space behind glass walls. It was strange and exciting to be able to read Dumont d'Urville's journal nearly two hundred years later, almost twenty thousand kilometres from France. Surprisingly, accessing the books was easier in Wellington than in Paris, where the reader is confronted with long waits, not to mention surly librarians. I had Alexander Turnbull to thank for this.

When I'd sufficiently mapped out the course of the corvette, I turned to the atlases. There was a flutter of wings and suddenly, out of the volume on Zoology flew a slate-grey *kokako*, followed by a plump *ngutuparore* with a bent beak. On one page, a Tonga fruit bat brazenly spread its leather-like wings, flashing a dark, furry abdomen. Splashing about on another page were striped wrasses and combtooth blennies.

Having feasted my eyes upon lustrous feathers and mottled scales, I finally settled down in front of *The Voyagers: Remarkable European Explorations of New Zealand*, a book by Paul Moon. It recounted the journeys of sailors, geologists, botanists, settlers, missionaries and artists throughout the 19th century. Chapters devoted to John Bidwill, Samuel Marsden, Charles Heaphy gave precious insight into their travels within the country and their views on the Maori.

As I flipped through the different sections, I heard:

"Wellington is a very dull place. The people seem idle and lazy, quite different from Auckland, where all was bustle and activity."

"I beg to differ!" I protested.

Francis Mackenzie glared at me. He had a long, sallow face with sunken cheeks and paper-thin lips. I knew him to be an army lieutenant who had left Scotland to serve in the 8th Regiment Bombay Native Infantry. However, in 1853 he resigned in hopes of becoming a farmer in a land with a fairer climate.

"What would *you* know?" he scoffed, sizing me up with heavy-lidded eyes. "You don't look like a local to me."

"It's because I'm not. I'm from France, for your information."

"Are you aware that one of your fellow countrymen was eaten up by a group of angry Maori some time ago?"

I had to admit the man knew his facts.

"That'd be Marion-Dufresne, in 1772", I nodded. "But to be fair, the captain had it coming, fishing in waters where Maori had recently died. Still, a dear price for breaking *tapu*."

"These Maori are a strange lot, I can assure you. I hired five of them to assist me on my journey from Auckland to Wellington and it wasn't easy to make them take me where I wanted."

He went on to describe how he had found a nice piece of land between Whanganui and Taranaki, only to be shooed away by a bunch of turbulent Maori who would not sell it at any price, although they made no use of it.

"You must have been pleased to arrive in Wellington", I said, pitying his dejected look.

"It took me thirty-one days to get there, so of course, I had high hopes. But in the end I found it a sorry place."

"Well, things have definitely changed! I can show you if you walk with me."

Mackenzie sniffed, obviously piqued at being challenged by a foreigner. However, having time to spare, he reluctantly pulled himself out of the book, gingerly unfolding his gaunt frame into the reading room. He cracked his neck and flexed his knees while I gathered my belongings.

A pale late afternoon sun was shining through woolly clouds when we emerged from the library. Cars and city buses streamed by on Molesworth Street. Shoppers hurried on to the New World supermarket further down the way. Runners with backpacks and fancy sports shoes whizzed past us, making Mackenzie nearly jump out of his skin.

“It’s not as quiet as I remembered”, he whined. “I wonder if the place where I stayed still exists.”

He racked his brain for its name.

“Barrett’s Hotel, that’s it”, he declared, snapping his fingers. “It was near an establishment called The Thistle Inn.”

“I know where that is! I was there not too long ago, for the AGM of the Friends of Randell Cottage.”

Seeing his puzzled look, I explained:

“I’m the writer in residence at Randell Cottage, up by Tinakori Hill. I was at the inn to talk about crime fiction to of a group of friends.”

“Crime fiction? You mean, you write about murders?”

“Something like that. Let’s put it this way: as an army officer, you kill for a living; as a crime writer, I kill for fun.”

I steered him past the Archives on Murphy Street, and soon we were standing in front of The Thistle Inn, with its white facade and welcoming windows. Couples were sipping drinks at the bar while some enjoyed a piece of cake by the door. Mackenzie swivelled his head, apparently quite distraught.

“I don’t recognise this at all”, he complained. “My hotel was much closer to the waterfront.”

A quick check on my smartphone solved the mystery.

“You’re right. The Thistle Inn, built in 1840, stood initially closer to the shore, not far from your hotel”, I said, starting off towards Lambton Quay. “It burned down in 1866 and was replaced by the current two-storey building.”

“Barrett’s Hotel is also gone!” wailed Mackenzie when we came upon its original location. “It used to stand in front of a wharf made from the hull of an old vessel.”

“Well, you must have been one of its last guests, because the hotel was destroyed two years later – in the massive 1855 earthquake. At least you keep fond memories of the place.”

“Fond? I didn’t sleep a wink that night. The landlady had got drunk and created a disturbance with some people in the house.”

“How so?” I couldn’t help asking. “A bout of fisticuffs? A cat-fight? Any broken limbs? Any blood shed?”

He shrugged, unable to provide me with the gruesome details I was expecting. As we walked past a string of shops on our way up to Bolton Street Cemetery, Mackenzie wrinkled his nose and remarked:

“I’m sure it hasn’t escaped your notice that Wellingtonians are idle and lazy, as I mentioned before. The shops open only at the whim of their owners, which is often late in the morning.”

“You must be joking. You should come to France, where stores are closed on Mondays and Sundays. I found the shopkeepers here very professional, on the contrary. The ones at Woodward Optical seamlessly rewelded a pair of broken glasses for me, at a very reasonable price, too.”

By then we had reached the first tombstones, scattered among rose shrubs and agapanthus bushes. This is a lovely stroll, but I

suddenly realised it was callous of me to make Mackenzie amble through a graveyard. Fortunately, far from being distressed, he marched on with a light gait, stooping now and then to read the names of the deceased.

“No wonder there are so many of them here”, he observed blithely. “There is often a cold, bleak wind ripping through the streets of Wellington. I noticed that a great many people had coughs, colds and influenza.”

Descending on Tinakori Road, Mackenzie sighted the alluring Sprig & Fern where patrons were cheerfully raising their glasses.

“How about a drink?” he suggested, his eyes lighting up.

“Why not? I’ll make you a cup of tea at the Cottage. It’s just half way up St Mary Street.”

He panted up the hill, somewhat disappointed. I caught him gazing across the road, as if trying to piece together his memories of Thorndon.

“That’s the Botanic Garden, established in 1868. You wouldn’t remember it. It’s the place to be in summer, when they stage free outdoor concerts under illuminated trees.”

A hand on the wooden gate of Number 14, I announced proudly:

“And this, Mr. Mackenzie, is the sweetest spot in all Thorndon.”

It was no lie. In the failing light, the white gabled cottage with its red roof sat peacefully amid Japanese anemones and the blue stars of borage blossoms. Burnt-orange chrysanthemums bobbed their heads as we picked our way to the door.

“Welcome to Randell Cottage”, I said, ushering him in.

I explained that it had been built in 1867 by William Randell, who landed with his wife Sarah at Wellington in 1855, shortly after the severe earthquake. His bricklaying skills were immediately put to use and the couple succeeded in buying the lot a few years later. They lived there with their ten children, making additions to the

house as the family grew. After renovating the cottage, William Randell's descendants – Beverley Randell, her husband Hugh Price, and their daughter Susan – gifted it to the Randell Cottage Writers Trust in 2001, so it would become a residence for French and New Zealand writers.

“And it is now one of the finest writers residencies in the world”, I assured him.

I praised the practical layout of the house, with an airy front room catching the light from three directions and no space lost between the living quarters. The wide floorboards in Baltic pine from ship's timber and the *rimu* kitchen mantelpiece added to the cachet of the cottage.

“See the pretty wallpaper sprinkled with flowers and the frames revealing multiple layers of old wallpaper?” I said, handing Mackenzie a cup of Darjeeling tea as a reminder of his days in India.

He admired the blue willow pattern of the china and moved towards the staunch Shacklock Orion coal range in the brick fireplace.

“Now *this* is the reason for consumption amongst the Natives”, he affirmed with a twitch of his pencil-thin mustache. “The disease is said to be caused by their wrapping themselves up in blankets and throwing them off when very warm; also sitting in a close house with a fire till they pour with perspiration, and in this state going out into the cold.”

Having shared his unsolicited scientific knowledge, he carried his cup over to the bookshelf in the dining room.

“Fiona Kidman, Janet Frame, Kirsty Gunn, Katherine Mansfield, Annie Saumont, Jo Thorpe, Patricia Grace, Maggie Rainey-Smith, Victoria McHalick, Beryl Fletcher...” he mused, reading the book covers. “Are they women writers?”

“They are. And damn good ones, too. Some were also writers in residence at Randell Cottage.”

“Has the literary world been taken over by women then?” he moaned.

“Just about”, I jested.

I glanced at my watch. It was almost five o’clock.

“You’d better hurry back to the National Library before it closes, Mr Mackenzie.”

I gave him precise directions. The man seemed dispirited. He probably fancied the afternoon in the sun more than he’d let on.

“Make sure to go to the reading rooms on Level One. Your address is 993.01 MOO 2014, mind you. Don’t get lost!”

I accompanied him to the gate. The sky had taken on a purple tint, with strands of gold towards the west. Cyclists in reflective vests toiled past the intersection.

“So, Mr Mackenzie, do you still find Wellington a dull place?”

He pursed his lips and muttered some indistinct reply. He managed to thank me cursorily before hobbling down the street and making a left turn on Tinakori Road.

I laughed. Clearly, the answer was *No*.