

# Carolyn Lane

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Amazing the places you end up when you're not sure where you're going! The constant roar in the background as I write is water rushing down the spill-race at the Roxburgh Dam, below the lookout we've parked on for tonight's sleep. We drove over the Dam earlier, and up the valley where in the 1950s there was a town of 3000-plus people. Now there are a handful of sheep, the Telegraph building,



Once was a town – Roxburgh Hydro Village

and a signboard telling the story of the Dam's construction and the town that arose there, and disappeared again when construction work was done.

Yes, of course you've guessed ... we're off in *Feierabend* our faithful house-bus, wandering around the South Island.

Otago has this surprising quality. So much of the landscape is unaffected by people. Other parts – the vineyards, orchards, the whole tourist-serving industry – are significantly altered. Then there are the parts which appear wild and natural – and then you realise that lovely deep blue lake did not exist before the hydro scheme was built.

Our impact on nature is significant. But nature's impact on us is something we need to think differently about. Think about the Queensland floods – and our own smaller sudden ones just after Christmas – the snows in Europe and USA, and the mudslides in Brazil. Our clever constructions, our huge investments in infrastructure, are wiped out in storms of natural forces.

Driving West between Christmas and New Year the road gangs were all out, clearing slips and opening the road ahead of us. The chocolates we'd been given for Christmas passed out *Feierabend's* windows into quickly-extended hands – well, they deserved them more than we did!

The rivers were raging. A DoC worker said she'd never seen the Buller rise so far so fast. On the river flat paddocks the plastic skins of hay bales were high in the branches of trees where they'd snagged – and the hay had gone sailing off with the river. The cattle were still on patches of higher ground because the silt-covered grass was so unpalatable.

So I'm thinking, could we be in a larger cycle – from millennia ago being at the mercy of nature, to then believing we "had dominion over" nature, to more recently trying to collaborate and work in har-

mony with nature, and now finding that indeed we have put ourselves back at the mercy of nature?

Back to the story!

The run-up to Christmas had had the Swiss seasonal delights. Mani was *Schmutzli* to Bruce Dunlop's *Samichlaus* at the Wellington Swiss Club. I really like the traditional approach. There's something very character-building about having to front up to the pair, and be praised for what you've done well, and publicly challenged about the things you need to do better. "No more fighting with your sister!" A couple of weeks ago in the Karamea Camp Ground we found ourselves next door (so typically NZ!) to Daniel Keller and Kathryn Wright, and their boys Luke and Anton – who'd been at the Samichlaus Party the year before. The look of horrified delight on the boys' faces when they were told they were talking to Schmutzli was wonderful to see!

Then we ran away for a totally relaxed Christmas in Nelson. We arrived in style – with a tall walnut tree travelling in the front cab of the bus between us, and a barrel of already-fermenting cherries in the back. Mani had prepared the sugar syrup before we left, and we added the cherries and yeast at the Blenheim cherry orchard. It's now bubbling away happily at son Daniel's place to be picked on our return. Mani's sons had done the hunting and gathering – venison, Nelson oysters, crayfish – and our friends had picked berries and peas – so the feasting was classic Kiwi Christmas.

Since, we've covered a few k's, seen glorious land-sea- and lake-scapes, and met – *natürlich!* – quite a few young Swiss tourists. There was a good session of *Jass* (with schnapps lubrication) by Lake Mahinapua. We've been right up to the north of the West Coast – Kohaihai where the Heaphy Track ends, and where there was continuous music from a *tui-hui* in the pohutukawas – and down to the south at Jackson for their famous fish and chips. Highlight for me: the white heron colony – a must-do if you're here this time of year.

Over in Otago we've been marvelling at the spread of what some may see as weeds – and others as nature's bounty. We've never seen as much Johanneskraut – the road-sides are golden, and we've stripped some into oil already. Of course the hills here are famous for their wild thyme and briar roses – the roses were introduced for a rose-hip industry, but are now run wild.

And elder trees everywhere! Mani says that a while back the Managing Director of Rutishauser was out here on a wine-buying trip, saw the wild elders, and quickly organised for students to pick the flowers which were reduced to syrup to add to cider back in Switzerland. Those students would have earned their money – the trees we've been seeing are on steep slopes, and well mixed with prickly briar rose bushes.

Must stop for this bulletin. It's morning now and I smell coffee and bacon. It's amazing what can be done in a bus on top of a dam!