

McClure, N. (2012). *Walking at Makara*. Retrieved from
http://www.travelcommunicators.co.nz/assets/ntw_walking_at_makara_neil_mcclure.docx

Walking at Makara

The Makara Beach settlement straddles the road between the Makara Stream and the southern side of the valley. Here, where the stream empties into a sheltered bay, sits a ramshackle collection of weekend baches. A cafe caters for Wellingtonians seeking a break from their city but only opens in the summer months.

The walking track climbed steeply from the shore. It lead Sue and I through scrub and pasture to a flattened terrace on a ridge jutting out into the sea; on one side Fishermans Bay and on the other the rocky coast that runs around to Opau Bay. Looking north, flat-topped Mana Island sat firmly in front of the larger, peaked, Kapiti Island. The Ngati Ira people built a pa here; it was a vantage point from which access routes to the estuary at the mouth of the Makara Stream were clearly visible. Fortified by timber palisades (the ground being too rocky for earthworks) it was a defence against other marauding Maori during the centuries of intermittent warfare. In this area seafood was plentiful and kumara gardens thrived in the alluvial soils of the valley. For the Ngati Ira this pa was their final refuge in 1826 when Ngati Awa and Ngati Toa warriors from the north swept down the coast killing and plundering. The roar of the invaders' muskets, bought from white traders, heralded the coming of a new age. Not a trace of the pa remains.

We followed the line of the escarpment upward and westward toward Opau Bay and the rugged slopes that form Cape Terawhiti; its ridge rising over four hundred and fifty meters above the Makara valley. Land once heavily forested was now open and barren, baring its greywacke bones to the elements. Within these hills gold bearing quartz seams brought a rush of prospectors in the 1860's. Mining companies named: Zealandia, Eureka, Caledonian, The Duke of Wellington, The Lord Nelson, and The Bonanza Company were among those that worked their claims. They cleared the bush, sunk shafts and dragged in machinery by horse and sled. They built tramways and set up batteries to crush the quartz and extract gold. No one got rich. By 1919 the gold rush was over. The odd rusting remnant and tramway cutting, long ago abandoned, is all that marks its passing.

In the distance a pair of grazing sheep lifted their heads and observed our approach before taking fright, leaping into the air and disappearing from sight over the edge of the escarpment. "Oh no," Sue called out from up ahead, "They've jumped over the edge." Scrambling over rocks I peered down expecting to see two carcasses lying far below us on the beach, but the drop was not sheer. The sheep were just a few meters down, delicately selecting flora from the near-vertical escarpment.

"They're just down here eating. I think vertigo must be a human affliction." We laughed, high up on the edge of the land with a wide vista of sea and the South Island.

"Gave me a real fright," Sue said, "I can understand why the track is closed for the lambing season," and it is, according to a sign we passed, closed August to October for lambing.

Ten minutes later, having negotiated the highest point of the track, we reached the crumbling concrete gun emplacements, long devoid of guns, that once guarded the sea route through Cook Strait and the city of Wellington. The fear of invasion had been very real in 1941. New Zealand was embroiled in the Second World War, its armies fighting in Europe and Africa. In defence of Wellington Harbour and the coastal sea lanes a series of forts were constructed at strategic points around the coastline. These two gun emplacements, with three meter thick concrete pads, held the ex-Indian, 1900's vintage, six inch naval guns of Fort Opau.

We sat with our backs against the mesh fence that kept the public off the concrete monoliths. Gulls wheeled and cried below. Sue rummaged in my bag and removed a misshapen pork sandwich. "Why did you only pack one sandwich?" she asked.

"I only made one", I said, "it'll have to be half each". We ate our half-sandwiches slowly, sun on our faces, breeze cooling our bodies still hot from the climb up.

"I wish you'd made more," Sue said somewhat wistfully. A line of cloud had formed on the horizon.

Behind the guns, in a flat section carved from the hillside, a few broken concrete slabs lay scattered and askew where army barracks had housed a one hundred strong garrison from the 10th Coast Regiment. I pushed my way through manuka scrub and entered an observation bunker that was still largely intact. The lookout would have peered through binoculars waiting to sight a distant speck that might just be the enemy. Coastal defence was dependant on the weather being fine enough for good visibility. A message painted on the wall read:

“THE WAR'S OVER P T EVANS DEC 1989”. The soldiers are gone; only the scars left upon the land remind us that they were ever here at all.

Three hundred meters further on a locked gate bars the traveller from entering the site of Makara Wind Farm. A forest of wind turbines is humankind's latest effort to exploit this land; erected despite wide opposition to visual and noise pollution. A modern city needs electricity and one resource Wellington has in abundance is wind. Up close they look like aeroplanes on poles, tall, sleek and seemingly sneering at the battered landscape they dominate.

The access road plunged down, alongside a stream, to Opau Bay where the stream disappeared under the piles of stones and driftwood that form the beach. The sharp pitch and loose stones of the beach made walking difficult, the traverse straining ankles, until a “goat track” appeared following the base of the escarpment. The sky-scraping escarpment, open to storm and sun, was like the face of the Makara coast, expression eroded into its surface. Chunks of it break and fall to be pounded by the surf into ever smaller pieces. Piles of coloured paua shell above the high tide mark tell of poachers. Below the pa site we had to climb over boulders to avoid the incoming tide.

Cloud was beginning to obscure the South Island and the breeze had picked up. We sat for a time on a boulder watching cormorants preening and drying wet feathers, wings outstretched, on top of rocks rising above the waves. A number of young people passed by, some carrying drums. They were smiling and laughing amongst themselves. “It looks like quite a gathering tonight,” I said.

“They'll be celebrating the Winter Solstice,” Sue said, “It's the longest night.” Tonight the young would commune, the sound of their voices and their drumming would mingle with the spirits of long dead forests and the spirits of the Maori who had once dwelt here. They would mingle with the spirits of fishermen and miners who had long ago moved on and the soldiers who had bided their time awaiting an enemy who never came. I wondered whether it was more than just chance that had brought these youngsters here. Perhaps they unknowingly felt the stirring of life, or the pain that this land bore because of humankind.

The day was fast fading as we returned to the car park. Sue was looking back over her shoulder at the cloud pushing its way across Cook Strait. The peaks that stand guard over Queen Charlotte Sound and the South Island were now hidden. The warm sunshine, something to be treasured on Wellington's southern coast in midwinter, had been cut short. We stopped to put on windbreakers as another group of young people, blankets draped around their shoulders, carrying bags and bed rolls, filed passed us on the track from Makara Beach.