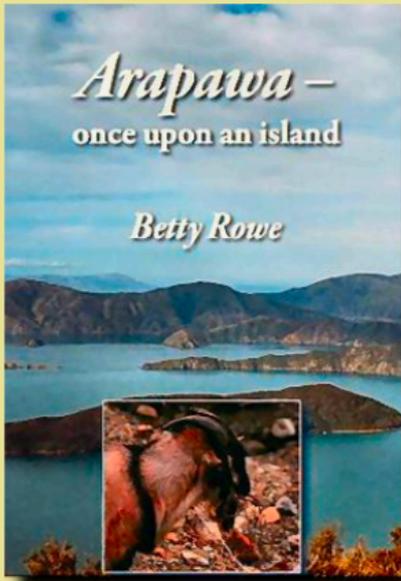


# Arapawa – Once Upon an Island

*Mary Critchley's 2008 review of this book by Betty Rowe is reproduced from her Warmwell website with her kind permission.*



*Once Upon an Island*

The story told in this book is far more than the chronicle of a battle. The hardening of Betty's courage and resolve against what she saw as a wilfully blind bureaucracy is certainly an important part of the book. But at its heart is the woman herself; someone of a depth, humour, and love that puts her way above the ordinary. The move to Arapawa Island was, at first, anything but the culmination of the happy dream that, back in noisy comfortable Pennsylvania, she had been determined to follow in order to show her three children "something of a life that isn't plastic-wrapped, pre-packaged, or advertised as a prerequisite to happiness."

With few advantages nor many skills to make it easy, the family moved to New Zealand and, charmed by the beauty and the people encountered, had nevertheless to overcome often painful humiliations to get to grips with an alien culture. After a while they moved to the wild, beautiful and storm-tossed Arapawa where the blessings of modern life the rest of us take so much for granted were far away. Their first attempts at self-sufficiency met snags and they often fell into the feast/famine syndrome. Even the generator, once bullied into operation, was found to have been put so close to the living area that they simply couldn't bear the noise and smell. "The pride in self-sufficiency was often drowned by sacrifice, denial of comfort and a longing for the good old days of

immediate gratification when every need had not to be preceded by hours of muscle-racking work."

How easy it would have been to gloss over such trials. But the bad as well as the bliss is there – the disasters often written in a way to make you smile as well as flinch in sympathy.

It was the gift of a couple of orphaned goats that was to change the course of Betty's existence (and these two were themselves to be directly instrumental in saving many of their kind from government attempts at extermination – as an exciting moment on page 91 shows). [Pages 92-93 in the first edition.]

The scientists who came to the island had spoken of the mammals there as "noxious vermin and pests" and lectured Betty that as a foreigner she could not possibly understand the fragile New Zealand ecology. What Betty did understand was that goats were to be shot from helicopters and their bodies poisoned with 1080 in order to kill the wild pigs. Talk of "control" was nonsense. Betty caught sight of a report that used the word "extermination" and that was what was planned. An agricultural historian, A. R. Werner, wrote to Betty that "the photographs of the Arapawa goat were in my opinion almost indistinguishable from the original English breed..." but, in the manner of government departments everywhere who, knowing nothing, always know best, Dr Werner's expert opinion of the genetic value of the Arapawa goats as the sole survivors of the now extinct English goat, was scornfully ignored.

Betty's wish to save what she could of the wild goat population drew support from other equally rebellious and warm hearted people. "We could not allow this muddle that passed for Ministerial wisdom to go unchallenged." The goats' champions did nothing violent to deter the officials – but their daring presence on the mountain, their interfering talk and action certainly made things harder for the forces of extermination. At one point, defiantly walking through the killers' camp then dashing back through the sheltering trees, swapping hats and jerseys to reappear like a stage army, they heard the appalled comment, "there must be hundreds of them!" – and the nine who had done it hugged themselves with fierce glee. But the killing was real:



*Betty Rowe with Samantha and twins – an illustration from the book*

... I almost jumped out of my skin when another shot rang out above me and watched horrified as a little buck vaulted head over heels past where I crouched, then lay dying with half its side blown away... Staggering to my feet, I picked up rocks and hurled them at the goats below to make them run. I screamed until I was hoarse: "Run, run. Don't just stand there, run!" With tails up and beards flying they raced out of sight. I sank to the ground and buried my head in my hands, sobbing...

Betty's struggle to protect the wild creatures she loved culminated in the building of a Sanctuary where visitors can come and learn – but she too needed sanctuary from time to time and the book describes with devastating candour the sacrifices she sometimes made in order to feel she was being true to herself. While, alas, the battle for the Arapawa goats continues and can never be certain of a happy ending, Betty's own account of all the battles of her middle-aged life is a testament of victory. After reading this book you may come to feel, as I do, in a world that can appal us with its mad cruelty, that the goats symbolise something beyond themselves – something worth striving for against all odds. As Betty wrote at the very end of the book, "The goats, timid and wary monuments to a bygone era, call softly to me and know I am their friend....we could but weep for the dead and promise those that survived that we would never give up." Those of us who feel that with Betty's death we have lost a friend, can, by buying and enjoying her book, feel that we are helping in a small way to continue her incredible work.