



NEW ZEALAND  
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## ARCHAEOLOGY IN NEW ZEALAND



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# RON SCARLETT AND LES LOCKERBIE

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I first met Ron Scarlett at an excavation of the Pyramid Valley moa swamp in 1952. I retain a vivid recollection of an ecstatic Ron doing a little jig, holding a bone ahigh—“*Cnemiornis, Cnemiornis!* The extinct goose!”, he pronounced triumphantly to his amused and slightly bemused assistant diggers. It was a typical act of enthusiasm of a man beloved by all who were lucky enough to know him, New Zealand’s authority on moa bones.

It was a number of years before I met him again. In the late 1960s I stood with a group of spectators watching the archaeologists return by boat across Bluff Harbour after excavating the Maori argillite adze factory at Tiwai Point. The first to land was an odd-looking fellow with squint eyes, clad only in tattered shorts and a very battered hat. People began to snigger. Then much to my embarrassment he spotted me and called out, “Hello Johnny”! The public sniggered louder at their local Ear Nose and Throat surgeon being addressed in such a familiar manner. What to do? I couldn’t possibly deny the warm-hearted friendly Ron that I knew and I stepped forward to welcome him ashore, much to the amusement of the onlookers.

Ron was always most generous in sharing his great knowledge of bird osteology and we always packed out our bird bone finds from our Canterbury Museum expeditions into Fiordland for Ron to identify, including the remains of kakapo skeletons and in 1965 two moa leg bones from a midden in Dusky Sound (Hall-Jones 2002). Interestingly, Ron identified these as two pieces of tibio-tarsus of *Euryapteryx gravis*, a moa species not found before in the whole of Fiordland. Because of the total absence of any other bones of this species in the oven or anywhere else in Fiordland, Ron postulated that the leg had been brought round from the eastern grasslands for consumption.

I was delighted to renew my long time acquaintance with Ron when I joined the Association at the Cromwell Conference in 1987, and I always looked forward to his warm, friendly conversations at subsequent meetings. We continued to exchange Christmas cards right up to the end, usually with some bright message from Ron such as, “Shucks! It’s that time again.” Yes, like Elliot Dawson and



*Figure 32. Ron Scarlett at the Coromandel conference, 1992. Photo John Hall-Jones.*

John Yaldwyn in their delightful article, *Yes, we knew Ron too* (2002), I will always remember Ron.

I first met Les Lockerbie when Dr Basil Howard brought him to see my father and fellow historian, Fred Hall-Jones. It was during the late 1950s and I remember Les as being very quiet and unassuming. I was therefore highly impressed when Basil introduced Les as one of New Zealand's leading archaeologists and that he had just discovered moa bones in an oven on The Neck on Stewart Island, where they were previously unreported.

Many years later, at the Cromwell meeting in 1987, I was delighted to meet Les again. Still quiet and unassuming, but very warm and friendly once you got to know him. Later, when I told him that I was writing an illustrated history of Stewart Island, *Stewart Island Explored* (Hall-Jones 1994), he most

generously offered me his photographs and the results of his excavations on The Neck for publication in my book. An exceedingly kind offer, as neither had been published before.

With such generosity you can imagine my acute embarrassment when I misspelt his name “Locherbie” instead of “Lockerbie” in my book. But it was typical of Les that he accepted this philosophically with a chuckle and was later gracious enough to come down to Invercargill for the book launch. Quite a journey for a man in his late 80s.

As with Ron, I always looked out for Les at the Association’s meetings and always enjoyed conversing with him. After the Dunedin meeting he invited me to his house to see his collection. Not knowing what the collection was and anxious to head for home, I turned him down initially. I think that I was expecting



*Figure 33. Les Lockerbie excavating at The Neck, Stewart Island in the late 1950s. Photo Basil Howard.*

to be shown just a box of old bones. Fortunately Les persisted. You can imagine my utter surprise when he ushered me down to the basement of his house to reveal a huge collection of artefacts and bones taking up the whole floor space, all carefully labelled and classified. Then, as if to sound me out he said, “John I’m thinking of giving this to the local museum at Owaka, in the Catlins, where most of the artefacts came from.” Catching my breath, then speaking as tactfully as I could, I said, “Les I am sure that this must be one of the most important private collections in the whole of New Zealand. My own feelings are that for posterity’s sake all your labours over the years should be housed safely under proper conditions in a much larger national institution.” Happily, I understand that this is to happen.

Yes, I am glad that I knew Ron and Les.

### References

- Dawson, E., 2002. Yes, we knew Ron too. *Archaeology in New Zealand* 45(4): 274–276.  
Hall-Jones, J., 1994. *Stewart Island Explored*. Craig Printing, Invercargill.  
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