

A musterer's sojourn on Campbell Island: the diary of Alfred Austin, 1919-1921

Edited by Paul Dingwall and Geoff Gregory

With commentaries by Conon Fraser, Erick Brenstrum, and Peter Moore



Department of Conservation
Te Papa Atawhai

Cover: a pastiche of text and a map, compiled by Chris Edkins from the original lease offer from the Department of Lands and Survey for pastoral runs on Auckland, Adams, and Campbell Islands, 1894; photographs taken by Alfred Austin and Bill Fleck while on Campbell Island; overprinted with a note scrawled on the back cover of his diary by Alfred Austin, giving the shearing tally.

The original diary and photographs were lent by Gerald Austin, who kindly gave permission to publish them. Chris Edkins designed the cover and the maps and enhanced the photographs. Production by DOC Science Publishing was managed by Jaap Jasperse and printing co-ordinated by Sue Wilkins.

This diary was published with the financial support of the Department of Conservation, Science & Research Unit. Publication was approved by the Manager, Science & Research Unit, Science Technology and Information Services, Department of Conservation, Wellington.

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ISBN 0-478-22094-4

National Library of New Zealand Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

Austin, Alfred, 1898-1973.

A musterer's sojourn on Campbell Island : the diary of Alfred Austin, 1919-1921 / edited by Paul Dingwall and Geoff Gregory ; with commentaries by Conon Fraser, Erick Brenstrum and Peter Moore.

Includes bibliographical references.

ISBN 0-478-22094-4

I. Austin, Alfred, 1898-1973. 2. Shepherds—New Zealand—Campbell Island—Biography. 3. Sheep ranches—New Zealand—Campbell Island. 4. Campbell Island (N.Z.) I. Dingwall, P. R. (Paul Richard) II. Gregory, J. G. (John Geoffrey), 1936- III. Title. 636.301092—dc 22

Printed on recycled paper by Astra Print, Wellington

Foreword

Located in the vast and stormy Southern Ocean, some 700 km from the South Island, Campbell Island is New Zealand's southernmost sovereign territory. Today it is an uninhabited nature reserve and World Heritage site administered by the Department of Conservation. But it has a long history of occupation and use for sealing and whaling, wartime coastal defence, meteorological observation and, despite its remoteness and subantarctic climate, for farming.

The Government's advertisement of a pastoral lease over Campbell Island in 1894 ushered in a farming era at the island that was to endure for more than 40 years. While intending to promote the pastoral industry that had swept through much of the South Island, the Government also recognised that occupation of the island by farmers would demonstrate sovereignty in the area and provide for surveillance over any illegal sealing activities.

The first lessee was James Gordon, a Scots migrant then living in Gisborne, who released 400 sheep on the island in 1895 and lived there for brief periods over the next five years. In 1900 his lease was taken over by another Gisborne resident, Captain Henry Tucker, who engaged shepherds from the Shetland Islands to run the farm during the next three years. They returned sporadically until 1922. Tucker also contracted Marlborough whalers from 1909 to 1916, but the farm took second place to their whaling activities and was neglected. Two Otago businessmen, D. Murray and J. Mathewson, became the third lessees of the island in 1916, forming the Campbell Island Company (later a Syndicate) to manage the farm. In the following decade they employed shepherds and shearers from the South Island to work on the island for one-year periods, and one of these was Alfred Austin, whose diary is published herein.

The decline in coastal shipping and cessation of patrols by government vessels in the early 1920s meant there were few ships to service the island. Moreover, wool prices slumped in 1926 and by that time the Syndicate's farm was operating at a substantial loss. In 1927 the lease was bought at auction by John Warren, a farmer from Waitati, and he liberated 5000 sheep on the island. Prices for wool and meat plummeted in 1929, and two years later a destitute Warren and his farm workers were repatriated to the New Zealand mainland. Warren's lease was declared forfeit in 1934 and finally expired in 1937, while his debt was written off by the Crown - thus terminating the country's southernmost farm.

Meanwhile, following a scientific expedition to the island in 1927, there was a growing call for protection of the island's unique vegetation and wildlife. Subsequently, Campbell Island was set aside for preservation of



All that remains of the homestead—a rusting stove.

flora and fauna in 1937, though it was not officially gazetted as a reserve until 1954. Many of the feral sheep, remnants of a flock that may have reached 8000 at its peak, died out, and from 1970 the rest were progressively reduced in number through culling. The last remaining sheep were finally eliminated in 1992, thereby ending the island's association with farming. Today, little physical evidence remains of

the farming episode. A rusting stove at Tucker Point shows where the farm homestead stood, and collapsed lines of wire and fence standards remind us that sheep once roamed the hills. The farmhouse and other wooden structures have long since rotted away or the timber has been used for subsequent buildings.

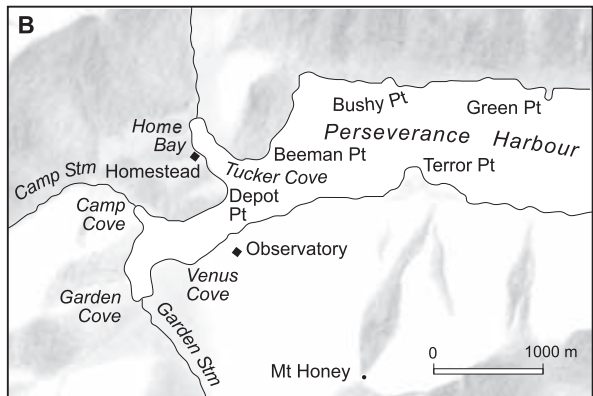
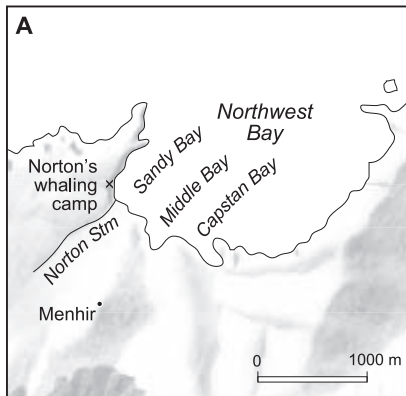
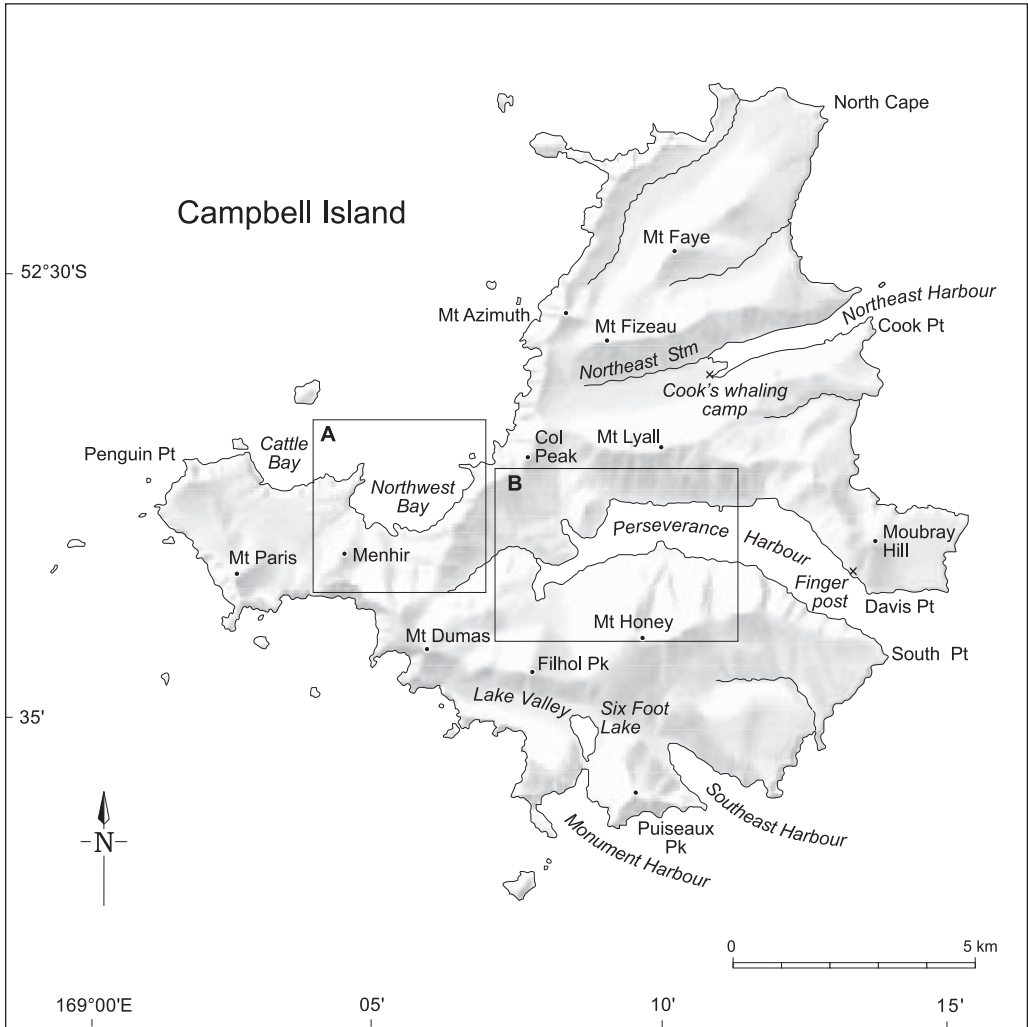
The history of the Campbell Island farm has still not been fully documented, so the availability of contemporary personal accounts and diaries is an extremely useful way of filling this gap. Austin's diary contains a daily record of the period from November 1919 to November 1921 and provides invaluable insight into sheep farming in an oceanic island setting at the very margins of human settlement. From the diary we not only learn about the farming operations, but also find a wealth of information on the way of life among a small isolated group of farm workers, the prevailing (usually inclement) weather, and the resident wildlife. In a series of explanatory essays derived from the diary accounts, each of these is discussed in turn. The resulting document is a very valuable addition to our growing series of personal accounts of human contacts with New Zealand's subantarctic island realm.

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March 2004

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Map of Campbell Island.

Alfred Ernest ('Jerry') Austin

Alfred Ernest Austin, known to his friends and family as 'Jerry', led a full and eventful life. The son of a Presbyterian clergyman, he was born in Dunedin in 1898 and educated, until age 15, at Otago Boys' High School. His first job was as a clerk in the Dunedin City Council, and he played the cornet in the St Kilda brass band. He enlisted in the army during the First World War, but contracted pneumonia just a week before he was due to be shipped out to Europe. He then worked as a shepherd at Campbell Island in the 1919-21 period. On returning from the island he, and several of his island companions, became very ill (possibly scurvy due to their inadequate diet) and Alfred's doctor sent him to work as a stoker in the Dunedin Gas Works to recuperate. Alfred then continued his mustering role, at the Orari Gorge sheep station. In 1927 he turned his back on rural life and joined the Shell Oil Company in Timaru, progressively working his way up through the ranks of the company in Wellington and Auckland to become branch manager of the Invercargill office in 1936. The following year his career took another turn when he purchased the Travellers' Rest Hotel in Drummond, near Invercargill. Two years later he moved to Christchurch and worked as a Rawleigh's Company salesman. During World War II he served in the Southern District Engineering Corps of the Home Guard, based in the grounds of the Riccarton racecourse. He was then employed as the distribution manager in the Latex Rubber Company in Christchurch. Following his retirement in 1965, he worked part-time as a runner for the National Bank. He also travelled around the world on cargo ships, writing a diary of his experiences. Alfred died aged 75 in 1973.

Alfred Austin



A remarkably fit man, Alfred was also a talented sportsman. In athletics he was a sprint champion, and he played both rugby and cricket at senior level. A leading rugby referee for many years, he controlled the match between Otago and the visiting South African Springboks in 1936.

Alfred is remembered as an immaculately dressed, well-mannered gentleman, who was a keen observer of life around him and a devoted family man. He and his wife, who died in 1955, had one child, a son Gerald, who is an architect living with his wife Wendy in the Christchurch suburb of Sumner. Gerald holds the original copy of his father's Campbell Island diary.

P.D. (based on notes from Gerald Austin)



View from Beeman Beach, showing, from the left, Mt Filhol, Mt Dumas, and South Col. Sketch by W.R. Fleck.