

The Upper Manuherikia Valley
by Brian Turner

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When there's only a hint of a breeze and the sun's bright, and the day promises to be warm, I think of making for the upper Manuherikia River, the valley between bulky Mt St Bathans and the pleated symmetry of the Hawkdun Range. In 30 minutes I can be there.

To me the burly hills and mountains that I live near are ever-interesting, ever-changing throughout the seasons. In the mornings they are fresh and wonderful and in the evenings mesmeric and consoling. I'm often mindful of Lawrence Durrell's feeling that mountains watched us and at the same time asked if we were watching ourselves in them. For I see the world around us, the hills, rivers and streams, and the forests and oceans for that matter - what is often termed the 'natural world' - as a community to which I belong. I do not think of nature as a suite of 'resources, or 'commodities', whose principal role is to provide for us materially. I see the whole as an entity that we are morally bound to nurture, respect, and care for.

The Upper Manuherikia above the lake formed by the Falls Dam is an airy and, on fine days especially, liberating place. I feel calmer there.

I go there to wander and fish, or simply sit and look at the tawny and pale gold grasses that clothe the mountains, and at the restful blues of the scree-slopes reaching for the sky. The river's cheeky, burbles and bounces. It gleams and occasionally froths, braids, merges again, then whips back and forth. When running high it undercuts banks. Mostly it is cool and clean and runs swiftly over yellow, white, grey and, here and there, dark stones.

The river's songs quell anxiety, make me happy. I sing along with it and remember when, in the 1950s, on Sundays, and at holiday times, our family began to visit the rivers and lakes of the south. We picnicked and fished, camped in a caravan or tent, ate sandwiches with lettuce, radishes, boiled eggs, tomatoes and cheese. We boiled water in a Thermette, drank tea or orange cordial. Dad had a bottle of beer. We drove home in the early evening singing songs from the stage shows.

Today, consideration is being given to raising the Falls Dam by as much as 27 metres, no doubt as part of a desire to 'grow the economy'. That would flood much of the upper valley – death to a major part of what remains of the river there. All this points to the fact that, once again, not only do we need to more precisely define what we mean by 'growth' and 'progress', we have to ask, Are there no limits?

It has been said that we don't inherit our place from those who preceded us, we borrow it from all that follow. Yes, and remember, Nature bats last.