

These early fires were on a scale and of a duration that moderns can hardly picture. They burnt for weeks, travelling fast or slow, north, south, east, west as the wind veered, changed, freshened and slackened. Like the Deity visible to the Israelites of old, they moved in pillars of cloud by day, of fire by night. Heavy dews no more than dampened them down. Rains that would instantly annihilate the transient restricted blazes of to-day were unavailing totally to extinguish these primordial conflagrations. Seed of fire was retained in logs that still at this period lay in considerable quantity on the hills – vestiges of a very different vegetative covering grown under very different climatic conditions. From the heavens' arch of thin cloud would blow the parching nor'-wester, and as if with the distant reflected glow of volcanoes, the darkness of night would be illuminated, red lurid lines in the open would trace themselves on the hill-sides, perpetually wavering and twinkling as from moment to moment the underglow was veiled by the fall of sapped surfaces of dead matted growth. In these early clearing fires scores of thousands of acres were blackened in one act. Enormous harm was done to wild life.

The flames themselves, the clouds of dense, low blown, acrid, choking, stupefying smoke proved fatal on a vast scale to ground bird species unable to fly, and hardly less so to those that take wing reluctantly and do not willingly rise a second time. In the shrubby growth feathering mountain gorges, in patches of wood-land covering sunless southern-facing hollows, the smaller birds of normal wing power also perished in multitudes. One negative virtue nevertheless attached itself to the holdings of the squatter. They were so immense that homesteads were few and far between. Where operations were conducted on a smaller scale, subdivision of land entailed a large number of households, each of which harboured rats, each of which possessed cats and dogs, each of which contained firearms. From every one of these primitive homes emanated slaughter of game birds – the harm however directly accomplished by man less by infinitude than that effected indirectly. He at least only slew for food and only during a portion of the year, whereas depredations of vermin proceeded during every one of the twenty-four hours of every day of the three hundred and sixty-five days of the year. In season and out of season continued an unabated raid on eggs and young of native birds. An evil start having been made, there was no staying its course.

In the beginning the number of chains of draining laid down, the size of orchard and garden plot, the bounds of the clearings for crops, the tract of hill-side bared of wood were negligible; as, however, the years passed the worked lands began to touch; on them grass – not flax, toetoe and rush – began to seem the natural covering. Man, certainly not God, saw that it was good; the face of the earth was changed.

As the number of settlers still increased, saw-mills established themselves in the forests, footpaths became horse routes; pack tracks dusty in summer, fascined and corduroyed in winter's mud, widened into clay roads and these into metalled highways. The early huts sown in the dripping woods shot into grey unpainted townships and then into galvanised iron towns each surrounded by its ring of desolation. Immediately without the streets the largest trees stood gaunt, grey and grim, naked in death or lay a scatter of charred logs littering the desecrated earth. New Zealand was rapidly becoming little better than a home for white men.