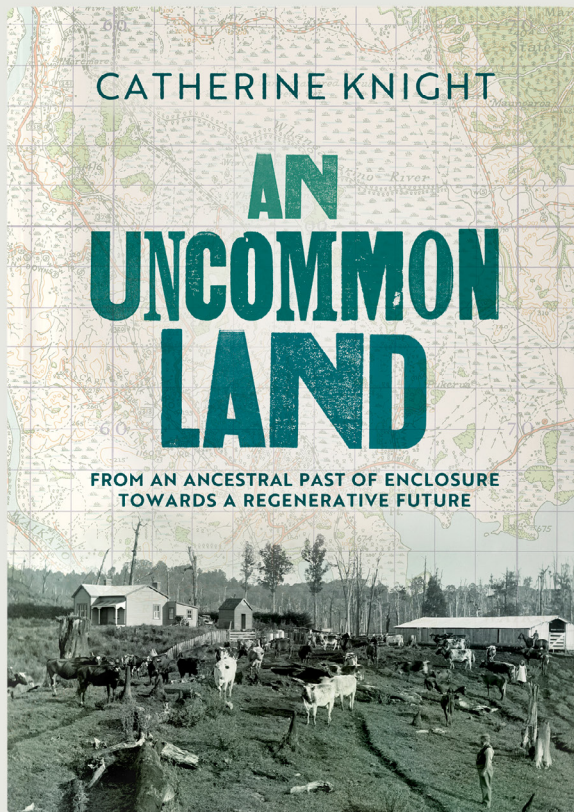


# AN UNCOMMON LAND

FROM AN ANCESTRAL PAST OF ENCLOSURE TOWARDS A REGENERATIVE FUTURE



*An Uncommon Land* is a story of enclosure, dispossession, colonisation and – ultimately – hope for a better future. Through the lens of her ancestors' stories, Catherine Knight throws light on the genesis and evolution of the commons, its erosion through enclosure and the ascendancy of private property in parallel with the rise of capitalism – a history that has indelibly shaped New Zealand society and its landscape.

Like other European settlers, the lives and future prosperity of the author's ancestors had their foundations in war, land appropriation and environmental destruction – but in their histories lie glimmerings of the potentiality of commons: tantalising hints of an alternative path to a re-commoned, regenerative future. From a past of enclosure, resource exploitation and exponential growth, this book shines light on the potentiality of a different future, taking inspiration from our collective history.

- Richly illustrated with maps and photographs
- A unique, personal exploration of the past using ancestry as a lens
- Skilfully interweaves New Zealand history with global histories of migration and enclosure
- A must-read for anyone interested in history, ancestry or political economy

'A highly original, intriguing and excellent work of scholarship, *An Uncommon Land* looks to the past to provide a pathway to a sustainable and fairer future. Weaving family histories of migration brilliantly into broader themes of colonisation, the commodification of land and climate change, Knight suggests we look to the concept of the commons as a way of managing finite environmental resources for the benefit of all. A timely, topical and essential read.'

**VINCENT O'MALLEY**

'Knight's research is wide ranging and impressive and the narrative flows seamlessly as she builds a complex and multi-faceted argument.'

**TOM BROOKING**

**Genre:** History and society

**Publication date:** May 2025

**Size:** 240 x 170 mm

**Publisher:** Totara Press

**Pages:** 274

**Author:** Catherine Knight

**ISBN:** 978-0-473-73453-4

**Format:** softcover (also available as e-book)

**RRP:** \$49.99

**Book trailer:** <https://www.youtube.com/@CatherineHKnight>

blocks of five-storey, brick-clad buildings containing 390 flats. A two-storey community centre and housing office was located in the centre of the site, with a small play area and ball court adjoining it. Designed by a new architect, a Mr E. Armstrong, the estate was considered to be very modern and comfortable compared to other social housing estates; its flats were more spacious, had more natural light and offered private bathrooms and kitchens.<sup>19</sup>

The flats were over-subscribed, with 1000 applications, plus 216 transfer applications, for the 390 flats available.<sup>20</sup> Reflecting on their own good fortune in gaining a flat in the estate, one former resident remembers:<sup>21</sup>

On 23 December 1946 my dad... applied for a transfer to 27, Kenwood House at Loughborough Park, in South London. It was a nice, new, modern estate, and all his friends and family told him that he had no chance.

The whole family is listed at their new flat at Loughborough Park in the 1939 national register (a type of census, undertaken on 29 September), with the exception of Sheila, my mother.<sup>22</sup> This is likely because Sheila had been evacuated from London, along with 800,000 other children evacuated from London and other cities in anticipation of declaration of war against Germany on 3 September 1939. This mass evacuation, which took place on 1 September 1939, was called Operation Pied Piper and involved the evacuation of 1.5 million people from urban areas identified as being vulnerable to enemy attack. This is consistent with my mother's memory of being



Eleanor King in her late teens or early 20s.



St Catherine's Roman Catholic Church, Meath Street, Dublin, Ireland. Robert King was born in St Catherine's Parish, Dublin. St Catherine's was his family's parish church and it is likely to be where he was christened.



A SIMPLE LIFE IN A HILLTOP SHACK

Jack was fiercely independent and reclusive, preferring the company of animals to people. One of his beloved dogs was Wowser, and the only existing photo of Jack as a young man shows him smiling down at his dog as Wowser looks endearingly towards the camera. His dog's name may reveal the ironic edge of Jack's sense of humour. The term has its genesis in Australian slang, meaning someone who is a moralistic killjoy, and was reserved especially for members of the temperance movement. In 1916, the Australian poet C.J. Dennis facetiously defined a wowser as 'an ineffably pious person who mistakes this world for a penitentiary and himself for a warder'.<sup>23</sup> It is difficult to imagine that Jack's much-loved dog fitted this definition of a wowser, though it is not inconceivable that perhaps he (or she) had a habit of barking in a way that implied moral judgement?



Jack and his dog Wowser on the farm. The fence in the background seems to be a very strong 'together' after perhaps utilising the black wattle posts that Jack's father Lars was advertising for sale around this time. A kerosene tin and possibly a cattle hole are visible at far right.

Jack's life was beyond simple; he seemed to revel in his rejection of 'modern comforts'. He lived in a roughly built two-room shack atop a windswept hill on Stewart Road, from where he would have been able to overlook most of his farm, lying to the west. He had vegetable gardens in some pockets of good soil near his shack and would nimbly climb up and down the hill to tend to them. He also had an orchard, though it seems likely it was his cattle that benefited most from the fruit it produced. Dotted around the farm block were a number of beehives,



Jack's shack. A painting by Marion Roe, commissioned by Glenn Holmes before the building was dismantled.

which produced honey that changed with the seasons. Catherine Lang, Jack's grandniece, remembers the delight of receiving kerosene tins filled with his honey and occasionally honeycomb too – sometimes golden, crunchy and crystallised, other times dark and treacly.<sup>24</sup>

In Jack's later years, the shack became increasingly dilapidated but no amount of coaxing from his family could convince him to upgrade or rebuild it. It is possible his aversion to contributing to the government's coffers (vividly illustrated by the gift duty anecdote described below) was part of the reason for his stubborn refusal to upgrade his dwellings, as this would constitute a form of 'improvement' that would inflate his land's valuation and mean a higher tax bill. Somewhat perversely, 'he delighted in people's reaction of shock at the chinks in the weatherboards, in the broken floorboards, and the newspapered walls blackened by years of smoke from the lamp and the wood stove'.<sup>25</sup> According to his grandniece Judy Simpson: 'The place had a strong smell of tar, mixed

initial 605-acre block and was looking to expand his land-holdings. In 1883, he purchased a 204-acre block of land a few kilometres to the west, near the Waikato River. The new block was strategically positioned on the northern boundary of a block of land that Lars was already grazing – a large block belonging to an absentee owner by the name of Edward Amphlett. Amphlett had been granted the land in recognition of his service in the Royal Navy but had never set foot on it, preferring the conveniences of his home in Sydney. Along with another early settler of the area, Edward Rodda, Lars had arranged to lease the land from Amphlett (or perhaps – at least initially – the arrangement was a little more casual).

Amphlett was one of many men who received a Crown grant in recognition of their service during the Waikato Wars, but he is better known for his connection with the worst maritime tragedy to occur in New Zealand waters. Amphlett was paymaster on the Royal Navy ship, HMS Orpheus, which in 1863 was on the final leg of its journey from its naval base at Sydney to deliver naval supplies and troop reinforcements



This painting by Richard Brydges Beechey depicts the shipwreck of HMS Orpheus on 7 February 1863. New Zealand National Maritime Museum, PA Edmonston Trust Collectors



Segment of map showing Crown grants in the Whangamānoa area, dated 1860. The Crown grant awarded to Edward Amphlett is marked by maroon lines. Block 19 is Crown Grants Rangiroa – Ngāruawhā – Ōpūata, Whangapūa, Whangamānoa, Peapepe Blocks. Archives New Zealand, reference G23850778

for the war in Waikato. Approaching Auckland, the captain decided to save time by changing the ship's course; instead of rounding North Cape to reach Waitematā Harbour, he decided to approach for berth at Onehunga in Manukau. It was a decision that proved disastrous. Unfortunately the ship's charts were out of date and did not reflect the new position of the channel through the bar. Lookouts on shore signalled a warning when they realised the ship was off course, but the Orpheus missed the message. The ship struck the bar and quickly sank into the sand, with only one boat-load of those on board getting away before the ship sank. Of the 259 souls on board, 189 perished, many of them young men aged between 12 and 18 years.<sup>26</sup>

Amphlett was one of just 70 men who survived the wreck. In recognition of his service in the Royal Navy during the New Zealand Wars (he also served on HMS Niger from 1859 to 1861), when the conflict was centred in Taranaki,<sup>27</sup> Amphlett was awarded a Crown grant of a 786-acre block of land in Whangamānoa Parish in 1869. This was the