

# Earnslaw Station

## A case history

In the South Island, 2.7 million hectares of high country land, or 10 percent of New Zealand's total land area, is public land divided amongst 365 pastoral leases. Much of this land is severely eroded or home to many special native plants and animals; some of it is also productive Merino country; parts are inhospitable to either plant or animal life, yet curiously some runholders still seek to retain grazing rights over it. In this article pastoral lands researcher Bruce Mason investigates the history of one controversial lease and argues that a large proportion of it has such high recreation, natural and scenic value and little farming value that it should now be resumed by the Crown.

It has been pointed out that the removal of land from runholders' leases can hurt their sense of ownership more than their pockets. The recent history of Earnslaw Station, at the head of Lake Wakatipu, goes a long way to proving the truth of this adage.

At 2820 metres, Mt Earnslaw is impressively high, towering over the tramper on the valley floor who has made his way up the swift flowing Earnslaw Burn to the southern foot of the mountain. A more dramatic alpine setting with such easy access would be difficult to find.

Immediately ahead lie the mounds of a glacial moraine, the rock and debris of which were deposited thousands of years ago from an extension of the Earnslaw Glacier; waterfalls stream over rock faces as the summer melt continues; the eye is continually arrested by the awesome ice blocks of the glacier and the snowy approach to the summit — an imposing west Otago massif in a typical west Otago valley.

However, the complete and simple elegance of the timeless landscape contrasts markedly with land tenure maps of the area; a complex mosaic, the result of 120 years of European land allocation and re-allocation, now overlays the tussock, beech, rock and ice.

As a result of hasty South Island land speculation of the mid-19th century, Mt Earnslaw, south glacier and all, became part of a pastoral lease, giving the runholder grazing rights over vast areas too steep even for mountain goats.

By the 1960s the absurdity of the situation had been recognised, culminating in the removal of 9250 hectares from the lease in 1973. But, despite this mountainous area having no pastoral value whatsoever, the lessee staunchly fought to retain this rights of exclusive possession over this land.

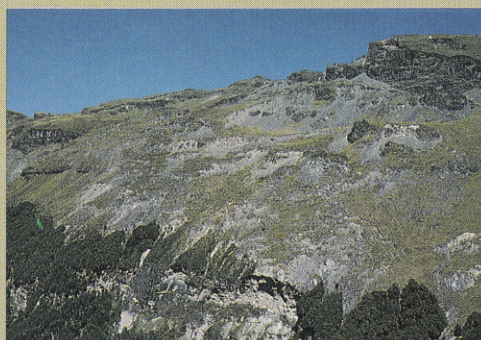
Thirteen years later the 33-year lease is up for renewal. Most of the Earnslaw block is considered unsuitable for farming but ideal for outdoor recreation and worthy of protection for the range of native plants and animals found there. Mountainous overhangs, waterfalls and alpine barrens can support recreationalists but few sheep. What possible use could such land be to a runholder?

In 1861, the year that gold was first rushed in Otago, the Earnslaw district was first settled for farming. Mt Alfred and

the flat, fertile lands between it and the Rees River were taken up and the lower slopes of Mt Earnslaw were grazed extensively in conjunction with two other large runs. Another type of gold — a "golden fleece" — was about to be spun.

Claimants' plans, for the sake of simplicity, extended run boundaries to the skylines. Runholders needed only to find some unused land, define its boundaries and ride back to Dunedin or Christchurch to legalise their claims. In such a haphazard fashion the high country was "won".

The 20th century has seen competing claims being made for Earnslaw Station



Severe geological erosion above the Earnslaw Burn. The land above the forest is in pastoral lease, and the National Park boundary runs along the crest-line.

pastoral lease land. In 1952 the lease covered 14,900 hectares, but at the time it was apparent that some of this would become part of the yet-to-be gazetted Mount Aspiring National Park. A special condition of the lease stipulated that the lessee was not entitled to compensation if any area was resumed for the National Park. This provision remains.

In 1971 a 364-hectare wedge of beech forest in the Dart Valley was surrendered and added to Mount Aspiring National Park. Protracted negotiations however failed to achieve surrender of the Earnslaw massif and Forbes mountains for inclusion in the Park. The Labour Government then stepped in and forcibly removed 9250 hectares for the Park in 1973.

Today the pressure continues for more of the lease to be resumed for recreation or conservation.

The Earnslaw Burn has long been the route for climbing access to the south face of Mt Earnslaw. However, it is more generally used by trampers crossing between the Rees River and Earnslaw Burn or to Paradise via Turret Head. Such trips normally take two days.

As a lower but isolated massif from the surrounding mountains, Mt Alfred provides

an excellent view of the district, in particular of Mt Earnslaw, the Dart and Routeburn Valleys. The more Glenorchy develops as a holiday centre, the more demand there will be for day walks — already there are calls for a track to the summit of Mt Alfred.

The pastoral lease fronts onto the important fishery of Diamond Lake, Lake Reid and Diamond Creek. Most of the fish are brown trout, with some rainbow and small landlocked quinnat salmon. Particularly popular with anglers is the five-km stretch of Diamond Creek upstream from where it meets the Rees. Fine alpine scenery and often difficult angling make this a rewarding stream to fish. Because it is a lake outflow, the stream is not prone to flow fluctuations, and is therefore prime trout habitat.

The forests within the pastoral lease all provide valuable bird habitat, with a similar range of species to that found within the adjacent state forest. Kakariki and South Island robin are among the more notable species, common here but reduced in numbers elsewhere in New Zealand.

At the beginning of this century a number of eminent entomologists explored the Earnslaw district for insects because of the ease of access and the attraction of the rich and varied vegetation. It has thus become the type locality for dozens of alpine species, providing the scientific benchmark for many species of wider distribution.

The Land Use Capability system ranks land from Class 1 down to Class 8, according to its production value. On this score, 68 percent of the Earnslaw block is Class 8 — severely eroded and totally useless for grazing — and 17 percent is Class 7e, prone to severe erosion. The only substantial areas of sustainable pasturage are on the Rees Valley flats and the toe of one spur. This block is lightly set-stocked year round with 1260 wethers.

Mt Alfred is a mix of state forest, pastoral lease, reserve and private land. The lower, forest-cleared slopes are Class 6 (moderate capability for pastoral use) and have been partly improved through aerial oversowing and topdressing. The upper snowgrass slopes are Class 7e.

The High Country Public Lands Coalition (comprising Forest and Bird, Federated Mountain Clubs, the National Acclimatisation Societies and the Deerstalkers Association) have proposed the following changes to the Earnslaw lease: