

## Ernest at Foxhill, February 1883

“It’s going to be hot today” George called out, to no one in particular. Ernest, still half asleep, pretended he hadn’t heard. If he commented on George’s remark he would have had no excuse to stay in bed. As the oldest son, George had lots of jobs to do round the farm, especially when his father James was away. As he was four years younger than George, not as much was expected from Ernest at this point. Still before he could walk to school Ernest’s task was to feed the hens and collect the eggs, followed by feeding the pigs the “scraps”. Still that took less time than milking the cows, as George had to do. Being the oldest wasn’t necessarily an advantage Ernest reflected.

Ernest liked the warmth of Nelson, the clear sunny days that made the sky shimmer. When he travelled with father to Nelson, past Tuhunanui Beach, the sea would take on a silver colour, blinding him so that he would have to look away. His mother had told him of her childhood in Taranaki before land wars between the Colonial Government and local Te Atiawa iwi forced her family to shift to Nelson in 1860. In Taranaki, she told him, it always seemed to rain. Even when it wasn’t raining the impressive conical peak of Mt Egmont was often covered in cloud, forecasting still more rain on the way.

“How many eggs this morning?” his mother Martha asked. Mum had been up for some hours already, getting breakfast ready and school lunches prepared. “Eight” replied Ernest and added that all the hens still seemed to be picking on the young timid white hen. Martha mentioned about a pecking order between hens. Ernest finished his rolled oats with fresh milk and packed his bag for school. George brought in the silver metallic containers of milk from the morning milking of the cows. Ernest checked to make sure he had the book called “Physics” by Balfour Stewart, Professor of Natural Philosophy at the University of Manchester packed. Manchester was in what Mother called that the “home country”. He could read that during lunchtime while the other children played ball games. Ernest was not in the “in crowd”, they called him “dopey” and he wasn’t as good as some of them at sport. Ernest found he could solve two problems at once when he sat in the shade under the walnut tree in the playground. Thomas Wright would leave him alone as he and his mates would be kicking a ball and he would have time to read his book. Father would be home in two days and he would expect to see the firewood from the fringe of the bush stacked for the approaching winter. That didn’t leave much free time to read before the evening meal, homework and darkness.

### Discussion questions

- 1) Why is being the eldest child not always an advantage?
- 2) How is the breakfast we eat different to what Ernest ate?
- 3) Was Ernest seen as a “cool dude” at school? Why?
- 4) In what ways was his life harder than ours?

School was directly across the Nelson-West Coast road from their house and Ernest always walked to school with younger brother Jim. They did everything together, from sharing a bed, to climbing trees in the bush across the Wai-iti River getting eggs

from the keruru nests, to manning the fort together when they traded missiles with Herbert and Charlie. Sisters Ellen and Alice trailed behind them, they too had tasks in the large Rutherford large family, looking after the younger ones. “Twelve children!”, neighbours exclaimed after Percy was born last winter. Large yes, uncommon in those days, no.

When they arrived Mr Ladley was checking the roll. Thirty four students had turned up today, aged from five to fourteen, on some days there were more than forty present. Harry Ladley made a mildly sarcastic comment about all six Smith children being away, “Perhaps they thought it was hop picking season”. A ripple of laughter went round the room, everyone knew that hop picking wasn’t till March, still a month away. Mr Ladley was twenty eight and had managed to satisfy the expectations of both parents and the dreaded school inspector. The students were graduating into the next standard at a younger age than most Nelson schools. He was also aware that there was no room to be complacent as Ernest’s mother Martha was a former teacher. She made sure all her children knew the alphabet and their multiplication tables up to twelve times before they started school. Homework would always be done and mother often quoted her favourite phrase, “All knowledge is power” to any offspring wanting to avoid completing the homework. Gathering round the fireside at night and competing to beat other family members in spelling bees and quizzes were regular parts of family life.

Morning school went smoothly, Ernest made good progress in long division. The only interruption to the morning’s learning was Walter Miller getting three of the strap on his hand for pulling Mary Lanham’s seat out from under her. “Rather the strap, than the stick” Ernest whispered to Jim. Recently the School Committee had requested that Mr Ladley stop using a stick to discipline students.

### **Discussion questions**

- 5) What sort of person was Ernest’s mother?
- 6) How was Harry Ladley’s class different to classes today?
- 7) What might “All knowledge is power” mean?
- 8) What were some of the fun things Ernest and his brothers did?

Ernest found it easy to multi-task in the shade of the walnut tree. A sandwich in one hand, Professor Stewart’s book in the other. What Ernest liked about the book was that it was more than reading lots of facts and writing, it actually got you to investigate things for yourself. The preface to the book stated “The book has been written, not so much to give information, as to endeavour to discipline the mind by bringing it into immediate contact with Nature herself, for which purpose a series of simple experiments are described, leading up to the chief truths of each science, so that the power of observation in the pupils may be awakened and strengthened.”

How happy Ernest had been when he used one of the sections to calculate how far a storm was recently. Three months ago in spring he had watched huge clouds form as a cold front pushed under a warm layer of air, followed by spectacular thunder and lightning. His young sisters, Florence, Ethel and Evelyn had become fearful as the loud sound grew closer. When he told his family that the lightning was still a mile away because sound took about five seconds to travel a mile, they were impressed.

Afternoon school finished up with the class reciting the kings of England during the fifteenth and sixteenth century. Everything still centred on England, not surprising though when it was remembered New Zealand, as it now was, was barely 40 years an English colony.

Ernest quickly drank a lemonade drink when he got home, thirsty after a hot day. He was about to go and collect some more firewood before tea when mother reminded him, "When your father comes home this weekend, he will need help from you to dig the potatoes". "There goes my Saturday swim with Jim in the river" thought Ernest as he wandered off to look for firewood.

Little did Ernest know that in twelve years time he would leave for England and his days of digging potatoes would be over.

### **Discussion questions**

- 9) Why did Ernest like his science book?
- 10) Why did the children have to learn about the kings of England?
- 11) Why might Ernest's father been away
- 12) Why do we see lightning before we hear the thunder?