Inside the Shell

Michele Usher

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FOREWORD

Michele Usher's photographic essay focuses on the lives of the women living in the tiny fishing village of Ngawi located in the Wairarapa region of New Zealand which occupies the south-east corner of the North Island. It is a sparsely settled, rural region. Physically, the Wairarapa consists of the broad flat valley of the Ruamahanga River running north to south down the western side with the majority of the region steep hill country to the east. The area is bordered by the rugged Tararua and Remutaka Mountain Ranges on the west and the Mount Bruce hills to the north. Along the east and the south runs the 220 km coastline.

It is a distinctive coastline whose normal form is a rocky foreshore bordered by a narrow platform of raised beach backed against steep hills. Vegetation is sparse for the weather here can be fierce. There is no landmass between the Wairarapa and the Antarctic and the cold southerly storms sweep up the coast. They alternate with warm, foehn North-west winds, sweeping down off the mountains, often gale force in strength and blowing for days, even weeks at a time. It is a wild and spartan coastal environment, largely isolated by poor communication. Ngawi is located on the eastern edge of the broad Palliser Bay, open to the south and completely exposed to the 'Nor-westers' blasting across the Bay.

The fish stocks around the coastline were prolific but poor communication, difficult access to markets and an almost total lack of any sheltered anchorage anywhere around the coastline, none at all in Palliser Bay, prevented any large scale local fishing industry. In the 1950s this situation changed. An overseas market developed for crayfish, or rock lobster, initially in the United States but increasingly in Asia. Since crayfish were taken close to the shore in rocky, shallow water this was fishing suitable for small vessels which could be launched from the land. On the western shore of Palliser Bay a shingle beach at Ngawi offered such an opportunity. The difficulty here was that the beach drops off steeply, over a gravel lip. It requires the power of a bulldozer to drag boats back onto the beach and hence the iconic lineup of 'dozers' in various states of repair, each hitched to a large boat trailer, lined up on the Ngawi foreshore.

The fishing village that developed at Ngawi the '70s, '80s, and '90s was almost unique in New Zealand. It was an insular little community. The road out was poor and unreliable and those who lived there were cast on their own resources. Lifting crayfish pots in rough seas and close to rocks was hard and dangerous work but it offered the chance for young men with little capital to make substantial amounts of money. It attracted the young and adventurous. This was an exciting place to be for 'the good keen man'. But for women the situation was different. They faced long lonely days while the men were away. There were few amenities in the village and the nearest town was an hour and a half's drive over a difficult road away. The closest school was an hour each way by school bus and the nearest secondary College at Greytown even further. In the winter the southerly storms come and for most of the year the North-west winds rolled down off the Remutakas, accelerated across the bay and smashed head on into Ngawi. It required a particular character to adapt, settle and enjoy this environment. Some didn't and left. Some stayed and grew to love the tight knit little community and exhilarated in their isolation and physical surroundings.

Michele Usher is a photographer living in the Wairarapa. She is currently completing a BA in Photography from the British Open College of Arts and was attracted by a chance to investigate the lifestyle of the eight women who currently live permanently in this isolated place.

Black and white imagery is used to set the Ngawi scene. This works effectively, giving not only a sense of place but also evoking the

harshness of the physical environment. The colour images of the eight subjects are informal and seek to imbue the viewer with a sense of their individual personalities and the different preoccupations of their daily lives. Each set includes an occupational portrait and then the camera moves in closer, sometimes to just a pair of hands, to capture the essence of their activities. The images are carefully chosen and well taken, leaving the viewer with an understanding of how each of these eight women copes with life at Ngawi. Michele has taken the time to gain the confidence of her subjects and this has enabled the relaxed and candid atmosphere of the images. The viewer has a sense of having come to know each woman individually and to understand the lifestyles possible in this village.

This relationship with her subjects convinced Michele that 'Inside the Shell' of Ngawi, is a core of women, whose roles can often go unnoticed, but who are an essential strength of the community. Her images convey that story perfectly. This is a professional and satisfying body of work.

Jim Graydon

MA(Hons) History, Dip. Professional Photography New York Institute of Photography, Author: 'On the Edge – Wairarapa's Coastal Communities' pub 2013, 2nd Ed 2021

Kia hora te marino, kia whakapapa pounamu te moana, kia tere
te kārohirohi i mua i tō huarahi

POLARIS

Whaia e koe te iti kahurangi;
Ki te tuoho koe, me mounga teitei

He manako te kōura i kore ai

He toka tu moana ara he toa rongonui

He moana pukepuke e ekengia e te waka

The Captains Table

Cook patties 75°c

Beef Burger - meat patty
Relish
aioli
Lettuce, carrot, tomato
onion, cheese, mayo

Beef works. add hash brown, bacon, egg.

Chicken Burger - chicken patty
Relish, aioli, mayo
Lettuce, carrot, tomato, onion
Cheese

Chicken Deluxe - add pineapple, Bacon, Hash brown

Fish burger - tartare, mayo, relish, battered fish + salads.

Vegan - check sauces: + cheese.
all salads, vegan patty, hash brown

Fish - Dip in batter flour then batter
add lemon pepper + Lemon wedge.

Works Wedges - on a large plate.
wedges, cheese, bacon pieces, sour cream,
Chilli sauce - shake wedge in cajun seasoning

Seafood Platter - 2 mussels - battered
2 squid bites
2 prawn twisters
2 small pieces fish.
Chips, salad, mayo, tartare + relish.

Fish + chips, salad
2 small fish, chips + salad.

Kaua e hoki i te waewae tūtuki, ā, āpā anō hei te ūpoko pakaru

E hara taku toa i te toa taku tahi engari taku toa he toa taki tini

The "Invicta" Scale
Capacity 30 Pounds

Ko te whaea te takere o te waka

Kia hora te marino, kia whakapapa pounamu te moana, kia tere te kārohirohi i mua i tō huarahi
May peace be widespread, may the sea glisten like greenstone. And may the shimmer of light guide you on your way

Whaia e koe te iti kahurangi; Ki te tuoho koe, me mounga teitei
Seek you the little treasure of your heart; If you bow your head, let it be to a lofty mountain

He manako te kōura i kore ai
Wishing for the crayfish won't bring it

He toka tu moana ara he toa rongonui
Your strength is like a rock that stands in raging waters

He moana pukepuke e ekengia e te waka
A rough sea can still be navigated

Kaua e hoki i te waewae tūtuki, ā, āpā anō hei te ūpoko pakaru
Do not turn back because of minor obstacles but press ahead to the desired goal

E hara taku toa i te toa taku tahi engari taku toa he toa taki tini
Our strength is not ours alone but that of our community

Ko te whaea te takere o te waka
Mothers are integral to the waka of our lives

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