



Beginnings

None of this would have happened without the stock market crash of 1987. That financial maelstrom sucked the Auckland advertising agency I was working for into its vortex and left me without a job. Also made bereft was one of the agency principals, John Woods, a former newspaperman who had given me my start in publishing.

John had launched a community newspaper in Thames in 1979, and I joined him a year later in a role that included composition (in those days, sticking galleys of type onto grid sheets with hot wax), subediting and photography. The newspaper was domiciled in a building that had been a bank, and my first task was to set up a darkroom in the vault. For three years I clanged its heavy steel door behind me as I printed photographs and made the screened images we called bromides.

I worked with John for seven years, following him through various expansions and acquisitions from Thames to Tauranga and then back to my home town of Auckland. In the wake of the agency collapse, he and I formed a public relations company, but when the opportunity to buy *New Zealand Adventure* magazine came his way, John left PR to me and returned to his first love, publishing.

In early 1988, he called me with an idea that was vintage Woods: he suggested we start a *Geographic* magazine. Across the Tasman, electronics magnate Dick Smith had launched *Australian Geographic* in 1987. If the Aussies could do it, why couldn't we? John would run the business side of the operation; I would handle the editorial.

In December 1988, the first issue rolled off the presses. Appropriately, in view of the economic uncertainty of the time, the mascot we chose for the magazine was Old Blue, the Chatham Island black robin that famously defied the odds and thwarted extinction. By the third issue, in what could be construed as either supreme optimism or ultimate hubris, we had switched to the tuatara for an emblem—a creature that has persevered for 225 million years.

So began my journey with *New Zealand Geographic*—15 years as editor, five more as a contributor. But, looking back, I can see earlier signposts that point in the direction of an editorial life. I think of the year I spent as technician in the electron microscopy suite at Auckland University, in 1978. For long hours I sequestered myself in the suite's two darkrooms, developing long, curling strips of photonegative and printing glossy pictures of cell walls, organelles and

'Every journey into the outdoors is a journey into the soul' is a favourite maxim of mine. And nowhere is it truer than in Fiordland, where the moss-carpeted paths are like the aisles of a vast green cathedral.

AUTHOR PHOTOGRAPH BY ROD MORRIS

viruses. The alchemy of image-making I learned during that year has been a professional asset as well as an enduring pleasure.

The microscopy job came my way through Warren Judd, a cell biology lecturer I met during my MSc studies. (Later the roles were reversed when I persuaded Warren to join me as deputy editor of the *Geographic*. He became editor when I stepped down in 2004.) Like me, Warren had a background in marine zoology. I was bemused by the obscurity of his area of expertise—the feeding apparatus of bivalve molluscs—as, no doubt, he was by mine: the taxonomy of sponges. We were both fortunate to have been studying at a time when professors were polymaths and breadth was the measure of a good education—a condition that is rarer today, when specialisation begins earlier and separation of the disciplines is greater. We brought that eclectic spirit to the magazine: a curiosity about ‘life, the universe, and everything’.

Science was, for me, a reluctant choice. Languages had been my first love at secondary school. I basked in the romance of Latin and French, but career-orientated pragmatism suggested that science was the way forward. So in the fifth form I bade farewell to *amo, amas, amat* and *la plume de ma tante* and applied myself to Markovnikov’s rule, Schrödinger’s equation and Darwin’s theory. Of the three disciplines—chemistry, physics and biology—I pursued the wordiest, the one with the fewest equations.

There was, perhaps, a family predisposition to specialise in the marine. My paternal grandfather was a swordfisherman and boatbuilder, and one of my great-uncles was a conchologist. Whether because of him or coincidentally, I don’t recall, but I started to collect shells, too. I still have the silver medal I won for a primary school speech contest in which I gave a talk about conchology and recited part of Rupert Brooke’s ‘Grantchester’. It seems remarkable to me that science and literature were right there, side by side, when I was nine years old, as they would be two decades later, when those two streams of interest converged in *New Zealand Geographic*.

Roads Less Travelled is a collection of photographs, stories and reflections from my 20 years with the magazine. Some of the material has been published before (in *New Zealand Geographic*, *National Geographic* and *Smithsonian*), but much of it, especially the photography, is presented here for the first time. As the title suggests, the journey has been mostly off the beaten track, or has felt that way. Even when the terrain has been familiar the challenge has been to find new routes and different vistas. Why take the tarseal when a gravel road beckons? I think of myself as an information prospector, looking for gold in unexpected places.

The book’s themes are those that have interested me most as an editor and writer. Among them, lost worlds—those scarce remnants of ‘old New Zealand’



that have largely escaped human impact—and the undersea realm: Cousteau’s ‘silent world’ that enticed me as a field of research in the 1970s. A chapter on the Pacific may seem a surprising inclusion, but it reflects a decision taken in the early years of the magazine that we would not restrict coverage to just New Zealand but celebrate the neighbourhood. During my years as editor we produced large features on the Cook Islands, Tokelau, Samoa, Niue, Bougainville and Lord Howe Island. We also ventured south to cover another significant neighbour: Antarctica.

When *New Zealand Geographic* was launched the country was a year away from the 150th anniversary of the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi. I believed the magazine could make a contribution by giving Pakeha New Zealanders an insight into the world of the Maori, so we prepared a special issue on Maoridom to coincide with the treaty celebrations. The Maoridom issue sold out faster than any other issue has before or since. One thing I came to appreciate while working on that issue is the Maori concept of *te wa*, the journey of life. Life is a *waka* voyage, but you don’t face it alone. The ancestors are in the canoe with you. Past and present paddle together. It’s an appealing principle for a geographical writer—the idea of being a multidimensional explorer, roving in time as well as place, discovering the connections and relationships that form the matrix of our world.

The journey continues.

On the road in 1989, the first year of *New Zealand Geographic*, interviewing a Bluff oysterman after a day of dredging in Foveaux Strait.

PHOTOGRAPH BY ARNO GASTEIGER