

SPACES

Where the poets hide

The writing is on the wall for the tiny town of Oturehua.

OTUREHUA IS A CHARMING SPECK OF A TOWNSHIP. LIKE IN MANY OF THE SMALL COMMUNITIES OF AOTEAROA, THERE'S NOT MUCH BEYOND A PUB, A GENERAL STORE AND A SINGLE MAIN ROAD. IT'S A ONE-HORSE KIND OF PLACE. YOU MIGHT STOP FOR A SNACK AND A STRETCH. PAUSE AND ADMIRE THE SILENCE, NOTHING MORE. LINGER A WHILE, THOUGH, AND YOU'LL NOTICE THE RUSTLE OF SOMETHING UNUSUAL: A LOCAL PASSING A NOTEBOOK OVER THE HEDGE TO A NEIGHBOUR, A STRANGELY LARGE NUMBER OF PATRONS HUNCHED OVER SCRIBBLED PAGES IN THE PUB, A POEM FRAMED AND MOUNTED ON THE WALL IN THE PUBLIC TOILETS, THE WORDS WRITTEN BY A POET LAUREATE.

The population of Oturehua is about 35, mostly farmers who have weathered this unforgiving Maniototo landscape for generations. But among them lives an unexpected bunch, a growing community of artists, as talented as they are quirky. They're mainly of the literary variety: writers and poets, huddled together in this remote corner of the Ida Valley.

It's an unlikely spot for a creative hub. For a start, it's bitterly cold. The Ida is the coldest valley in the country, as locals will tell you with a hint of

pride. The skies are vast, the high alpine landscapes barren, and it's a solid 45-minute drive to the next main town. There are no art galleries, there is no live music; it's a culture vulture's nightmare. There is, however, an undeniable peace in the hush of the open sky which, combined with the silent presence of Mt Ida and the pleated Hawkdun Range, conveys a feeling that this would be the perfect place to nurture a broken heart. This is exactly how Brian Turner found his way to Oturehua more than eighteen years ago. He never left.

Affectionately called the Village Elder by his fellow writers, Brian tells me he's more widely known as a bloody nuisance. He is, in fact, a celebrated poet (he was the 2003 New Zealand Poet Laureate) and a member of one of the country's best-known sporting families. He and his two brothers have all represented New Zealand (Brian for hockey, Greg for golf and Glenn for cricket) which, if you're taking notes, makes them the answer to a regular pub quiz question. These days, though, Brian's life is wholly dedicated to words.

"The landscapes and skyscapes are astonishing. It's marvellous." Brian, who's just turned 75, fixes me with a gaze that's both devilish and shrewd. "It's sort of head down, ass up, get on with your work here." Surviving in Oturehua does take a bit of nous. If you don't chop enough wood to keep the

fire crackling all winter, for instance, you'll be in trouble when it drops to twenty below.

Brian lives surrounded by piles of books and notebooks. Poems are scribbled on every surface. "A lot of it is bilge," he tells me, "but over time you start to recognise the good stuff."

In Oturehua, for several years at least, Brian got his wish for solitude, alone with his books, his mountains, his poetry, and, of course, the pub. "I find it quite stimulating, to have a bloody good serious discussion on a Friday with certain farmer friends of mine." He was the only poet in town until the day in 2010 when author Jillian Sullivan came knocking on his door. After the end of a marriage in Nelson, she was searching for a place to start a new life chapter, and to write. Perhaps it would turn out to be, as she writes in her memoir, "where wood smoke plumes above a frosted roof".

"I looked, for five days, everywhere from Queenstown to Dunedin and the Catlins, but it was the bare hills that drew me in. I'd bought Brian's latest book and called in to ask him what it's like to live here as a writer."

The quick answer? It's cheap. Property in Oturehua has actually gone down in value. As Jillian explains, "We're too far from the mountains to be trendy;



Oturehua

is no place to gawp. Celebrities
don't stop here to shop
hence there's no paparazzi,
and tinsel's short-lived
though jazzy in a nor'wester.

The glamour's in the land
and skies and what they nourish
within. The real troubadours
are wind and water and sunshine
and the brilliance of the starlight.

You'll not find beggars
or buskers here, and if
you're wanting botoxing
you'll be shit out of luck
unless a bit of filler from the garage

would do. But they don't do
re-bores anymore, and most
of the servicing is left to Barry's
bulls and rams. As for
'significant venues', think historic store

and engineering works, churches,
backpackers, sale yards, cafe and a pub.
And after the final debauch, if you
fancy a long view of Mt Ida
and Rough Ridge, there's still room

for another headstone in the graveyard
at Blackstone Hill. It's not
far away up a dusty back road
that's been that way
for longer than most can remember.

Brian Turner



people can't live here and have that mountain lifestyle. It's really rural and you have to be self-sufficient."

Lured in by the hills, the property prices and her new friend, Jillian set about building herself a strawbale house. More than just stacking hay bales and covering them with mud, this was something of a hero's journey for Jillian, and she called on the expertise, kindness and elbow grease of a wide circle of friends and family. "The day my son-in-law, Sam, arrived, we started digging. And that's when Brian turned up with his gloves and a grubber—he was there from day one."

The writer's village had grown to two. "He was like my mentor when I first arrived, and we would have long conversations about poetry," says Jillian, who has published books, essays, short stories and poems for adults and children. "He'd read me other poets and we'd talk about why it was working or not working. I almost wanted to record him and take notes. These days he always comes tramping in the mountains with me for my research."

It was Jillian's strawbale house which eventually caught the attention of more kindred spirits. Novelist and screenwriter Mike Riddell, having read Jillian's work, found himself renting her place for a six-week holiday with his wife Rosemary. Mike

had just received a diagnosis for prostate cancer, and what started as a consolation trip to replace a planned visit to Canada became a watershed moment for the family.

It didn't take long before they were under the spell of the open skies. "We went to an art exhibition down the road in Alexandra and, when we got back, I said to Rosemary, 'I've met more creative people tonight than I've met in the last thirteen years in Cambridge!'" Rose decided to retire from her work as a judge (she's also a film and theatre director), and they promptly bought the cafe across the road from Jillian. It had been for sale for three years, and within eight months they had turned it into their home and moved in. For Mike, who has a head-thrown-back laugh that can be heard from anywhere in the village, his new community is the closest thing to a writers' colony he's ever found.

"It's something that I've always longed for, but have never been able to achieve. I've always liked the idea of a writers' colony, a group of people who understand what you're doing, who you can share ideas with. It's really hard to achieve—you might be living in a city where there are a lot of writers, but they're all sort of burrowed away and doing their own thing."

**"THEY'VE BEEN
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Writers are a particular breed. In 2019, Mike gathered the growing Otarehuna literary collective and orchestrated the biggest event in town for decades. The wider community was warned in the weekly newsletter of the inaugural Under Rough Ridge Writers' Retreat—the Ida Valley would be flooded with a strange species of humanity. “Don’t be scared of them, they’re mostly woolly and will blend right in with the cross-bred ewes,” Mike wrote. “A celebratory dinner will be held at the pub Saturday night, so be on the lookout for inebriated pedestrians bearing notebooks and pens. Anything you say in conversation may find its way into a best-selling novel—you have been warned.”

It’s an odd pairing, writers and farmers, but it works, especially with the pub serving as common ground. Brian, of course, did a lot of the groundwork in the early days. “A few of them knew me because I was a Southerner originally, and because of my surname,” he says. “I think a lot of them were a bit bewildered by the arrival of a

few people at the start; it was like they were being outnumbered! But it seems to be working.”

In fact, as Mike muses, there’s a mutual fascination. “They’ve been facing into the wind for 50 years. They’ve got good stories to tell.”

For Mike and Rose, though it was the landscape that they fell in love with, tragedy has given them roots in Otarehuna. Only several months after they moved, their daughter Polly, with whom Mike was co-writing a book, died suddenly. She had been planning to live in the village and was staying with them while her house was built next door. Polly touched the hearts of the Otarehuna community in her short time there. At “40 years young”, Mike says she touched everyone. “She’s buried at the village’s Blackstone Cemetery, so we’ve got a deep connection here,” he says. “It does feel like we’ve got an affinity with the place. Our other daughter and her family have moved in next to the pub, and Rose’s 91-year-old Mum decided she could live here, too,

**“IT’S SORT OF HEAD
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HERE”**



after she came down for Polly’s unveiling! So we’ll have four generations.”

The layers of people who have passed through Oturehua fascinate all the writers, but Jillian in particular. She tells me it’s one of the areas where Māori travellers quarried quartz to make tools; then came the gold miners, the farmers, the cyclists doing the Otago Central Rail Trail, and now, refuge-seeking writers.

Huddled next to her stone-mounted fireplace, her work to one side, Jillian tells me her writing has started to reflect her surroundings, just as it did when she lived by the sea in Motueka. True enough, her memoir, *A Way Home*, is told through the story of the strawbale house. With undulating earth floors that you can grip with your toes and thick walls, it’s both homely and wild, and protects against the extremes of the Ida Valley. She points to parts of the wall where friends and family have mucked in and left their mark. “Those are fingerprints of my friend who’s in the SAS, and Pat, who was 73 when she worked here, her handprints are there too.”

Building and working on the house, as tough as it is, brings some welcome balance to the time spent with pen to paper. Like Brian, she finds satisfaction in the visceral nature of self-sufficiency. “When you’re always writing, it’s really nice having the physical

things—we really like our vegetable gardens, we move in and out. It’s easy in the country, I don’t know what urban writers do. I can go out and talk to all my trees.”

As the community swells to include the likes of poet Bridget Auchmuty, who now lives nearby in a yurt, and editor Paula Wagemaker, Jillian can go out and talk to them, too. “Trouble is, with the bigger community is that as you get more like-minded people and friends, you start to get more social life, and that’s not a good thing for a writer!”

For Brian, who’s as at home with a fishing rod as he is with a pen, the natural beauty also fuels his work as a lifelong environmental activist, for which he works hard at his “bloody nuisance” status. “A lot of what takes place in the name of progress and development ends up with depletion and destruction and degradation. Not always, but quite often. It’s hard for me to leave an environment like this now. On the rest of the planet, well, there’s more and more human beings and we’re getting on with quickly destroying a hell of a lot of it.”

Brian and his growing tribe may have found a sanctuary where most of the world won’t find them, but, as he told the gathering of retreat-goers, “we writers have to make more noise”.

GEORGIA MERTON

GEORGIA MERTON HAS SUCCEDED TO THE ALLURE OF THE MOUNTAINS AND NOW LIVES IN WANAKA. HAPPIEST WRITING ABOUT ECCENTRIC FOLK, INTERESTING FOOD AND OUR ENVIRONMENT. CURRENTLY ATTEMPTING TO MASTER THE ART OF COMPOST. GEORGIAMERTON.JOURNOPORTFOLIO.COM



ALL PHOTOS ROSS MACKAY
EXCEPT JILLAN SULLIVAN, PAGE 17, BY GEORGIA MERTON.

