

My Dearest Georgie

Transcriptions of 24 letters from James Hector
to his wife Georgiana

Judith Nathan & Simon Nathan



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Introduction

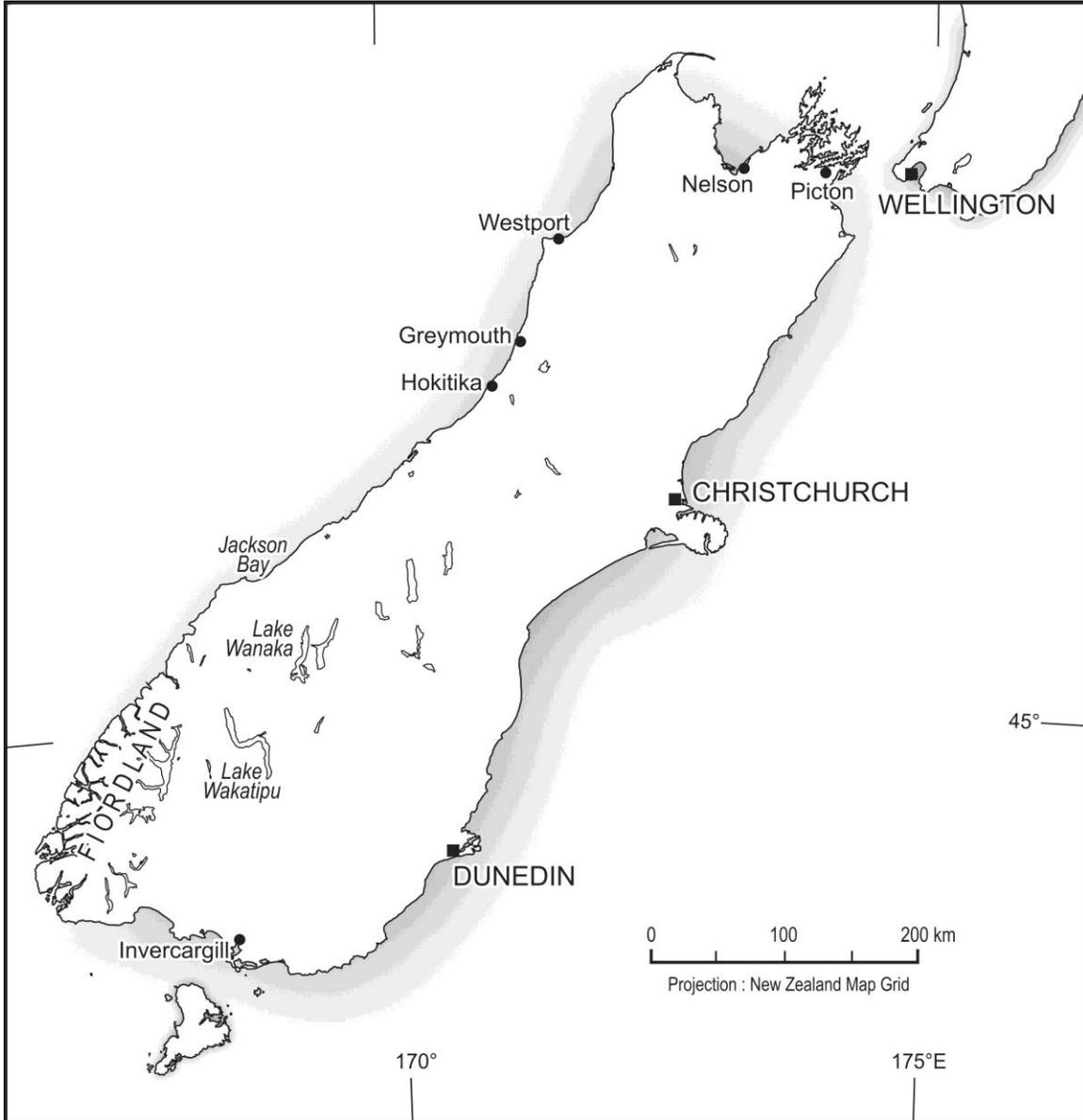
Sir James Hector was a dominating figure in the scientific and intellectual life of late 19th century New Zealand. By 1868 he was in charge of the Colonial Museum (now Te Papa Tongarewa), the Geological Survey (now GNS Science), and the New Zealand Institute (now Royal Society of New Zealand). In 1885 he was appointed Chancellor of the University of New Zealand. While mixing in Wellington society, he took care to maintain good relations with the Governor and with politicians, and was often used as an advisor on technical matters by the Government. Hector was regarded as ‘a safe pair of hands’ who could competently tackle complex issues, and be relied on not to embarrass his political masters.

Although there is a huge amount of correspondence about Hector’s official activities, there is much less information about his personal life and opinions. He travelled around New Zealand constantly, and there is evidence that he wrote regularly to his wife, Georgiana, but few of these personal letters have survived. A group of 22 letters, covering the period from 18 August to 1 November 1890 is held in the Hocken Collections, University of Otago. They cover a hectic period when Hector was chairman of two Commissions of Enquiry – the first in Dunedin, enquiring into the sanitary conditions in Dunedin Hospital, and the second in Greymouth investigating industrial conditions in the Grey Valley coal mines. Hector found both enquiries tedious, and was unhappy to be away from home for such a long time. His concerns were heightened by widespread industrial unrest associated with the 1890 Maritime Strike which he feared would lead to violence, and he was concerned for the safety of Georgiana and their family.

These letters are a small window into the personal life of James and Georgiana Hector, and they also illustrate James Hector’s work ethic – never a moment to be wasted. So in addition to the commission hearings in Dunedin he spent time with his son Charles, presided over a university graduation, socialised with many of the leading families in the city, and attended to a never-ending stream of letters and telegrams. Although he was absent from his base in the Colonial Museum, he continued to closely supervise all the organisations he was responsible for.

Hector’s handwriting is notoriously difficult to read, and this has long been a discouragement to researchers. Somewhat to our surprise, and in contrast to many other letters written by Hector, the writing is consistently neat, and he did not descend to hurried scrawl on the final pages as he often did when writing to his clerk, Richard Gore. Although we found the letters were easier to decipher than we feared, they did require repeated scrutiny and discussion. After twenty years of marriage, we wonder if Georgiana had insisted that James make an effort to write legibly so that she could read his letters.

There were a few words that we could not decipher, and these are indicated by dashes. Minor corrections, that were probably slips of the pen are shown by square brackets, but we have generally retained Hector’s spelling and punctuation.



Locality map, showing the main places mentioned in the letters. James Hector travelled from Wellington to Dunedin (and return) directly by boat. When he later went to Greymouth from Wellington, he travelled by boat to Christchurch, and then overland (across Arthur's Pass) to Greymouth. He later returned to Wellington by boat from Westport.

The Hector family

The Hector family lived at *Ratanui*, a property set in native bush on the western hills of the Hutt valley, near Wellington. Fire was an ever-present danger, and Hector refers to this in his letters.

By 1890 James and Georgiana Hector had seven surviving children. The oldest, Barclay (b. 1869), worked for his father in the Colonial Museum. Charles (b. 1871) – known in the family as Charlie - was a medical student at Otago University. At that time there were no halls of residence, so Charles boarded with a Mrs Taylor together with another medical student, Bart Wilford, who also came from the Hutt valley. Of the remaining Hector children, Constance (b. 1873), Douglas (b. 1877), Lyell (b. 1882) and Georgina (known as Ina, b. 1884) were at school, and Marjory (b. 1886) was at home with her mother.

The Dunedin Hospital Inquiry

Concern about the safety of Dunedin Hospital arose when Dr Batchelor complained that the hospital was unsanitary. Two of his patients who had minor operations there had got blood poisoning, and one had died. It was a serious allegation that cast doubt on the safety of a large hospital, with the possibility of legal liability for the government. The government decided to set up a Commission of Inquiry, and James Hector was an obvious choice to run it. He was a qualified doctor (although he never practised in New Zealand), and had served on the Board of Health. His fellow commissioner was E.H. Carew, a Dunedin magistrate.

For Hector, the trip to Dunedin was a chance to revisit Otago, where he had been Provincial Geologist from 1862-65 before moving to Wellington to set up the New Zealand Geological Survey. The hospital was in a building quickly erected for the 1865 New Zealand Exhibition (of which Hector was one of the organisers). Hector knew the building well, and realized that it was fundamentally unsuitable to be a hospital.

The first letter was written a few days after he arrived in Dunedin.

Additional letters

After the first edition of these letter transcriptions was published in 2012, two more letters from James Hector to Georgiana were located in the Hocken Collections: one describing a trip to meet Maori leaders at Waitara, north of New Plymouth in late 1878, and the other describing a visit to Clyde in central Otago in 1872 to observe the Transit of Venus. These letters have been transcribed, and placed at the end of the collection.

Part 1: Letters written while James Hector was in Dunedin, August-September 1890

[MS-0443-3/27/9]

Dunedin Club
Tuesday 18 August

Dearest Georgie

I saw Charlie again yesterday morning finding him hard at work in a cold room – no fire – but he said he was soon going out to college. I have told him to get measured for another suit as he has only his best and the one he wears at college - which is all stained. He thinks you must have taken Connie's measures for his nightshirts as he can't button them or get his hands through the cuffs without a great squeeze. I don't suppose I will see much of him till Saturday as I will be busy now every day. I called on Dr Scott & on Revd Dr Stuart yesterday about the "Capping" arrangements. There are over 2000 tickets issued so it is to be a very grand affair.

We had a short meeting of the commission in the afternoon to arrange with the lawyers in the case. The hearing is to be in the R.M. court and open to the public. One side alone is to produce 18 witnesses & about 40 learned works of reference – and the other side's case is even more formidable. Then in addition I find the commission requires us to enquire into the condition of the building & its management & a lot of things outside the matters in dispute. Carew the R.M. who is with me is a very nice man but not in good health. He gets headaches with any exertion he says, so I will get the brunt of the work.

I hope to get a note from you. I see in the T'gram this morning that there was a big fire at Petone. Do make them all be careful. Barclay is very careless with candles and lamps in his place.

I am just off as we sit at 10

Yr affect hub

J Hector

Love and kisses to Marjory, Ina, Lyell & Doug

[MS-443-3/27/10]

Dunedin Club
Saturday morn. [24 Aug 1990]

My dearest Georgie

I must send a line to reach you on Monday. I am just off to meet Charlie & go for a long walk. Tomorrow we dine with Parker and sup at judge Williams. Last evening I dined at Dr Scotts and the night before at Whites who married Miss Holmes. They have a splendid house and do things in great style.

I have been sitting every day on the commission & find it very dreary work. Were it not for the lawyers I could find out all about the matter in ½ the time. I had a wire yesterday from Chas Brown at Taranaki that old Puketaura is at point of death & his sons wish to sell me their ten acres for £50 per acre. I wired back that they were only joint owners with Epuni of 20 acres in all – that the price asked was absurd & I would only give £300 for the lot provided that the Epunis joined in selling. They have just wired back that they will take £150 for their interest & want £50 advance to pay expenses for the funeral feast for the old man. I am inclined to do this even tho it leaves the thing rather unsafe as the Epuni folk may stand out, but if I do not make the advance some one else will & then the trouble will be greater. I can't form any notion of how long this Hospital enquiry will last. We are not done with the chief exam of the first witness even. I do long to hear how you are all getting along. It seems an age since I left.

With much love to all

Yr affect hub

J. Hector

[MS-443-3/27/11]

Dunedin Club
Wed 27 Augt '90

My dearest Georgie

I got no Sunday letter as the boat missed the express yesterday. Maskell has turned back from Lyttelton as he can't be here in time for the capping tonight. Bad luck he has the Report and notes for my speech with him so I don't know how I will get on. It was lucky that at the last moment I thought of bringing the diplomas with me. I hardly expect this will reach you as all the steamers are out of gear with the strike. I am not nearly done with this hospital enquiry. They only began to cross-examine Dr Batchelor yesterday after he had been four days in the box & we can't meet today or tomorrow forenoon on account of a criminal trial that requires them all. It is a great bother.

On Saturday I took Charlie out to Mosgiel & had a long walk & on Sunday we had a walk with young Andrew & then dined with Parker who has just lost his father, poor fellow - & in the evening we walked out to Anderson Bay & had supper with the Judge Williams family & spent a very pleasant evening. It is a pity that Chas is so shy & quiet - folks must think there is nothing in him. Chas is going to write to Connie about her ankle - and advise her to get broad low heels & always to wear lace boots. He is quite the Dr now & talks with authority. He is to send her a diagram of the bones in her foot & of what will happen to them if she does not take care.

I hear there is to be a great crowd tonight. About 3500 tickets have been issued. I don't look forward with much confidence as I can never make myself heard in such a large hall - not that it matters as I have nothing particular to say.

I am writing with a needle pen which I use for taking down the evidence. I got your postcard on Sunday & saw your letter to Charlie. Thank Marjory for her letter & say I will come back soon. Also thank Ina.

With much love to you all.

Yr Affc Hub

James Hector

[MS-443-3/27/13]

Dunedin Club
Thursday 28 Augt '90

Dearest Georgie

Well I have got the big event over all right. I have never seen such a mass of people in N.Z. before & I have never had to speak to such a lot before. I felt in a blue funk at first but I don't think I showed any signs & it went off at once when I heard my own voice. It was very hard work to speak in the hall. It seemed as if ones throat would crack. However I kept my eyes on the furthestest off row of people in the back of the gathering and spoke so that I could see by their faces that they understood me & I am told that every word I said was heard by everyone. They were certainly very orderly & I had no difficulty controlling them. It was a most decided success altogether & will do a lot of good. I send you today's paper with the report of it.

I got your short note of Monday morn. last night but have not the one enclosed to Charlie yet. You are quite right in your view about the Maori land & it is just what I have done. I only pay the £150 if Epuni joins and accepts the same for his share so that I get the whole at the same time & under one deed.

We have had the most splendid weather here since I came – only one cold showery day. But this morning it looks dark and threatening. The commission does not sit till 2 today. I must make them push on a little faster. I don't see what is the use of all the evidence. The matter is quite simple & plain. I'm afraid that I will have to go to Riverton before I return as the Govt. have refd. some papers to me about a deposit of oil shale. I do wish I could get back home again – But with all the steamers on strike it may be difficult. Do be as sparing as possible of coal and everything else as there is going to be a regular famine. I feel extremely uneasy about your being left all alone. Riots are quite expected down here.

With kindest love to all.

Yr affectionate husband

James Hector



James Hector dressed in the official regalia as Chancellor of the University of New Zealand. The date of the photograph is uncertain, but it was probably about 1890 when he officiated at the graduation in Dunedin.

Alexander Turnbull Library, ½-025368-F

UNIVERSITY OF NEW ZEALAND

GRADUATION CEREMONY

The annual “capping” of graduates who have kept their classes at the University of Otago took place in the Garrison Hall last evening, and, as in former years, the ceremony excited a considerable amount of public attention. The demand for tickets was indeed, if anything, in excess of that on an former occasion, and there was the usual amount of struggling upon the part of those who were fortunate enough to procure tickets to obtain seats from which a fair view of the proceedings might be secured. The ceremony was announced to begin at 8 o’clock, but more than two hours before that time there was a steadily increasing knot of people clamouring for admission into the hall.

The CHANCELLOR, who was greeted with loud cheers, said: Ladies and Gentlemen, I am quite aware that this is looked upon as a meeting of the university, but I am as well aware that it is not one surrounded with the fears and tremblings of university meetings when examinations are taking place – (Applause). I can recall my own feelings on similar occasions, when I have felt the joy of the university meeting without the fear of examinations – (applause) – and therefore I hope that you will not think it at all improper on the part of the students, who are here in great force I am glad to say – (applause) – that on this occasion they are going to have a little fun – (Loud applause).

Unfortunately on this occasion I have to apologise for the absence of the Registrar – (Oh) – owing to circumstances beyond our control, owing to the unfortunate disarrangement of our means of communication – (Laughter). The registrar reached Lyttelton yesterday morning, and found that he could not possibly arrive in Dunedin in time to be present this evening, so has had to turn back.- (A voice: “What about the fees?”). Unfortunately the registrar has the report in his pocket – (laughter) – so that I cannot present it.

[MS-443-3/27/14]

Dunedin Club
30th August
Saturday morg.

Dearest Georgie

I got your note from Charlie yesterday morg. and at once wired you that I did not feel easy about Douglas & that you shd. get Whitehead to overhaul him. The chills you mention are very suspicious.

I had a long day at the enquiry yesterday. 9.30 to 6 & in the evening took Chas to the concert – programme enclosed. It was very good – the part singing being simply perfect. We sit again from 9.30 to 1 today and I have appointment with Charlie to meet him at two & we will go out by rail somewhere till Monday morg for a change. It will do him good as he is working very hard. Bart Wilford ---- ill yesterday and had to go to bed. I hope that he has not caught anything in that Hospital.

I had a wire from Mr Fergus last night asking me to go at once as a Commissioner to investigate the row with the colliers on the West Coast!! I replied that I could not go until after the Hospital enquiry is over - & then it would be v inconvenient as they have cut down my Dept so much. Besides it is a commercial question about which I am not supposed to be an authority.

With much love to you all

Yr. affect Hub

J. Hector

I hope you are saving all you can for hard times seem to be coming. Coals here are up to £3 p. ton but provisions are not up yet as with you. JH

[MS-443-3/27/15]

Dunedin Club
Tuesday 2/9/90

My dearest Georgie

There is a chance of a mail from Lyttelton tonight so I must send you a few lines. Chas and I had a nice trip by aft train to Lawrence on Saturday & on Sunday rode 24 miles over the hills & visited the Blue Spur & other diggings. The day was splendid & as we got up 3500 ft our view extended to the Hector Mtns at the Wakatipu & south to the Bluff. C enjoyed it very much. Yesterday we returned by the train at 6.30 so that he was back in time for his classes & I for my enquiry.

Bart Wilford is very ill. Dr Cougherty is attending him & had to get a nurse for him yesterday. He has Pleurisy & inflammation of the liver. As he has been moved to the sitting room I have sent Charlie to other lodgings (where Andrews is). I wired to Dr Whitehead yesterday to tell Mrs W. I understand Dr W is away in Sydney. There are great rows going on here. I do wish I could finish here & get back to you as you must be anxious.

With much love

Yr affect hub

J.Hector

[MS-443-3/27/16]

Dunedin Club
Wed 3 Sept '90

My dearest Georgie

I see the *Isabella* is not to leave Lyttelton this evening till after the *Empress* arrives there – so I write a line as it is hard to say when another steamer will be allowed to go. Bart Wilford was not so well yesterday. His temp went to 102°. I had a wire from G. Moore asking if I thought Mrs W. should come down to nurse him. I replied no but would ask the Drs (Coughtrey & Ogston) & wire this morning. Chas says that some time ago he had his hand poisoned in the dissecting room, & on the capping night he only had on cricketing flannels & it was a cold wet night. They went in a procession through the streets & then went to a students supper & did not get home till late. So after all it is no wonder he is so ill. He has rheumatic fever and pleurisy – only a small patch at the base of the right lung – but the inflammation has also affected the liver which is only separated by the diaphragm so that he has inflammation going on both in his thorax & abdomen. The Drs think very seriously of him. He suffered such acute pain that have to keep him under morphia & salicylic acid. I write all this to ease your mind about Charlie as you might fancy it something catching.

The horrid lawyers won't let me go on today or tomorrow with Hosp Enquiry as they have to attend cases in the Supreme Court. However I can fill up the time getting the report into shape as the case of one side is now closed & I know what we will have to deal with. I can't imagine what the other side can say in defence of the hospital. You shd. just see the place where they prepare the food for the poor sick people down in a dark cellar with great furnaces like the stokehold of a steamer!

What a row about nothing all over the colony – but it will lead to great hardship and disorganisation. I fear the new parliament will be very ruthless and not care much for right or wrong. No one is to be paid more than a working man's wage. That is the creed freely discussed down here. I wish to goodness I could get home. I had no letters last night and have not heard of your doings since last Monday week.

With much love

Yr affect hub

James Hector

[MS-443-3/27/17]

Dunedin Club
Thursday 4 Sept '90

My dearest Georgie

It seems as if we had more chances of writing now that communication is cut off than we did before! The *Manipouri* is advertised to take on mail today & as I have ½ hour to wait for breakfast I may as well write to you. I got a note last night from Gore so there must have been a steamer from Wn to Lyttelton. Except going down to see Bart Wilford yesterday morning and a walk to the wharf before dinner, I was hard writing all day yesterday. I found Bart rather better & well looked after. He has a trained nurse at night and during the day several ladies take it in turns never to leave him alone. Mrs Ulrich is one of them. I wired yesterday to his Mother.

This place was very quiet yesterday but it is sad to see the harbour empty & everything at a standstill & crowds of sulky looking men blocking all the corners. I can[t] help thinking there will be a row & some broken heads before it is over.

I dined last night at the Belchers. There was only one other gentleman there. They do things certainly in very high art style. The dinner was very neat and plain – french style – but the lighting & decoration of the rooms are wonderful. Mrs B & Miss B were both got up in the most extraordinary flowing robes – So fashion with buttons or trimming. Mrs B was in a venetian bronze silk & Miss B's tourquoise blue silk must have cost a sight of money. Dr B was in this garb, a long black cassock down to his ankles with enormous silver buckles!! It was queer. They were very kind & chatty & I had a pleasant evening.

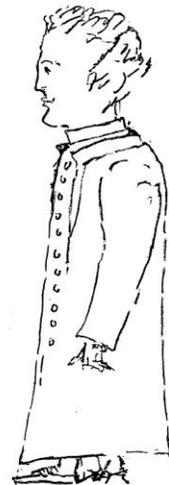


I have not seen Charlie since Monday evening but will try and take him for a trip on Sunday next. I am going on writing all today as the conn. is not to sit until tomorrow morning. Yesterday was very cold & showery but it is fine again today. I think about 4 days more will finish the enquiry so far as evidence is concerned – then we have to agree to a report

which won't take long. So I hope to get away about this day week - I do long to hear from some of you but I suppose you are all right or you would have sent a wire.

With kisses to the little ones from their dad

J. Hector



[MS-443-3/27/18]

Dunedin Club
Friday morg. 5/9/90

My dearest Georgie

I went down yesterday morning after writing to you to see Bart Wilford and found your letter to Chas & on taking it to him at the college was delighted to find that there was one for me in it. I was so sorry to hear that you have a regular hospital with medical & surgical cases. Poor dear Ina, she is always getting knocked about. I hope it won't leave a mark on her face. I am glad you took Douglas to Dr Whitehead. He seems to have found just what I suspected was the matter. And poor Boysie also laid up. Except twice for a few hours when it was cold & rain (very little tho) from the south the weather has been magnificent all the time I have been here – but you seem to have had a lot of rain and wind.

Bart is very ill indeed. His joints give him acute pain & his heart's action is very laboured. I did not hear how he was last night as I was out at dinner at Dr Lindo Fergusson's. In the aftn. I felt so stupid that I went for a long walk all around the Ocean Beach which did me a lot of good. This morning I sit at 9.30 and will be at it all day & tomorrow forenoon & at 2 Charlie is to call for me & we will go off somewhere if it is fine. Tell Connie that I got her kind note & will answer it soon. I am glad she enjoyed her first Ball! Is she considered as "out" now?

Kiss poor Ina's forehead for me & also Marjory & tell Douglas & Lyell that I hope to find them quite better when I return.

Yr affect husband

James Hector

There's breakfast!!

[MS-443-3/27/20]

Dunedin Club
Friday 11 Sept 1890

My dearest Georgie

It is a long time since I have heard from you. Yr last was written on last Monday week I think, but I daresay you are all well. I did hope to finish this work but have no chance of doing so now as they only let me sit an hour yesterday. The day was not lost however as I spent it in going over the evidence & putting it in shape for the printer. There is already about 400 p.p. & only ½ of it is written out from the shorthand notes. My own notes are over 200 p.p. & I only take down the substance of the answers. Yesterday morning I got up at five and made a surprise visit to the Hospital and took the temperatures &tc of all the wards & spent an hour seeing the beds made & observing how they managed the slops etc. It was a very disagreeable job & made me feel funny all day.

On Tuesday I dined with Dr De Zouche – rather a slow evening – but there was some good music by a Mrs Ferguson & her sister whose name I did not catch. She said she was staying some months ago with Mr E. Riddiford at the Hutt. Last night I was at a very swank dinner party at the Percy Neils. They live in Dr Buchanan's old Home up the N.E. Valley. It was a gentlemans party given to [?]goring. This is the third of the kind I have been at so it seems to have been very popular down here. The Neils must be very rich from the style they live in. He is a merchant here & came from Melbourne.

The strike is subsiding here I am glad to say. There is a good story about it. One of the rioters was fined £10 or a month in jail & the money was subscribed and given to his wife to get him out. But she said "But its John's own fault & if he was out he would not be earning anything so I'll just keep the money & let him take it (the time) out in jail. The money's of more use to me --- now than he would be.

Bart Wilford is still about the same or rather better but his temperature is still over 102°. I have not seen him for a few days but I hear about him every morning from Dr Coughtrey. It is raw & cold today. With much love to all

Yr Affec hub

James Hector

[MS-443-3/27/21]

Dunedin Club
Saturday 13 Sept '90

My dearest Georgie

Charlie brought me your letter of Monday last yesterday. I was glad to get it. You seem to be having very bad weather while it has been fine here, but the last few days have been rather raw & wet. I don't think Chas & I will be able to have our run into the country today. We finished all but two witnesses yesterday & then we start this morning at 10 & if the lawyers will only refrain from long speeches we may finish at 1 o'clock & if we can stick at it I may get the report drafted tomorrow and have it all over by Monday night. That is if Carew will make up his mind, but I don't suspect that [he] will disagree very much on the main points. I dined with him last night & Dr Truby King was there so we had a good talk. It was thick fog & rain when I came home & I had a long walk as he lives away on the top of the links & I noticed when I came out of his warm room that my breath seemed to catch & I felt dizzy & this morning I woke up with pain in my side but I have been up for an hour now & took a very hot bath & now feel all right.

You seem to have been keeping a private hospital of your own at home. I do hope that Ina & Marjory will not get laid up. Bart Wilford keeps about the same as yesterday. Dr Coughtrey said there were symptoms of typhoid appearing but they were not sure. I have told Charlie that he must not go back to Mrs Taylor's again. The back premises are not what they should be. Don't say a word about Bart's having typhoid as the Drs will telegraph when they are certain. I only tell you as you may know all Charlie's surroundings. Poor Charlie came out very badly in the Biology exam last week. Prof Parker asked me about him. Charlie's explanation is that he has felt upset with Bart's troubles & has not been working so hard of late.

I don't think that there can be much for McLaggan to do. There were a few odd jobs such as you mention besides the fortnight he was to give to the garden, but I should think we could dispense with him now. In fact we must stop spending in all directions. I quite expect Govt will have to stop salaries & no one will be able to pay their interests. Down here there is no business doing & no revenue being collected.

With much love

Yr affect hub

J Hector.

Bart Wilford died on 17 September 1890. James Hector accompanied the casket and members of the Wilford family back to Wellington.

We record with great regret the death of Mr. Bartholomew Wilford, second son of Dr. Wilford, of the Hutt, the sad event having taken place at Dunedin yesterday. Deceased, who was about 20 years of age, was once a pupil of Wellington College and the Wanganui Collegiate School, and left for Dunedin about two years ago in order to pursue his studies at the Otago University. He was a young fellow of considerable mental attainments, and his educational progress was so satisfactory that Dr. Wilford decided to send him to the Edinburgh University in March next. A few weeks ago he contracted rheumatic fever and pleurisy, and although everything was done for him by the leading physicians of Dunedin he succumbed yesterday. A brother and sister, who went down from Wellington last week, were present when he breathed his last. Deceased was a fine young fellow and deep sympathy will be felt for his parents and relatives in their bereavement.

Evening Post, 18 September
1890

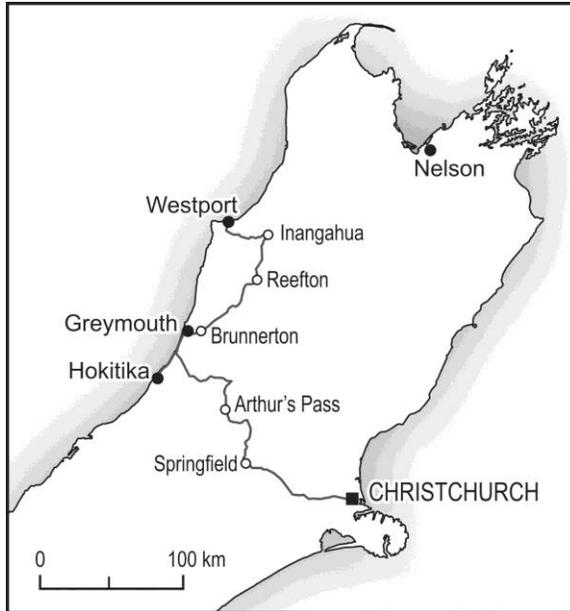
The body of Mr. Bartholomew Wilford was brought up from Dunedin by the steamer Herald on Saturday, and was interred in the Lower Hutt cemetery yesterday. The funeral was largely attended, persons from all parts of the district being present. Amongst the number were six members of the Wanganui Collegiate School Old Boys' Association, viz., Sir Kenneth Douglas, and Messrs. F. Ho'dsworth, O. Cooper, G. Downes, G. Kemp, and B. Hector, who acted as pall-bearers, each wearing the colours of the Association in his button-hole. Before the mournful cortege proceeded to the cemetery the coffin, upon which there were several beautiful wreaths, was taken into St. James' Church, where the Rev. Archdeacon Faucourt, assisted by the Rev. J. Jones, conducted a service, Mrs R. Jackson playing the "Dead March" at the close. Dr. Wilford, father of the deceased, is at present in Auckland, having just arrived from Sydney, and was unable to be present at the funeral.

Evening Post, 22 September
1890

Part 2: Letters written while Hector was in Greymouth in October-November 1890

In early October 1890, only a fortnight after the conclusion of the Dunedin hearing, James Hector was on his way to Greymouth from Wellington to preside at a Commission of Inquiry into the Grey Valley coal mines. To get to Greymouth, Hector travelled by boat to Lyttelton, by train across the Canterbury plains to Springfield, and then

over Arthur's Pass and on to Greymouth by coach (see map).

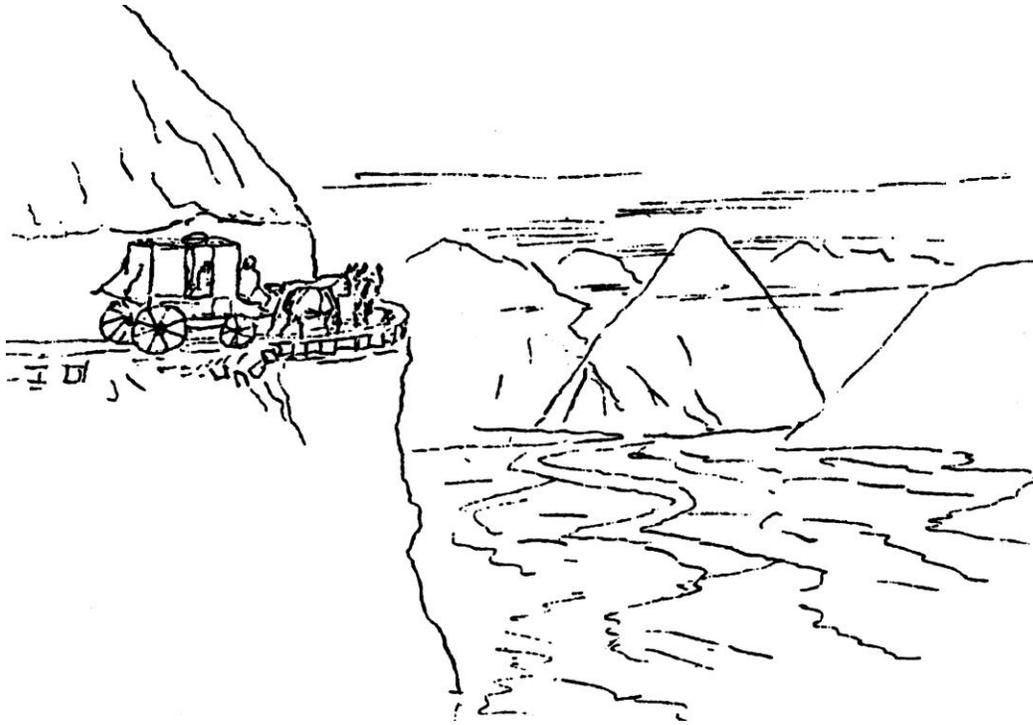


No sketches or photographs of Hector's journey survive, but we were fortunate to be able to use several sketches of the same journey, made by J.H. Menzies in 1883.

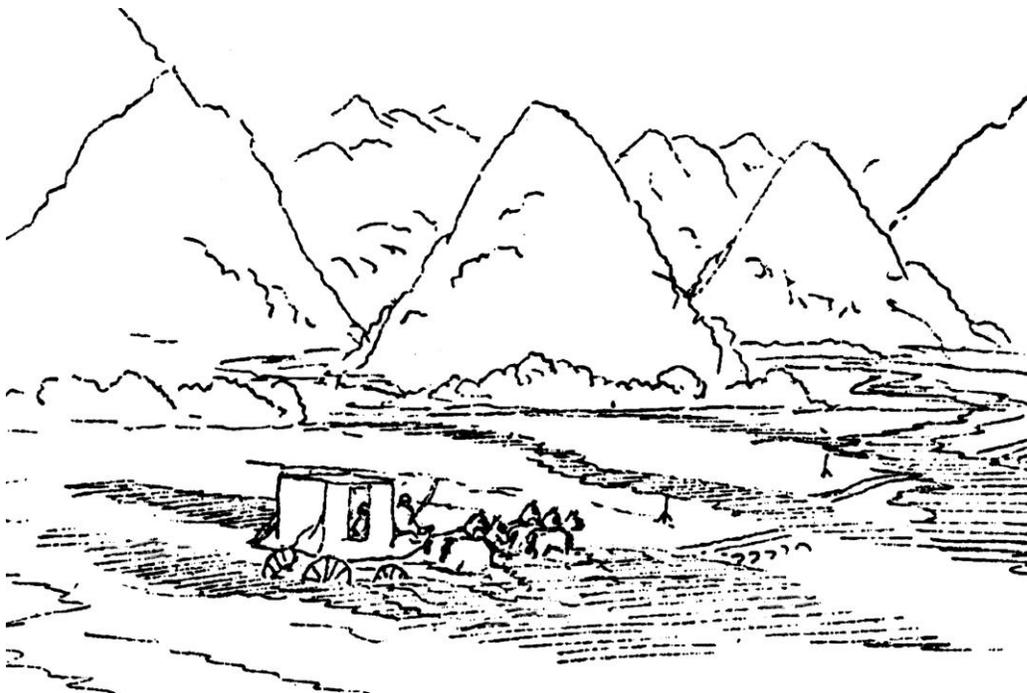
The background to the Grey Valley inquiry is complicated, and difficult to fully understand. By the end of the 1880s the coal trade in New Zealand was controlled by the Union Steamship Company which had a virtual monopoly on transport routes and owned most of the coal mining companies including the Westport Coal Company and the Greymouth Coal Company. Most of the company's high-grade coal came from the Buller coalfield north of Westport, but this was supplemented by coal from the Grey Valley when extra production was needed. An attempt to reduce the pay and working conditions of the Grey Valley miners led to a series of strikes and lockouts. The miners complained that they could not live on the wages offered by the Greymouth Coal Company, and wanted parity with their fellow miners in Buller. In order to broker an agreement, the government agreed to a Commission of Inquiry into the Grey Valley coal mines.

Hector was a surprising choice as Chairman of the Commission. As he himself pointed out, he had little knowledge of matters related to economics or issues about the cost of living. It is tempting to suggest that the Commission was regarded by the government as a stalling action. But by the time Hector arrived in Greymouth the miners were on strike – partly in protest against the coal company, and partly in sympathy with the Maritime strike. The letters start in early October when the strike was at its peak, but by late November it had collapsed and the miners reluctantly returned to work.

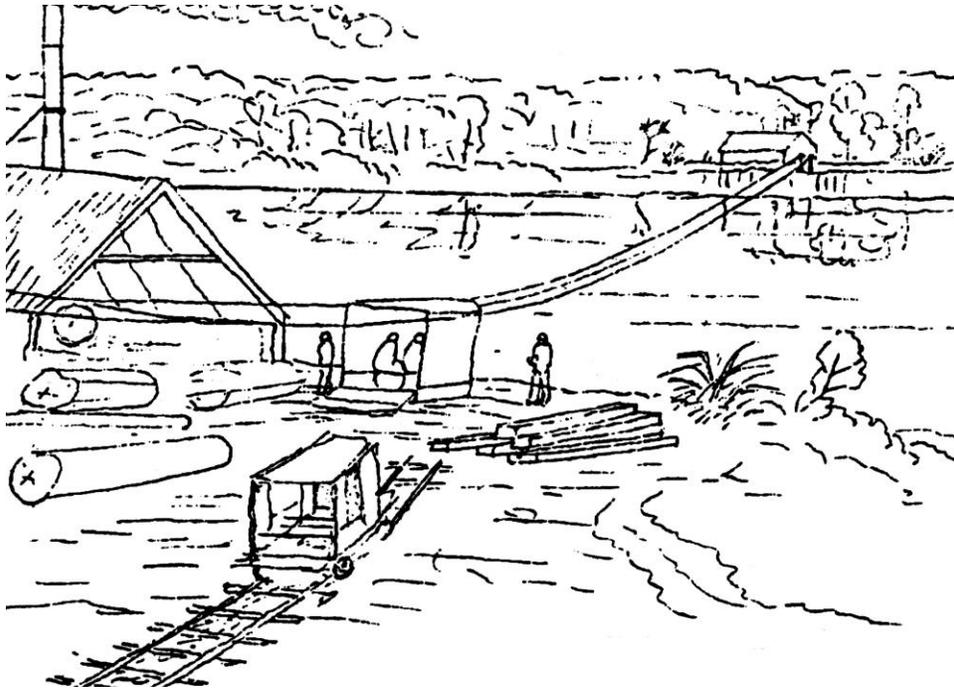
His fellow commissioners were R.W. Moody, an Auckland mining engineer, and William Brown, a Dunedin businessman. The commission was assisted by H.M. Gore, a shorthand writer who was son of Hector's clerk, Richard Gore.



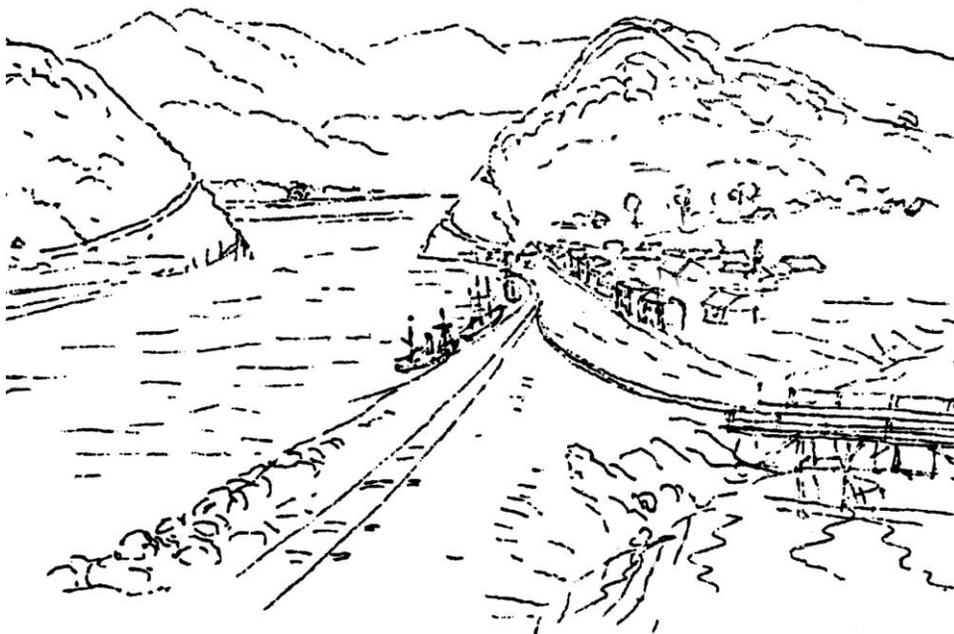
Coach on the narrow road, high above the Waimakariri River. (J.H.Menzies)



Coach crossing the upper reaches of the Waimakariri River, near Arthur's Pass. (J.H.Menzies).



Crossing the Taramakau River in a cage (J.H.Menzies)



Greymouth, on the right hand (south) side of the Grey River, with ships tied up at the wharf. (J.H. Menzies)

[MS-443-3/27/22]

Greymouth
Thursday Morg.

9 Oct 1890

Dearest Georgie

We got away in the *Wairarapa* at 6.15, a great crowd on board. Besides my colleague Mr Moody I only knew George McLean and Miss Hawkins who was put in my care by her Mother who asked very kindly after you. I had a horrid inside cabin under a round skylight & in the next cabin was a mother and child that squalled the whole night through so that I got no sleep & after the Elect. Light was put out they lighted a lamp & the officer on deck threw a cover over the skylight & so stopped the ventilation.

We got to Lyttelton at 9.30 & I found a special train waiting for us. I took up G. McLean and Miss Hawkins to Ch.Ch & found the Govr. and Walrond all alone on the Platform – don't know why. I asked Walrond to take care of Miss H. as the Govr. went off with McLean & then we went on at our journey with Mr Brown & Gore & got to Springfield at 12.30 before the coach had started. It was very full & I had to ride on a seat on the roof where it got very cold before we reached the Bealy at 9 p.m.

Yesterday morning we were off again at 4.30 a.m. & got down to Kumara at 3 p.m. where we left the coach and took a wooden rail horse tram to this place crossing the Taramakau 700 ft wide in a cage swinging on a wire rope. We got there within 48 hours from Wellington. The crossing of the pass (Arthurs Pass) was splendid as the early morning air was clear & keen enough to make the walk pleasant. There are no alpine flowers out yet & there is very little snow on the Mts. It was high above us in the pass which is very unusual for this time of year. I felt rather sore last night with the long journey as the shaking was pretty severe, but I was all right & out at 6 a.m. & went over the harbour works before breakfast. I write this while waiting for the rest to start up to the Mine where we spend today. This will catch the aft. coach & should reach you on Monday.

With much love.

Your affect Husband

J. Hector.

[MS-443-3/27/23]

Greymouth Harbor Board
Monday
13 October 1890

My dearest Georgie

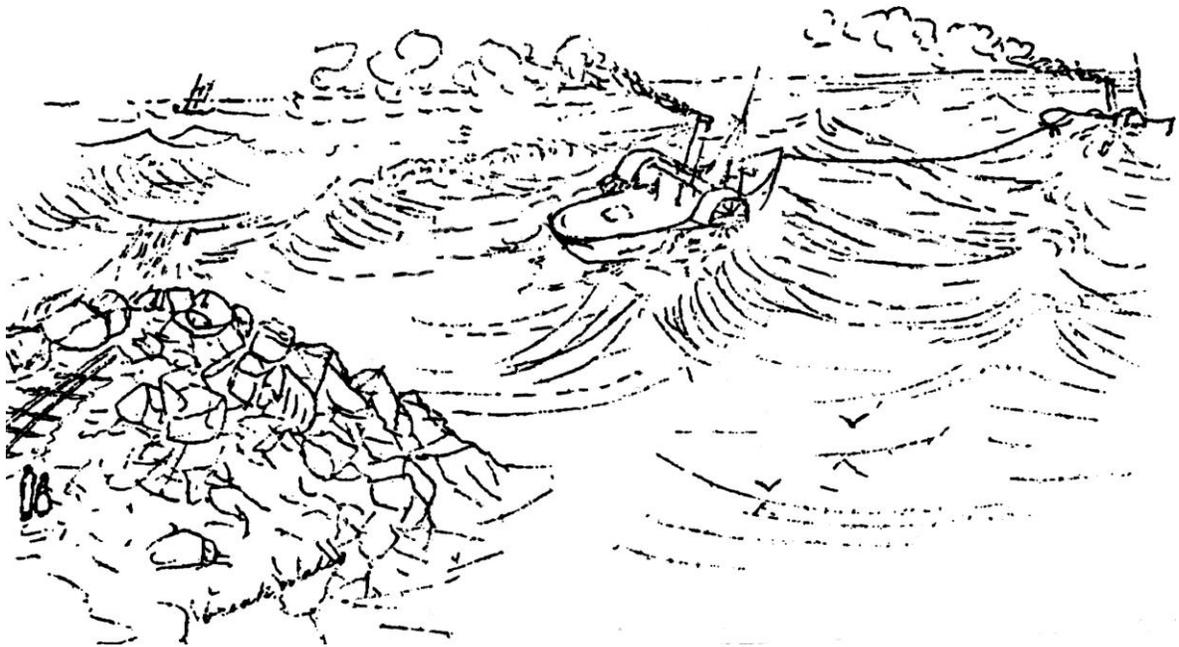
I have ½ an hours lull so may write you a note to go by tonight's overland mail which may reach you on Thursday. I wrote since our visit to the Mine on Thursday last & I fear we have already got into trouble thro' the local newspapers of which there are three – all little rags of things – but they think they should be fully informed of all that we do and particularly wish to be present & give their version of the evidence we take so as to keep up with the excitement. We have however decided to have no one present except the witness who is being examined as there is so much intimidation that the men would fear to speak out their minds.

On Friday we sat from 9.30 till 5.30 going through accounts & again on Saturday all forenoon & in the afternoon had a long walk examining the Harbour works but both Sat & Sunday it rained very hard in the forenoon. I intended to have ridden north yesterday about 16 miles to visit a coal seam that is on fire but it was too wet. In the aft. it cleared & we walked over to Cobden & visited some gold dredging claims & in the Evg. I went to church with Gore & heard some very good music. The church is very pretty & they have a nice organ & choir. Archdeacon McLean preached. He is a very little man & did not make himself well heard. After church we went to sup with Mr Martin, the district Engineer & his wife played very nicely & she sang. So far we are a happy family. Mr Brown is very steady going & quiet. He is somewhat like what [?] Seed used to be in appearance. He is very strict & went twice to church yesterday - & would not go to the English church as he does not approve of the service.

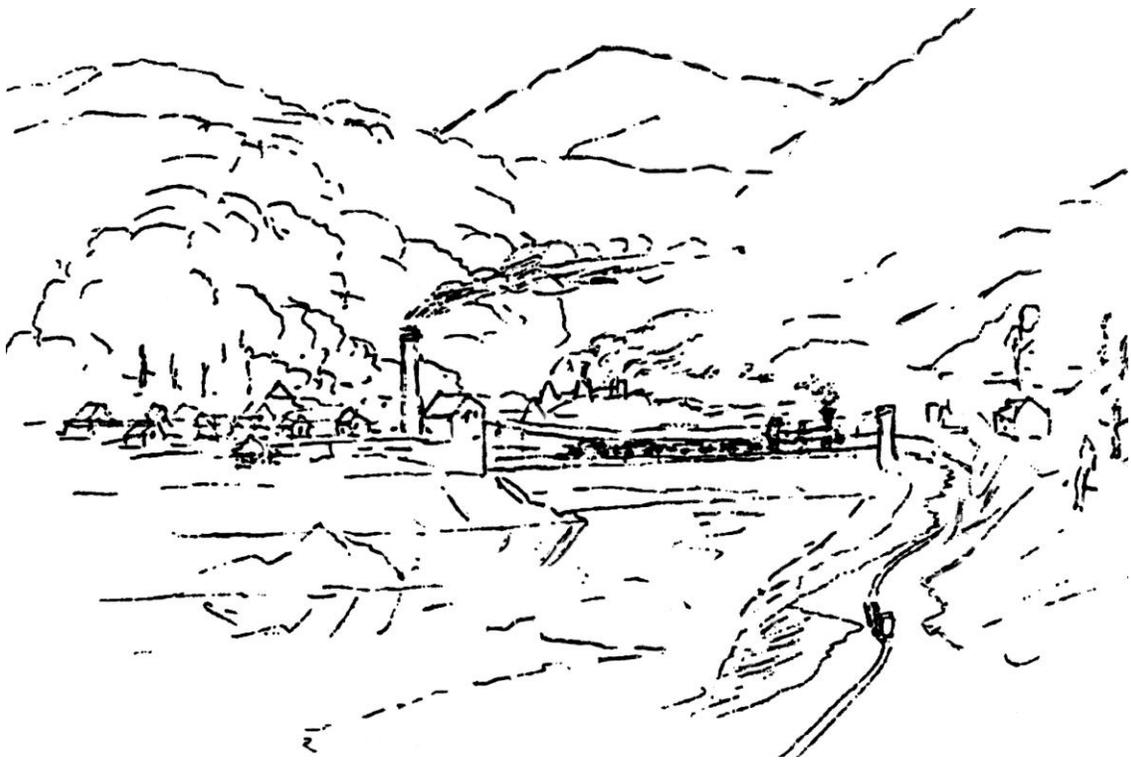
This morning we had our first witness – Mr Martin Kennedy – who is managing director of the coal mines where the dispute exists. I was 3 hours examining him & found it pretty hard work. As Gore has more shorthand notes than he can write out tonight we go on with Kennedy again tomorrow morning & thru afternoon discuss the documentary evidence. I am afraid it is going to be a very long job. It is as well that we did not wait for Friday's coach as it has not yet arrived. Something has happened to it between this and the Bealy where it is still detained I hear – but I hardly expect a letter from you when it does come. We have had five steamers in from the north since Friday & got Wellington papers up to Wed Eveng. & a lot of big official letters. I hope before long to hear how you are getting on. Our quarters are not very comfortable. Everything gets damp & smelly. I forgot night garments & had to buy 2 at 6/- each. I wish I had brought some more things but it can't be helped now. It looks like clearing up at last. Now I must send love to all at home & go to work again as I hear them coming back from lunch.

Yr affect. Hub

J. Hector



Mouth of the Grey river, with vessels crossing the bar (J.H. Menzies)



View of Brunnerton, with mine buildings, chimney and miners' houses in the centre. (J.H. Menzies)

[MS-443-3/27/24]

Greymouth
16 Oct 1890 (Thursday)

Dearest Georgie

I must let you have half my lunch hour as there will not be time to catch the mail after we rise this evening as we are sitting long hours. It is much harder work than Dn as there are no lawyers & I have to conduct nearly the whole examination myself. This involves my getting up the subject each witness is to be examined in before hand, so that I get all the points out of them in proper order. But I daresay that I will survive it.

There is very little distraction here so I might as well fill up the time with work. The weather has been steady rain since I last wrote till today when it is finer. There has been a great flood in the river, making a grand sight. My daily routine is very regular. Up at 6.30. Shower, Bath & read. Breakfast at 8. Office at 9. Lunch at 1. Adjourn for a walk or smoke at 5. Dinner at 6. & spend the evening with the others discussing evidence & the like & turn in at 11 p.m. Except on Tuesday evening last this has been very regular, but that evng. we were invited to an entertainment by the Minerva Club in the Volunteer Hall. About 300 came then & we sat in the dark and enjoyed a series of *Tableaux vivant* by the young ladies of the club introduced with songs etc. It was really well done & lasted over 2 hours. To soften the effect a gauze sheet was in front of the stage – a great improvement - only it caught fire and was soon extinguished.

We have got through 5 witnesses now & I have an interview with the strike leaders & they are to come before us at Brunnerton on Monday. I suspect we will have to get some police to be in attendance. The men look very sulky & determined to have their way. I am afraid they are getting in debt. There are about 450 miners out on strike here & the wages they are refusing range from 10/- to 15/- per diem!

I have not had a word from home since I left. Fridays coach did not arrive till Monday i.e. 2 days late but Monday's mail was up to time last night but no letters for me. The bar is quite closed now with the flood so no steamers arrive. I will send you a loving wire on the 18th. God bless you dear wife. Give my love and kisses to Marjory & Ina & Boysie & all the rest. I wrote Charlie the other day – I thought you was to send me a delayed T'gram now and then!! I do weary to hear of you all. Make Barclay write to me & Con & Doug.

Yr affectionate husband

J Hector.

[MS-443-3/27/26]

Greymouth 20th Oct 1890
Monday mng

My dearest Georgie

As the flood in the river has gone down a little the *Grafton* will probably get out at 11.15 today – noon – so I may as well write you a note before breakfast as it will reach you sooner than on the overland mail this evening. The weather has been very bad here. Now almost hot rain & gales from the N till Friday night when there was thunder and lightning & up it came from the SW with tremendous force & very cold so that the hills were quite white in the morning. Yesterday there was passing showers with fine weather between so I got a short walk & went to church in the Evening & heard a very good sermon partly on the strikes. I went all alone as Gore went with some folks that he had tea with, & Mr Brown went over to Cobden to preach in a schoolroom there. He was preaching in the morning somewhere else. I fancy he is a Plymouth brother or some such. Mr Moody stuck to the fire all day.

We got a lot done last week & worked late on Saturday. Poor Gore has to take evidence all day & then has to sit up all night neatly writing it out for the witnesses to sign. It is just a week since Govt promised to send a second reporter, but he has never come yet.

We go up by this morning's train to Brunnerton to begin examining the miners. The leaders who seem to take a deal on themselves have written sending us a list of mens names & what questions they are to be asked!! So I suspect there will be some fuss. The river has been very grand & at one time it was thought there might be a --ad big flood like last year when it was a 4 ft deep in the town & over the top of the dining room table in this house,

With love to all from yr affect Husband

James Hector

[MS-443-3/29/273]

Tuesday 21 Oct 90

My dearest Georgie

Yesterday turned out a very stormy day with fierce wind & rain so that the river is higher than ever this morning & the *Grafton* did not get out. She is advertised to go at 2 p.m. today & as there is not much wind she may do so. I will have been here a fortnight tomorrow & am getting very sick of it.

We went up to Brunner yesterday morning but found such a storm raging & got so wet & they have nothing but a kind of shed for us to meet in – with no fire & perched on the brink of a high terrace on to which we had to climb up a watercourse – so that we struck at once and came back by the return train bringing our first miner witness with us & examined him all day in our office here. We got their side of the story which turns out very sad. There are about 320 men out of work & even if the Mines opened again to day there would not be room for more than about 100. We are to have one of the great leaders up to day – Ansell – who is standing for Parliament. There is a satirical letter in today's "rag" about his doings which I will send you. Pass it on to Mr Comber. The papers never mention us as we won't let them report the evidence.

It is queer that I have never had a letter since I left – nor a paper from any one. You sent on a letter from Prof Carpenter which came off the S.F. Mail & I got it last Thursday. I have also got big parcels of official documents by several mails, but no letters except from Hutton.

This is a very out of the way place. I suppose you are all well as I get no telegrams. Yesterday Gore wired for a weeks leave for Barclay. Where is he off to? & why did he not wire to me himself? I do wish I was at home again. With much love

Your affect hub

J. Hector

[MS-443-3/27/28]

Greymouth
Wed 22 Oct 1890
7 a.m.

My dearest Georgie

The *Grafton* is not away yet but is to sail at 3 today bar permitting – but it looks very unpromising at present & then comes the rain again tho when I got up it was quite bright and fine. I was so glad to get your wire last evening saying all was well & that you want to go over to Zealfield. I am going to wire you this morning that I don't think I can be home for a fortnight & that you should try to get some one to take charge and go over at once. I daresay you could manage this.

We are working as hard as we can but there are still some 20 witnesses whose names have been suggested but there is a lot of them that I don't see any need of hearing as they will only repeat the same stories. We had three yesterday, an engineer & two miners one of whom Ansell is considered a very turbulent character & is going to stand for Parliament. He is a very hideous and rough looking chap but he proved quite quiet in my hands – even docile - & I got a lot of point out of him. The other miner was a splendid witness, a tall strapping fellow, frank & fearless & truthful & not a bit anxious to push extreme issues. If all of them were like him there would be no strikers & yet queer enough he was put in as a witness by the other miners which to me shows that they don't care about extreme unionism. We were going to try again at Brunnerton today if fine, but I suppose that this rain will bring the witnesses we had arranged for down by train. I am going to start on the Report this evening & get it framed out. Gore is now a week behind with writing out his shorthand notes – and there is no sign of the *Murray* with the second reporter they are sending.

Why not get Connie¹ over to stay with you & bring some of the children? That would fix the matter & then when I return you could go back with her.

With much love

Yr affect Husband

James Hector

I will write every morning till that steamer goes. Col. Hunn has now been waiting 6 days to get away.

¹ Constance Dillon, Georgiana's sister, whose husband had recently died

[MS-443-3/27/29]

Greymouth Harbour Board
Thursday 23 Oct. 1890

My dearest Georgie

At last I got a note from you last night, very late – & it was most welcome. It was dated 15th so it was 7 days old, but you have probably written since then as there are now 3 boats on the way here from Nelson. Mr Hyde the reporter to relieve Gore left Wn on Saturday in the *Kennedy* & they don't know where she is, probably in West Whanganui or some other place where there is no telegraph – taking shelter. It has been horrid weather here. The *Grafton* only got away this morning at 5 a.m. after six days detention. She must have several of my letters to you on board!!

I got a lot of letters sent on by Mr Gore that came by S. Frisco Mail. Among others from Prof. Huxley & Prof. Newton of Cambridge saying that they are very sorry that they can't get away to attend the meeting at Ch.Ch. I also had a nice letter from Charlie which I enclose. When you send his money (or if you have done so) send £1 extra to pay for a tin box and to pay his expenses of ---ting. Dear old boy – isn't he a real good chap. I expect when the *Kennedy* comes to get more news from Barclay. Charlie sent me your last letter to him of 13th which gave me lots of news so I have had quite a fine time & feel much less desolate. We are giving the whole of today to working up evidence & going through accounts as Gore is so far behind with his notes that there is no use taking more evidence.

During the last two days we have had great arguments with men who are Unionists & out on strike as we were anxious to find out really what is in their minds and to discuss something about their ---- organization. The poor men here have been quite deluded & there are about 2000 women & children very near starvation. Brunnerton is a very queer place. The houses are built along the sides of a deep gorge in the Mountains through which the Grey River rushes furiously in a narrow cleft hundreds of feet deep. This is crossed by two suspension bridges & along the side of the gorge by the big mines you see the great coke ovens & retorts throwing out a great blaze of light. The mines extend into & under the mountains for miles by the turns & twists of the tunnels but the furthest in point is only $\frac{3}{4}$ mile in a straight line from the entrance. The other miners go down to the coal by shafts 660 ft deep & they have worked out acres of coal right under the river.

I am getting a lot of nice photographs & will keep a set for you & perhaps put them on glass slides & give the chicks a lecture. I think our report will be rather interesting. I have written this in a lull of the work to go by the overland coach tomorrow at 5 a.m. so if rivers don't stick up the coach you shd get this note on Monday mrg.

With much love to all

Yr affect hub

J. Hector

[MS-443-3/27/30]

Greymouth
25 Oct 90
Saturday Morg.

My dearest Georgie

Three steamers from Wellington came in last evening & I got two notes from Lord Onslow about some Partidges he expects but no others. I was quite looking for a budget & also some papers as we never see any news here. Mr Hyde the 2nd reporter also arrived. The *Kennedy* left Nelson on Monday & got stuck over at Tonga & did not reach Westport till Thursday morg. Mr Hyde then left her & took the coach round by Reefton so that it took him two days & he arrived here only an hour before the *Kennedy* after all!

I fancy we are to see the coal mines at work again on Monday – as the strike is giving way. The miners here are getting frightened at last as they hear that 119 men have been engaged in Dn to take their places. I don't think the mine can at present employ many more than that number as owing to the long time it has been standing it is out of order and the deep parts are full of water which will take 2 months to pump out. I fear that at least 1500 men women & children will be thrown out of employment without much hope. A bad feature is that many of them have bought land & built houses out of their past earnings & if they have they will not find any purchasers as the men who are coming have neither money nor credit.

It ceased raining yesterday forenoon but came on again at night & the weather looks better than morning. We will get on a little faster now & I begin to see the end of the evidence taking at this place – then to Reefton for 2 days & then to Westport for 3 or four days. Then Nelson where we have to look up documents in the Land Office & where we will remain until the report is finished and signed. If I were to return to Wn to work on the report I would be immediately bothered with other things & moreover the special pay for this work_would cease!! & I would have to do this kind of work for nothing. However I quite expect to be home about Sat 8 Novbr.

There goes the old cracked gong for breakfast & as we meet at 9 I must be off.

With love to Marjory & all the rest

Yr affect. Husband

James Hector

This will go by some of the boats – prob the *Charles Edward*

[MS-443-3/27/31]

Greymouth
27 Oct 1890

My dearest Georgie

The mail via Ch.Ch arrived up to time on Sat. evening & I was very glad to get two letters of 19th and 21st from you & and an enclosure from Connie. Barclay's letter you mention did not arrive but I got two "N.Z. Times" & a "Mail" addressed by him. From what you write and my T'gram to you I hardly expect this will find you at home. It will be so nice if you can manage to be back from Zeafield when I am home again as I dislike this sea-saw business as much as you do. What does Connie mean about going to Ch.Ch to stay. Why should she go there – or perhaps she means to Mrs D-----'s. I wish she would take a place near us instead of living all alone on the run. It must be very miserable for her. How queer of Mrs Busby to be so stiff under the circumstances. How can it be accounted for. Perhaps she feels shy thinking Connie may know all about Tom's trouble.

I am so glad that you were able to be kind to Mrs Kinross. Poor thing, she must need all the help she can get from old friends. I hope Old K. has got some comfortable kind of home for them to go to. About Mrs Baldwins letter. I only know that the agents found a tenant for the house but they asked that certain repairs should be authorized & I had to agree tho it will swallow up ½ years rent or more, so I don't think she will get any remittance for some time. Then the Insurance & Rates are very high. I paid them for last year you may remember & they are about due again & I suppose they will claim against me. It is a horrid bore having to be placed in such a situation. It is hard enough to have to look after ones own affairs.

The weather here is fearful – gale after gale with only a few hours between each. NW. Thunderstorms – torrents of rain & a hurricane – SW – hail & plumpers – sunshine or moonlight – for two hours & then have it all over again. But I see today that it has been much the same from West Australia and all over Australia to N.Z. & that you have been enjoying your share in Wn. I hope that no serious damage has been done. We have still a lot of evidence to take but I do hope we will finish this week. I spent all yesterday at the Report until evening when I went to church with Mr Gore. I like feeling that when I am going through the service that you and some of the other dear ones may be doing the same at Petone. There was a large attendance & the church was full. They have a lot of hymn tunes and chants that were new to me and which Gore did not know. He is a very nice lad. So quiet and hardworking but so bright & pleasant all the time.

I wrote a note to Con last evening. I wish Barclay had sent his letter as he could have given me some of the office news. I hope he will enjoy his holiday. He was 21 on Saturday & he really should begin to steady up a bit & face the work of life. Every day he puts off loitering it will only make it harder for him to begin.

With much love,
Yr affect husband

James Hector

[MS-443-3/27/32]

Greymouth
30 Oct 90
Thursday

My dearest Georgie

I think I will be able to start on Sat morn. for Reefton & get on to Westport on Monday & perhaps leave there for Wn direct on Wednesday. But all this depends so much on the weather & other things that it can't be depended on. I finished taking evidence this afternoon. We have now been sitting 19 days & examined 25 witnesses – some of them on two days. We have a great pile of evidence of all sorts & I have made so little progress with the Report that the others have agreed to go on with the enquiry at Reefton & Westport & then adjourn to Wellington & get a room there where we can get through the job in comfort.

Yesterday we went up to Ahaura by rail & on the way back spent the afternoon examining the formations at the Brunner Gorge & tomorrow I am to spend underground examining the mines as far as possible. There will be less risk now as they have been driving air in with fans to get rid of the Fire damp that may have accumulated during the time that the mines have been idle. I think they will get started again on Monday as 84 free labourers are on their way & 120 of the old hands have applied to be taken on again without conditions.

Yesterday & today have been the first fine days we have had but this evening is again clouding up again in the west. This will go by the West Coast road & if it catches the steamer will reach you on Monday. If not I may be with you as soon as this is.

With lots of love from your affectionate old hub.

J. Hector

[MS-443-3/27/33]

Greymouth
1 Nov 1890
Saturday

My dearest Georgie

The *Grafton* is going out tonight so I may write a line as it will reach you a few days before I get to Wn. I fear I can't be there before you leave on Thursday but it can't be helped. I had a long day in the mine yesterday & went thro every part of it – right in to where the pillars have been taken out & the roof is tumbling down in great masses. It felt a bit queer at times, but I think it is all safe enough. We had safety lamps with us but found no gas tho the choke damp was rather bad in places. You see the mine has been standing for more than a month & has got out of order. The strike is quite broken now & the first trucks of coal for six weeks came down the Rly last evening! A good many hands were begging for work yesterday in the most piteous manner & going into the mine on any terms. I think they see now what fools they have been. As I came away in the evening it was quite pleasant to meet a lot of them with their little lamps stuck in their caps again on their way to the Mine.

Gore and Mr Hyde stay here today to finish up notes etc & go on to Westport by the *Grafton*. Probably Gore may go right on with her to Wellington & Mr Hyde will wait for us. We leave at 9.30 by rail for Ahaura. Then by coach to Reefton & get there tonight & on Monday by coach to Westport – a long day down the Buller Gorge. The others talk of coaching to Nelson but I will try and catch a direct steamer from Westport to Wellington as I am sick of this job & want to get to my other work. I have not done a thing on my address yet!! It looms up like a horror.

With much love & hoping soon to be home again.

Yr loving husband

James Hector

Postscript

James Hector returned to Wellington from Westport in early November 1890. His first task was to complete the final reports for the two Commissions of Inquiry, which were tabled in parliament in early 1891. They were printed in the Appendices to the House of Representatives (AJHR), and are now available online at <http://atojs.natlib.govt.nz>

Dunedin Hospital Inquiry

AJHR 1891, Session II, section H-01

Grey Valley Coal Mines

AJHR 1891, Session II, section C-03

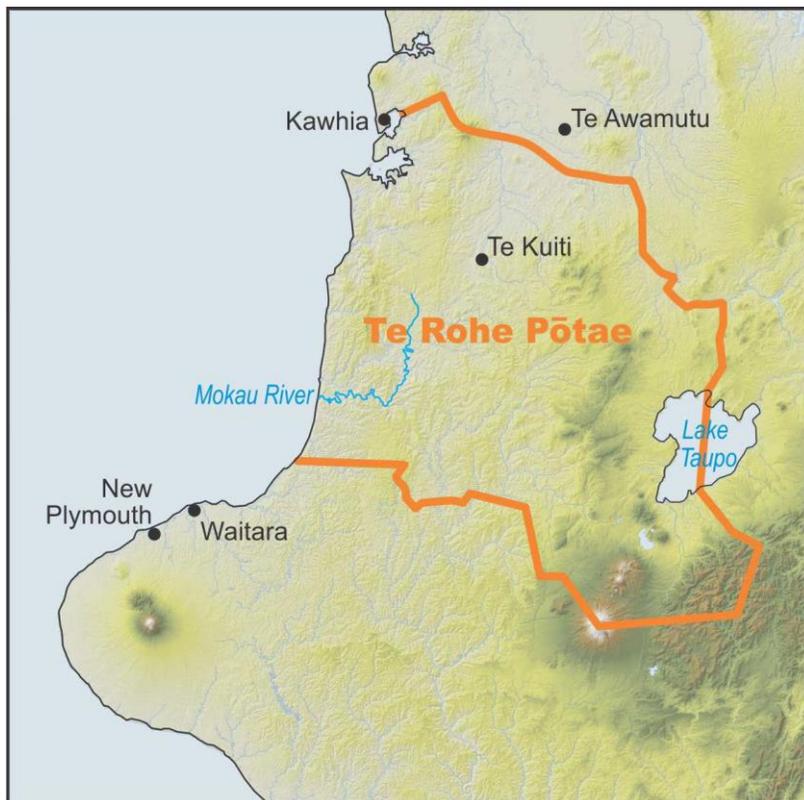
Following the general election in December 1890, a new Liberal government was elected, with John Ballance as Premier. Hector was clearly identified with the previous government, and his political influence declined. He returned to Greymouth in 1896 as a member of the Commission enquiring into the Brunner Mine disaster.

Part 3: Other letters written by James Hector to Georgiana

A trip into Te Rohe Potae - 1878

Following the land wars in 1863-64, Waikato tribes retreated southwards into the territory of their Ngati Maniopotō allies. For the next 20 years this region was a refuge for Maori called Te Rohe Potae (known to pakeha as the King Country). During the 1870s there were several attempts to persuade Maori to allow settlement and construction of a railway linking Auckland and Wellington. In 1878 Hector attended a meeting at Waitara with a group of government officials and chiefs, including the highly respected warrior, Rewi Maniapoto. While general access was still denied, it was agreed that Hector could accompany Rewi on a trip up the Mokau River and examine coal seams that were known there. He visited Te Kuiti, then the headquarters of the King movement, and then travelled overland to Te Awamutu.

Hector wrote to Georgiana while he was at Waitara, before leaving for the trip up the Mokau River.



Sketch map of the extent of Te Rohe Potae in the late 1870s

[MS-443-3/17/13]

Waitara
Wednesday 27 November 1878

My dear Georgie

There has been no chance of writing to you but as I am off into the remote districts as soon as the rain clears I must send a few lines to say how I am getting on. We had to wait more than an hour for Mr Sheehan on Friday morn. so I was in lots of time. The party included Mr Zeneis S's private secty, Major Campbell, Mr Maunsell & two Maoris Major Kemp & Nahi. We had a pleasant sail as far as Stephens Island when we met such a storm that we put into D'Urville Island for shelter till 4 a.m. on Saturday when we had again a fair wind that took us to Taranaki by 5 p.m. where we landed without much difficulty. On Sunday we all drove out to this place which is 12 miles N of N. Plymouth & interviewed Rewi. We had 3 carriages as Major Brown & a lot of others came to take part in the commissioners visit. It was a fine day but windy & the country is looking lovely at present. I must bring you to see it some day. I spent the evening with Major & Mrs Brown. Their House is in a nice situation overlooking the sea, but is a rather dilapidated old place. The river would be very pretty but the sand on the beach which is very wide being black gives the landscape a dismal look. Sheehan went back again to stay all night at Rewi's & talk matters out but I stayed in town & on Monday morn. started on the 7 o'clock train to Inglewood which is 16 miles on the road by the back of Mt Egmont to Hawera & Wanganui & all the distance the railway is just open. I would have ridden on the remaining 36 miles to see Charlie, but I feared being too long away. I had a splendid view of the Mt & got back to town by 11.30 & just in time to go out again to this place (Waitara) with Sheehan. (Campbell & Maunsell had gone back to the "Stella" the previous evening.) We drove out to Waihi & had a meeting with the Natives in a huge Maori House, 2ce as big as the one at the Museum & the result was that we all drove back in triumph to town with Rewi & a few other great chiefs that had never been previously in the settled districts. It was very interesting to watch them as they were quite nervous. In the evening there was an entertainment of the Mayor & visit to the Theatre where there was a kind of mixed dancing singing & acting by the Star Coy. The front seats had all been secured for the Maoris but Rewi and most of the big chiefs were as solemn all the time as if they were at church. I don't think they saw the fun of it. What did seem to rouse him was the piano at the Margins(?) Miss Hulse played & he sat close to the Instrument with an expression of intense delight on his face. He is a fine looking old chap & much tatoed.

Yesterday morning the Maoris having staid all night in town there was another talk & Sheehan told me it was decided that he is not to try to get through to the Kings country up the Mokau to the Waikato but that Rewi was going & that I might accompany him as far as they would let me so I made all my arrangements & having finished my business in town came out here last night to pick up all the news I can about the Natives & to be ready to start. Sheehan goes back direct by steamer to Wellington. Rewi will have a large party of Natives with him & I think I have in all right with the big chiefs so I have

no fear of anything worse than being turned back. If I am not allowed to go right through I will try to cross to the head of the Wanganui & go down that river in a canoe.

But Rewi has a little child, a niece with him who is sick & I have already started treating her & several of the Natives as I have got a big package of medicines & 3 pairs of tooth forceps & I think that the chances are that they will take me through as their travelling Physician! I don't care as long as I get a look at the country – but I must not be too successful in my cures as they may want to keep me for longer than I care. Mr & Mrs Hulse who have a pretty house here that they use in the summer, came out in the train & asked me to tea so I spent a pleasant evening & this forenoon I have had the Rev Mr Walsh the parson talking with me so I am not lonely. Notwithstanding that, the rain is pouring down & the wind howling & the “Public” is a very rough place.

My programme is as follows. Rewi goes overland to Mokau but sends all the baggage by a little steam launch & I will go by her so as to avoid taking a horse & I will get to Mokau in 2 hours while they will take 2 days. We then are to go up the Mokau River in canoe for 70 miles (say 3 days) & from this point it is about 2 days journey to Te Kuiti where the Maori King is. If it is all right I can get from there to the Waikato Railway in 2 days & on to Auckland. If not I will try to cross to ?Tukina & work down to Wanganui. If they won't permit that – I must come back by the Mokau & this place.

Now you have all my news. I telegraphed to you on Sunday & ask news of Connie but have got no answer. I hope she is up and about again all right.

I suppose I wont hear from you now till I return. Nor you from me till I get ----- back to this place, or through to Alexandra or Wanganui where I will telegraph. I am pretty right now but for damp & rain which is making my head ache again & the boils still keep coming & going. I daresay I will be all right when I am finally in the bush.

With lots of kisses to the dear little ones
Ever your loving husb.

James Hector

The Transit of Venus – 1882

The 1882 Transit of Venus was an event of great interest to the small New Zealand scientific community. Under the leadership of James Hector and James McKerrow (surveyor-general) plans were developed for a network of official observers around the country, all linked together by telegraph to give accurate timing.

There were observing groups in all the main towns, but Hector decided to make observations in Clyde, central Otago. He took with him a 6-inch Cook telescope loaned by G.V. Shannon. His own, smaller telescope was left behind, to be used by the team at the Colonial Observatory.

Hector's letter to Georgiana was written in pencil on the back of telegraph forms. He describes the preparations leading up to the Transit.



Temporary observatory at Clyde in 1882, From left, local school teacher (name unknown), Reverend Clinton, and James Hector (with telescope).

Photo: Hocken Collections, University of Otago. S08-223.

[MS-443-3/21]

Clyde
4 Decr. 1882

My dear Georgie

I am now ready for the Transit having finished the fitting up of the Observatory & nothing remains but to get my chronometer error and to practice with the Telescope & with my assistants so that they may be well drilled in their duties. Whenever I have been able to leave I have been off in various directions to see gold diggings & mines & last night I gave a lecture to an audience of about 200 which is a large number for this place. Some of them drove in 20 or 30 miles to hear it. I had made a lot of diagrams on blank calico & it went off very well. So you see I have not been idle. There are a few very nice folks here but as a township it has gone back sadly. Indeed the whole of this district has quite a deserted look whereas it was at one time the most bustling part of N.Z. The diggers have all gone to other places but have left lots of good rich deposits quite untouched. The expense of living & of getting water for washing the gold has been the great drawback. If they would only contrive machinery to make the big river lift up part of its water to the level of the Plains there might be abundance of food grown & abundance of gold obtained.

Mr. & Mrs. Walter Johnston with Werry & Blair spent Wednesday night here, which made a pleasant change. They were such a mess of dust after coming thro' the gorge but seemed to have enjoyed their trip up Lake Wakatipu. They were also at the Wanaka Lake. I was there last Sunday & found it lovely. I had not seen it for 18 years! & found very little change – except a few houses & farms, very little planting of trees, but a great destruction of native vegetation of all kinds by fires & rabbits. The borders of the lake & the little Islets all look quite bare. In the forenoon I basked in the sun in a beautiful garden that belongs to the hotel by the side of the Lake. It reminded me of Lucerne somewhat. In the afternoon I drove to see the Govt nursery garden where they raise trees for distribution in the district & in the evening went for a sail on the Lake in the Moonlight with a lot of children. I must take you to see the Wanaka some day. In the course of six months they will have a fine steamer on it.

I rode over to Galloway one day with Mr Clinton the clergyman to call on the Rees family who used to live in the Wakatipu Lake in olden days. One of the girls is going to be married to a young Clinton in a few days (a lawyer here). They have made Galloway such a pretty place – but he has only been managing for Robt Campbell & he has suddenly got notice to leave which is very hard on him. Another day I rode south to Alexandra & ----- the river to examine some new reefs near to where Frasers station is. He is down in Dunedin at present so I have not seen him.

I have a little sitting room & bed room at a queer tumble down Inn, kept by Mrs ?George, a fat old lady who makes us very comfortable. Ashcroft sleeps in the Observatory hut but has his meals with us. The Observatory is just out of the town on the edge of a plain that extends about 7 miles before it reaches the hills on the other side of the valley. I have

taken possession of an empty old Iron house of four rooms & have fitted up all the topographic fixings & led in wires from the Telegraphic office in the Town so that we send messages direct. In front of the hut I have put up a canvas tent ----- for observing from with the big telescope. I have lots of visitors on fine nights to see the stars thro it. We have had many dull days since I came up but the nights are generally fine. Last night we had hard rain for the first time (Sunday).

I hear the coach coming past the obs. so must run over with this. I will start back on Friday & hope to get home about Wednesday week.

----- much love to all

Your J. Hector

Postscript

Transit day was fine over most of New Zealand, and most observers got excellent records. But the *Evening Post* of 7 December 1882 reported, "The only significant failure among the more important observations was that of Dr Hector at Clyde, whose view was vexatiously intercepted by a dense cloud almost at the very instant of contact".

Hector must have been bitterly disappointed, but later that day he telegraphed Mr Shannon, "Sorry lost observation by one minute through a small dark cloud getting in the way: glad you saw well. Your telescope was admirable".

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