January: New Zealand

Among westerners Abel Tasman was credited with the first sighting of New Zealand in 1642, and it was of course James Cook who extensively mapped out the coast from 1769–1770. Each trip was a learning experience on both sides. There were hostilities. Both sides because the Maori had actually discovered New Zealand in the 13th century.

To give you an example of what happened when the two cultures matirculated, Jared Diamond (of *Guns, Germs and Steel* fame) in his book *Collapse*, wrote,

> Traditionally, they fought fierce wars against each other, but only against closely neighboring tribes. Those wars were limited by the modest productivity of their agriculture, whose staple crop was sweet potatoes… When Europeans arrived in New Zealand, they brought potatoes, which could now grow enough food to supply armies in the field for many weeks.

In typical Jared Diamond fashion he shows how the increase in crop yields and other provisions allowed the Maori to go on the warpath for longer periods of time and over greater distances.[1]

So as you can see or probably already knew, Maori have a very distinct warrior culture that predated European contact. So you'd be on notice for violence if you were trying to colonize New Zealand, and there were many early bloody conflicts. And with resilience the colonizers took control and also with resilience many aspects of Maori culture survive.

One thing though that stands, among the wounds is the loss of land. The Department of Conservation is known as the Department of Confiscation. On this trip I will see South Africa as well, and maybe somehow compare the two with South America, in terms of indigenous peoples' successes to keep it upbeat. Surely colonization as a subject is anything but.

I sort of want to scan the literature and get quotes like a movie review to show just how scary we're talking about here. The idea needs emphasis. In *New Zealand, 1769-1840: Early Years of Western Contact*, Harrison M Wright begins the book with the sentence, "The first meeting of white men and Maoris was brief but violent."[2] I did read about all the bloody conflict there was in those early years, so I can attest it was bad, but there is some semblance of national unity.

In both World War I and World War II, Māori and Pākehā (New Zealanders of European descent) served. Trying to find a quick reference is difficult to point to their bravery in combat, however the sentiment is there. Perhaps another quote would round out this and give more historical context on how that shaped national identity.

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[1] Diamond, Jared. *Collapse: how societies choose to fail or succeed: revised edition*. Penguin, 2011. Page 165.
[2] Wright, Harrison M. "New Zealand, 1769-1840: Early Years of Western Contact." (1959). Page 3.

Though much of early western contact was on the North Island, I chose to opt for the South Island, that I'm much more familiar with having spent the Fall of 2005 there (January - June). For a semester I studied at Lincoln University outside of Christchurch. I studied all kinds of things about New Zealand while there, including the natural history of the continent.

Since this was my first trip abroad, one of my discoveries was that I was able to discern better amongst different species in their native habitats. In this case the species were beech trees that were in the genus *Nothofagus*, a funny latin name that means false beech. These trees are everywhere on the South Island, and they reminded me of *Fagus grandifolia*, the American beech.

It would be interesting to do a psychological experiment by having people recall what trees they remember and the memories and experiences associated with them. Of course there is always the backyard tree; who doesn't remember their favorite backyard tree? From the most familiar to the most exotic, trees can very easily be one of things that help define an experience in nature. The image of a tree can be uplifting and many have the power to stay in our minds forever, some becoming our most cherished memories.

One group of trees that I will always remember is from a forest that I used to walk home through a lot. Living in an area where neighborhoods are connected by small forests I was able to walk to and from many places; this particular forest that I hiked on my way home from school was the Woodfield reservation in Princeton, NJ. I had taken the path so many times that it became the place where I first understood how a forest really worked.

Halfway through the forest was where the brook took a bend and there was a small wooden bench where you could sit and rest. There was some way that I knew the trees around me, that they were American beech. They must have been among the small list of trees I had learned in adolescence, easily recognizable by its leaves' toothed margins and smooth grey bark. They were common in this forest and surrounding the bench were beeches of every size. One of the beech trees closest to the bank had had water erosion work away at its root system. As a result it had pitched over ninety degrees and grown right above the now almost dormant stream. Branches adapted to grow toward the sun, and the entire tree was developing sideways!

I also noticed behind me that the path had let in many columns of light and that in the understory many saplings were growing tall. I looked around to see where the big trees were and where the small were. I started to picture how the big trees had dropped their seeds onto the ground and the ones in open areas were able to grow taller. There was topography, a hierarchy of trees all reaching toward the sun. Roots sprawled over the ground to find a place where a new sapling could sucker.

Of course there were great things I noticed about the trees themselves. All of them, especially the larger ones, had a smooth gray bark that rarely split. With the yellow fall color of the leaves there was a brilliant shine to the forest, difficult to describe but very noble and decent in the cooling winds and setting sun.

As I look back I wonder how different the forest is twenty-five years down the road. I wonder if the side-turned tree is still there and if I would notice how the others have grown. I may be able to recognize some of the other trees that are perhaps scattered in the midst of the beeches - ashes, oaks or chestnuts – fighting for a spot in the dense canopy. But looking down at the path that approaches the bench you can always tell when you are coming upon the great area of Beeches as the exposed roots start to run across and along the trail, and you begin to hop from one to the other around the bend to where the brook swings through the forest.

In New Zealand in 2005 I caught the same vibe from the beech trees - not to be unexplained I was in forests that colonized over glacial melt. Early explorers who knew the European beech well, *Fagus sylvatica, named* the New Zealand trees white (or silver), red and black beech (among other types). The leaves were decidedly smaller but the bark was unmistakably the smooth grey of the beech. Later it became known that Fagus was a northern hemisphere genus (of the oak family *Fagaceae*), while *Nothofagus* was a southern hemisphere genus (of its own family, *Nothofagaceae*).

This is a convenient way to see, in real life, how trees evolved when isolated on different continents. The two were distant relatives of Pangea. When the supercontinent split into Laurasia and Gondwana, the beeches and false beeches evolved differently. While beeches are found in North America and Europe, False beeches are found in Australia, New Zealand and higher elevations of Papua New Guinea, as well as Chile and Argentina. New Zealand has its own beech trees as it broke apart from Gondwana 80 million years ago.

Antarctica was also part of Gondwana. In my research I found one relevant quote to help tie this all together:

> "The Antarctic element, represented by five evergreen *Nothofagus* species, plays an important role in the forests of both North and South islands. These mutually exclusive forest species form a mosaic for which there is no satisfactory ecological or climatological explanation."

It goes on to say that through volcanic disruption on the North Island and glacial melting on the South Island that Nothofagus are one in a succession of plant species that have colonized. The authors also note that some of the forests of the fjordlands where rainfall is high resemble those of Southern Chile.[3] We shall see in December.

And that leads us some of the way, but not all of the way to terroir, what we are after. After geology comes soil and climate. New Zealand is 103,000 square miles. Again in Jared Diamond's words, summing up an area of the globe he knows extremely well, "The climate in Polynesia varies from warm tropical or subtropical on most islands, which lie toward the equator, to temperate on most of New Zealand, and cold subantarctic on the Chathams and the southern part of New Zealand's South Island."[4]

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[3] Breckle, Siegmar-Walter. *Walter's vegetation of the earth: the ecological systems of the geo-biosphere*. Berlin: Springer, 2002.
[4] Diamond, Jared. *Guns, Germs, and Steel*. Pg 58.

The South Island has the Southern Alps that run along the spine of the land mass. They drain into an alluvial fan with the Wairau River as its catalyst. I'm not sure if that's the right geological term. In *A Dictionary of Geology*, an alluvial fan is defined as "A mass of sediment deposited at a point along a river where there is a decrease in gradient, e.g. from a mountain to a plain."[5]

Nearby to Marlborough is the Nelson area where I plan to do my excursion this month at the Heaphy and Abel Tasman Tracks. I can get a feel for the climate from Lonely Planet's Hiking and Tramping in New Zealand that opens up the chapter with, "Welcome to the sunny side. This corner of New Zealand is typically claimed as having more hours of sunshine than any other area in the country, which means, long, sun-baked days for tramping."[6] As it will be with growing grapes.

When I was in New Zealand in 2005 I was on a bus that took me through Marlborough and I saw vineyards, if I remember correctly, almost abutting the coastline. At the time the wine region was in a period of intense growth, with the 50,000 acres planted to grapes by the year 2000 quadrupling by 2012.[7]

What about in 2026?

[5] "The Penguin Dictionary of Geology." (1972) pg 22

[6] Hiking and Tramping in New Zealand. Pg 156.

[7] Johnson, Hugh, and Jancis Robinson. *The World Atlas of Wine*. 7th ed., Mitchell Beazley/Octopus, 2013.