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Low Country Liz
-the making of a rural Southland woman

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long essay submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) degree in History at the University of Otago, Dunedin, New Zealand.

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Acknowledgments

Dedicated to Elvira M Begg, a remarkable woman for whom I have an enormous amount of personal respect.
A very special thanks to the Begg family for their generosity and support in granting access to Elvie’s personal archives.
To my supervisor Professor Erik Olssen, thank you for your unrelenting encouragement and support, and for convincing me that it was actually ‘history’ that I was writing.
Love and thanks to Mum for her continuous support for my studies.
Thanks also to flatmates and friends for putting up with my rantings and ravings, and listening patiently with apparent interest as I told of my daily discoveries.
This work is for the rural women of Southland.

J. Crawford
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October 1995
Preface

The wealth of archives and primary material left by Elvira Begg presents an exciting opportunity to examine as closely as possible the histories of rural Southland women. It was the discovery of these treasures that first inspired me to write about rural women's history. The focus of this work centres on the experiences of an educated city girl who met and married a young man with a farming background. Personal diaries, a collection of poems and an unpublished autobiography left by Mrs Begg form the basis of this study.

Elvira’s life will be traced chronologically, but the central focus will be on the transition from city to farm life, and how the experience affected this woman. The aim is to examine her life in Christchurch and the intellectual environment of Canterbury University, then look at the impact of the transition to an isolated sheep station in Eastern Southland. Christchurch during the 1930s provides the background to Elvira’s life as an educated city girl. Chapter Two deals with her initial experiences and first impressions of rural New Zealand. In Chapter Three, entitled ‘The Making of a Farmer’s Wife’, the focus is on the way Elvira adapted to the new environment over the years. Rural New Zealand between the 1940s and 1960s provides the historical context for her experiences in Southland. I will also examine Elvira’s unique response to the challenges of rural life, in particular looking at her writings under the pseudonym ‘Low Country Liz’. One woman's life also raises theoretical issues relating to women’s biography. Questions of identity and constructions of ‘self’ are relevant in this context.

The ethical issue of confidentiality, in deciding how far to delve into another person’s life, is an important practical consideration for any biographer. I am very grateful to the Begg family for their generosity in allowing me access to personal archives, and consulted with members of the family throughout my research. I was very aware of the need for tactful selectivity. I hoped to respect the family’s expressed wishes for some privacy, and detract from the intimate nature of the essay. I wanted to respect Mrs Begg’s desire for anonymity as far as possible. For this reason there is less emphasis on the nature of her relationship with husband.
John. I also chose the pseudonym 'Liz' because this was adopted by the subject in her own unpublished autobiography. The use of a pseudonym serves to portray this individual as part of a wider social group. This method enables greater emphasis on a type of woman, rather than a specific individual.

This study does not aspire to make broad conclusions about the experiences of rural women. Rather it is hoped that an examination of this woman's life will help to illuminate aspects of life in rural Southland, whether by illustrating homogeneity or highlighting diversity. The intention is to expose the myth of the stereotypical 'Southland farmer's wife' and to show the diversity of backgrounds which have shaped the stereotype of Southland woman.
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(Illustrations courtesy of Begg family archives, 1995)
Introduction

The histories of ordinary women, in their own words, are important in understanding the context in which they lived and aspects of their daily experiences. It is through their thoughts and perceptions that historians can hope to discover what life was really like during a given historical era. Social history demands that we examine all aspects and levels of society, in particular those groups who have for so long remained silent and on the fringes of mainstream of conventional historical study. There is a need, for example, to recover from obscurity the experiences of women if we are to present genuinely well-rounded social histories. This is particularly true for rural women, whose histories remain seriously under researched in this country. An examination of the social roles and perceptions of what we call ‘ordinary women’ requires that we look at how they really felt and what they really thought about their lives. This necessitates the use of unofficial and unconventional sources, such as the personal diaries, letters and poetry of such women. The survival of women’s accounts is a matter of chance, and ought to be seized upon for their historical value.¹

How would life in the Southland farming environment between the 1930s and the 1960s impact on the experiences of a university educated city girl with little first-hand knowledge of rural living? Did Liz have a uniquely individual experience, or was it typical of women from such educated background who made the transition to farm life? Did she become a stereotypical ‘Southland farmer’s wife’, and, indeed, is there such a social construct? These and other questions may be addressed by discovering, as far as is practicable, what Liz felt about her life, and how she developed as an ordinary woman in a certain historical era. We need to appreciate the significance of the personal experiences of the people around us. Feminist biographers challenge the criteria of selection in traditional biography.² This can open the way to different ways of seeing a life as interesting or successful, thus revealing women’s lives and establishing women’s biography as a legitimate study. There are, of course, pitfalls in individual

biography, and it may be that collective biography is better suited for making historical generalisations. Nonetheless, examining an aspect of Southland rural history from the point of view of a visionary and particularly articulate woman presents a novel perspective and hopefully provides some insight into a part of New Zealand history too-long neglected. By illuminating one individual’s life it may be that we can reveal an aspect of rural Southland history hitherto unexplored. The time has come to reveal the voices of ordinary New Zealand women, who have had as much to play in the history of this country as the 'firsts', who have occupied the limelight for so long. This is not to undermine the achievements of women who have triumphed in the public world and have earned a place among the annals of conventional histories. Rather, this is an attempt to show the equal historical value of those women who toiled silently in the background of New Zealand history. The unpublished women deserve a wider hearing, for their own sake, and for the sake of contemporary social history.³ Let the women speak for themselves, so that we may write authenticated histories and remain true to our subjects of study.

Slow warmth shuts out the slate-grey cold, lulls to reluctant sleep
Sink down, sink lower down, just as the sun does.
Dull dawn repaints the rows of rubber boots
Beneath pale stars still fading.
Steamed windows, chilled meowing at the door, butter hard to cut
Bear harsh impact, and faces half-washed, wet coats that smell,
Hands red and raw, rubbed to soreness.
Who cares for beauty...frost on feathered grass,
Or runnelled frozen clay? it clings to things yellow.
No love for mists in gullies or hill-hollows,
It searches out bone-marrow bitterly.
The withered sun creeps forth meanly to make a shallow traverse
Into a foggy darkness, then we with joy,
Draw round the fire, and warmth comes crowding back
Our mother sits with us, tells us of sleeping children, leaf covered,
Of Lucy in the snow, spreading a glimmer on the silent waste,
Of dying Beth, or Tom, poor Tom acold and the little match-girl.
The crackling flames pick out upon our cheeks
Our childish grief, then, with gentle kisses.
We dwindle back into our small chill selves again,
Leave the room shrinkingly and folded in our beds
Rub one cold foot upon the other
Beat back the uncanny noises of the dark, and beg for sleep.

WEST COAST WINTER 1965

1

Educated City Girl (1930s)

Liz was born on 26 April 1916, in the small West Coast mining community of Reefton. She was the second oldest of five children in the family. Liz had a fairly poor and difficult upbringing by all accounts. The imagery of ‘West Coast Winter’, for example, indicates the trying lifestyle imposed on the people by the area. It recalls a time of cold and hardship, balanced with imagination and a sense of protection offered within the family. Living on the Coast with its isolation and difficult way of life may have prepared Liz for her later life in rural Southland. She did sustain some fond memories of the Coast and its unique way of life, and this is reflected in later diary entries. ‘We had a good old time fog here this morning, which made me feel quite homesick for the coast.’

Her father was a coal miner, who died in a mine collapse when Liz was twelve. Many local people in the Reefton area were involved in the mines, around which the communities developed at this time. Fatal accidents resulting from the hazardous work undertaken in the mines were not uncommon. This tragedy naturally impacted on the family’s personal and financial situation. Not long after the accident, her mother took the children to Christchurch. The family settled in the poorer suburb of Linwood in 1928. Little is known about Liz’s mother. Liz attended Christchurch Girls’ High School, and at sixteen she wrote the first of the diaries now forming part of her archives. These ‘diaries of a young lady of Christchurch’ provide a valuable opportunity to examine the personal experiences, thoughts and dreams of a young woman in a particular historical context.

Liz clearly led a full and stimulating life in Christchurch. She became very much a city girl, and aside from her childhood experiences in Reefton, had little direct knowledge of rural life at this point in her life. ‘I enjoyed plays

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4E. Begg, personal diary, Tuesday 9 July, 1935.
5Interview with Dr Jim Begg, 13.6.95.
6E. Begg, personal diary, Tuesday 9 July, 1935.
7Ibid., Thursday 22 January, 1932.
1 Year Six at Christchurch Girls' High School 1932.
Liz is sitting in the front row, second from the left.
and parties and films, I liked to walk in Hagley Park and kick the autumn leaves along, and the streams of bicycles in Colombo street were a joy to me. Church at St. Luke's with resplendent Easter Day processions, boats on the Avon, even the Band Rotunda were part of my life.\textsuperscript{8} Christchurch by the 1920s had emerged as the economic capital of Canterbury. It was, however, still very much a market town, servicing the surrounding areas of the productive Canterbury plains.\textsuperscript{9} In the 1920s, rural mixed with urban in the town of Christchurch. Flocks of sheep still grazed in Hagley Park and the Show Day at Addington was considered by many townspeople as a highlight on the social calendar.\textsuperscript{10} This balance between urban and rural meant that townspeople were indirectly made aware of a type of rural life that stressed the idyllic nature of farming, and obscured the realities of the lifestyle. The city of Christchurch expanded its industrial base by the 1930s and, despite the difficulties brought about by the Great Depression, continued to develop as the decade went on. The expansion, for example, of city department stores such as Ballantyne's, were signs that the town of Christchurch was becoming an altogether more urbanised area by the 1930s.

Growing up in the workingclass suburb of Linwood it is likely that Liz was aware of the conspicuous privilege and concentration of wealth in other parts of the city. Social and financial distinctions became particularly acute during the difficult times of the Great Depression. She was certainly aware of the financial difficulties suffered by her family. Comments in her diaries do indicate the daily problems. ‘We are going to get the ‘phone cut off, because it is a luxury rather than a necessity. I’ll miss it, but must not say anything. It’s all in the day’s work, the giving up of these little privileges, we’ve grown to regard as necessary.’\textsuperscript{11} For her twenty-first birthday, Liz was given a bookshelf by her mother, a gift prized by the young woman, as she was aware that ‘it meant much scraping and saving’.\textsuperscript{12} There was a growing awareness of social class distinctions on the part of Liz, and occasionally some resentment towards displays of wealth. She once commented that ‘poverty is the most depressing thing, it gets you down physically and mentally.’\textsuperscript{13} Nonetheless, this articulate woman

\begin{itemize}
\item[\textsuperscript{9}]J. Castle, Christchurch, AH & AW Reed, Christchurch, 1971, p.16.
\item[\textsuperscript{10}]S. Eldred-Grigg, A New History of Canterbury, John McIndoe, Dunedin, 1982, p.104.
\item[\textsuperscript{11}]\textit{ibid.}, Sunday 25 January, 1932.
\item[\textsuperscript{12}]\textit{ibid.}, Sunday 26 May, 1935.
\item[\textsuperscript{13}]\textit{ibid.}, Friday 6 July, 1935.
\end{itemize}
also displayed a genuine faith in the world at a time when economic depression was beginning to beset 1930s New Zealand. Liz generally remained hopeful about her future.

She displayed a zest and passion for life, and an enthusiasm for the joys of youth. Liz appears to have remained optimistic about what life had to offer her in the future and maintained very romantic views. For example, on one occasion she confided to her diary that 'life was not made for us. We were made for life, to be played with as the winds with autumn leaves.'\textsuperscript{14} Liz did not wish to grow up too soon, because she felt that she was 'in love with youth and all the jolly fun and good friendship, and deepening sensibilities, and rising of new ideals, new tastes and thoughts that attend it.'\textsuperscript{15} To her youth, strength and truth were 'the qualities which would make a perfect world.'\textsuperscript{16}

Time spent at Christchurch Girls' High School was a positive period in Liz's teenage life. Opened in 1877 under the control of the Canterbury University College, the aim of the school was to prepare students for further education.\textsuperscript{17} Official policy stipulated that without sound secondary school training, the women students aspiring to Canterbury University College would be ill-equipped to make good use of the opportunities offered to them.\textsuperscript{18} Until 1948, the secondary school was one of four administered by the College. Liz was fortunate to be one of the young women to benefit from this policy. She thrived on the intellectual stimulus offered by learning and enjoyed the friendships made with fellow classmates. Liz looked forward to gathering together her gym frock, black stockings, tie and hat, and returning to school each term.\textsuperscript{19}

Study was important to Liz, and her thirst for education is reflected in the boredom and frustration she felt during school breaks. Holidays were the period in which Liz tended to become 'moody and feel bored and stupid and wild all the time and go to bed to dream of possibilities.'\textsuperscript{20} Liz was

\textsuperscript{14}E. Begg, personal diary, Sunday 25 January, 1932.
\textsuperscript{15}\textit{ibid.}, Saturday 23 May, 1931.
\textsuperscript{16}\textit{ibid.}, Friday 9 January, 1932.
\textsuperscript{18}A. G. Butcher, \textit{A centennial history of education in Canterbury}, Centennial Committee Canterbury Education Board, Christchurch, 1953, p.150.
\textsuperscript{19}E. Begg, personal diary, Wednesday 27 May, 1932.
\textsuperscript{20}\textit{ibid.}, Monday 11 May, 1932.
clearly an intelligent young woman, who thrived on her Latin studies, and displayed an enthusiasm for most areas of schooling. She once commented with amusement that ‘everyone thinks I’m an intellectual. I suppose this fallacy comes from the idea that I write poetry and wear specs, have matriculated and go to High School. The silly fools! But I don’t mind at all.’\textsuperscript{21} Numerous extracts from her diaries contain reminiscences about school life, and resentment of the holidays. ‘But oh! damn! I do feel stale! I even thought of doing some Latin, which shows I must be a bit of a confirmed reeder’.\textsuperscript{22} ‘Tonight I feel the need of something cold and steadying, something to rest my racing brain upon. Truth to tell, I will be glad when I shall have to sit down and ponder on sub-junctives again.’\textsuperscript{23} This fondness for the intellectual environment continued at a tertiary level.

Liz matriculated from Christchurch Girls’ High School in 1933 and was admitted to Canterbury University College where she successfully completed a Bachelor of Arts degree in Latin. The university occupied the top of the educational pyramid in Christchurch, and while offering several bursaries and scholarships, was dominated by the middling class at this time.\textsuperscript{24} Liz managed to secure a regular bursary, although this merely contributed to the cost of fees. It is probable that her mother continued to work hard to support Liz’s education, deriving finances from her widow’s pension as well as her own income. Liz’s situation was somewhat unique in this respect, because she was afforded the opportunity to join an intellectual elite within an exclusive establishment in Christchurch. Social distinctions were apparent, although extremes of wealth did not really prevail in the largely egalitarian society of 1930s New Zealand. Most students were from varying backgrounds and acknowledged that a university education was a privilege. Intellectual arrogance or a sense of superiority were rare.\textsuperscript{25} University life did, however, shelter Liz from certain realities, including rural New Zealand. She became very absorbed in philosophical thought and intellectual aspirations as a young woman. College continued to be a small and intimate intellectual environment during the 1930s.

\textsuperscript{21}ibid., Sunday 7 December, 1930.  
\textsuperscript{22}ibid., Friday 26 December, 1930.  
\textsuperscript{23}ibid., Sunday 13 January, 1935.  
\textsuperscript{24}S. Eldred-Grigg, \textit{A New History of Canterbury}, p.146.  
2 City girls about town, Christchurch 1935.
Liz is on the right.

3 Party Invitation, Christchurch University College 1935.
Liz led a stimulating social and intellectual life during her university years. The opening of the Students’ Union from 1930 proved invaluable as a centre for student organisation and activities.26 Drama was one area in which Liz took a particular interest. The Drama Society was the pre-eminent club in the College at this time, and was especially active in the 1930s.27 Liz was an artistic young woman who, while rather introspective at times, displayed an enthusiasm for self-expression. She felt, for example, that drama like most forms of art was ‘only another way of finding reverberations of yourself’.28 Liz maintained a personal interest in drama, literature and the arts, attending numerous plays and immersing herself in the classic works of the day. She had a mature and critical eye, and was very expressive in her comments. ‘We went to see “Roberta” at 5 o’clock. Fred Astaire has the most marvellous feet, they twinkle like stars. I went to drama on Wednesday, to see two plays - “Women at War” and “Symphony in Illusion”. They were mediocre, but enjoyable. Dorothy Chamberlain was very sweet as Nan Shodles.’29 She also immersed herself in such works as the letters of Keats, which for Liz made ‘thrilling reading’.30

Spirits were not completely dampened by the economic depression and students continued to enjoy themselves during the 1930s. Liz included herself in the 1930s social scene of Christchurch, attending regular dances every weekend, and generally leading a full social life. Dancing was popular from the 1920s, and the cinema also became an accessible form of entertainment for the young people of Christchurch at this time. There appears to have been regular contact with Boys High School. For the Sixth Form Dance, for example, the girls collectively invited a group of young men from the school, ‘to ensure that we’ve plenty of boys to keep the show going.’31 Socialisation continued in later years and Liz wrote with some detail about local dances with Lincoln College. The fun involved in the etiquette of arranging dance programmes and mixing with the young men is quite apparent. At one function she ‘had two dances with Bill, two with Lynn and one with Neil Young (but I missed that one as we were at

28 E. Begg, personal diary, Sunday 20 April, 1935.
29 ibid., Friday 12 July, 1935.
30 ibid., Friday 12 July, 1935.
31 ibid., Saturday 13 June, 1931.
supper) and the rest with John. There was far too many people there and dancing was difficult, but we managed. John drank a little too much neat gin, and got wobbly, but did not fail me.'\(^{32}\) Liz also commented in her diaries from time to time on the nature of the men she met. 'Neilson was rather charming I thought, but much too pretty. Bill Emmet was on his own and had a right royal time getting drunk and indulging in doubtful witticisms.'\(^{33}\) It is evident, however, that young Liz was a rather introspective young woman, once exclaiming, 'dear me! I must take a pull at myself, I’m developing into a silly giggling little flapper, and that is the last thing I want to be - I - who can be so serious at times...'.\(^{34}\)

Liz was a deep-thinking young woman for her age, possessed of a vivid imagination. As she got older, by 1935, she seems to have become burdened by her intellect, with frustration and a certain cynicism evident at times. For Liz, imagination and sentimentalism were 'an evil combination and that is what keeps seething within me all the time.'\(^{35}\) She was convinced that 'the deep thinker cannot hope for any peace or content in a world like ours. He is wedded by his very introspection to pain and strife, but would he have it otherwise. I don’t think he would.'\(^{36}\) This intellectual young woman would seem hardly suited to the apparently stifling environment of a remote Southland sheep station.

Her awareness of the outside world and international events heightened as she matured into a young woman during the 1930s. A delightfully refreshing and articulate style of writing vividly captures Liz’s mood and the historical era in which she was living. 'We’ve been to Australia tonight, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide, on the wireless set that is here on approval. It is all very wonderful.'\(^{37}\) Liz wrote with passion about the 1931 Napier Earthquake, and the effect of the human tragedy on New Zealand communities.\(^{38}\) She also commented from time to time on the impending war in Europe, with considerable perception. 'It is just twenty one years since the outbreak of war in 1914. How changed the world is from that which was so tossed and scorched in those years. It is still rocking, still

\(^{32}\)ibid., Thursday 1 August, 1935.  
\(^{33}\)ibid., Thursday 1 August, 1935.  
\(^{34}\)ibid., Wednesday 22 July, 1931.  
\(^{35}\)ibid., Sunday 3 March, 1935.  
\(^{36}\)ibid., Monday 5 August, 1935.  
\(^{37}\)ibid., Saturday 2 March, 1935.  
\(^{38}\)ibid., Sunday 8 February, 1931.
smouldering and even flaming in parts today, but it is essentially a “brave new world” looking back, but not gaining from those four bloody years, for the human character has not outgrown its pride and selfishness during the passage of the years.”\(^{39}\) She read several novels on changes in Germany during the 1930s, yet Liz tried to maintain an impartiality towards accusations and hope for the best. She sincerely hoped that there would be no war. Liz wondered, for example, ‘who can judge the Hitlerised Germany so early? All the time I kept thinking. Is that the truth? Can that be?’\(^{40}\) Her interest in the world also manifested itself in a desire to travel and experience new cultures. ‘I am dying to have enough money to go places and see things. I would like to see London before I die or become devitalised by age and disillusion.’\(^{41}\)

Liz was certainly a very ambitious young woman, even as a teenager. To her, ambition was ‘a pivot on which everything else turns. If there were no ambition we could not suffer failure, or rejoice in success, and feel dumb despair, or pride and further ambitions. And so the cyclic order swings on.’\(^{42}\) She desperately wanted to ‘do something worthwhile with the life that has been given to me. No matter if the world does not hear of it.’\(^{43}\) Liz often wrote about what she wanted to achieve during her life, considering a variety of career paths including teaching, drama, and a career in the medical profession. ‘Have seen Stanley Kingsley’s “Men in White” today, the screen version with Clark Gable. It gave me the old old thrill that the sight of doctors, hospitals, nurses, gives me always. Last week I read, or rather devoured, a book by Dr. David Masters, “The Conquest of Disease”. It was a most absorbing book. It told of the continual fight between health and disease waged by Science in the cause of humanity. The nerve-racking anxieties, the patient experimenting, the slow creeping-in of success. Oh! it is all so gripping. I wish I were in the thick of it, but I am only a woman, and a poor one at that, and so, as in all times of battle and crisis, I must sit back with bated (sic.) breath.’ While ambitious and displaying a strongly independent attitude at times, it is clear that Liz felt constrained by the gender relations existing in 1930s New Zealand society. She was by no means a radical feminist. Liz displayed

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\(^{39}\)ibid., Sunday 4 August, 1935.  
\(^{40}\)ibid., Tuesday 19 February, 1935.  
\(^{41}\)ibid., Saturday 12 January, 1935.  
\(^{42}\)ibid., Sunday 25 January, 1932.  
\(^{43}\)ibid., Friday 9 January, 1931.
more a simple belief in equal rights for women, to the extent that they be given a chance.

The thirties were years of radicalism and intellectual debate within the university.44 Liz also participated in numerous debates, and articulated her attitudes clearly. 'I got some stunners in my last speech....and included bits on men getting an increased idea of their own importance and deciding the women ought to be suppressed etc....We must have another argument -er- debate I mean, next year. They're corking fun.'45 She developed some feminist inclinations at this age, and was quite aware of gender relations existing in New Zealand urban society at this time. Liz commented from time to time on the relationship between men and women, showing particular insight for a young woman of her age. Liz was aware, for example, of the choices (or lack thereof) available to women in the 1930s. 'Have had quite a pleasant evening talking to Lorna. She came up tonight. She has been accepted for Training Coll. (sic.), and is pausing midway between romance and ambition. She doesn’t want to tie herself up, and yet she doesn’t dare let the opportunity of marriage slip by.'46 Liz herself remained a determined young woman, stating she could 'be happy without men. A woman should first of all fill her mind with the things that are clean and sweet. Strength will follow.'47

At sixteen, Liz was a very sensitive, dreamy and poetic young woman, absorbed by a romantic vision of nature. This view was reflected in several diary entries. 'It is glorious out here today, with the busy hum of monotonous bees over the flowers; the weariest rustle of the bamboo’s knife-like leaves; the cumuli clouds in the north and west bordering the otherwise cloudless dome of the bluest of summer skies; and the careless, indifferent voices of the children on the corner. It is all too lovely: it makes me wonder what the world has ever done to earn such beauty.'48 Liz was growing up in a town that was moving steadily towards urbanisation. Rural New Zealand did not feature consciously in her daily life as a young woman. At this point in her life, Liz had had little first hand experience with daily farming life, and as a result had built up an

44W. J. Gardner et al, A history of the University of Canterbury, p.287.
45E. Begg, personal diary, Monday 15 December, 1930.
46ibid., Wednesday 19 January, 1935.
47ibid., Tuesday 8 January, 1935.
4 John Wyndham Begg.
Arcadian vision of nature and rural New Zealand. She once described a
cherry tree in her backyard as ‘all of a creamy richness that reminds me of
the country and its abundance of life.’\(^{49}\) She appeared to share the
traditional belief, outlined by Miles Fairburn, in the natural abundance
inherent in this country. This romanticisation of rural life continued
throughout the 1930s. The last thing Liz seriously contemplated was
marrying a farmer. She considered herself ‘a city girl, naturally gregarious
and ignorant of country ways.’\(^{50}\) To Liz, ‘wool was bought in shops and
knitted into jerseys, mutton was eaten in neat pieces, cattle were ferocious
beasts who would chase us if we wore red and climbed illicitly over the
fence to pick mushrooms. Farming was a dull page in *The Press*. I never
read it.’\(^{51}\)

Her sister once visited a Southland farm when on holiday, and told Liz
about her impressions of rural life. ‘“Don’t marry a farmer, Liz,” she said
earnestly, and I listened with disbelief as she described the lofty, quaking
sponges, acres of scones, and cauldrons of tea being swept away by hungry
shearers and harvesters. We laughed at these tales and did not wish nor
ever expect to experience them.’\(^{52}\) It was at this point in her life that Liz
met John Begg, at a Revue Dance in 1935. Her first impressions were that
‘he was awfully nice, very Scotch but not too canny.’\(^{53}\) The Begg family at
this time were living as absentee landowners of a sheep station in Eastern
Southland, leaving daily running of the farm to a manager and usually
only visiting during family holidays. John was a student at Lincoln
College and it was in this context that Liz was given her first glimpse of
rural New Zealand. She observed with amusement, during one visit, that
John ‘had a green pullover and plus-fours on, and save for some mud, he
looked rather chic.’\(^{54}\)

Liz’s developing relationship with John brought her first real contact with
the rural way of life in this country. ‘I had another letter from Lincoln
College yesterday. He tells me he is pulling out “mangles” and milking
cows. I can scarcely imagine it. His letters are quite fascinating.’\(^{55}\) She

\(^{49}\) ibid., Friday 26 October, 1930.
\(^{51}\) ibid., p.1.
\(^{52}\) ibid., p.1.
\(^{53}\) E. Begg, personal diary, Sunday 9 June, 1935.
\(^{54}\) ibid., Wednesday 12 June, 1935.
\(^{55}\) ibid., Thursday 30 May, 1935.
5 The Lincoln lads outside their study 'Stagger Inn'.
John is playing the guitar.

6 Graduation Photo 1936.

7 The young farmer in the shearing sheds.
A somewhat romantic portrayal of farm work?
observed going-ons at Lincoln with the detached fascination of one not accustomed to rural activities. Liz made numerous visits to Lincoln Agricultural College, visiting the cow-yards, the wool-sheds, the shearing sheds, the grain-shed, where they sort out the different grains, the poultry, the pigs (lovely little things!) the vet’s room, including his patients, three sick dogs and a sheep being tested for blindness. It was all most interesting to Liz, and while there was plenty of mud and quite a few smells, she claimed that they did not bother her. There was an air of unreality about Liz’s visions of rural life, even after her occasional holiday expeditions to Wyndham Station with John. She was not at all prepared for what rural life on an isolated Southland sheep farm had in store for her. At this point, farming to Liz was still little more than a dull page in *The Press*.

Liz graduated with her degree in 1936 and followed this with a year’s teacher training. She then became a teacher at North Linwood School. Even at this stage in her life Liz was not fully aware of the realities of isolated farm life, referring to it affectionately as ‘the outback’. John proposed to her ‘in the most unromantic setting, out in the paddock, surrounded by an unruly pack of mustering dogs, so that the result went something like this: “Liz, what do you think...get in behind, Joe...I thought it would...WAYLEGGO!...I’ll warm you, you so-and-so...Look dear will you...WAYLEGGO! Ned Way in here, you pack of B’s...Liz, let’s get married...Hell!” and away with boots flying, to settle the dogfight that was brewing.’ Liz had to put up with endless teasing from her class regarding her decision to leave city life and make the transition to a rural area. “Gosh, you’ll look a real dag on a horse”, they said, with scant respect for my academic dignity, and I could only agree.’ And so it was that Liz, an intellectual young woman from the town of Christchurch, crossed the abyss into rural life in an isolated corner of Southland. ‘Up here a woman may seem to be courageous, but in reality she is far more dependent on her husband than in towns and cities, but this I had yet to discover.’ What lay in store for Liz was more than travelling south to ‘the outback’ with her new husband. She was about to embark on a much greater

56*ibid.*, Monday 17 June, 1935.
57*ibid.*, Monday 17 June, 1935.
59*ibid.*, p.3.
60*ibid.*, p.5.
John and Liz’s wedding at Knox Church, Dunedin 1938.
greater journey of exploration and self-discovery, in which she would need to summon considerable inner strength if she was to cope with the changes to her life. Challenges to her social skills, practical abilities, and above all her intellectual strengths, lay ahead.
Approximate location of Wyndham Station is marked.
Wyndham Station is a down-country sheep farm nestled in Mokoreta Valley, Eastern Southland. The Upper and Lower Wyndham Runs were selected by John Anderson and his son in 1859. The holding was then subdivided in 1884 to lay out the local ‘village’ of Mokoreta, which never developed much beyond a primary school and local hall. In 1903 the Wyndham Run was taken over by James and John Campbell Begg, and in 1906 John Begg took over the entire lease, which consisted of over 42,000 acres of downland and tussock, with about 8000 acres of native bush. In the 1930s much of the holding was still covered in tussock and the surrounding hills were dense with native bush (or ‘dark green rainforest’ as Liz initially called it). By this time, another subdivision had reduced the size of the holding to some 12,000 acres. Wyndham remains the closest township, 20 miles from the Station. For many years, including the time spent there by Liz, the area was rightly considered the ‘backblocks’ by most local people. The Station itself was situated at the farthest point of the only access route into the valley in the 1930s. It was, quite literally, the end of the road.

Liz was married in 1938 to John Wyndham Begg, and soon afterwards they settled into the district. Liz quickly confessed to having no ‘pioneer blood’ in her veins. She discovered that ‘carrying the bride over the threshold is a sweet and romantic idea but carrying her two or three miles because you are bogged is quite another’. At the time they shifted in, there was only a footbridge over the river to the homestead. Much to Liz’s dismay, everything had to be unloaded and brought up the hill in separate loads. Liz was not alone in this experience as something of a ‘pioneer bride’. Rangi Gibson, educated at Saint Margaret’s College in Christchurch, also

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61 Interview with Ian C. Begg, 3 July, 1995.
63 ibid., p.6.
64 ibid., p. 4.
65 ibid., p.4.
66 ibid., p.11.
10 The homestead and front paddock viewed from Wyndham River.
found that life in a remote Canterbury valley was a sharp contrast to her early years. Her furniture and belongings were in fact taken to her new home by horseback across three rivers. There was a considerable amount of adjustment facing women who were new to the area. Daily difficulties dogged their way, not least of all brought about by the condition of the access roads. Liz recalled that her friends, when pregnant, asked permission from their doctors before attempting the journey to the Station. She often encountered problems herself travelling to and from the farm. ‘On the way back I broke the back spring of the car again! Was I fed up! The road is dreadful, full of pot-holes. They have apparently decided not to tar-seal it after all.’ Liz and John got stuck returning from Wyndham one day, John managing valiantly to get them out by placing tussocks in the deep ruts that scarred the road. Even getting the mail was a new experience for Liz. Stores of mail and papers as well as milk and bread only came twice weekly.

When John and Liz arrived to the Station, it is possible that they found themselves socially distinct from the rest of the community. In the Wyndham district, The Begg family had been absentee landowners for some years, leaving running of the Station in the hands of a manager until the late 1930s. Wyndham Station inevitably commanded a certain social niche in the community, not least due to it being the namesake holding of the district. It was not really part of mainstream Mokoreta, set apart not only by physical isolation but also in a social sense. The ‘wealthy’ station owners who lived separately at the top of the valley often marked the top of the social hierarchy in rural areas. Even though they were warmly welcomed into the district, and other moderately large holdings existed in the area, social differences may have played a part in Liz’s developing feeling of isolation. Talk in the area was that the son and heir to the Station had married a “foreigner”, and everyone wanted to see “John Begg’s new wife from Christchurch”. These attitudes contributed to Liz’s initial loneliness and feelings of social isolation. Social hierarchy

70 ibid., Saturday 30 March, 1946.
71 ibid., Thursday 12 July, 1956.
73 Interview with Ian C. Begg, 3 July, 1995.
only takes form when viewed from the cultural perspective of the people involved. It is their attitude and perceptions of social worth that matter in the stratification of rural New Zealand.

Despite initial difficulties experienced by Liz, she also came to realise that neighbours depended on each other in the Wyndham area. The structure of rural communities in New Zealand in the 1930s and 1940s was such that there often developed a certain interdependence. The business of farming depended upon a high degree of neighbourliness, and this exerted a strong influence on the social life of a community. Rural areas usually needed to be self-contained and a feeling of comradeship and helping one another was a common attitude. Liz encountered this social phenomena when she moved into the Eastern Southland district at the end of the 1930s. The young couple were introduced to the area in traditional fashion with a welcome home evening held at the local hall. However, it took Liz some time to adjust to the rural way of life, and to feel part of the community. She had certain lessons to learn, such as ‘when your neighbour invited you over the telephone to the school break-up, which took the form of an outdoor picnic, you did not do as I did and reply ‘Oh no thank-you I wouldn’t know anybody’. You went because everyone went, and that was where you got to know people.’ The intricacies of a party phone line also took some getting used to, though Liz soon realised that it was ‘...always good for a few spicy tales in a rural area...’. It was not until the early 1950s that the Station was connected to a party line on the Wyndham exchange. Before then contact was maintained via a fairly unreliable single wire party line to Clinton, which had up to eleven families linked to it at times.

Community spirit was alive and well in Mokoreta. For example, during the month of March 1956 Liz was bedridden with leg pain, and a kind neighbour sent up a collection of food and reading material, which was gratefully received. Others came up to do the housework and help out wherever they were needed. Liz was initially overwhelmed by the extent

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77 *ibid.*, p.38.
78 Interview with Ian C. Begg, 3 July, 1995.
79 E. Begg, personal diary, Thursday 22 March, 1956.
11 Men (and young disciple) engaged in serious discussions over smoko.

An interesting depiction of the respective roles assigned to men and women in farming areas.

12 The women tending to the children in the background.
of rural hospitality, particularly in times of need. She received a lot of help from those ‘down the road’ from the Station.

There was certainly no lack of social organisation in the Wyndham district, even if not of a type that a young city girl would be accustomed to. Social contact was possible, it just took more effort and was undertaken in a different way than in the city. Unique patterns of leisure developed in rural areas. For example, an annual cricket match was held in an open paddock, though the game was beset at times when ‘...the ball became slippery after landing with a soft plop into a fresh cow pat...’.80 There were regular woolshed parties and dances held at the local hall, offering ample opportunity for socialising. Liz could not help noticing, however, the differences between rural and urban social life. ‘Dances have not changed much in this district, though they have completely changed in the cities. Here they still do the Gypsy Tap, the Canadian Three Step, the Gay Gordons...’.81 Church was also attended regularly on Sunday, providing in particular another chance for rural women to mingle. The Sabbath was observed by most people, and farm chores avoided where possible on Sundays in this Eastern Southland community during the 1950s and 1960s.

As an educated young woman from the city Liz had to cope with starkly different social attitudes and behaviour in this remote Southland community. Liz brought with her a certain kind of gender consciousness, alien to the nature of the society in which she found herself. The transition to Wyndham must have caused Liz to reconsider her views, when placed in stark comparison with the somewhat conservative attitudes of most locals. She was probably not sure what to expect and would have been surprised by the conservative nature of local society. On most farms during the 1940s women were in a minority, and Liz had to come to terms with this, ‘taking a back seat, darting forward at the allotted cues to perform roles essentially feminine...tea-making etc, with grace and alacrity.’82 Men and women have for some time fulfilled distinctive roles on New Zealand farms. The separation of spheres was certainly quite apparent by the 1930s and continued into the following couple of decades. Liz had to come to grips with her decision to leave city life for a new life in rural Southland, and in time she would have to adapt to this

81ibid., p.71.
82ibid., p.48.
environment. The roles of men and women on the farm was only one aspect of the learning experience that lay in store for Liz.
The making of a Farmer’s Wife (1950s and 1960s)

Liz recalled in her autobiography that ‘the period of adjustment that followed for me was one of trial and error, life was indeed changing for me.’ She was immediately forced to deal with the daily difficulties that accompany the farmer’s wife. The Wyndham river that swirled through the middle of the farm was a cause of consternation for this young woman from the city. Regular flooding cut the homestead off completely and interfered with Liz’s daily chores on the farm. The seasons dictated the rhythm of work on such New Zealand sheep stations. As is the way with many remote stations, nature controls activity with a firm hand. Liz had to come to grips with the fact that station life had its own tempo, quite distinct from the regulated town life to which she was accustomed. In the ‘outback’ it is a matter of daylight, the weather, the job and the season, rather than the clock and calendar. Shearing can only be accomplished when the sheep are dry, and of course any rain interferes with hay-making. Unexpected frosts can occur with disastrous results during lambing season, as well as upsetting the daily routine of the homestead. One morning Liz woke to a severe frost with everything frozen hard. She cut her thumb trying to carve solid meat and discovered the river frozen completely over in still pools.

Liz quickly discovered that she was ‘unprepared for farm life in its manifest earthiness.’ Her previous contact with livestock only came with occasional visits to Lincoln College, and the local A and P shows where bulls were ‘huge lusty creatures led around the ring by men in white coats and sheep were never looked at.’ This indifference was put to the test once Liz found herself surrounded by livestock, and she was initially quite alarmed by the creatures that would suddenly rush up at her should she step outside on the farm. She considered that her years spent

83ibid., p.11.
85E. Begg, personal diary, Saturday 8 June, 1946.
87ibid., p.23.
in Christchurch left her ill-prepared for dealing with and relating to animals. To Liz, a horse in Christchurch was simply ‘the other half of a bakery van.’\(^{88}\) That animals could serve other purposes did not consciously enter her mind. Liz felt little empathy with them and did not enjoy the enthusiastic affections of panting sheep dogs. She was, for example, bemused at the fact that John cried “Get in behind” to the dogs. ‘But why behind? How could I be prepared to deal with their ferocious onslaughts if they were behind me? Let them be in front where I could see them.’\(^{89}\) Exposing her urban beginnings, Liz continued to look upon the various farm creatures with detached amusement coupled with uncomfortable unfamiliarity. Liz appeared determined to retain some pockets of refinement and urban living in the middle of this isolated country. She initially swore never to possess gumboots, but soon realised that it was clear there was no option.\(^{90}\)

Some years later, when one of her young sons wisely advised her what to do if she saw a ewe “hanging out the back”, Liz stated in no uncertain terms that her ‘embroidery lessons do not extend to sheeps’ back ends.’\(^{91}\) She was not alone in finding that the transition to rural life brought with it considerable personal adjustment. Colleen Carrick, for example, shortly after meeting her future husband (a young farmer), recalled fleeing in embarrassment from a lambing ewe in trouble.\(^{92}\) Most townspeople seemed quite unprepared for their first contact with the realities of farming life. They did not have the benefit of the rural upbringing of some other women who lived in the area. In the end, women who became farmers’ wives out of the circumstance of marriage rather than the choice of career, did learn to adjust and enjoy the lifestyle afforded by rural New Zealand. Many even began to take an active role in the difficult and uncertain business of farming. This transition was, however, very much an individual experience, structured by the nature of the farm, historical context, and the attitude of the woman herself.

Somerset makes interesting comments regarding the habits and efforts of the rural women of Littledene, where chores such as baking became

\(^{88}\) ibid., p.23.  
\(^{89}\) ibid., p.23.  
\(^{91}\) E. Begg, personal diary, Friday 28 September, 1956.  
something or an art in these communities. Empty tins were a sign of inefficiency in the Mokoreta district, and at first that Liz found this to be a 'weekly ritual and a tyranny' that occupied much of her time. Southland farmers’ wives had long been recognised for their ability to deal cheerfully with hordes of musterers, land agents, shearers and numerous casual visitors who dropped by unannounced for a cup of tea and a bite to eat. Liz quickly discovered a 'ritual of politeness' that involved inviting people in for tea rather than asking at the door what they wanted. She also found that while the men engaged in long discussions about the weather, women would scurry through the tins of food and 'hover in the background, uncertain whether to prepare dinner or not.' This was an aspect of life that Liz would have to learn to cope with, and at first she tended to look upon these habits with disdain and misunderstanding. Most of her comments were tongue-in-cheek, reflecting the detached amusement of one who felt like an outsider entering a conservative rural community.

While life on the station could be lonely for a farmer's wife, it was often interspersed with various visitors to the homestead. 'A lot of people in today, first an insurance agent, brash and lacking in discretion, then a National Mortgage agent, also brash and lacking in both knowledge and discretion, then about 5 o'clock we heard a plane and as it was very low we went out to see -to our surprise it circled round and landed in the paddock just below the house. It was H. Campbell, pilot for Hewet's Aviation, come about the top dressing. An engaging young man with the wind in his tail.' Liz generally enjoyed the opportunity to converse with others, especially as it broke up the monotony of her day. 'A home missionary called to bring us the Word, and was persuaded to try the homemade apple cider, he went away wobbling on his bicycle, very happy.' It also meant, however, making endless cups of tea and keeping the tins filled with home baking. On one occasion Liz 'rushed around cleaning up and baking for the “Wild Pig Menace Committee of Visitation”, then four of them turned up for lunch! So I hastily grilled chops, did some potatoes,
and did a tin of spagh. with parsley (sic.). Very interesting discussion about Wild Life - pest extermination etc, with Jack Simpson providing the shells and Max Kershaw the kernels of the arguments. ¹⁹⁹ These facts of daily rural life were encountered by most rural women. Most farmers’ wives managed to deal with this form of rural hospitality with a cheerful attitude and considerable resourcefulness. Florence Beck, for example, also learnt to be prepared to whip up a batch of pikelets on the spot as, naturally, they were not handy to stores where you could pop in and buy something quickly.¹⁰⁰

Liz found dealing with whole sides of mutton a ‘fearful grind’ and marvelled at the ability of those ‘farmers’ wives down the road’ to deal with culinary demands.¹⁰¹ She was required to cook on a coal range during her first years at Wyndham Station, before a rudimentary electric range was installed in 1941. Liz took time to feel part of the farming lifestyle of rural Eastern Southland. She did eventually come to terms with this reality of farming life for women. Liz became, for example, ‘absolutely expert at getting a meal for ten or twelve out of a tin of baked beans and some eggs.’¹⁰² Such things usually had to be learnt by trial and error. The ritual of smoko (or ‘Smoke-Oh!’ as Liz named it at first) was curious to her, and she did not immediately comprehend what exactly was involved. Her first experience provides an amusing anecdote of Liz’s early years at Wyndham. ‘At the correct time, ie. 10 am (I did know that), I put on a tray a cloth, sugar bowl, milk jug, cups, saucers and teaspoons and took it up to where they were working. Nothing was said, but I saw some strange looks pass around. I was instructed in the use of billy and mugs before too long and learnt to make the tea strong and sweet.’¹⁰³ Liz learnt to deal with the demands of station cooking and over time became an adept cook. Improvisation became a valuable attribute to Liz on the farm. Her skills at preserving fruit and vegetables developed and she learnt to make do when provisions were scarce. Liz had many ‘colossal days’ baking cakes, biscuits and roasting legs of mutton beside the usual other chores.¹⁰⁴

¹⁹⁹E. Begg, personal diary, Wednesday 2 May, 1956.
¹⁰⁰F. Beck, *These Days were Mine*, C. Beck, Edendale, 1982, p.43.
¹⁰²ibid., p.49.
¹⁰³ibid., p.13.
¹⁰⁴E. Begg, personal diary, Saturday 17 July, 1948.
Of course cooking was not the only chore occupying Liz's daily life as a farmer's wife. Prior to the advent of regular electricity, washing was a laborious task which took up much of her time. Washing and wringing piles of shirts and trousers was certainly hard work. A load would take well over an hour to wash and hang out and there were usually two or three loads to be done in a day. The many entries in her daily diaries indicate the work involved in this chore, even though it was often carried out cheerfully. 'I did the washing. Both Ian and Peter were home, so they helped me carry it out. It did not dry, so I left it out, hoping the goats don't eat it overnight.'

Ironing with latties and flat irons heated on the coal range was another particularly demanding chore in the days prior to regular electricity. When a modern electric iron was purchased in 1965, it proved to be a valuable acquisition and decreased the burden of household work considerably. Liz was certainly appreciative of this, placing the old flat iron on the doorstep 'to keep me humble.'

Most rural areas in New Zealand were slow to gain the benefits of electricity. This naturally impacted on the daily lives of rural women. Wyndham Station, however, provides an interesting case study as it appears to be one of the first farms in the country to make use of a private hydro-electric power generation system to help with daily farm life. In 1909, John Campbell Begg (Liz's father-in-law) sailed to Melbourne to see about shearing machines and he ordered a McCormick Turbine power generation plant. The principal purpose of the system was to facilitate electric shearing, as well as making the homestead more comfortable. Unfortunately the power scheme ran into many problems and fell into disuse until the late 1930s, when John and Liz took over Wyndham Station. In the meantime Liz was forced to come to grips with this temperamental and often unreliable source of water-driven electricity. Liz recalled that 'John often said he could never divorce me, because he could never train another wife into the vagaries of our water-driven Direct Current generator.' Farm logs indicate daily problems, for example having to spend entire days trying to start the generator. On one occasion John finally started the unit by touching bare wires to the commutator.

105 ibid., Monday 23 April, 1956.
107 J.C. Begg, Farm diary, Monday 5 December, 1909.
Electricity was not always forthcoming and there were many instances when the plant was under repair and the family had to resort to kerosene lamps. To Liz this was not necessarily a bad thing as she tended to be suspicious of the system and was reluctant for many years to accept it into her home. Besides, ‘the kerosene lamp with gilded frill and white shade cast a mellow glow’, reminding Liz of period rooms in museums and giving her a feeling of nostalgia at times.\textsuperscript{110} She was bemused by the invention and it took her some time ‘to cope with single-throw-double toggles and to talk wisely of amps, volts and armatures.’\textsuperscript{111} One day she returned from town to find a large rheostat installed on the kitchen wall. It really meant nothing to her other than a foreign item not to be trusted. It stayed, but in an act of defiance Liz refused to dust it.\textsuperscript{112}

Liz had to deal with the daily problems brought about by the power plant. When the power went off (a common occurrence it seems), it resulted in ‘chaotic mornings when we’d wake in darkness and go rushing around chopping firewood for the coal range and hunting for candles in the chilly air.’\textsuperscript{113} Liz recalled numerous times when the family would ‘go around in a glow-worm cave, feeling our way ahead like Lady Macbeth.’\textsuperscript{114} On one occasion Liz was preparing to host a party but found the electricity was faltering. She was forced to improvise and light the coal range to finish the baking. The party was conducted in an atmosphere of ever-decreasing light but was still deemed a success by Liz, who had always felt that cakes came off much better in a coal range anyway.\textsuperscript{115}

Generation depended on steady water levels in the nearby Wyndham River. Power could not always be counted on during times of either extreme flooding or dry spells as this reduced the voltage output. Fluctuations in power naturally affected the running of the homestead. Several diary entries illustrate the difficulties encountered by Liz: ‘I did a little washing by hand as voltage is down to 140 v. with this awful drought. The iron won’t go either as yet. Hope it rains soon.’\textsuperscript{116} ‘Wet all

\textsuperscript{110}E. Begg, ‘Low Country Liz’, p.3.
\textsuperscript{111}ibid., p.34.
\textsuperscript{112}ibid., p.34.
\textsuperscript{113}ibid., p.33.
\textsuperscript{114}ibid., p.35.
\textsuperscript{115}ibid., p.35.
\textsuperscript{116}E. Begg, personal diary, Saturday 21 January, 1956.
day. Heavy rain brought river over the bank and I could not iron, much to my annoyance.\textsuperscript{117} Furthermore, household chores always came second to power requirements in the shed as both buildings could not be supplied simultaneously. Liz was often forced to hurry to do her washing as well as double ironing if the power would be in use at the shed the next day.\textsuperscript{118} Washing was done by hand when the men were crutching.\textsuperscript{119}

The era of private generator power came to an end when Wyndham Station was linked up to the national grid in 1965. The advent of a safer and more reliable form of electricity changed life on the farm and eased the burden of Liz’s household chores in a number of ways. This new source of electricity was warmly welcomed by the Begg family. In January 1965 a large water cylinder was installed in the house along with a modern washing machine motor.\textsuperscript{120} The kerosene fridge was replaced with a modern appliance, which would have had important implications for the storage of perishables in this remote area. On 6 February 1965 the powerhouse was shut off and main power used in the house for the first time.\textsuperscript{121} The new Shacklock electric range was installed and a television set purchased the same day. These changes heralded the end of the era of private generator power at Wyndham Station. Certain tiresome domestic tasks were made more bearable with the arrival of the ‘electric servant’ in rural New Zealand.\textsuperscript{122} Life in isolated areas was undoubtedly made more pleasant and comfortable for most farmers’ wives. The arrival of such luxuries as television and radio also relieved the sense of isolation felt by Liz.\textsuperscript{123}

Liz’s skills at adapting to her new environment were put to the test once she and John began a young family. Family life was very important to Liz, raising four children with John. Pam was the oldest and was born in 1941. Helen was born in December 1942, followed by Ian in 1945 and the youngest was Peter who was born in 1948. The children provided valuable

\textsuperscript{117}ibid., Friday 16 June, 1956.
\textsuperscript{118}ibid., Thursday 21 November, 1946.
\textsuperscript{119}ibid., Thursday 4 March, 1948.
\textsuperscript{120}J.W. Begg, farm diary, 25-29 January, 1965.
\textsuperscript{121}ibid., Monday 6 February, 1965.
\textsuperscript{123}E. Begg, personal diary, Thursday 4 March, 1948.
13 Liz preparing to drive the children to Mokoreta school.
company for her when John was away mustering, but also stretched her talents and ability to deal with the realities of rural life. She managed to cope with the difficulties of a young family in the outback with remarkable courage and resilience. Sometimes Liz would take a baby in the pram out to meet the muster as the mob came home across the front paddock. Times of sickness with the children must have been especially harrowing when living in an isolated area miles from the nearest doctor. Consultation was often conducted over the phone during the 1950s, leaving the young city woman to deal as best she could with a wailing child. Liz was forced to improvise and adapt to her rural surroundings, for example, weighing the children on a scale in the woolshed. John of course would help out when he could, but such is station life that there were invariably times when Liz had to make do on her own at Wyndham Station. John’s brother Jim recalled a time when Liz was due to have her third child, and John was out on a long muster. Jim bundled the expectant mother up in the old Chev and they set out for town, John managing to meet them halfway there on horseback. Liz adapted to the realities of rural life as time went on and the children got older. She was fortunate to get paid domestic help from 1948 which undoubtedly relieved the burden somewhat. Liz often suffered from severe bouts of asthma and so any extra help was gratefully received. John was also willing to help around the house when necessary. Several diary entries indicate that he often cooked for the family and washed clothes. A certain type of amicable partnership developed between Liz and John over the years. While Liz did not become as involved in farm chores as did most other local women, she often worked together with John in running the homestead and raising their family.

Liz played a central role in the early education of her children, spending hours in front of a blackboard set up for her by John in the kitchen of the homestead. Her academic background enabled her to realise the importance of a thorough education, and this she tried to instil in her children. The eldest child, Pamela, was initially enrolled in

124 E. Begg, personal diary, Saturday 2 May, 1942.
125 ibid., Tuesday 6 June, 1950.
126 ibid., Sunday 4 January, 1942.
127 Interview with Dr. Jim Begg, 13.6.1995.
128 E. Begg, personal diary, Monday 29th November, 1948.
130 ibid., Tuesday 30th November, 1948.
Correspondence School, and Liz set about with great gusto to ensure lessons were diligently followed. The education of her children was a priority to this academic city girl. 'I set to and became a teacher, though I was a graduate in Latin, of all things, now the most useless, I had fortunately had a year's training in the infant school.' The four children were eventually enrolled at the local school six miles away, and in the early 1950s Liz learnt to drive so that she could ensure regular attendance. She practised her skills by driving a 1939 Nash around the paddocks on the farm. The use of a car also enabled Liz to maintain a greater degree of independence and lessen her feelings of isolation. Later the school bus route was extended to the boundary gate of the station, so that it was merely a mile and a half away from the homestead. Mokoreta was a one-roomed sole-charge school, housed in the original building from pioneer days in the district. It was the typical country school, probably quite different to what Liz had experienced growing up in Christchurch. Liz recalled with amusement the annual Pet Show at the school organised by the Boys' and Girls' Agricultural Club. The show consisted of 'a grand collection of yelping puppies, pet lambs, all beautifully coiffured, clutches of pet little bantams, hens with hungry chickens, incarcerated in crates [and] soft-eyed dairy calves on leads...'. The children were required to demonstrate their knowledge of how to care for their pets, and here Liz suggested her children suffered a little from the urban background of their mother.

The reality of isolated rural life during the 1950s and 1960s was that, where finances permitted, it was usual to send the children to a boarding school in the city. This was the harsh but unavoidable penalty of isolation for those who chose to live on remote sheep stations throughout New Zealand. The four children were enrolled at respective single-sex boarding schools in Dunedin. The girls attended Columba College and the two boys went to John McGlashan College. To Liz, who had spent considerable time in her children's early education, this was probably a huge loss. 'Time went by, and one by one, they went off to boarding school.'

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131 E. Begg, 'Low Country Liz', p.73.
132 Interview with Ian C. Begg, 3 July, 1995.
133 ibid., p.76.
134 ibid., p.76.
14 A typical days work on the Station - mustering cattle through a ford.
My feelings about this are mixed.'\textsuperscript{136} Not only had she lost an outlet for her academic interests, but she was once again alone for most days as John spent a great deal of his time away on musters or attending stock sales. Liz missed the company of the children terribly. She lived for the times when the children returned for holidays, and dreaded the trip to the train station for farewells.\textsuperscript{137} She fully supported the education of her children and saw something of herself in their academic successes. Liz once wrote that she was ‘thrilled to hear Helen say in a.m. “I miss all the learning, I love learning” - same as I’d said in my dairies years ago “I want to learn and learn and learn” ’.\textsuperscript{138}

Liz had to come to grips with the reality of station life, which meant regular periods spent alone or with the children while the men were shearing or mustering. Farm logs and diaries indicate the time required for most farm chores. Tailing, for example, was usually conducted at the end of each run, with a temporary set-up shifted from block to block, rather than driving stock the long distance back to the sheds.\textsuperscript{139} This entailed very long days of up to a fortnight away from the homestead. The dictates of farm life required that tasks were tackled whenever weather and time permitted. John away from 4.30 a.m. to 10 p.m. mustering Cattle Corner. We spent day rushing out to see if they were coming down the Chimney Ridge.'\textsuperscript{140} She often felt the solitude that accompanied life in this part of Southland, and this reflected from time to time in diary extracts - ‘Nobody came or went or rang. I took up two hems of frocks.’\textsuperscript{141} Liz recalled that she had plenty to do in retrospect, but still spent a great deal of her time looking out the window watching the hills and waiting for the men to return from a muster.\textsuperscript{142}

Throughout most of her years on the farm, Liz also dealt with periods of boredom with the daily routine of a farmer’s wife. This was perhaps accentuated by the contrast with her urban background and the feeling of having experienced another, perhaps more stimulating, way of life. Liz once wrote with exasperation that she was ‘tired of food’, finding that

\textsuperscript{136}ibid., p. 31. 
\textsuperscript{137}E. Begg, personal diary, Sunday 20 March, 1956. 
\textsuperscript{138}ibid., Saturday 7 May, 1966. 
\textsuperscript{139}J.W. Begg, Farm diary, Saturday 31 October, 1953. 
\textsuperscript{140}E. Begg, personal diary, Tuesday 26 January, 1945. 
\textsuperscript{141}ibid., Sunday 17 May, 1970. 
\textsuperscript{142}E. Begg, ‘Low Country Liz’, p.43.
'routine jobs like wiping down the range and bench get on my nerves.'\textsuperscript{143} She often described the daily chores of washing, baking and ironing as an 'utterly dull' part of her life as a farmer's wife.\textsuperscript{144} Liz had plenty to do with a young family for some years, but she appears to have also spent a lot of time pondering on the isolation of her rural existence. Isolation and the peace and quiet of rural life suits some, but it is doubtful if it was what Liz sought or expected as a young intellectual city girl. As time went by and the children got older she was required to find other outlets for her intellectual and social self.

Liz did become involved in the local area to an extent and by the 1950s she was more accustomed to the way of life in rural Southland. She did her bit in the rural community, once spending an entire day in 1956 sewing items for the School Fair.\textsuperscript{145} Liz attended church on a fairly regular basis which allowed for a degree of social contact. She also played some part in the local Women's Division of Federated Farmers. Founded in the 1920s as the Women's Division of Farmers' Union, the organisation aimed to improve the conditions and quality of rural life.\textsuperscript{146} This farm-centered group was an important outlet for most rural women and created a sense of social organisation, if for no other reason than for providing an excuse to get together. It helped to mitigate the isolation and loneliness encountered by most farmers' wives. The organisation also created the potential for women to establish their positions in terms of rural power relations and politics. It became a means for many women to assert their status and win recognition of their worth in rural communities. As a largely rural province, Southland was quick to form satellite groups. Liz did partake in the annual birthday concert and fondly remembered entertaining the local children by dressing '...as Space Women, wearing our own kitchen colanders on our heads with knitting needles as antennae...'.\textsuperscript{147} She also collected for charities and provided baking for the various meetings. Liz did not, however, became actively involved in the politics of women's organisations.

\textsuperscript{143}E. Begg, personal diary, Saturday 19 March, 1956.
\textsuperscript{144}ibid., Saturday 16 April, 1966.
\textsuperscript{145}E. Begg, personal diary, Monday 16 July, 1956.
\textsuperscript{147}E. Begg, 'Low Country Liz', p.68.
Liz went out of her way and tried to be part of the community, but often she did not quite know how to deal with it all. During much of her time in Mokoreta, she did not really fit into the mainstream of local social life. When it came to discussion groups organised by the Women's Division, for example, Liz found herself intellectually estranged from most other local women. While attending various meetings throughout the 1950s, and helping out where necessary, she did not like the topics under discussion, finding them mundane and boring at times. In a sense she perceived the Women's Division in a similar manner to Somerset, who described the meetings as 'sociable affairs largely dominated by afternoon tea.' Discussions at most rural meetings were confined to local issues concerning the district, rather than subjects concerning the wider world. One evening she attended a meeting but found it utterly futile because 'they were discussing the Flower Show, and nothing bores me more than Flower Shows!' Naturally Liz was relieved when the opportunity arose for more stimulating meetings. 'In p.m. we went to the Women's Division Dominion Conference in Civic Theatre. It was most interesting, a huge body of influential farmers' wives from all over N.Z. (sic.) is really impressive. I was particularly impressed with the good accents of all the chief speakers, they spoke clearly and well.' On the whole, however, Liz indicated some disdain for the usual social chatter and was disappointed that other local women did not generally support her wish to confront what she saw as the major issues of the day. Unlike some educated farmers' wives, Liz did not feel the urge to get fully involved in the organisation. While organisations such as the Women's Division of Federated Farmers and the Country Women's Institute aimed to give women greater access to education, it is likely that to an academic of Liz's calibre, such groups did not reach the intellectual level to which she was accustomed. Thus she remained on the periphery of such groups, dealing with the isolation of station life in a different, more private way. Liz felt like an outsider for many years in the close-knit community of Mokoreta, perhaps because of her educated, urban background.

148Interview with Ian C. Begg, 3 July, 1995.
150E. Begg, personal diary, Tuesday 6 November, 1956.
151ibid., Thursday 12 July, 1956.
Liz and John did socialise with others in the community, but generally the family living at the end of the valley remained quite separate from the rest of Mokoreta. Despite egalitarian pressures in the post-war era, aspects of social hierarchy persisted into the 1950s in most rural communities. The Begg family were fortunate to be farming in the 1950s which was a generally prosperous era for rural New Zealand. Life was not as tough as it could have been, and so this was consequently a more optimistic time for most farmers. Although trade had not fully recovered since the war, prices remained high and standards of living improved. This allowed for regular family holidays and even occasional overseas trips for the Begg family. A new homestead was built in 1954 and the family celebrated the move with a housewarming dance in the woolshed. John and Liz were also able to send all four children to private boarding schools in Dunedin. Access to such education at this time tended to indicate the social standing of a rural family and could easily be associated in local thought with a certain social background. Liz and John’s own tertiary educations also may have set them apart in social terms. It is difficult to gauge to what extent this may have impacted on Liz’s experience. Social distinction may have contributed to her feelings of isolation.

Despite the availability of social contact, Liz did not feel comfortable as part of the local community in this isolated area of Southland. It was perhaps a combination of social distinctions, along with Liz’s own academic and urban upbringing. It is important to note that John also felt the isolation from time to time, albeit in a different way and perhaps not as sharply as Liz. The male perspective is indeed relevant when assessing the experiences of rural women. The personal transition from urban to rural life was, however, more difficult for Liz and she often felt intense loneliness during her early years on the farm. On one particularly stormy night Liz lay in bed and felt ‘100 miles from nowhere’. She often wrote that ‘sometimes I feel the loneliness of this place is too much for me, no outlet when the spirit falters.’ The physical isolation of the Station naturally made things difficult. One day Liz attempted to go to Invercargill

152 Interview with Dr. Jim Begg, 13 June, 1995.
156 E. Begg, personal diary, Thursday 15 March, 1945.
157 ibid., Monday 10 September, 1956.
but had to turn back as the river was high and the creeks were flooded, forcing her reluctantly to return home to do the washing instead. This forced isolation was a fact of life in the area, and continued to affect Liz up to her last years at Wyndham Station. This is illustrated by an extract from her 1969 diary: ‘Snowed all day - 6" in paddocks, drifts deeper. No power all day, but mail man got up at 2 pm. Power still off...’.

The tone of her personal diaries reveal a certain sadness, especially when compared with the vibrant quality of her Christchurch writings. This is hardly surprising, considering the changes she was facing as a young woman from the city.
Cold as marbles are her eyes,  
Staring up the dusty roadway.  
Parchment fingers knit and pluck,  
Mouth contorts as cumulus rolls by.  
Oilskins rustle, and she turns,  
Draws within the door paint-blistered,  
Sun-forgotten, dream-begotten,  
Loneliness be-sistered.

FARMER’S WIFE 1962

The emergence of Low Country Liz (late 1960s to 1980s)

As part of her adaptation to daily life on a farm, by the end of the 1960s Elvira Begg began to write about her experiences. She developed a unique sense of self by adopting the pseudonym 'Low Country Liz' in her writings. 'Liz' was beset by the daily difficulties of life as a farmer's wife and found the isolation and loneliness particularly hard to deal with. Above all, it was her educated background and intellectual ability that set her apart, and made the transition to rural Southland difficult. This was typical of many educated city women who adapted to life in an isolated area. Lillian, an early teacher at Makarora, also found this way of life a trial which required that you learn things by yourself.\textsuperscript{160} Liz's extensive tertiary education was unique in some respects, because while many rural Southland women had some sort of qualification, few had progressed to the Masters level and then ended up on a farm. Liz was certainly the only Latin scholar in the Wyndham district at this time.\textsuperscript{161} She coped with the isolation in a number of ways. Instead of reaching out and getting involved actively, she dealt with the isolation on a personal level. She kept contact with her educated urban background in a number of ways.

Liz tried to keep herself intellectually motivated in a very personal way, rather than always seeking out group interests or collective activities in the community. Educational opportunities in rural areas in the 1960s did not match those available in the cities. Education was a problem faced by many women in remote areas. Virginia (Barns-Graham) Candy, for example, returned to her local rural community after completing a degree at Canterbury University, and found one of her greatest frustrations as a rural woman was the distance from opportunities to extend her intellectual experience. Virginia adapted by organising evening sessions at the local school with guest women speakers on thought-provoking topics.\textsuperscript{162} Liz dealt with the lack of intellectual stimulation in a different,

\textsuperscript{161}Interview with Dr. J. Begg, 13 June, 1995.
\textsuperscript{162}"Virginia (Barns-Graham) Candy", in L. Robinson and M. Roy (eds),\textit{Women in the Country - Some Portraits}, pp.65-66.
more private way. She was quite an introspective woman who spent a great deal of her time reading. She discovered that in this rural district it was considered 'obviously more important to have your tins full than your bookshelves' and recalled with amusement being caught red-handed in Invercargill coming away from the library with an armful of books. When confronted, Liz 'blushed guiltily, but did not explain that to me this was meat and drink. The books had to last me a month.'163 Greater adjustment was necessary for a woman such as Liz who had had very little rural experience. Liz had to adapt and make do for intellectual stimulation in her own way. She made time to read constantly, making use of the Library Van that regularly toured the farming area, as well as loaning numerous books from the Country Library.164 The Country Library Service was an important outlet for many rural women. Liz preferred to read rather than partake actively in women's groups which, in her opinion, were not intellectual enough. She seemed determined to maintain some of her previous academic interests, which did not always sit comfortably with the demands of farming life. 'We got up early and took the L. Rover to town, completely with caggly (sic.) load in the back - dags, dead wool, a lawn-mower to go to Todd's [and] my case of library books.'165

Liz also continued to maintain an avid interest in world affairs and was often frustrated by the indifference displayed by others in the local community. Several diary entries show that Liz followed events as they unfolded during World War Two.166 In 1956, she and John remained glued to the radio for news of the Middle East crisis over the Suez Canal.167 Liz also followed with interest the first landing of astronauts on the moon in 1969.168 This probably helped to dilute her sense of isolation, by maintaining a connection and keeping in touch with the outside world. A link was deliberately maintained by Liz throughout her years on the farm, perhaps making adjustment to rural life all the more arduous.

She left a wealth of written archives, amounting to a personal legacy to her family. This includes journals kept as a teenager and young woman in

164E. Begg, personal diary, Tuesday 12 February, 1946.
165ibid., Monday 3 December, 1956.
166ibid., Thursday 3 to Wednesday 9 May, 1945.
167ibid., Saturday 3 November, 1956.
Christchurch, as well as diaries, poems and an unpublished autobiography based on her life at Wyndham Station. The Christchurch journals are a joy to read and are written with the vivid style of an enthusiastic young woman. These are in contrast to the farm diaries, which include generally brief and scantily written entries. Factors determining this may have been a loss of inspiration or simply a lack of time. Liz may have also felt the need to keep her true feelings to herself as she came to terms with the transition to rural life. This would perhaps explain why the poetry and autobiography were written and kept private. A struggle to assert and understand her own identity may have led Liz to separate her intellectual self from her perceived role as a farmer’s wife. She can perhaps be compared to Simone de Beauvoir, who generally felt the need to write in times of stress. Isolation, the need for an outlet for her intellectual self and a means to escape boredom may have been further motivating factors in this context.

It is also evidence of consciousness of self, and construction of identity. As Simone de Beauvoir in her ‘Memoirs’ tried to give meaning to her life and make sense of it in relationship to the larger world, so did Liz attempt to find a place for herself. Writing about her experiences was a way for Liz to explore a sense of shared identity with other women in a similar rural situation. This is illustrated by the chapter in her 1985 autobiography entitled ‘Feminine Singular’. Collective consciousness and a relational sense of self emerged while Liz was living at Wyndham Station. The autobiographical self exists very much with others in an interdependent existence in the community. This is reflected, for example, in Liz’s autobiography with chapters on social life, such as, ‘Gentlemen Take Your Partners’. This led to a unique form of self-definition for Liz. Group consciousness plays a role in the construction of personal histories. In her autobiography, Liz created her female self by exploring her relationships with others. Mary Mason, for example, argues that women’s sense of self

170 Ibid., p.242.
exists within a context of a deep awareness of others. Liz's sense of being an outsider in a rural community is indeed apparent from her writings. Hers is a type of cultural autobiography relevant to the historical context of rural New Zealand during the last fifty years.

It thus appears that the daily diary helped Liz to separate her intellectual self from her perceived role as the wife of a Southland farmer. An intriguing discovery of over seventy poems was made after she passed away in 1989. Most poems have quite moody and despondent tones, dealing with the subject of the loneliness experienced by a farmer's wife. It is probable that Liz wrote poetry as an outlet for the frustration of having no one to talk with, when John was away mustering and the children were at school. This remarkable collection provides a unique view of the daily lot of a farmer's wife in rural Southland. It may have been an important outlet, and a way of making sense of her life. Furthermore, writing poetry probably helped Liz to deal with the isolation by expressing her loneliness. Her unpublished autobiography, 'Low Country Liz', is particularly impressive as a way in which Liz interpreted her life on the farm. She adopted the pseudonym 'Liz' as part of this process of self-discovery. The autobiography was discovered by the family only after her death and was printed posthumously in 1990. Written in 1985, this is a very personal account of Liz's rural experience. It contains many amusing anecdotes, and while a feeling of lost aspirations is discernible, Liz concluded that she had no regrets about her decision to live on a farm. Naturally authors tend to iron out the difficulties of life and paint a more favourable picture when experiences are discussed in retrospect. One only needs to glance at her poems and diary entries to realise that life on the farm had certainly not been easy for Liz.

Liz eventually adapted to life in rural Southland, although she never lost sight of her intellectual, urban background. Adjustment inevitably occurred after thirty odd years in the country. By the 1960s Liz was more comfortable with her surroundings and began to feel part of the local community. She gradually settled into her chosen groove and felt more at home as she got to know more people, 'and did not always move in a

175 Interview with Ian Begg, 26 March, 1995.
15 Wyndham Station.
cloud of bewildered inefficiency and loneliness.'\textsuperscript{176} Liz became less of an observer in the community as she pieced together her rural life. The writing of her autobiography no doubt helped to her establish of sense of 'self' in this rural setting. Originally a woman without any real farming experience, Liz developed as an individual over the years who is now part of rural Southland's heritage. Perhaps more than she realised, Liz is part of an era of the history this rural area. While hers is not a typical experience nor is it necessarily representative of rural Southland, it is nonetheless part of that history.

It would be erroneous to assume that Liz's life on the farm was altogether miserable and lonely. While the effect of the isolation cannot be denied, nor the impact of transition under-estimated, there were positive aspects to her life as a farmer's wife. In retrospect Liz felt that 'the loneliness, the makeshifts, and the mistakes have without doubt been more than compensated for by the joys, some of which stand out like rich jewels.'\textsuperscript{177} It is the intangible things that she remembered after leaving the Station, such as the beauty of the countryside and the free pace of a rural lifestyle. She recalled such things as the 'brilliant evening sun on the golden tussock with ragged edge of shadow of the plantation tress showing in the forefront.'\textsuperscript{178} Certain things were typical of Wyndham to Liz, such as the 'appetising smells of roast mutton and mint sauce.'\textsuperscript{179} Her sense of isolation and dysfunction lessened over the years. A measure of privation accompanied this shift. Advances in transport and communication naturally reduced the physical isolation experienced by Liz. By the 1960s cultural and social distinctions were also blurred as Liz became part of the local community. Accomodation remained somewhat limited, however, and this was probably due to Liz's introspective nature as well as the status of the Begg family as the local station owners in the district.

Leaving the farm and retiring to Invercargill marked another transition for Liz. After more than thirty years on the farm, Liz had become accustomed to rural life and indeed adopted this lifestyle as her own. How did she find the transition back to the town? Insecurity upon leaving a farm which has provided your income for so many years, as well as

\textsuperscript{176} E. Begg, 'Low Country Liz', p.16.
\textsuperscript{177} ibid., p.79.
\textsuperscript{178} E. Begg, personal diary, Saturday 25 February, 1956.
\textsuperscript{179} E. Begg, 'Low Country Liz', p.81.
16 John and Liz in later years, Mosgiel 1985.
harbouring many memories, is commonplace.\textsuperscript{180} Uncertainty of what the future holds and fear of losing that intangible tie with the land existed for Liz. ‘Cameto In’gill (sic.) - looked round a few house but we are so uncertain about our plans. Depressed by proximity of neighbours - may look for a small farm yet.’\textsuperscript{181} There was reluctance on the part of both John and Liz, indicating Liz had indeed become something of a ‘rural woman’. For Liz, finally shifting away from the Station was a ‘sad moment despite all preparations mentally - hills looked so beautiful.’\textsuperscript{182} It marked the end of a chapter of her life. Ian Begg took over the farm in 1970, and John and Liz moved to Invercargill soon afterwards. They lived there for a number of years before shifting in 1985 to Mosgiel, a small town south of Dunedin. At this point Liz was able to sit back and mentally reflect on her life at Wyndham, writing her autobiography the year they arrived in Mosgiel. Liz died on Monday 27 August 1990 and John passed away eighteen months later.


\textsuperscript{181}E. Begg, personal dairy, Tuesday 15 September, 1970.

\textsuperscript{182}\textit{ibid.}, Thursday 29 October, 1970.
Conclusion

Reflection on the life of a rural Southland woman

Liz adapted in her own individual way to rural life. She probably did not become a stereotypical Southland farmer’s wife, if there is such a thing. She did all the baking, washed the clothes and fed the shearers, but throughout she maintained a different perspective on rural life. Liz’s life illustrates the diversity of this social group. Hers was not a typical history or experience. At the time of her arrival in the late 1930s, tertiary education was foreign to most in rural Southland. She had the advantage of comparison with her younger urban life. Social context and Liz’s individual perceptions merged to create a unique experience as the wife of a Southland farmer. Liz did eventually adapt to life on the farm and learn to cope with her new found environment, perhaps more than she herself realised.

Is there such a social construct as a Southland farmer’s wife? Rural women are diverse in background, occupation and lifestyle, yet all share to some extent the stress of isolation. Liz preferred to deal with life on a remote sheep station in her own individual way with a degree of privation. She herself felt that she did not adapt adequately, falling far short of being of good farmer’s wife. But what does this mean? Is there such a thing as the prototypical Southland farmer’s wife? Liz dealt with the transition from urban to rural life in her own way which is not necessarily the ‘wrong’ way. This illustrates the diversity of different woman sharing similar experiences. The danger of mass biography is that generalisations are too easily made. There is no such thing as the typical ‘Southland farmer’s wife’. Historical and social context interplay with the individual’s background and attitudes. Southland women share a rich and varied history. While they ostensibly share similar daily patterns of life, the way rural women deal with life and interpret experiences is very much an individual thing. Physical and social isolation was certainly a

183 Interview with Ian C. Begg, 3 July, 1995.
widespread female experience, but rural women understood and assessed their situation in very different ways. Personal experiences and interests shaped women's lives. Some women coped with isolation on a Southland farm by becoming fully involved in women's groups and social organisations. Others, such as Liz, dealt with difficulties in a very different way. In particular, she immersed herself in books, as well as indulging in poetry and writing an autobiography of her experiences on the farm.

There is a clear need to dispel the myth of the traditional farmer's wife. As revealed by a 1985 survey on rural Southland women, there exists a multiplicity of talents and diversity of interests and experiences within this broad social group. Tentative conclusions may be made on a historical basis, but one must guard against assuming uniformity of experience. That is why individual biography can be potentially very valuable to any social history. The technique of individual biography allows one to illuminate a person's life and acknowledge specific contributions within a given historical context. While this does not allow for broad historical conclusion based on class or gender, it is nonetheless valuable in highlighting diversity and dispelling social myths.

It may be that collective biography is more valuable for studying the 'normal', everyday aspects of people's lives. It does enable more sound conclusions to be made. The danger of individual biography is that it is fragmentary and can lead to false generalisations about rural women as a whole. Too much material can be another problem, which involves selection. One may become lost in detail and lose sight of the historical context. I must stress, however, that this work is intended as the illumination of one woman's life. As has become clear, it can by no means be taken as typical of the experiences of Southland woman. In a way this adds to the value of the work because it highlights the diversity of rural women's lives. A feeling of isolation and the expected role of women are common threads, but each woman is still an individual and the problem with mass biography is that these differences are too often overlooked in the search for 'sound' historical conclusions. It is also important to acknowledge the value of illuminating one person's life in history.

To tell a person's story may appear easy enough, but the art of biography is by no means simple. Can a biographer really reach the inner life of another person? The study of the individual in historical context often involves making judgements as the biographer attempts to shape his or her subject's life. Can a biography ever be objective? As my research and writing unfolded, I sensed that something of myself was becoming part of this project. I learnt about myself as I examined the life of this woman. I do not apologise for leaving my signature as a biographer throughout the content of this piece of work. Themes evolved, and inevitably facts were structured to fit my expectations as biographer. While perhaps creating an illusion of reality, this does not necessarily make my biography of any less value. Creativity in dealing with the facts before you does not impair the authenticity of biography. Interpretation of fact is inherent in any historical work, and the search for the 'truth' or 'what really happened' is inevitably coloured by the historian's own views, background and expectations. This is especially true of biographical works, where fact and image are brought together in a complex narrative. No biographer, however close they may be to their subject, can ever tell the whole truth. 'Paradoxically, language in biography does not record as much as it reinvents a life.' Reading between the lines is necessary, as it is often unclear where the truth lies. Should the pattern of interpretation be factually correct? Indeed, it may be true that the aim of biography is not so much to convey the 'facts', but to present an attitude or perspective. That may be so, but one is still left with the feeling of skating on very thin historical ice. It must be acknowledged that the business of writing biography is difficult and is unlikely to achieve satisfactory historical objectives.

Special problems arise with regard to women's biography. The orthodox biographical tradition stresses that only those individuals at the forefront of historical change are worthy of biographical treatment. Inadvertently excluded are the powerless or anonymous and those who do not tend to keep traditional archives. On the whole this tends to mean women. In the case of Liz I was fortunate to have access to a wealth of written and oral

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188 ibid., p.207.
189 ibid., p.208.
190 M. King, 'Political Biography: A Comment', in J. Phillips (ed), Biography in New Zealand, p.36.
archives, but generally there exists little about women’s lives in the traditional written sources that continue to dominate biography in New Zealand. There is a need to overcome the elitism of traditional biography and give women a voice in our history. The life experience of ordinary people can be reconstructed, using alternative research methods such as oral interviewing or written questionnaires. Ingenuity and thoroughness are required if we are to rediscover the lives of rural women. Historians need to take biography in new directions. Women’s daily lives are different, and do not generally conform to the rules of the biographical game.191 This does not mean that they are inappropriate for historical research. Women are characters worthy of biographical treatment.192

Why then have women remained out of sight of New Zealand biographies for so long? Most women who have been studied are those who have made their mark in the public sphere. Only in the last few years has an individual’s private life been given significance. Before this, ‘the biography of the eight-hour day’ prevailed in New Zealand.193 In other words, only the public experiences of individuals were deemed worthy of scholarly examination. Women’s lives as a result tended to be eclipsed by the distinction between public and private life. This distortion must be examined and priorities reassessed so that women are made visible. Dominant ideologies require rethinking if we are to do justice to the roles of rural women in New Zealand history. There is also a need to emphasise women as individuals in their own right. Women as too often viewed in a relational sense, as someone’s wife or mother. Admittedly, much of this comes out in Liz’s own work, and perhaps I too have been swayed by the tendency to relationise women in history.

Women’s roles and contribution ought to be acknowledged as a very real part of the history of rural Southland. In a project carried out in 1985, Vivienne Allan recognised and was duly impressed by the resourcefulness, competence and diversity of rural women.194 This is nothing new. Women in remote areas of Southland have for many years

been overcoming the odds and coping with life in the ‘outback’. Rural women have long played vitally important roles in society. Not just as wives and mothers, but as individuals in their own right. The time has come to build on this, and recover fully from obscurity the lives of these remarkable women. A comprehensive history of rural women in Southland would be welcomed. There is a need for a history that acknowledges their individual diversity as well as their shared experiences. This sounds ominously like a PhD topic, and that is another story for this budding historian. In the meantime the hope is that individual biographies will illuminate one life in historical context, and can provide the inspiration for more work on this rich topic in the near future.

There is a need to take up the cause of rural women, which entails convincing women that their lives are worthy of historical study. Support networks would help to enhance awareness and provide encouragement for women to tell their story. This may have the flow-on effect on encouraging more women to record their own lives, thus expanding sources and helping to develop this area of history. In my research I encountered too many rural women who introduced themselves with the preface “I’m just a farmer’s wife”. People have also asked me why I chose to study this individual, because in their view she didn't “do” anything. Enough! Why should history continue to be couched in terms of public achievement and traditional forms of becoming “somebody”? The orthodox historical tradition will continue to stifle women’s stories as long as we allow it to do so. Liz’s story has been told in the hope that it will inspire more rural women to recognise the value of their stories, and create a valid place for this unique group of New Zealanders in our country’s history.
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**Theses**