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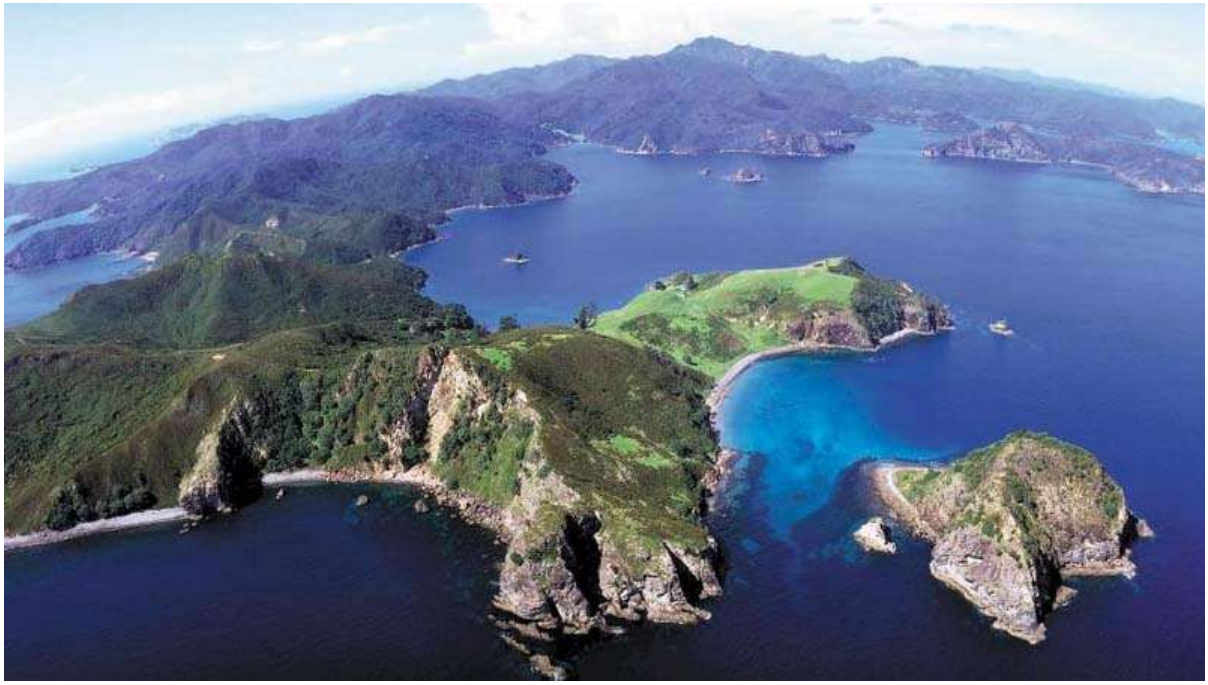
THE LAST FRONTIER

Last, loneliest, loveliest, Great Barrier Island is a mystical, mythical place, the last big land mass between Auckland and the vast Pacific. For years a haven for dropouts and eccentrics, it's been discovered by well-off Aucklanders who are paying high prices for land even as the island's resident population drops and jobs dry up.



Great Barrier Island, Aotea, is beautiful, ruggedly beautiful. It is craggy, moody and utterly captivating, the first port of call for storms that sweep off the Pacific, its bony limbs sheltering the Hauraki Gulf. The east coast is all surf beaches, the sand beaten fine by the swell over eons, and its west coast is all deep, Pohutukawa-fringed coves.

Perhaps it is best to describe it in moments. The gut response you get when you slip around a narrow, graveled corner, emerging out of the bush-clad hills to find the sea laid out in front of you. The way locals lift a couple of fingers off the steering wheel to greet drivers coming the other way. One day I stopped the car to let an endangered brown teal duck cross the road. The island picks up Auckland radio stations, so this blissful moment was accompanied by the harried description of a pile-up on the northern motorway at Tristram Avenue.

Great Barrier is a wilderness, its population scattered through small, isolated communities stretched over 280 square kilometres: Port FitzRoy to the north, Claris and Tryphena in the south, the odd roof among the trees in between.

There is one pub on the island, and it is Irish. On a balmy February evening, it is locals' night at The Currach in Tryphena on the island's west coast. Dave, a second-generation farmer, is staring into his Kilkenny, his square, calloused hands dwarfing the pint. "Law and order has caught up with us," he muses. "This used to be the wild west. Not anymore."

Once, Barrier was renowned as a haven for "the three As": anarchists, alcoholics and artists who existed uneasily alongside farming families. But now, Great Barrier's course is changing as Auckland realises what a stunning wilderness it has on its doorstep: the once casual (or non-existent) building and development consent processes have become more rigorous, there's pressure to protect and rehabilitate the environment and the wealthy are rediscovering one of the last boltholes within a day's march of the city.

Despite this activity, Great Barrier's permanent population is dropping, its school rolls shrinking and its population aging (Work and Income figures show a growing number of superannuitants compared with other benefit types). At the 2001 Census, the island had 1086 residents, down from 1152 in 1996. A hundred people doesn't sound like much, but for a small population, it's a king hit.

Dave, one of a handful of farmers left, owns 130 acres of inherited land on which he runs a few cattle but he says "there's f-all money left in farming these days". He does a bit of contracting here, some drain laying there, a spot of labouring now and then to pay his way: the islanders pride themselves on flexibility.

After a few minutes of stilted, so-what-do-you-do-then exchanges, Dave admits he's nursing a large hangover. He chuckles. "I was meant to go to work today, couldn't face it. I woke up, took the phone off the hook and went back to sleep."

The frontier mentality has long been in action on the Barrier. As recently as the late 1980s, many Great Barrier residents built their own houses, going without bathrooms, without power, without kitchens. Some camped in rough huts before finally getting a roof over their heads.

Rugby game at Claris

John and Jane Sutton are archetypal Barrier settlers. John Sutton found 15 acres at Tryphena 20 years ago after scouring New Zealand for the perfect spot, and Jane followed. "I fell in love with him and he already had the land, but I would have gone anywhere with him, really," she laughs. They planted a macadamia orchard and started a fruit-tree nursery, built self-contained chalets for tourists in the bush, and John has a roading contract with Auckland City. Their house is a sprawling, board-and-batten affair surrounded by trees, built by John and his mates as finances allowed.

They've now reached a level of middle-class comfort. "I certainly knew I didn't want to just stay at a very subsistence sort of a level," says Jane. "I wanted to be able to go off the island if I needed to, have a comfortable place to live in. It doesn't just happen. You have to do

something to get there. Now, people expect everything. We started off with this one room, no real power, just our wood range that heats up the water. No phone, no TV, any of that sort of carry-on… It didn't matter. They weren't the priorities then."

Life is hard here. The island is dependent on fuel for its very existence, but petrol is $1.72 a litre. Unemployment hovers at about 10 per cent. Fullers cancelled regular winter ferry services two years ago so access is limited to a slow freight ferry or a short flight from Mangere, which costs $172 return. Less than a quarter of the island's roads are sealed; the rest are narrow, gravel and perilously steep. There is no reticulated power, no town water supply, no sewage treatment plant. There is no bank. Groceries are freighted in from Auckland supermarkets. The creaking automated telephone system installed in 1990 is due for a $1.9 million upgrade, something Telecom has been reluctant to do with such a small customer base, and until that happens about 100 people go without a telephone. There is little cellphone coverage and internet access is patchy. And there is no secondary school: your children either go to boarding school or you move away once they enter their teens.

Great Barrier people are a hardy lot: only the toughest survive. You find won't many long-term beneficiaries here: if you haven't got some means of making a living — and that's challenge enough in itself — you simply can't survive.

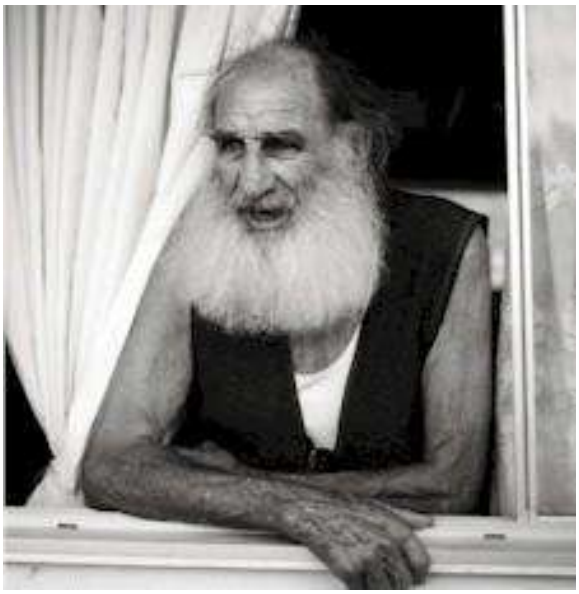
The adversity used to be romantic enough to attract a few intrepid souls; in the 1980s it had one of New Zealand's fastest-growing populations as young couples moved to the island, taking advantage of cheap land and the idyllic lifestyle. Their children attended the three local primary schools and the island's population swelled from 573 in 1981 to 1152 in 1996.

The Barrier also used to look like a giant wrecker's yard: islanders would drive cars until they broke down one last time, get out and leave them on the side of the road to rust. In 1988, *Metro* reported that "instead of swimming pools, spas and private tennis courts, the route to recognition is the number of abandoned wrecks you have on or near your property."

No longer. In 1987, the Great Barrier Island County Council was amalgamated with the Rodney District Council and in 1989, the island became part of Auckland City. The council's traffic department, reportedly horrified by the hulks and by the number of unwarrantable cars still on the road, has slowly brought the islanders into line and has removed most of the remains to city wreckers.

The cleanup is symptomatic of where the island finds itself in the 21st Century: slowly, but surely, Auckland's last frontier is being roped in. Corralled. *Organised.*

A whole host of acronyms are asserting influence on the Barrier, and it's not often welcome. ACC (Auckland City Council), DoC (Department of Conservation), the QMS (Quota Management System), and the RMA (Resource Management Act) have all changed the islanders' way of life in the past two decades.



A place for the non-conformist: Barrier resident Hank Hollick

Example: Auckland City Council, which has jurisdiction over the island, has enforced building codes more vigorously. Families "would put up a house, and they'd put it up in bits," says Adele Robertson, one of the island's two community nurses who moved to the island with husband Shannon, a mussel farmer at Port FitzRoy, in 1985. "Now, when you put in for your consents, you have to have all your plans drawn up."

Example: the Quota Management System spelt the end of the local fishing industry. Introduced in 1986 when the island had about 25 commercial fishermen, it was intended to better manage fish stocks by making fishing licences a tradable commodity. The last two fishermen retired last year, but young blokes can't afford to buy quota from the big companies now plying the Barrier's waters. Says Shannon Robertson: "The paperwork was just beyond them. The guy who's going fishing, he doesn't want to fill in a whole lot of special reports and things. And so gradually… he saw the easy option. He could sell his quota."

Now, you can't buy fish on the island. "If we want to put fish on the table," says Ivan McManaway at the luxurious Mount St Paul Lodge above Kaitoke Beach on the east coast, "we have to buy it from town."

And then there's the recent sharp increase in land values. Prices have doubled in recent years as Aucklanders, expatriates and foreigners have turned to the island. After all, to a middle-aged professional looking at holiday traffic creeping along the highway north of Orewa, a 25-minute flight from Mangere seems pretty appealing. So do the prices: on Medland's Beach, a pristine stretch of white sand on the east coast, beachfront sections sell for less than $200,000. Locals just can't compete.

Couples likes John and Jane Sutton could no longer start the way they did and it shows in the primary schools. All three have falling rolls; Mulberry Grove School at Tryphena lost four families last year, 14 children in all. "That school has done full circle," says Jane Sutton "Twenty years ago it was a two-teacher school, and now I would say, by the end of this year it'll be a two-teacher school again."

The island is simply powerless to control its own destiny, says winemaker John Mellars, chairman of the Great Barrier Community Board. "We're shrinking, if anything. The people who've been here for a long time see that as a very dangerous thing because for every little piece of infrastructure, every facility, every classroom in every school, it means somebody around here has fought really hard to get it. To lose anything is tragic, because you lose kids. School rolls this year are the lowest they've been for 20 years. It comes really down to the people that are here, it's their ultimate responsibility. But we've got no power, no say."

Helen O'Shea came to Great Barrier 50 years ago with her husband Mick to farm, but still describes herself as "president of the newcomers' club". A former Kingseat hospital psychiatric nurse, she's 70 with a shock of curly red hair atop a broad, sun-tanned face. She meets me in a dusty bus stop across the road from their farm in Awana. "My whole outlook on life is every day is Christmas," she volunteers. "We're just so lucky. I say we live in paradise on earth. It depends entirely on your mind." There's a twinkle in her eye, a ready hoot of laughter. I suspect she's laughing gently at me, the urban interloper on the hunt for an easy quote. She pretends to rural eccentricity but it's plain that she's ruthlessly intelligent.

She gives a pretty good potted history of the Barrier, too. "In the beginning," she says, "it was the landed gentry, and they came from Cornwall and Ireland, three or four families, and they ruled the roost. And then you have the newcomers, we came in. And coming in here, an Irish Roman Catholic, that's Mick, and me Irish, part Maori. Wow. Didn't fit into the scheme of things. Yeah, it was very rough. And then you had the hippies, and the other itinerants who lived in the bush, but then they got old and wanted all the stuff that ordinary people have. And now, we've got the rich coming in in their helicopters."

At this farm half an hour down the dusty road to Medland's Beach, George Medland, a third-generation farmer from one of the island's pioneering families, says farming's time is limited on the island. "They won't allow you to keep your property clear, so as far as farming goes it'll be on the decline. Hopefully there'll be a couple of farms on the best pieces of land. I'd hate to see it all go back to nothing but scrub. They talk about scrub here as an endangered species, just about, and it's a noxious weed."

The Barrier is possum free and there are ambitious plans to rid the island of its remaining predators. Trapper Dean Medland with victims.

Farmers like O'Shea and Medland are farmers from another era, a time of government subsidies and guaranteed returns. As farms on the mainland have amalgamated to achieve greater productivity, Barrier farms have stayed the same size or been split between children. Here and there, they've sold bits on the coast and in the bush to make ends meet. They are critical of the Resource Management Act for the effect it has had

in hindering development of their land, about the only asset many have left. "We had to subdivide to survive," says Medland, who chopped up family land in the sand dunes at Medland's Beach in the 1970s. "They wouldn't let you subdivide it now… DoC and the greenies seem to have made it very biased in their direction."

The farmers are frustrated: one man, whose family's plans were thwarted at the Environment Court, says he believes the ruling breached the inherent rights embodied in the Magna Carta. "Islanders are living off their equity, basically. It's all they have," he says. "You pour five, six hundred thousand dollars into the ocean and for what? It hurts."

The RMA has made it hard for the locals to develop land the way that they want to but Auckland City Council rejects assertions that the district plan is strangling them. "The plan is set up so you can do almost anything you want on the island, provided you manage the environmental effects," says Karen Bell, council manager of planning policy. "So you might have to go through a process which requires you to show how you're going to deal with earthworks, how you're going to manage access because with a lot of them, the access is quite difficult. And that brings cost into the process."

At Claris airstrip

Auckland City is making the plan more permissive**,** she says, but the council is nervous of further subdivisions in marginal areas such as sand dunes, cliffs and wetlands. "There's a community that's been there for a long time and so they've got this expectation that 'this is our island, this is our land, we should be able to do what we want with it.' But the environment that their families flourished in, of government subsidies, of not so much control around fishing industries, has changed, and maybe we have to find, or the community has to find, a way to work together to get them to benefit from its major selling point — its isolation and its heritage values."

That's small consolation to some islanders, living on land worth millions but earning a pittance. John Mellars, who runs a boutique vineyard on his 70 acres in Okupu, says the islanders are frustrated. "You've got this piece of farmland, which to all practical purposes is useless for farming anymore. What are you allowed to do with it? Do you just walk away and let it revert to scrub and watch your life's work disappear?"

Some landowners want to continue to extract value from their land; others, often those better financially resourced, believe the island's future lies in rehabilitating land, in other words locking it up from development.

Huge tracts of it are already tied up: the Department of Conservation controls up to 70 per cent of the island's land area (remarkably, no one seems to have an exact percentage. "It's more than 60, and less than 70," says Jim Flack, DoC's community relations officer on the island).

The island's rugged interior.

DoC, or the "Department of Constipation" as a local wag called it, arrived in 1987, taking over land formerly controlled by the New Zealand Forest Service. Since then it has pursued an unashamedly conservationist ethic, as it should: as well the brown teal duck, the chevron skink has been found in the hills and the black petrel, which commutes between South America and New Zealand, only nests on Great Barrier and Little Barrier islands.

There are tensions. Locals find DoC bureaucratic and ideologically driven. The department is criticised by environmentalists for being bound by red tape, by others for seeming to forget that the island has human inhabitants. It's probably a healthy tension, says Faye Storer, Auckland City's councillor for the Hauraki Gulf. "When your job is to protect endangered species, you probably do get a little bit precious about it."

For most of the island's European history, extractive industries have ravaged the land and sea. The island was once covered in kauri forest, which was progressively milled until early last century, leaving behind, high in the hills, the famous kauri dams where bushmen stored logs before floating them downstream. Pioneer farmers burnt off the bush, converting the land into pasture. Gold, silver and copper sparked strike fever. An ill-fated whaling industry, established near what was erroneously believed to be the migratory path of sperm whales, operated out of Whangaparapara as recently as the 1950s.

The island's population has always fluctuated, says Adele Robertson, who recently profiled the community for her Masters in rural health. "Resource communities, who haven't got business and industry to rely on, have to use the resources in the area. So there are periods where it's really profitable and it brings lots of people. There's an increase, then it reaches a peak and then it winds down and the community can go through a period of poverty... If communities are really proactive, they can make the troughs much shallower."

Some argue that, as farming and fishing decline, tourism will ease the island through the next trough — but in what form? Although there are numerous tourist operators, from rough-and-ready backpackers to the giddy heights of a luxury lodge, most are under-capitalised, many are couples or families making a bit on the side, and few have marketing budgets, although the internet is changing that.

About 20,000 visitors a year visit the island; there are no official records but, anecdotally, numbers have dropped since Fullers pulled out of regular fast ferry service in 2001. Local tourist operators are critical of the Fullers service; which, they say, can be erratic or non-existent.

"The Scots have got their fingers in the till of Stagecoach," says one man of Fullers' owners, "and they're making a very good profit out of it. They are just taking money out of the cream stuff."

More importantly, the island has lost Fullers' marketing grunt. It's a Catch 22: as the tourism numbers drop, there's less money going around the island, fewer jobs and, eventually, a reduced population. Full-time ferry service won't resume the way things are. And without a ferry service there's less marketing, less access, and yes, fewer tourists.

But that's not necessarily a problem, says Tourism Auckland's chief executive Graeme Osbourne. Although he admits the island's tourism industry has undergone some "shrinkage" in recent years, he's unfailingly optimistic. "Maybe you don't want it to be a high-volume destination," he says. "Maybe you should be really targeted in terms of backpackers or high end. If you go to the high end, you're going to a high-yield visitor and they appreciate getting away from it all, paying to be comfortable and paying for all the privileges and luxuries that are on offer."

The island's main asset may well be the DoC estate and the impression of trackless wilderness that gives, but tourism will only succeed, says Faye Storer, if there is good access to the estate and if the department allows commercial operators to use it. Expert guided tours, she says, are vital to creating employment — something Flack says there is "heaps" of scope for.

She wants Auckland City to develop a blueprint of all the DoC, Auckland City and private tracks, ultimately connecting the entire island for public access — particularly the coast. "It has to be done yesterday," she says. "We've got to negotiate with them now, and if it means land purchase, then so be it. If it means purchasing access or easement, let's do it."

Tony Bouzaid, whose well-known yachting family has several marine businesses and properties at Westhaven, owns 230 acres and a house in Port FitzRoy, in the island's north. He believes it's crunch time for the island. "If you are looking at it as a wilderness area for tourism, you will lose it if you subdivide, so you really have to make a choice at some stage. Is this going to be a place for holiday homes, and forget about the environment and forget about what it means to employment? Fine. You'll have another Catalina Island. But if you believe, as I do, that the future of the island is in eco-tourism, then it's the wrong way to go. There's plenty of land that's been subdivided at the bottom end of the island, and as far as I'm concerned that's the place to keep it."

Bouzaid is developing Glenfern Sanctuary, complete with a bush walk through the regenerating forest with little labels identifying the native trees, and a platform resting in the crown of a kauri from which the view is white-knucklingly good. He's replanting intensively, and, most significantly, eradicating rats and feral cats from his land and attempting to stem reinvasion.

Great Barrier has the distinction of being possum-free, and almost free of goats, but Bouzaid and others are pushing to rid the island, or at least pockets of it, from rats and cats. Judy Gilbert, manager of the Windy Hill-Rosalie Bay Catchment Trust, has a vision. "I don't believe this island will have social, economic and environmental well-being," she says, "unless we make the environment the asset that we can bank, by preserving it."

Judy Gilbert is driving the campaign to rid the island of its predators and turn it into an international eco-tourism destination.

When she was only 19 Gilbert bought a fifteenth share of 230 acres at Rosalie Bay. "I was a hippie, you know," she jokes. Thirty years later she lives in a magnificent house inspired by a scallop-shell, its front wall of glass doors looking down to Medlands Beach. Surrounding it are acres of regenerating bush.

The trust is establishing a pest-free zone on its land and a neighbours' without poisons — instead, two workers have been employed with the help of several grants (from Work and Income and others) for the past four years to trap rats and cats. The island could become the sort of wilderness destination eco-tourists only dream of. "We've got an opportunity to create something absolutely outrageous," says Gilbert. "Amazing. The biggest in the world. There is no other land mass of this size that would be pest-free."

A phone survey of islanders found that 94 per cent supported eradication — although there was disagreement on how to achieve it. An aerial poison drop with manual poisoning or trapping around inhabited areas is the most likely method, but some worry about safety, given the large numbers of stock and pets on the island. (Flack says it's possible to remove stock for the drop, and that pig hunting would be banned for 18 months.)

It could happen as early as 2010, reckons Flack. The department last year cleared Campbell Island of rats — Great Barrier is "just" two and a half times the size — but it won't do anything without full community support. That's where Gilbert steps in. "It has to be a community initiative," she says. "It'll die in the water if it's not."

Judging by the hordes of for sale signs, Great Barrier is in the midst of a real estate boom. Auckland City seemed to think so too when it revalued the island's properties by an average 46 per cent last year.

"We're getting people with money now, like big money," says Robyn Grice, "They're cruising in, and they're buying up, but they're using people locally which is great."

Another Waiheke? Probably not. The island is remote, access is a problem, and the DoC estate severely limits development. "We'll never lose the island's character," says real estate agent John Cran. "You're never going to see high-rise apartments." But, he insists the island's not in a decline, just undergoing change. "It's on the map, mate. For 30-odd years it wasn't on the map. Don't let anybody tell you it's going backward… They don't know what we do in a year in terms of the property business, and I can tell you that's a very good gauge. Better than a rain gauge."

Even so, he claims the 46 per cent valuation rise as misleading. The areas to which Aucklanders are attracted, those juicy bits of the oh-so-desirable coast, have increased. But the bush blocks, the small sections on the west coast? Still cheap as chips.

Ironically, as the population dips, the Barrier is experiencing something of a building frenzy: with just 800 houses on the island, 145 building consents are issued each year. But Lance and Nicola Herbst, husband-and-wife architects who have designed several baches for clients on the island as well as their own, say most want simple houses. "Man's input here has been low-key and weathered, and that's what's cool about it," says Lance Herbst. "So we're very aware of maintaining that in our buildings, and actually improving on it by using materials that are weathered and making small, fractured buildings."

Auckland City's building code for the Barrier favours materials that weather naturally, and this, plus the lack of power and water, puts off the PlayStation set: there are no Tuscan-style mansions in the dunes, and there's barely an automatic garage door on the whole island.

The lack of basic services is all part of the Barrier experience, says Herbst. "There are all the rituals about making light and heating water. None of it is, 'just turn a mixer, or push a button'."

Still, the prices worry Faye Storer, who fears the island may become too exclusive. "My personal concern would be that the average New Zealander can still afford to go there in 10 to 20 years."

In 1971 Grace Medland, daughter of the pioneer Thomas Medland, published *Great Barrier Calls*, a history of the island. The book traces the island's settlement, its rising and falling fortunes, and the failure of efforts to achieve self-funding independence (to this day, for every dollar Auckland City receives in rates, it spends about four).

A government Committee of Inquiry's £24,350 proposal for a new port at Whangaparapara, better roads and denser settlement was rejected in 1951 by the islanders, suspicious of bureaucracy and afraid their way of life would be interrupted. Another committee was convened in the 1970s, seeing agriculture as the island's future.

In a 1975 reissue Medland was critical of wasted opportunity. "The committee recognises the deterioration of the island," she thundered, "as resultant upon its faulty early survey, lack of unity, inefficient local control, also lack of adequate roading and transport." Aged 84 and convinced the book was to be her "last assignment", Medland lamented the lack of progress. Her views have a certain familiarity in the current debate: "The Barrier could now have been an asset to [the] Hauraki Gulf, an attraction to visitors, its natural beauty enhanced, with residents multiplied and self-supporting."

A slim volume, it is imbued with a trust in progress, a belief in the dominance of man over nature, and a desire to turn the wild landscape into a pastoral paradise. But on the Barrier, things rarely go according to plan — locals say that you don't change the island. In time, it changes you.