

1990

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Recommended Citation

Duncan, Grant, An Expedition to Explore the Interior, *Kunapipi*, 12(1), 1990.

Available at: <https://ro.uow.edu.au/kunapipi/vol12/iss1/9>

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An Expedition to Explore the Interior

Abstract

In all ways there is this barrier fiercer than supplejack or granite indifference there is fear to hold me to strangle and out-wait me

Grant Duncan

AN EXPEDITION TO EXPLORE THE INTERIOR

In all ways there is this barrier
fiercer than supplejack or granite indifference
there is fear to hold me
to strangle and out-wait me

The rain and river have trapped us
in our silence and the thought
that it makes no difference if I let this
be my final resting-place
or struggle to find somewhere else

if I make this river's destination mine
or become a remainder
for the wekas to peck out my eyeballs
and see me rot without blessing

17 February 1847

*I am sorely disappointed in the appearance of the river
during a fresh. I expected something majestic...*

singlehanded
I believed I would be guided to the sources of fable
but I find only the rigours of a fern-root diet
I am repelled as an intruder
mocked as a newcomer and stung by nettles

I have discovered only torn skin and empty belly

And beauty?
That's too harsh a word to speak

Picturesque and romantic
are just hallucinations

26 February

*I am getting so sick of this exploring, the walking and
the dietary both being so bad, that were it not for the shame
of the thing, I would return...*

The silence falls
as far as rain on the river

the air condenses
and the plants keep to themselves

But this aching
it feels like eyes are upon me

wanting to crush me and
waiting for my emptiness to explode

This aching
my head and stomach burn

my member burns
for want of a woman

and my companions' eyes burn
while their native tongues lick my name

I am a feral child
who chatters with fever

I am your ignorance your majesty
your faithful and attached servant

3 March

*This is without exception the very worst country
I have seen in New Zealand.*

16 March

*I am afraid to quarrel with the natives, for I am told to
look out for myself if I choose, and they will do the same.*

Reason is just a push against madness
and the desire to scream out loud

Hunger is to be consumed
in a dream of every skeleton
of every bird we've eaten

and all the eels and ferns discarded
and the soil feeding on our human litter

the scabs picked off
cerumen faeces left-over skin
nails saliva hair semen blood
urine and sweat
the bodily travail and its trail of leavings
scrapings and secretions

piecemeal
we discarded ourselves

but in this same midden they would leave me
whole
as a home for fungi
like the snow-white one I ate

21 March

*Rain continuing, dietary shorter, strength decreasing,
prospects fearful.*

There is an alien organ in my gut
perhaps that same taipo
as the women call it

though I don't believe
I don't believe in possession of souls

Only land

And now this true fearful devil
boiling my blood and shivering my flesh

Hot and cold pains rank fluids
and sleep gave no relief

I lay paralysed and heard trees rushing
then passed out like being swallowed up
or blown out like a match

I felt the terrors of a child
I saw snakes
adders rising out of darkness
telling with their tongues they meant no harm
but came to whisper of forgotten things

and motioned me towards a cave

Then it was lost but for their tongues licking
and a sweet smell...

I found myself on a sparsely wooded hillside
walking upwards in the twilight

There were cats coming down past me
with a menacing air but ignoring me

Streaks of coloured light thundered past my head
and a voice boomed through the din

It told me to prepare for the godhead on the hilltop
and then there was silence

I was standing in a clearing
with the dusk gathering around

and there was nothing
but a run-down wooden homestead

Awoke startled
as the clouds revealed their treasure
the sun!

My face flushed in this narcotic air
and I rose to a lush luminous world
a forest that filled me and nourished me
and had changed without moving

So we sprang to our feet and walked on

This is without exception
the closest to paradise I have ever been

30 March

...I felt I was fast losing all my English diet.

Not even black tea with one lump
to wash down the fernroot

Like walking barefoot or a taste for claret
a tolerance for such a diet is acquired slowly

And while considering the decay
that takes root in a body
my tongue plays with fancies of chocolate
or the bitter delights of coffee

After dinner the rain cleared
and the earthsmell rose from the leafrot

Too late to push on
so my fingers idled in the mould
contemplating a living never moving from this spot

an acquired taste for the singularity
that evanescent feeling
and the many delights of reducing to a mould

13 April

*It tries one's nerves to be dangling on a flax rope about 100
feet above a granite rock, with a load on the feet and no hold
for the hands.*

Dangling indeed it could be so wasted
but for a faith in flax fibres
and the shame of a body fallen victim
to the fear of living

I would not be here
if not first cut off from my lifecord and spat forth
to seek passes majestic rivers magical mountains

pasturelands and roadways for horses goats nails
and seed potatoes

Impressed with the stamp of his consciousness
and the foot poised like a question-mark
on a quivering tongue
he you I we set upon this crazy trip
wanting to make a mark greater than any exclamation
over cakes and tea or a guided tour

But rather some brave trespass
or singlehanded reckless blunder into tanglewood
like vermin through unkempt hair

And as he has done
so do I we you

and until the day I'm blasted home and gone
I remain a faithful and attached servant
leaving only with sadness

Based on Thomas Brunner's journal of his expedition down the Buller Gorge, published as *The Great Journey: An expedition to explore the interior of the Middle Island, New Zealand, 1846-8* (Christchurch: The Pegasus Press, 1952). He took three months to cover on foot what can now be travelled by car in a couple of hours. His four guides were Maori, two men and two women. The two men he calls Epike ('...a greedy old fellow, and I should have been better, and have had better fare, without him'), and Ekehu ('...a faithful and attached servant'). The two women are not identified.