



Peter Walker

Hard by the Cloud House

**Hard by
the Cloud House**

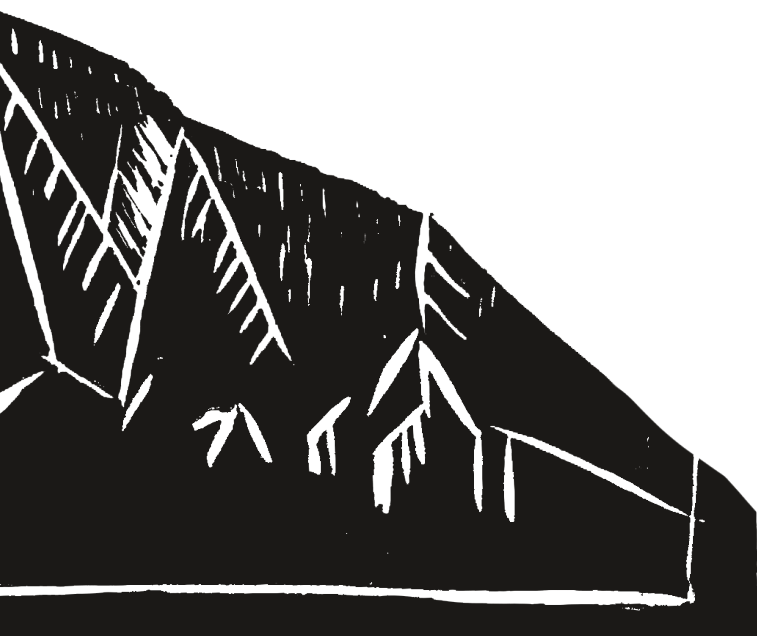


Peter Walker

Hard by the Cloud House



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For J. T.
And in memory of J. V.

Te Hokioi on high! Te Hokioi on high!
Sleeping companion of the thunder god,
Where she dwells high above, and
hard by the Cloud House

— *Māori lore*

You quell the thunder and forked
lightning, golden lyre . . . and the eagle
sleeps on the sceptre of the god

— *Pindar*

I've been circling for a thousand years
and I still don't know — am I a falcon,
a storm or a great song?

— *Rainer Maria Rilke*

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I

To Honeycomb Hill

Chapter I

Late one afternoon in March 1860 a man in a thin green velvet jacket and a wide-awake hat arrived on foot at a sheep station named Glenmark, about 65 kilometres north of Christchurch. The man was in his mid-fifties but he looked older. Several people who met him that day agreed later that he looked 'careworn', although they could not agree whether his corduroy trousers were patched or not. Earlier in the day he was given a glass of ale by the landlord of the Kōwai pub, 25 kilometres south of Glenmark, and then, after watching him closely, the landlord sent out another ale and a free meal.

The man, whose name was Henry Davis, took to the road again. For a few miles he got a ride on a passing wagon. By mid-afternoon the wind began to blow and rain could be seen whitening in the foothills to the south. As Davis walked towards the farm house at Glenmark, about a mile from the road, rain began falling and he encountered the manager and

part-owner of the station coming from the stockyards. With a piercing gaze, tall, handsome — when he was 80 he was still ‘slim as a youngster and straight as a gun barrel’, a neighbour recalled — George Moore was already one of the richest men in the colony. He saw the stranger and stopped.

‘What do you want?’

‘I’m looking for work.’

For a man to turn up at a remote station asking for work was well within the normal run of things. The population of the new colony of Canterbury was small, the roads few and the nights very dark. By 1860 there was a little army of swagmen walking from place to place looking for work and, if there was no work available, for shelter and food. It was regarded as a plain duty to provide these. Obituaries for wealthy men often included the sentence ‘No swagman was ever turned away’.

‘What do you do?’ asked Moore.

‘I’m a hurdle-maker.’

‘There’s no such work here.’

Davis then asked if he could stay the night in the men’s hut.

Moore: ‘I don’t run a hotel. There’s public accommodation at Weka Pass. Six miles if you go back and take the road. Three miles if you go over the hills.’

They regarded each other for a few moments, the rich man and the poor man, then turned away, never to meet again.

The rain was now coming down in earnest and darkness fell early because of it. Davis must have seen a light at a window because he then knocked at the door of a hut where a carpenter named John Henry lived with his wife. Henry also refused Davis shelter.

A week later he told a Christchurch court what happened: 'He asked for a drink of water which I gave him, as I had no tea at the time. He said "I have just seen Mr. Moore who has denied me stopping here this dreadful wet night: what shall I do?"

'[He] attempted to come into the hut, but I refused, and said that Mr Moore had on a former occasion accused me of having had two men at the place . . . I directed him to the woolshed about three or four hundred yards distant, where he would find shelter. It was raining heavily all night while I was awake. About midnight I heard the dogs barking, and I said to my wife that poor man has lost his way, I think.'

That was a Wednesday night.

Davis was nowhere to be seen the next morning and his existence was therefore forgotten. Glenmark was by then a vast estate, about 60,000 acres, and days or weeks might have passed before he was found but in fact it was only one day later that a shepherd saw a man in the distance, apparently sleeping in the sun: 'On Friday morning last, March 9th, between 8 and 9 o'clock, I saw a man lying on the ground about a mile from the station, near the direction of the Pass.

'He was lying on his back with one leg crossed over the other and his arms spread out, his hat lying about twenty yards from him. I thought he was sleeping, but as I saw no motion as I was calling to my dog, I then thought that he was dead. I went forward and saw some spots of blood on his face and a four-barrelled pistol lying at his feet . . .'

If the barking of the dogs heard by John Henry was a reliable indicator, Davis had killed himself about midnight. He had never found the woolshed. There was no path to follow over the hill to Weka Pass. For four hours, in other words, he

had floundered in darkness and rain and travelled a mile.

When news of the incident became known there was public outrage. The new colony was a Church of England settlement and rather high-minded. There was not much bother about equality but everyone, according to high-church and high Tory principles, was bound together in a net of rights and duties. There was a special obligation on the rich to look after the poor. 'Shame — a thousand times shame,' said the *Lyttelton Times*, 'to the individual who sent from his door into the waste a famished footsore man, without a chance of reaching shelter or a prospect of a bit to eat . . . What man with a spark of feeling would serve a dog so?'

George Moore defended himself coolly at the inquest: 'He could have found his way if he had been the right sort of man by the way I pointed out to him; it was getting dusk . . . There might have been room in the hut for several more; but . . . I have been imposed upon too often. I refused him because he was in liquor. I smelt him of it. That was one reason . . . He did not appear to be feeble; he looked a strong, able man. I am guided by my opinion as to whether men are impostors or looking for work. I considered this man an impostor. I did not think he was really looking for work, although he asked for it.'

Moore himself was, in his own view, very much the right sort of man. He was a Manxman, hard as nails. He regularly walked the 40 miles to Christchurch and if he was caught out in the rain at night he did not flounder about and wish he were dead but climbed into a flax bush and went to sleep. He did not know that Davis was carrying a pistol and would turn it on himself in a fit of despair, and he therefore cannot be entirely blamed for the suicide, but it must have been his contempt for

a 'weakling' that led him to more atrocious decisions.

The body had been found about nine o'clock on Friday morning. The farmhands wanted to move it, at least into the woolshed, but Moore forbade this. It seems that no one was allowed even to approach Davis to cover his face. Moore eventually sent a message to the nearest town, but only by the slowest method, a passing dray.

'I had no horse handy,' he told the inquest.

A policeman arrived at Glenmark on Sunday morning. Davis had been dead more than 80 hours and was still lying where he had fallen. His wide-awake, the broad-brimmed hat of felt or straw worn by most male settlers against the strong antipodean sunlight, was still 20 metres from his body. The autumn sun had been shining on the body for two days. Decomposition had set in.

The constable asked if one of the carpenters could make a box to carry the dead man away. Moore refused. His men, he said, worked on contract: he could not order them to do this. In any case, it was Sunday. How could a carpenter possibly work on the Sabbath? The policeman was offered a box that was lying up at the house.

'I looked at it but it was too narrow,' the constable told the court.

Moore then let him have an old sack from the woolshed to carry away the body.

'Mean, hard-hearted, barbarous, blasphemous man!' cried the *Lyttelton Times*. '[We] express our loathing at religion being made an excuse for want of charity. We cannot say with certainty that Mr Moore's offence is within the letter of the law; perhaps it may be. But this we do know — that after this,

no hand of a Christian man should clasp that of Mr Moore till he has done penance for his deep crime against the laws of God and man.'

Moore was not in the least moved by this anathema. He was burnt in effigy in Christchurch. What did he care? When he went to town he carried a tent on his back and slept in Market Square. Glenmark expanded from 60,000 to 150,000 acres. He waged war on all sides — 'What do I care for my neighbours?' — and deliberately kept his sheep diseased with scab, so that other runholders would not take their flocks to market across his land. He became known as 'Scabby' Moore. At one point, it is said, he was ordered to cure his sheep of the disease and instead drove mobs off a cliff to die on the beach below.

Any workman at Glenmark seen with a straight back during daylight hours was fired on the spot for slacking. The men naturally hated their master: 'The air turned blue as soon as he had moved out of hearing,' a neighbour recalled. In the Glenmark stockyards, no races were built for drafting the sheep. 'I do not care to employ a shepherd too lazy to lift a sheep over a rail.'

Twenty years after the swagman died, Moore built the most magnificent mansion yet seen in New Zealand. The house had a peculiar feature: there was only one external door, which was at the front. Moore's dread was that, while his back was turned, the servants might spirit away his valuables or hand a piece of bread to a poor man at the kitchen door.

It is pleasing to report that everything Moore built turned to ashes in his own lifetime. Two years after it was completed, the great house burned to the ground. Molten lead poured like rain over the single door. His daughter

Annie, a spinster, rushed in and out to save her canaries, carrying them to a Wellingtonia tree in the middle of the lawn, but the tree also caught fire and Miss Moore herself was 'much scorched'.

A few years later the vast estate was broken up under threat of government expropriation. Moore then retired to Christchurch, where he went blind. Annie saw her chance and married the family doctor. Moore never knew. He sat in the dark in his mansion on Park Terrace listening out for wayfarers and treasure hunters, unaware that the greatest prize, Annie, had already given herself away.

Long before, he had quarrelled with his wife and his three sons and broken off contact with them and there he died in Park Terrace, sightless, friendless, deceived, and he would have soon been forgotten in the special oblivion which races to erase all memory of those who live selfish lives except for one strange circumstance: a magnificent creature, one of the great productions of evolution — the largest eagle that ever flew — was named after him.

Harpagornis moorei.

At first the reasons for this look quite straightforward. After Moore bought the bare rolling hill country which became Glenmark, he put his men to the task of draining the swamps. They soon began to uncover bones of the giant moa, the huge herbivorous birds which weighed a quarter of a tonne — 250 kilograms — stood 3.6 metres tall at a stretch and once roamed over the plains and foothills of the island. The first moa bones found at Glenmark were stored in the woolshed, but there were so many they began to take up too much room.

In 1866 Moore invited the government geologist in Canterbury, Julius Haast, to come and see the aggregation. At the time, Haast was planning a museum for Christchurch. He drove away from Glenmark that day with a 'large American four-horse waggon' full of moa sub-fossils. This was a gift of enormous value. By then museums around the world all wanted a specimen of the 'wonderful, struthious bird', as it was called by Richard Owen, the famous naturalist who identified it in 1843 from a section of leg bone sent to England. (Everyone else thought the fragment must belong to a horse or an ox.) Haast began a brisk trade in his booty from Glenmark.

There was not much room in his workshop in the tower of the Provincial chambers in Christchurch, so Haast and his assistant, a taxidermist named Frederick Fuller, laid out their bony jigsaws on the grass between the Chambers and the Avon River, which slid gently, genteelly almost, through the centre of Christchurch, the pious if rather tipsy little town whose spires, turrets and lychgates, along with 34 pubs, had sprung up a few years before on the southern marches of Polynesia.

Arranged into sub-species and individual specimens, the skeletons were packed up and shipped to the museums of Europe, which in return sent items from their own holdings. 'Animals trooped in as they did for Noah,' Haast's son wrote. 'Birds of every hue, insects of every dimension, stone implements of the vanished races grouped themselves in historical train.'² Plaster casts of famous classical statues arrived as well — *Venus de' Medici*, *Diana Robing*, *The Dying Gladiator*, *Boy with Goose*, *Cupid and Psyche*. Within a few years Haast had a magnificent museum in the middle of town.

Meanwhile the wagons kept arriving from Glenmark.

Moore even put a team of workers at Haast's disposal to excavate the swamps, the 'precious bog' as it came to be called, and Haast's assistant, Fuller, was often on hand to supervise the proceedings.

One day in March 1871 Fuller, who with his 'flowing hair and beard looked like some figure of the Ober-Ammagau passion play',³ looked into the bog and saw, lying there among the moa bones, a single huge claw, like a dagger at a pyjama party. He realised it had belonged to a raptor of immense size.



A few weeks later Haast held up the claw (above) at a meeting of the Philosophical Institute. There were gasps from the audience. 'Only the lion and tiger perhaps have larger ungual phalanges than this extinct raptorial bird,' said Haast, who had to assure one anxious member of the audience that its owner really had been an extinct bird and not some unknown giant feline still living in the mountains.

Haast went on: 'Having seen its curved talons, the fable of the bird Roc no longer seems so very extravagant and strange . . . I may add that a human being, if not well-armed or very powerful, not to speak of children, would have stood a very poor chance against such a formidable foe, if it had chosen to attack him.'⁴

Soon after this discovery, certain Māori tales were remembered which told how Māori who first settled the island had to do battle with a gigantic, beautiful and very dangerous bird, the Pouākai, which attacked human beings and 'carried them off' to feed its chicks. Ancient songs about a giant eagle known as Te Hōkioi were also set against the discovery at Glenmark. In the 1850s, Māori in the Whanganui district had informed the missionary Rev. Richard Taylor that an immense bird they called a Pouākai 'lives on the tops of the [South Island] mountains'.⁵ The present tense was used.

Thinking the matter over, Haast began to wonder whether he himself might not have seen the eagle on his journeys into the interior of the South Island. He recalled a sighting in 1862: 'The most interesting inhabitant of these Alpine regions is a very large bird of prey of crepuscular and nocturnal habits which visited our camp first on the night of April 6 when we were sitting round the fire. For a short time we heard the flapping of its wings which became every second more audible. For a moment it sat down close to us but before we could reach the gun it rose and disappeared . . .'

Again in 1866 he saw a 'large bird of prey pursuing a sparrow hawk and flying very high above us', and for the rest of his life he remained unsure about these encounters. 'It is possible that the large bird of prey met with in the heart of

the Alps may be . . . the *Harpagornis*, of which the bones were first discovered in the turbary deposits of Glenmark,' he wrote in 1879.⁶ In London the celebrated Richard Owen declared himself 'charmed' by the 'gigantic raptorial' and in 1872 he read a paper on the subject to the Zoological Society, but even before that he wrote to the editor of *The Academy* magazine to break the news.

The discovery at Glenmark was not just of scientific importance. It had cultural and literary significance. It was a little late for Henry Yule's famous translation of Marco Polo's *Travels*, which had just been published, but in the second edition, of 1874, there it was: 'The bones of a veritable Ruc from New Zealand lie on the table of Professor Owen's Cabinet,' Yule wrote in his preface. *Harpagornis* had begun its strange career as a source for the ancient legend of the Roc, or Rukh, or Rukhkh, of Sindbad.

Haast meanwhile began a new international trade, this time in eagle claws — not real ones, as there was still only one of them available, but in plaster casts — which were sent in all directions, to London, Vienna, New York. It was the size of that terrible talon which made Haast think of the Greek *harpax*, a grappling hook, and provided him with the descriptive part of the name. At the Philosophical Institute that night in 1871 he concluded his speech: 'In order to pay a just compliment to my friend, Mr G. H. Moore, of Glenmark, who has always afforded me every facility in his power to pursue my researches, I propose the name of *Harpagornis moorei* . . .'

The grappling-hook-bird of Moore.

But it is an odd story. How to account for the unstinting generosity on the part of a man who hated his neighbours, cut

off his wife and sons without a penny and cared nothing for public opinion? Among the facilities 'always afforded' to Haast was the woolshed which the swagman Henry Davis could not find on the last night of his life and which was then barred to him in death. Perhaps, in Haast, Moore had finally met someone to admire. He himself might walk 40 miles to town and sleep in a flax bush, but Haast had set about exploring the whole South Island, marching over mountain ranges in ten-league boots as if out on a morning stroll.

Haast's decision to honour Moore was also out of character. Meticulous, hard-working, generous and kindly, Haast was a leading figure in colonial society. He had been a lonely young outsider when he arrived from Austria and was delighted years later to find himself successful and famous and surrounded by ladies in Christchurch drawing rooms, and even more pleased when Emperor Franz Josef gave him a knighthood, which meant he could put 'von' in front of his name.

Haast, in other words, was a social lion, and these are often timid animals in one respect: they don't like to risk their status. Yet here he was saluting the outcast, whose hand the good people of Christchurch were advised never to clasp, and even bestowing a kind of immortality on him. Under normal protocols the eagle should have been named *Harpagornis fulleri*, after the taxidermist who first saw the claw in the bog and swiftly identified its owner.

Far away in London, Richard Owen thought so, and made public and rather pointed references to Fuller's part in the story of *Harpagornis*. Fuller was a likeable character, also hard-working and skilled, but easy going, tolerant, a father of seven, fond of a drink. He accompanied Haast on journeys into the

Alps, and Haast often paid tribute to the diligence and skill of 'Mr Fuller who has worked day and night indefatigably [sic]'. The discovery of the eagle's claw was the climax of Fuller's career, but at that point Haast ignored him and turned instead to honour Moore of Glenmark.

Depressed perhaps at the injustice of the world, Fuller began to drink more heavily. Haast dismissed him for drunkenness. Fuller appealed to the people of Christchurch for a fair hearing but the newspapers would not publish his letter. In a fit of despair he ran to his workshop and drank from a bottle of taxidermist's arsenic. 'Oh Fred, I am poisoned,' he called to his son, and 'fell and rolled over in the yard'. He died two days later, leaving his family destitute.

If Haast had followed the usual rule this lamentable scene might never have occurred and the eagle would now be *H. fulleri*. There is a mysterious aspect to the names things bear. Some are eerily apt, as if fate itself has stepped in, and the point of the intervention seems to be that names matter.

'Names rise from the heart of a thing,' said Dante. It would be hard to think of an idea more thoroughly unmodern, yet in this case the great apex predator of the Southern Alps was named not after the mild taxidermist who looked like a figure from a passion play but after the pitiless and grasping runholder behind whose back the 'air turned blue' — a kind of apex predator himself who for a few years came to rule over the same rolling hills where the eagle once flew.

After Fuller's death, Haast was stricken by remorse: he immediately set up a collection of funds for the widow and gave her title to some of his own property so she and her children could keep a roof over their heads.

Chapter 2

One day in 1980, deep in a cave named Honeycomb Hill in the north-west of the South Island, a man named Phil Wood found the relics of a strange creature. There was a sinkhole nearby and it was in the dim light coming down from the forest floor that Wood saw the curve of a large bone, ‘shaped like a spoon’ he later told me, in a pile of spalled rubble.

Wood was not a scientist — he sold menswear for a living — but he was an experienced caver, had found cave fossils before and knew this one did not belong to any species which was living or, so far as he knew, had ever lived in the forests above his head. He decided to send it to the museum in Christchurch for identification.

The answer that came back was something of a riddle. What he had found, he was told, was the humerus or wing bone of *Harpagornis moorei*, commonly known as Haast’s eagle, and although there had been much excitement when

remains were found at Glenmark a century earlier, interest soon waned. Von Haast and Owen believed the eagle had hunted its prey, but in a fit of national modesty New Zealand scientists in the 1890s decided they were wrong and that *Harpagornis* was not a proper eagle at all, but a kind of flightless scavenger. Its sheer size was its downfall. Haast had noted that the major wing bone, the ulna, was 'relatively' short. In other words, although the bird was three or four times larger than a golden eagle, its wings were not three or four times longer.

Soon the 'relatively' was forgotten, and *Harpagornis*, whose stock had briefly soared so high, was brought sharply down to earth. If it could fly at all, it could not do so well. It could not therefore have hunted and killed prey. Then everyone lost interest in this unlovely creature, which had gone rustling from corpse to corpse for its next meal. No scientific papers were published on *Harpagornis* for the next 80 years.

Only two or three complete skeletons of the eagle had ever been found. One was sent to the Royal Museum of Scotland and promptly mislaid in the basement. Another was discovered in the 1940s by archaeologists working on a moa-hunter site on the east coast of the South Island. They put the skeleton in an old iron oven nearby, then forgot to go back and collect it.

This was roughly the information that came from Christchurch in 1980. The caves themselves, though, the message went on, sounded promising. A team from the museum would soon come over to see if there was anything of real interest in the area Phil was exploring.

What followed was a comical scandal later known as the ‘raid’ by Canterbury Museum. Perhaps museum scandals are inherently comic. A museum exists for a solemn and high-minded purpose, to bring some order to the slovenly archives of nature and art, but when a collection is put together in ways that don’t quite bear scrutiny it is hard not to laugh. It took me some time to find out exactly what happened when the team from Christchurch arrived.

Thirty years later, Phil Wood, by then in his eighties, could hardly bring himself to talk to me about it.

‘I was not happy.’

‘About what?’

‘What they did.’

‘What did they do?’

‘It wasn’t what they did, it was *how* they did it.’

‘How did they do it?’

‘I was — not — *happy*.’

Interviewing Phil was not easy. He took early charge of the conversation but was naturally taciturn and touchy and could shut it down without warning. It was only when I contacted a scientist who worked for another museum at the time that I learned what had happened at Honeycomb Hill in 1980.

‘Aha!’ he wrote. ‘I’d completely forgotten about the “raid” by Canterbury Museum . . . Phil Wood was very bitter about this, accusing them of simply grabbing everything interesting in sight, with no real thought to scientific exploration. He told us that they collected as many moa skulls as possible (these are far more rarely preserved than the larger leg bones of moa) . . . However, Phil told us that the skulls were often removed by the Canterbury Museum team from otherwise

semi-complete skeletons and no proper notes of which skulls belonged to which bones were made at the time . . . Phil thought this very unscientific. (It was!).’

Once I knew Phil better, I realised it was not just the lack of scientific method that embittered him. He had been personally insulted. The visitors would never have behaved in such a way if other scientists or staff from another museum had been present, but there was only Phil Wood of Phil Wood Menswear, on the main street of Westport, and who cared what he thought?

Naturally Phil saw things in a different light. After all, Honeycomb Hill was not the first cave system he had explored, and *Harpagornis* was not his first find. There had been relics of the extinct giant goose *Cnemiornis calcitrans*, whose discovery caused quite a stir in palaeozoological circles, and what about the time he found the entire backbone of a whale lodged in a cave high in the hills above the Tasman Sea — a sight so extraordinary that the famous oceanographer Jacques Cousteau himself came to pay homage to the whale, and to greet Phil Wood as an equal.

On the other hand, what *did* it matter what Phil thought? The Canterbury visitors were leading figures in museum circles. They had published dozens of papers between them on their specialist subject, the moa. Who in the world knew more about the gizzard contents of the moa than they did? But they were archaeologists, not palaeontologists, and were mainly interested in that brief window in time when giant moa and human beings came face to face.

They hurried through the caves picking up skulls — these empty eye sockets might once have turned to the first human

beings who set foot in the land! — and recording no data about where they found them. Phil Wood took them to the place where he had found the wing bone of the eagle and they picked up one or two other pieces of *Harpagornis* but they made it plain these were of minor importance. Then they went back to the surface and drove away laden with beaky treasure and were never heard from again.

Phil, for his part, went back to work behind the counter of his shop in the main street of Westport, a hundred-odd kilometres down the coast . . .

And there the story might have ended or remained on pause for another hundred years, but fate intervened in the form of a certain Dick Dell — Dr Richard Dell — who just then stepped on stage in a timely manner. Dell had recently retired as director of the National Museum in Wellington. His idea of retirement was to drive around the country looking for things to save. He arrived on the West Coast and happened to meet Phil Wood, who told him: ‘I’ve got a cave full of bones no one’s interested in.’

If Phil then mentioned the story of the ‘raid’ by Canterbury Museum, Dell would have been deeply shocked. He was a born conservationist. ‘Put that boulder back’ was a family motto. At the age of ten, he had opened his first museum (molluscs) in the henhouse in a backyard in Auckland. He listened carefully to Wood’s account of the caves he had found and that no one cared about.

Meanwhile a new problem was emerging, in the form of an official known as the Assistant Conservator of Forests. Honeycomb Hill stands in the middle of a valley named the Ōpārara Basin. The land belongs to the state, and was then

under the control of the Forest Service. The primary duty of the assistant conservator at that time was not, in fact, to conserve forests but to ensure the supply of timber for the nation's needs, and if not that, to make money from them in some way or other. The rainforest of the Ōpārara Basin had never produced a penny. Very well! Now it must pay its way.

It is hard to believe today some of the plans hatched by the Forest Service in the 1970s for the untouched bush on the West Coast of the South Island. First, the most valuable trees would be cut down and winched out for sale. Then exciting new technologies could be brought to bear. All the trees left standing would be bombed from the air with herbicides, with Agent Orange for instance, contaminated with dioxin, as used by the US Air Force to strip the communist-concealing jungles of Cambodia and Vietnam. The dying trees could be left to dry for about five years and then bombed again with an incendiary such as napalm, also used in Vietnam.

Poisoned, blackened and burned, the land would then be ready for a cash crop. In this case, pine trees.

It was the philosopher Thomas Hobbes who first advised humankind to 'make war on nature', our situation in the universe being so horrible, the argument ran, we might as well make ourselves comfortable . . . But not even gloomy-minded Hobbes could have imagined these weapons of war turned on a primaevial forest. After 40 years — in about 2020 — a local paper mill could be built and the pines of the West Coast turned into wood pulp.

The effect of deforestation on the caverns would be rapid and irreversible. Rainfall is high in the area. Heavy rain falling on bare hills would flood the labyrinth and debris would block

the exits. All the strange and wonderful forms which rise from the floor and descend from the ceiling of limestone caves — stalactites, stalagmites, chandeliers, drapery and straws, fluted columns, frostwork and moonmilk crystals, rimstone pools, ‘paddy-fields’ and ‘mushrooms’ of micro-crystalline calcite — would be soon drowned and then dissolved by the acidity of the water. Fossils which had lain there for thousands of years would be washed away and lost forever.

The sound of chainsaws could already be heard approaching Honeycomb Hill.

Here now was a battle worthy of Dick Dell. This was something worth saving! Again, names seem to rise from the heart of the matter. *Dell* and *Wood vs Agent Orange* and *napalm*. But how would the battle be joined? Back in Wellington, Dell alerted museum staff to the existence of the caves, and Wood contacted them separately from Westport. Within a few weeks a second team of museum experts, this time from Wellington, arrived at Honeycomb Hill and Phil Wood led them down into the dark.

What they saw amazed them. Everywhere they turned their torches, it seemed, treasures lay half buried in fine red loam or grey fluvial silt. Taphonomy is the name given to the deposition of fossils. It has a soft footfall, this word, coined in Russia in the 1940s from *taphos*, the Greek for tomb or cave,⁷ which suits the processes of fossil formation that take place unseen in silence and in darkness over many centuries.

Here, for instance, is a description of how *Harpagornis* fragments were preserved in one cave at Honeycomb Hill named Eagle’s Roost: “Throughout most of the time that these were accumulating [on the cave floor], powdery