Journey to the end of the Earth - New Zealand and Australia, December 2007

Stephen Swan

A short distance from where I live in Cartagena, south-east Spain, there is a street named after Juan Fernández, a conquistador and explorer of the 16th century. It was once thought that Juan Fernández, blown way off course while exploring near Chile, was the first European to see New Zealand, in August 1576. Later historians have disagreed and now that distinction is given to Abel Tasman who saw New Zealand in 1642 but was unable to land. Juan Fernández has had to be content with giving his name to a group of wind-swept islands off Santiago, Chile, and to a street. Tasman is remembered in the name of the Tasman Sea, the 2000 kilometre wide body of water between New Zealand and Australia, and in the name of Tasmania, after the settlers there decided that their 'Van Diemen's Land' had acquired such a bad reputation they needed to rename and start afresh.

The man who literally put New Zealand on the map, however, was Captain James Cook. On his first voyage, still without the help of the accurate chronometer, he, from his small ship the Endeavour, mapped nearly two and a half thousand miles of New Zealand coast in six months starting in 1769. He was accompanied by hard-headed surveyors and navigators who wasted no time thinking up names for the thousands of places and features they discovered. An inhospitable Bay was called Poverty Bay, and its opposite, the Bay of Plenty. When, one day, Cook declared, "Doubtless, this is a bay", the place was christened Doubtless Bay. The origins of Doubtful Sound and Farewell Spit can be left to the imagination. From New Zealand they moved on to map much of the coast of Australia with their customary great accuracy and terseness. All of which gave me something to think about as I sat in the plane at Lahore airport waiting to take off on my particular voyage of discovery to the ends of the earth on Friday, 14th December, 2007.

The previous week in Pakistan had been full and intense, now I had no choice but to relax and take it easy for the next twenty-four hours as we flew serenely first to Bangkok, then on to Hong Kong and from there down to Auckland, a total distance of 8,814 miles (14,185 km.). At both of the stops we were recycled through very strict security controls and then had a chance to walk round the extensive duty-free areas where the commercial message of Christmas was loud and clear.

At last, after a long journey, our destination was sighted. "Isn't it green?" everybody exclaimed. And indeed it was, and grey and raining slightly. At immigration there was a sign which said 'Welcome to Aotearoa', (Maori for 'the land of the long white cloud'). Doubtless, this is New Zealand, I thought. We were met by another lot of security, this time concentrating on what they call biosecurity. No wood, plants, drugs, fruit, meat or other items which might harbour pests and disease are allowed into the country. On the way through to Customs I took the chance to throw away some spices I had bought in Pakistan; better bin them than be sent back to Lahore.

Waiting to greet me in Auckland was Tom Bryan, an old friend from Sangre and former Marist brother. Tom was going to drive me down to the De La Salle Brothers' community in New Plymouth, a journey of five or six hours. Not for the first time on this tour, I was impressed by the kindness of people I had last seen many years ago. We had in common only a few months together in the New Mexico desert and his subsequent short visit to Khushpur, but that was enough for friendship to revive and thrive.

By now it had stopped raining and we emerged from Auckland airport into a clear and bright early summer morning; a change from Pakistan where it had been cold and misty winter. Before moving off south, we went up to One Tree Hill from where you can see much of Auckland. Unfortunately, you can't see the eponymous tree as it was cut down by an enraged protester some years ago, an unexpected event in this peaceful place where we could see sheep safely grazing, people jogging, and young families out cycling through the beautiful countryside around the city.

Auckland, the largest city of New Zealand with over a million of the four million inhabitants, was soon left behind. In case you were wondering, the national capital is Wellington, a city of about 180,000 inhabitants, situated in the south of North Island, and we were on our way to the Taranaki region in the west whose main city is New Plymouth (pop. 70,000).

On the way we stopped at Otorohanga to see the Kiwi Park. "Is the New Zealand kiwi the green or the yellow variety?" I was later asked by one of my Spanish students, but to the readers of this article there is no need to explain that the original kiwi is not a fruit but a brownish, nocturnal, flightless bird with an unbelievably long beak which has nostrils at the end which help in locating ants and small insects. It walks round in the dark at night making

a piercing 'kee-wee' call, hence its name. In a darkened viewing area, our guide showed us the large variety, the Northern Spotted, which is about the size and shape of a basketball, with immensely strong legs useful for fighting off dogs, stoats and other recently introduced attackers which have brought it to the verge of extinction. She told us that the legs weigh up to two-thirds of the body weight. 'Do they weigh the legs separately', I asked innocently. I should have asked, if over thousands of years the absence of predators had meant it didn't need to fly, why was it afraid to go out during the day; the dogs and stoats are too recent an introduction to have caused that behaviour.

Leaving behind the mysteries of kiwis, and birds like the kea and the kaka, not to mention the morepork owl, which flies around at night greedily calling 'morepork, morepork', we continued on our way along quiet, orderly roads, passing by farmhouses and clean villages, through the amazing countryside of this beautiful country. Sheep, horses and cattle grazed on the hills in the shade of splendid trees and ancient ferns tall as palm trees, while in the background the forested mountains rose to a blue sky. South Island is justly famous for its scenery, as was seen in the Lord of the Rings film trilogy, but North Island offers good competition. The peaked mountains and folded landscapes speak clearly of their volcanic origin; in fact, New Zealand is one of the youngest countries in the world, parts of it having, in geological terms, only recently risen out of the sea. This explains why the local flora and fauna are completely different from those of Australia, which is an old continent once attached to ancient Gondwanaland. It seemed like paradise to me, but a bit better as there are no snakes at all on these islands.

As we went on, I realized that Cook's men did not have a monopoly on place names. In fact most of the places we passed through had typically polysyllabic Maori names. While the larger towns have English-style names the villages tend to be Maori, for example, Hangatiki, Whakapapa, Marokopa, and Waitako, famous for the Land Wars of the 1860's.

The Maori are not at all related to the aborigines of Australia, having arrived less than a thousand years ago from Polynesia. Although a Stone Age people, they were quick to grasp the agricultural and trading methods of the settlers and cultivated their own lands successfully, but ended up on the losing side in the Land Wars despite brave battles at Waikato where they gallantly allowed the settlers to escape before setting fire to their farms. As usual, the settlers didn't always keep to agreements, and the Maoris' way of life and culture has suffered to such an extent that they often struggle to keep their place in society though a good number have prospered. There is an attempt to keep Maori culture and traditions alive and the use of Maori place names is one way of honouring the original inhabitants of the islands. The settlers' way of life has had other unexpected effects which I learned about from a radio phone-in discussing whether people should be able to retire later than at 65 years of age. One caller said that there were not so many Maoris who lived to over sixty. Maladaptation to a European diet, widespread diabetes and ill-health means that their life expectancy is many years shorter than that of the majority population. Even so, they make up about 9% of the total population.

We arrived at New Plymouth in the early evening and made for the Francis Douglas Memorial College which is run by the De La Salle Brothers. Francis Douglas was a priest from New Plymouth who was working in Samoa at the time of the Japanese invasion during the Second World War. He and five companions were never heard from again. The school name keeps alive their memory.

We were welcomed by Pete Smyth, an Australian Brother from Melbourne who has been working in New Zealand for the last twelve years. He was another member of the Sangre group of 1986 and the prime mover of my trip. He had later visited me in Cartagena and often encouraged me to go down under. With his customary kindness he had chosen a room for me from which I could hear the birds singing in the garden in the morning, which turned out to be a splendid idea as jetlag kept me awake most of the night. The birds were mostly the blackbirds, thrushes and sparrows you would get in English gardens, and the mynah bird introduced from India. Most local birds prefer to keep away from the mynah as it is an invasive pest, and kiwis have their own reasons for not going near populated areas or school playgrounds. The roses and the magnificent blue hydrangeas around the community house were the work of Br Oliver who, at the age of 94, has lived through over half of the settled history of the country. The small community soon made us feel at home.

The school had already broken up for the long summer holiday and would reopen in February. There is a day school for about 650 boys and a boarding section for over a hundred more. The boarders are mostly from the large dairy farms around the area and go home at the weekend. The school is set in beautiful grounds with plenty of room for games activities, particularly rugby, which is the local passion.

On a visit to New Plymouth with Tom the following day, I saw how the locals were preparing to celebrate Christmas in the middle of summer. The shopping centres were full of Christmas trees and decorations and the people went about in shorts and t-shirts stocking up for the festivities. In the supermarket I was impressed not only by the friendliness and helpfulness of the assistants but by the quality of the fruit and vegetables, the cheapness of the beef and lamb, the large section of New Zealand wines, and the enormous variety of the cakes. It looks as though someone has gone round the world, collected all the cakes and decided to make them in New Zealand.

New Plymouth itself is a small, pleasant, seaside town with clean, tidy streets and orderly traffic. Because of the constant threat of seismic activity, there are few tall buildings and most of the houses are single-storey, made from weather-board rather than brick. Many of the front gardens boast the beautiful hydrangeas and blue and white agapanthus flowers which grow so well there. Down on the sea front with its 7 kilometres of walkway, we saw more of the spectacular Pohutukawa, the New Zealand Christmas tree, *metrosideros excelsa*, a hardwood tree covered at this time of the year with magnificent red flowers. The long beach is of black volcanic sand which can burn the feet in summertime, and at the far end can be seen the port installations for oil and natural gas piped from the rigs out to sea.

Dominating the whole region and about half an hour's drive from New Plymouth is the majestic Mt Taranaki, a snow-topped dormant volcano 2,500 metres high, home to rainforests and kiwis, (no dogs allowed). In shape it is so like Mt Fuji that it served as the backdrop for the film The Last Samurai. Despite the fact that it is due for another major eruption within the next 100 years, the local people are very proud of their mountain and one man we met in a pub on another day said that the area is great for tourism as you can ski in the mountains and half an hour later surf off the beach. He added, humorously, that this is only bettered by Australia, where you can play cricket and sledge at one and the same time! The men we met in the pub were what the rugby commentator Bill McLaren would call 'big Taranaki farmers', and a number of them had connections with the school. What impressed me, apart from their size, was the fact that all of them had spent some years out of New Zealand, in the UK, USA or Australia, and had all gone back home to New Zealand for the 'quality of life'. Although New Zealand is a small country far removed from the rest of the world the people are by no means inward-looking and many young people travel the world in search of fame and fortune or a well-paid job for a few years; there is even a New Zealander doing research at Cartagena University Faculty of Agricultural Engineering. Cheaper air travel has also led to a boom in people taking holidays in Thailand, Malaysia and China.

On a rainy afternoon, Pete took me out to visit a dairy farm owned by the parents of one of his rugby team. The Taranaki area enjoys a warm, moist, temperate climate with 56 inches average annual rainfall, (compared to the 44 inches of the UK), making it ideal for growing grass for the cows. The 280 milking cows on this ecological farm were mostly Jerseys and Holstein Friesians and much of the milk goes to making cheese which sells all over the world. In New Zealand there are around four million cows, one each for everyone, and about 50 million sheep. Agriculture is the backbone of the Taranaki economy with useful contributions from the oil and gas industry and growing tourism.

In the 1950's there was a flood of migrants to New Zealand from Great Britain going there on the £10 assisted passage scheme. I remember they were joined by a family up the road from ours in Birmingham which, uniquely, kept pigs in the back garden; when they left most of the excitement disappeared from the street. Britons are still going to pastures new down under but there is an increasing number of immigrants from other countries. As I saw from the yearbook, most of the students at the Brothers school in South Auckland are from the Pacific islands or of Chinese origin.

The days passed tranquilly in New Plymouth and by the end of the week I had adjusted to life there. For someone from GB it is not difficult to feel at home. The people understand you immediately and ask where you are from; only rarely does the NZ accent cause any misunderstanding. There is a tendency to for 'i' to be pronounced 'e'. So one day I was confused in a shop when I was asked if I needed a 'pen' rather than a 'PIN' for my credit card. A story tells of a community of NZ Sisters studying in Australia requesting the telephone company to assign a number with no 'sixes', to avoid misunderstandings.

New Zealand is a rich and tranquil country whose people know that in a changing world they have to work hard to maintain their customs and standard of living. Tourism has just overtaken agriculture as the main source of income, so many more people will travel to this beautiful land and be enchanted by what it has to offer. 'Kia ora', the traditional welcome means 'be healthy'; after a week there I felt relaxed and healthy as never before and ready to undertake the next part of my journey, to Australia, where even more surprises were awaiting.