



GREENER PASTURES?

There is a quiet revolution taking place in rural New Zealand. Over the past decade, migrant labour has become essential to the country's dairy farms, vineyards and kiwifruit orchards, and as a result, the culture of regional communities is changing. A bustling Sikh temple has opened in Te Puke, songs from Vanuatu warm chilly nights in Central Otago, and in Southland, around 1500 Filipinos are employed on the region's 900 dairy farms. Yet many new-migrant families lead insecure lives, at the whim of immigration law, their future in this country uncertain.

✦ BILL MORRIS ✨ LOTTIE HEDLEY



SPRING

A southerly front rushes across Southland, draping the Hokonui Hills in a fresh veil of snow. Close on its heels, cold, heavy showers, boisterous as lambs, cavort across the landscape.

Just north of Winton, I turn off the highway and pull into the driveway of a small farmhouse. Dante Banzuelo, the farm manager, welcomes me into a warm kitchen, wallpapered in a lush green floral print from the 1970s. A Christmas tree is up in the next room, even though it's only the middle of September.

We share a lunch of pizza and tinned spaghetti, a variation on the dish championed by former Prime Minister Bill English, whose family farm is just up the road.

Banzuelo, his wife, Grace, and their four children, aged from six to 21, are among the 4000 Filipinos who now call Southland home. Banzuelo has been here for a decade. Three of the kids attend school locally, while the couple's eldest child, Danielle, is studying hotel management at Southland Institute of Technology.

Banzuelo is tertiary educated, too—he came to New Zealand after finishing a university degree in the Philippines. His first job was as an assistant herd manager on a dairy farm. Up to then, most of his work experience had been in offices, but he quickly adapted to 5am starts and long days in the worst weather Southland can muster.

Landing a job in New Zealand's dairy industry was a major achievement, he says. Back home, employment opportunities are few, wages low, and poverty and corruption rife.

"It's really the aspiration of most Filipinos to work internationally," he says.


New Zealand is near the top of the list for Filipinos looking to export their skills, he adds, but it's tough to make a home here.

As soon as Banzuelo arrived, his temporary work visa began ticking towards expiry. To stay, he had to climb the career ladder as quickly as possible. If he didn't work his way to the equivalent of a farm manager role within three years, he would have to leave the country.

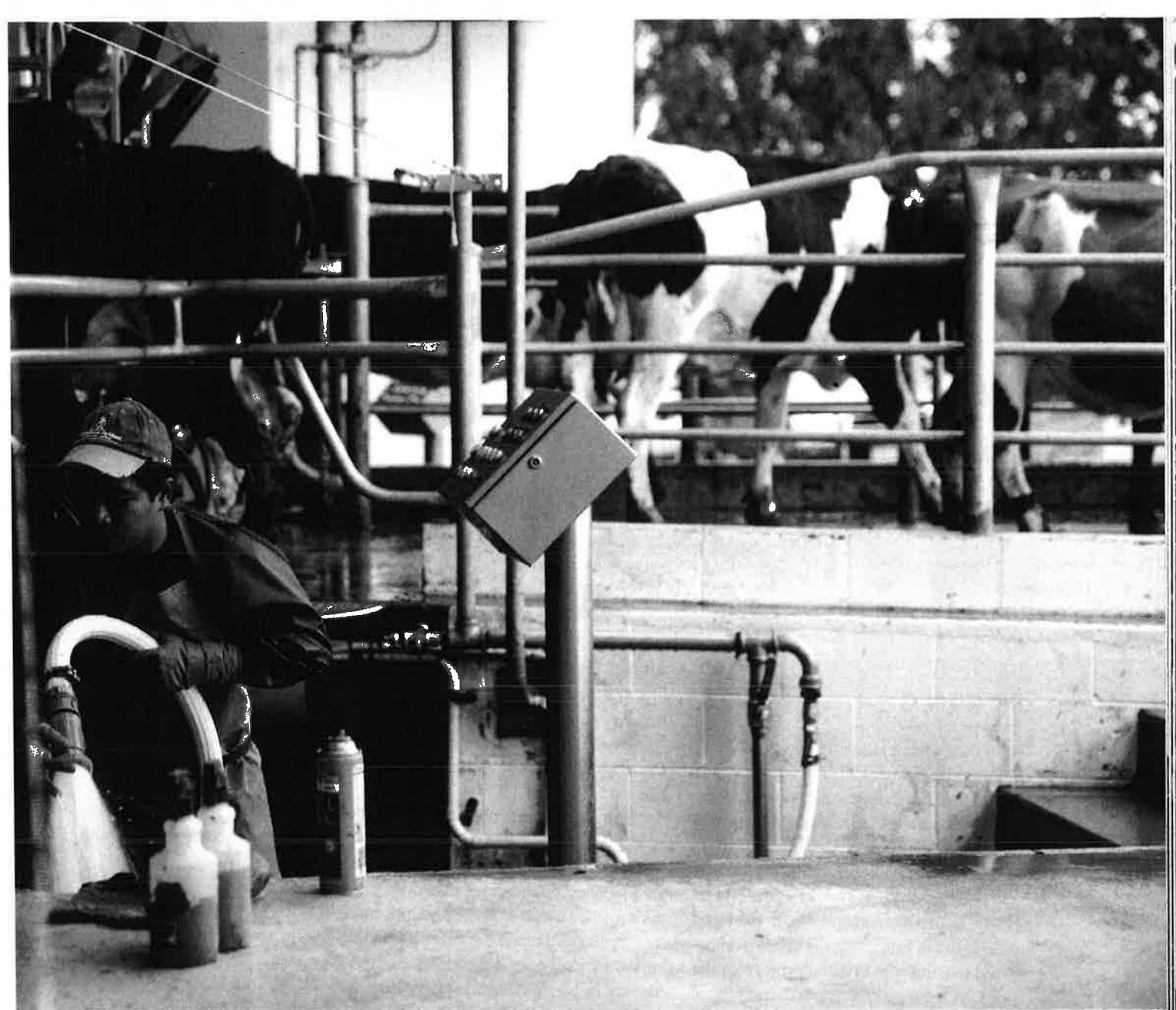
"From every employer, I tried to learn as much as I could, so I could be promoted in the next season," he says. "If I didn't have the opportunity to be promoted, I would move to another farm."

Banzuelo landed a manager's job after three years, but his ultimate goal is to stay in New Zealand, and that remains elusive. His latest application for residency was declined, on the basis that the farm owner who employed him also worked on the farm. Banzuelo was deemed by officials not to be in total control of the farm's management, something demanded by immigration law.

Now, all he and Grace can do is take things one day at a time.



Christopher Alonsabe, pictured here and on the previous spread, works on Rosehill Farm, which is managed by Michael Omega. He is one of about 4000 Filipino migrants in Southland, which has the lowest regional unemployment rate in New Zealand. Despite high demand for skilled farm workers, Filipinos find it hard to attain permanent residency even after years in the country.



“Our lives are here. My children consider this as their country,” he says. “We don’t have anything to go back to in the Philippines.”

IN THE SMOKO room of the dairy shed at Rosehill Farm, near Gore, farm manager Michael Omega, three Filipino workers and farm owner Kenny Baynes are preparing to bring the cows in for the evening milking.

Robust and deep-voiced, Baynes is a born-and-bred Southlander. He converted this farm to dairy five years ago with the help of his brother, Brett, who hired Omega to manage the place. Baynes remembers meeting Omega for the first time: “I just assumed he was an Irishman.”

The joke is greeted with a roar of laughter. On a rain-sodden dairy farm, the Filipino love of humour is a valuable trait.

New Zealand’s dairy industry has undergone significant changes in the past few decades. The shift to more intensive farming has created a labour vacuum, most notably in Southland, a region with an unemployment rate of less than one per cent. The industry is now largely dependent on migrant workers, meaning that skilled Filipinos, such as Omega, are in high demand.

Far from being a convenient labour force to be used and discarded by dairy farm owners, it is increasingly Filipinos who are doing the hiring and firing around here.

“We’d be stuffed without them,” says

Baynes. “They’re dedicated, focused and super reliable. They just have a really good work ethic. They don’t use drugs, they don’t booze up.”

Many Filipino dairy workers have become contract milkers, meaning they provide labour in return for an agreed rate per kilogram of milk solids, or share milkers, which means they have a financial stake in the farm’s livestock and equipment and take a cut of its profits.

Omega is in his mid-40s, and possesses a quiet demeanor. After graduating with a bachelor of science degree in the Philippines, he worked for nine years in Saudi Arabia as an accountant and manager for the world’s biggest dairy farm, a corporation milking 240,000 >

cows. For much of that time, he and his wife, Sheilah, maintained a long-distance marriage, seeing each other for one month a year.

When Omega reached New Zealand, he was employed as a dairy farm worker, the lowest rung on the hierarchy. His new home was a farm near Otautau in western Southland, where, fresh from the desert, he encountered snow for the first time in his life. Sheilah joined him the following year.

"We came here to earn money and support our family; that's always in our heart," says Omega. "That's why, despite how hard it is, we're still going to do it."

He has managed Rosehill for seven years now. In his second year, dairy prices plummeted—the start of a brutal three-year slump for the industry. Baynes credits Omega's managerial skills with keeping the farm afloat.

"Mike's a top operator and that helped us

get through those years," he says. "The government's saying, 'Why not employ Kiwis, there's lots of unemployed here'. But they're just not willing to do the hours, have the lifestyle and deal with the isolation."

Recently, Baynes made the Omegas contract milkers, cementing their working relationship.

"We're not really stealing the job from the locals, because it's hard to get locals," says Omega. "If there is, they might stay here for two months and then leave because they don't like it. In a hundred Kiwis, maybe 10 really have the heart and passion for this farming."

SUMMER

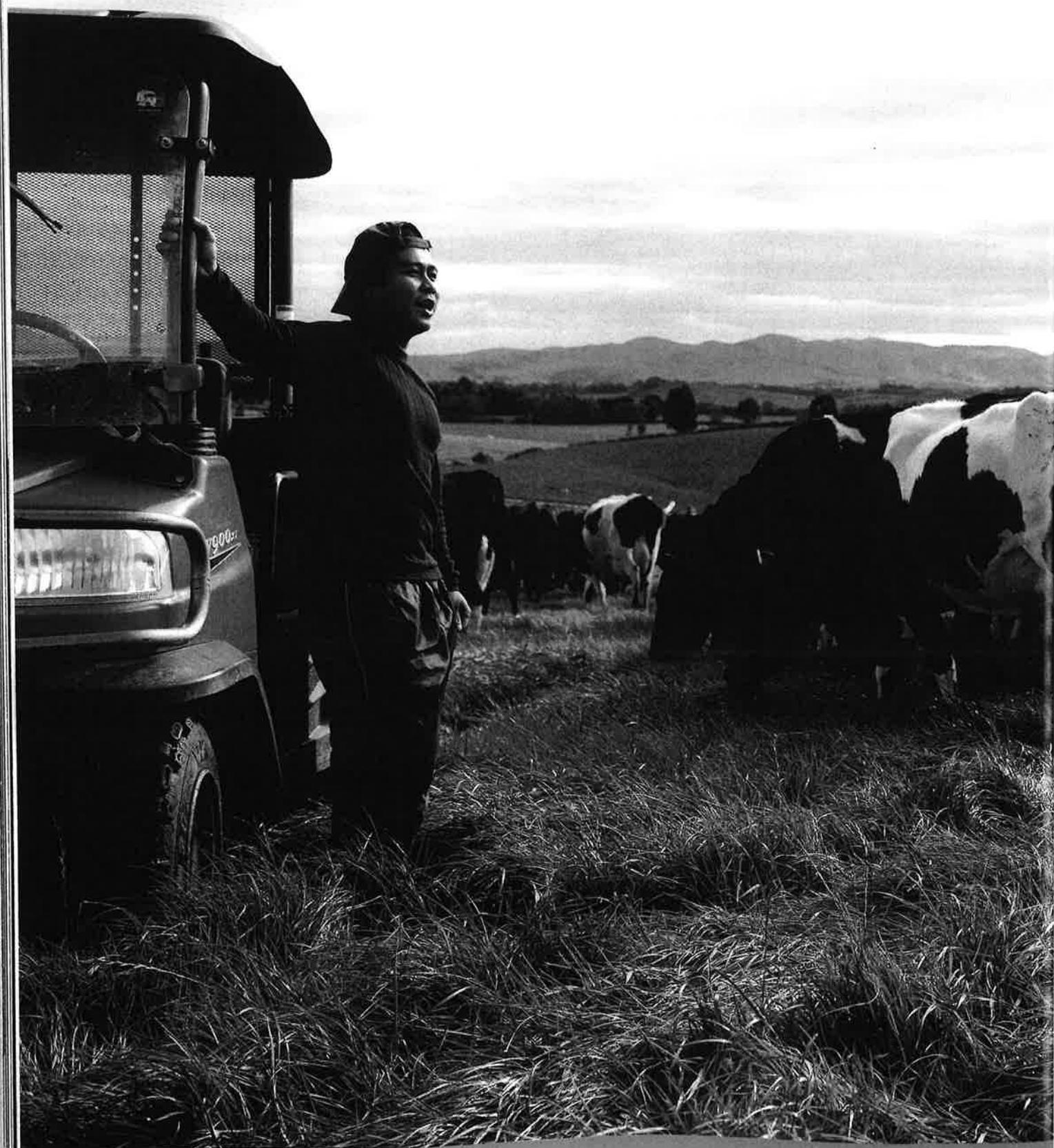
On a balmy evening, I join the crowd filing into Gore's Catholic church. The congregation is composed of two distinct groups—Pākehā parishioners, many of whom are tending towards old age, and a throng of Filipinos, none of whom look older than 50. Filipino children and teenagers populate the aisles. Tonight's service celebrates the Catholic feast of Santo Niño, led by Filipino priest Father Fredy Permentilla.

Permentilla's calling, since migrating to New Zealand five years ago, has been to travel >

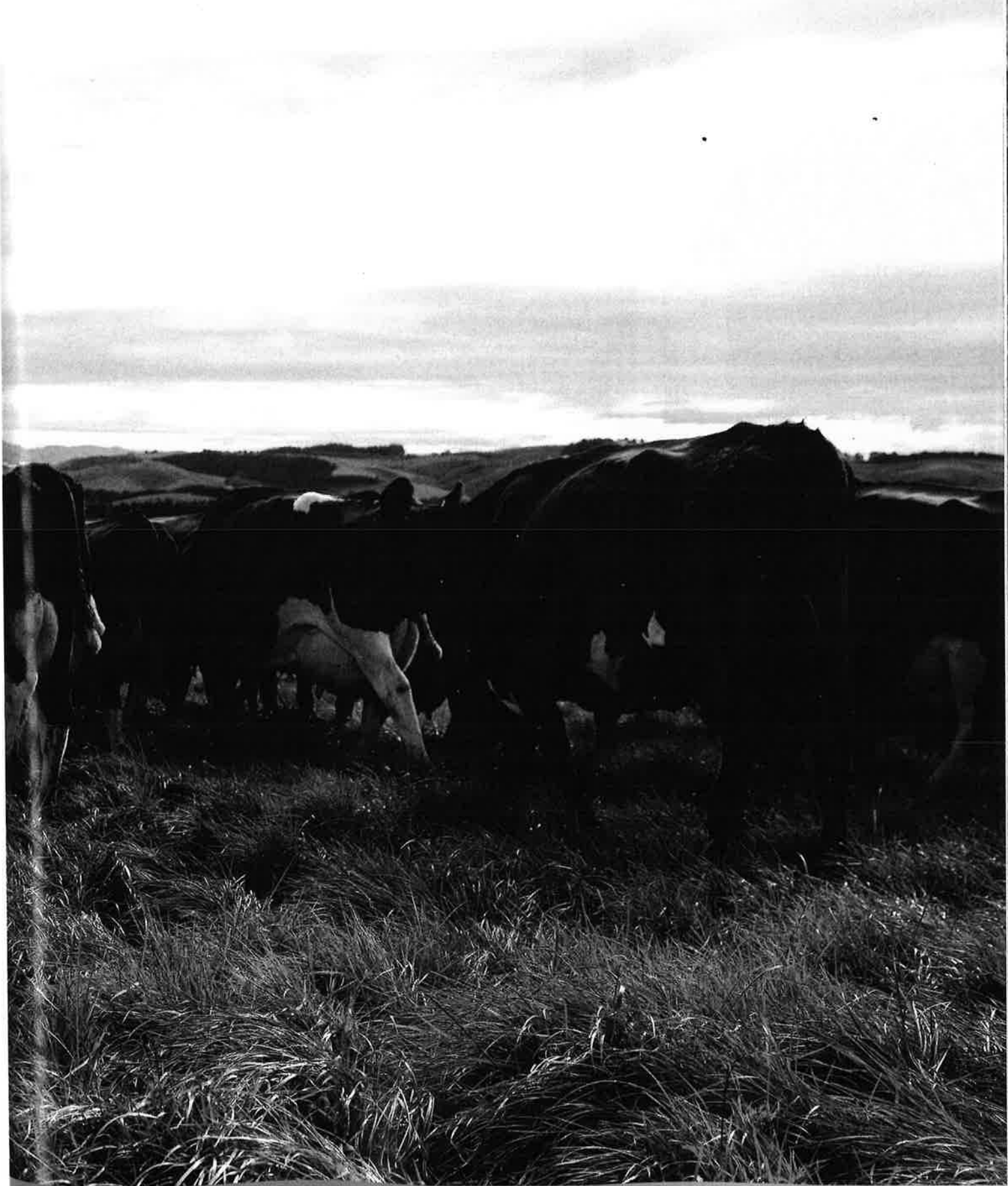
On Good Friday, a crowd of worshippers takes part in the Stations of the Cross procession in Lumsden. With no local priest and a dwindling congregation, Lumsden's Catholic church was in a state of decline until a Filipino woman, Bernadette Pardo, rallied the Filipino community to fill the pews. The Stations of the Cross is now a regular annual fixture and Filipinos come from across Southland to participate.







Christopher Alonsabe brings in the cows for milking at Rosehill farm. Alonsabe has a wife and two children in the Philippines, but because he is currently classed as a low-skilled migrant, they are unable to join him here, meaning he rarely sees them. Since this picture was taken, Alonsabe has moved to another farm, where the prospects of attaining a manager's role are higher.



the byways of Southland, ministering to the Filipino community, visiting the sick and attending to the spiritual needs of farm workers. Being a religious people living in an increasingly secular society presents a few challenges for Filipinos.

"The Filipino people have a deep faith—we inherited it from our parents," says Permentilla. "But sometimes their bosses and co-workers will discourage them because they don't believe in God. The challenge now with the families here in New Zealand is with the children, to keep the faith, because they're influenced by their classmates, their friends."

As the church fills up, I take a seat in the back row, near a choir and dance group dressed in traditional red-and-yellow Filipino costumes. Later in the service they perform, the church shaking with the beat of a foreign rhythm. The oldies in the middle pews look somewhat perplexed, although I do notice a few toes tapping.

Afterwards, everyone heads to the hall across the road. Sharing food is integral to Filipino culture, and a big gathering like this always concludes with a feast. Beneath strings of bunting, long tables bear tureens of curry, rice and noodle dishes. Two whole pigs lie roasted on enormous silver trays.

Children run around between the tables. One is celebrating a birthday, and a spectacular cake is produced and cut. A dozen desserts, most challenging the law of maximum sweetness, are arrayed on a separate table.

Amid the hubbub, a table of elderly Pākehā parishioners floats like a life-raft of the old Gore faith, swirling on the dynamic waters of a young church culture.

"I think it's wonderful," one of the elderly women tells me. "They're such a happy people."

As the crowd disperses, I reflect that maybe this is not so new after all. Didn't small-town halls always fill up like this on a Saturday night?

Southland aims to attract 10,000 skilled migrants to the region over the next few years, and Filipinos are queuing up to fill the gap. Only New Zealand immigration law stands in the way.



These social gatherings have dwindled with the decades—but the Filipino community is reviving them, re-establishing a cornerstone of rural New Zealand life.



KNAPDALE SCHOOL, NINE kilometres north of Gore, is comprised of two small buildings, a netball court and a playground surrounded by flax bushes and macrocarpa trees. Beyond, green farmland stretches away in all directions.

The school has six teachers and 38 pupils, almost all of whom come from local dairy farms. About a quarter of the children are Filipino, but there's also a Nepalese pupil and a Kenyan pupil. This kind of diversity is

becoming the norm, rather than the exception, in rural Southland.

One of the school's two classrooms is decorated with posters that capture the blending of two cultures.

"Being a Kiwi kid is about pulling into Milton and getting a cookies and cream ice cream, melting all down your shirt."

"Being a Filipino kid is about big family gatherings that go late into the night. It's eating freshly baked piya for dessert."

"Being a Kiwi kid is all about going fishing on a huge vessel and hauling gigantic salmon on board."

"Being a Filipina is about being yourself. We are all special and we are hard workers and we make our country a better place to live."

One of the school's teachers, Helen Mountney, tells me the Filipino kids excel.

"They're quite academic children and they enjoy coming to school," she says. "The parents expect a lot of their education and they have high expectations from the kids."

Sheilah Omega arrives to pick up her two

Sheilah Omega and her youngest daughter Shane, left, in the kitchen of their home at Rosehill farm near Gore. Shane and her sister Samantha Mikaele attend Knapdale primary school, below, where around a quarter of the pupils are Filipino, almost all from local dairy farms. While many rural schools in New Zealand face dwindling rolls, the influx of Filipino kids in Southland has helped keep schools like Knapdale going strong.

children, and while waiting in the playground, she tells me about working in a large city bank in the Philippines. It was her job for 15 years before she emigrated.

“In the morning, I would put on a lot of makeup and mingle with a lot of clients and talk, talk, talk,” she says. “When I transferred here, I nearly got depression. It’s so hard for me to accept I’m in a remote area without neighbours and without Filipino friends. All you can hear is the ‘baa’ and the ‘moo’.

“Every time I make an overseas call it’s so expensive, so I cannot even talk to my parents. I just prayed that God would give us a good future for our kids.”

In those days, desperate for social interaction with fellow Filipinos, Sheilah and Michael would often drive two hours across Southland just for a birthday party.

Now, they’re well established in the Knapdale community—their youngest child was born here, and Sheilah is on the school’s board of trustees. Like the hundreds of Filipino parents in the region, their children will grow up speaking English as their first language and thinking of Southland as home.

In 2018, the Omegas were made citizens, fulfilling their dream of more than a decade.

“After we had this citizenship, I could say, ‘God is so merciful to us, because after these long years, we are who we are,’” says Sheilah, her voice becoming fragile. “I’m happy now. Because we survived.”



UPSTAIRS FROM THE meat workers union in Invercargill, a sparse conference room and small office form the headquarters of the >



Southland Filipino Society—an information centre and advocacy organisation. Its president, Socrates Mallari, is a veterinarian who came to New Zealand to work on dairy farms.

“When I came here, I was lucky with my employer,” he says. “But I know a lot [of Filipinos] were being abused. New Zealanders didn’t believe that we were capable of thinking for ourselves. But what they didn’t know is most of us are university graduates, that we’re just trying to find better pastures somewhere around the world.”

Recent research suggests worker abuse is

still common in New Zealand’s dairy industry, especially towards migrants. In Southland, however, the tide appears to be turning.

As Filipinos become sure of their worth, it’s easier for them to simply walk away from bad employers—and the market is in their favour. The industry, not to mention the region itself, simply can’t afford to lose these people. Southland shows a side of the immigration debate that Auckland, with its overcrowded roads and housing woes, may never see. Here, population decline is a major concern—a loss of skills, and not enough people to keep

infrastructure running. Shops boarded up, schools closing.

Southland aims to attract 10,000 skilled migrants to the region over the next few years, and Filipinos are queuing up to fill the gap. Only New Zealand immigration law stands in the way.

At a Wednesday-night meeting of the Filipino Society, one issue dominates the conversation—residency.

Most Filipino migrants arrive on a one-year ‘essential skills’ work visa, which they can reapply for annually. But if they aren’t



Hot weather meant a record early harvest for Central Otago's fruit and grape growers last summer. The Ministry of Social Development declared a labour shortage in horticulture, which enabled people on visitor visas to obtain work permits for fruit-picking. There are calls to expand the seasonal worker scheme which brings employees from Pacific islands such as Vanuatu.

earning more than \$52,000 (equivalent to a manager's salary) at the end of three consecutive years, they will be deemed low skilled, and must leave the country and wait 12 months before reapplying. Workers who haven't reached that salary threshold are not allowed to bring their families to New Zealand, enforcing long periods of separation from loved ones.

Migrants facing a one-year stand-down period don't usually return to New Zealand, meaning the time and money farmers have spent training Filipino employees is lost. Even if migrants do reach the salary threshold within three years, many run into bureaucratic brick walls as they try to gain residency.

To Filipinos, Immigration New Zealand appears to give with one hand while taking with the other. In 2017, it announced a special 'work-to-residency' visa pathway for Southland dairy workers on temporary visas, in recognition of the region's labour needs. Meanwhile,

are brought home to me by 20-year-old Alvi Nanat. Her father's New Zealand employer recently changed the name of the farm's registered company. When it came time to apply for residency, Nanat's father was declined on the basis that he was now technically working for a different employer and had not applied for the correct variation to his work visa.

Meanwhile, Nanat had graduated as dux of Central Southland College in Winton, with a scholarship to the University of Otago. But without permanent residency, she faced enormous international tuition fees. Desperate to stay in New Zealand, she repeated Year 13 at school, where her teachers had her tutor other students to keep her occupied.

With the situation still unresolved, she reluctantly returned to the Philippines for a year. Then, finally, she caught a break—Southland Institute of Technology offered her

"We export \$1.7 billion of wine a year. It would probably be half that if the Vanatuans weren't here."

it removed the roles of herd manager and assistant herd manager from the immediate skills shortage list, denying the migrants who held these jobs a pathway to residency. Mallari calls it a "slap in the face".

As a result, Southland is losing Filipinos to Australia or Canada, where immigration law is more amenable and the pay is better. Many migrants I speak to acknowledge they could be getting a better deal elsewhere. But they fight to stay here because they love the place—its lifestyle, its people, even its climate. But uncertainty about the future takes a huge toll on family life.

"We want to settle here and become future citizens," says Rhea Malinao, her voice breaking with tears. "My daughter loves sports, she loves the views of the mountains. She asked me, 'Can we stay here?' And that is so sad. It depends on us, depends if we can pass the qualification, depends on policy."

The life-changing effects of policy details

a scholarship, and she began studying commerce, with the goal of working as a chartered accountant in Southland. She worries about her younger sister, still at school, whose future remains unclear.

"My dad has been here for nearly 10 years," she says. "Doesn't that count for something? My sister has lived half her life here. I went to high school here. All my friends since I was 13 are here."

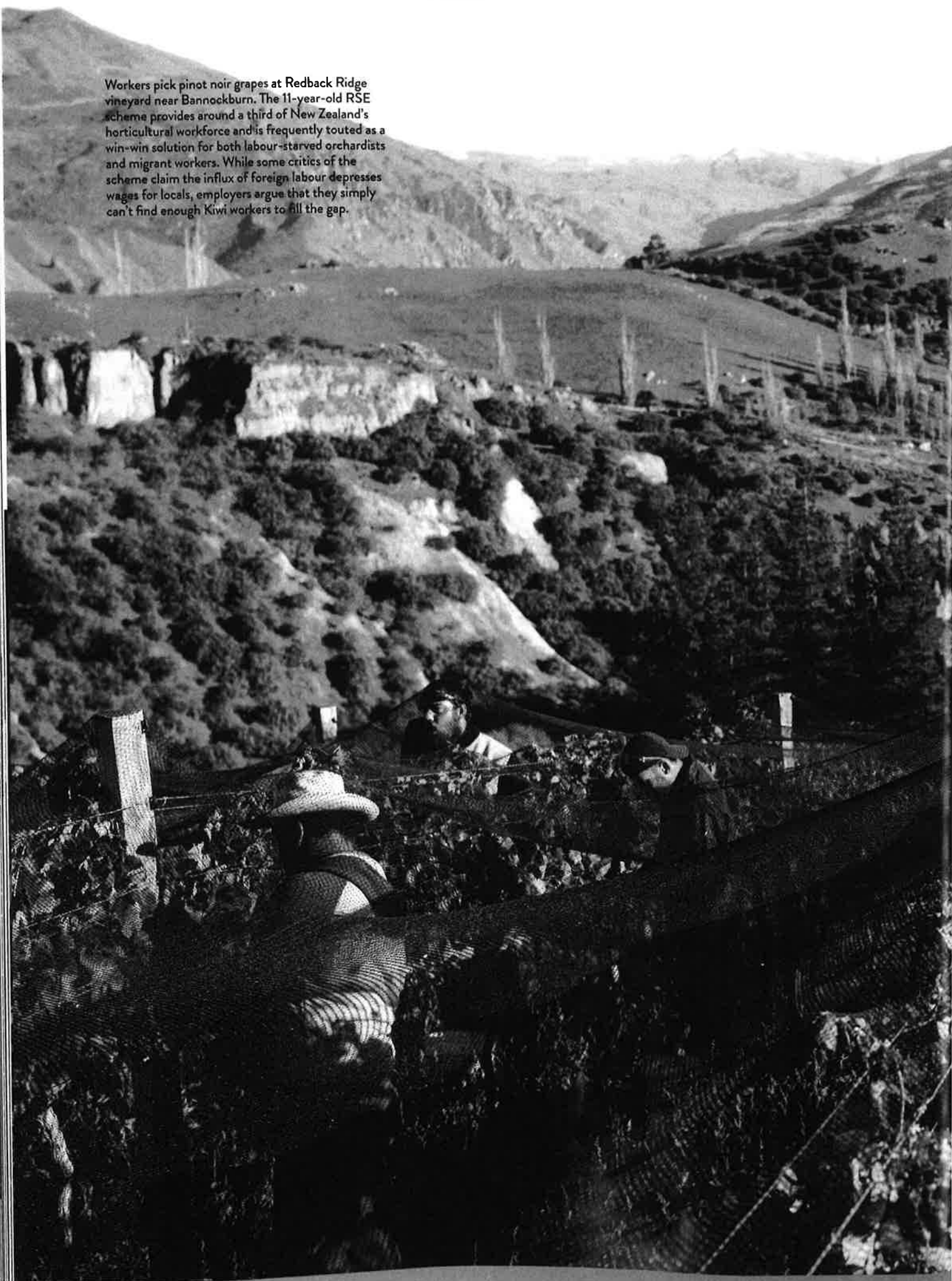
"They're saying they want more people here, but I'm already here. So why don't they want me?"

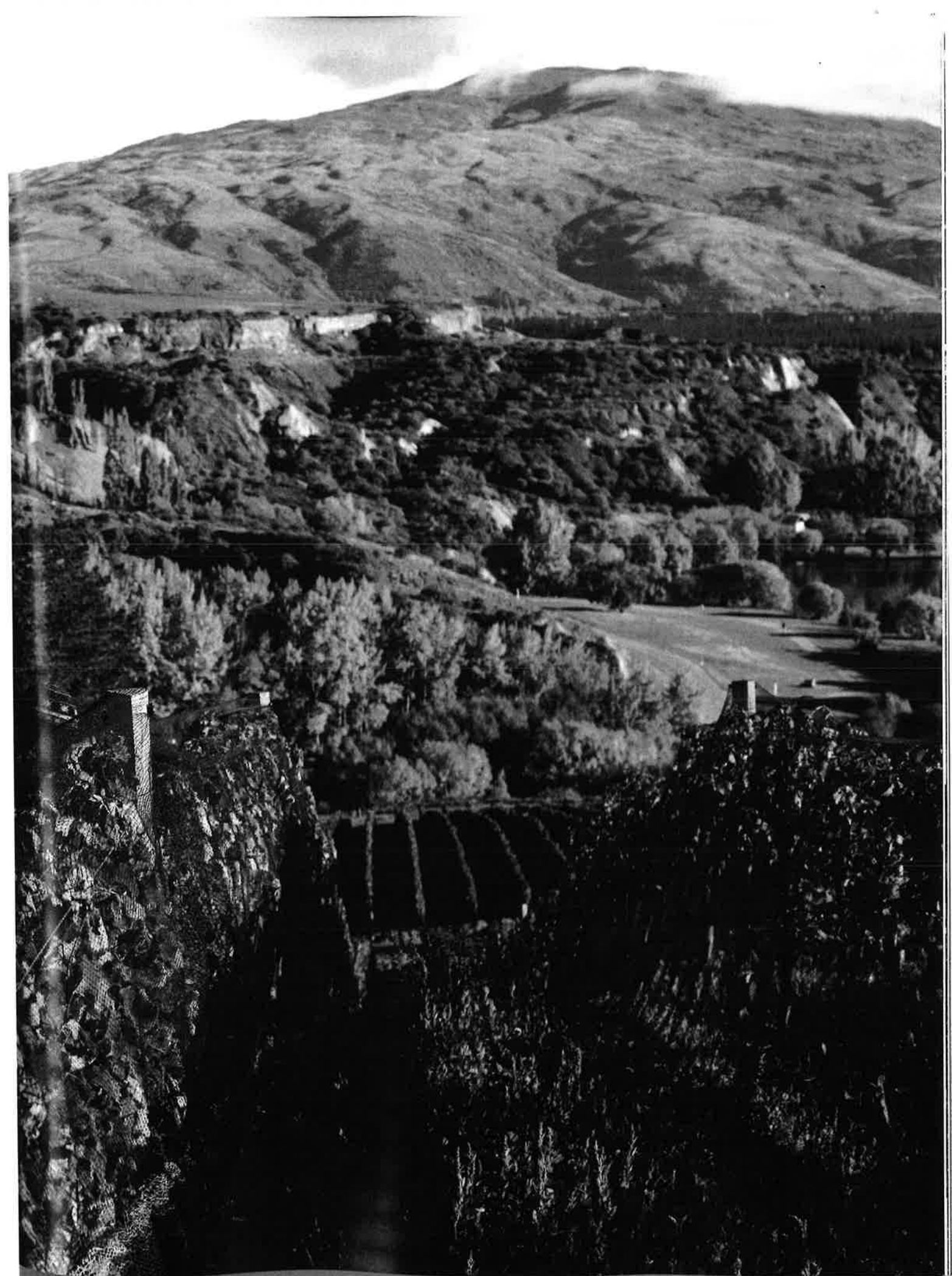
AUTUMN

The sun sets over the Clutha Valley, staining the snow on the Pisa Range strawberry-pink. Outside a fruit-packing shed on the outskirts of Cromwell, melancholy music rises through the chill autumn air. A group of men strum >



Workers pick pinot noir grapes at Redback Ridge vineyard near Bannockburn. The 11-year-old RSE scheme provides around a third of New Zealand's horticultural workforce and is frequently touted as a win-win solution for both labour-starved orchardists and migrant workers. While some critics of the scheme claim the influx of foreign labour depresses wages for locals, employers argue that they simply can't find enough Kiwi workers to fill the gap.





guitars and ukuleles over the thud of the bush bass—a large wooden box with a pole and a string that is plucked. Their harmonised voices form sweet, ephemeral chords full of longing. These are songs of a tropical home, the kind sung by those in exile.

Around 375 men from Vanuatu work in Central Otago each year, helping grow and harvest the region's fruit and grapes. They're referred to as 'ni-Vanuatu', or more colloquially, 'ni-Vans', and they are seasonal workers on work visas of seven to nine months, earning not much more than the minimum wage. Nonetheless, it's a rate that translates to good money back in the islands, where employment is scarce and wages low.

The Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme began in 2006, when 45 ni-Vanuatu were employed in New Zealand on a trial run.

At the time, the horticulture and viticulture industries were mostly dependent on backpackers for labour.

Contractor and vineyard owner James Dicey was instrumental in setting up the scheme in Otago.

"We were concerned they'd be working on island time," he says, "and whether they'd understand what it meant to work in our environment for an eight-hour or 10-hour day.

"I still remember the very first morning. For a 7am start they were ready to go at 4am. Ever since then they've been an integral part of my workforce. It's only in a very occasional

year that I recruit backpackers."

More than 11,000 seasonal workers from around the Pacific now come to New Zealand through the RSE scheme each year, with money flowing back to Tuvalu, Tonga, Fiji, Kiribati and other island nations. In Central Otago, however, it is the relationship with Vanuatu that remains foremost.

Early morning down Earnsclough Road, and a van pulls into the yard at Three Miners Vineyard. Five ni-Vanuatu men emerge from the vehicle, hoodies pulled up, their breath clouding in the crisp air.

A small group of backpackers, mostly from

A group of ni-Vanuatu musicians, led by Jessie Tamar, second from right, rehearse at a packing shed near Cromwell. The group perform around Central Otago and are a fixture at the local farmer's market. Such performances are perhaps the most visible connection the ni-Vans have with the wider Otago community. The men also occasionally travel to play in Dunedin and elsewhere in Otago.



South America, are already here, having camped onsite. They join the ni-Vans to form a team of about 20 people. As the sun asserts itself on the horizon, I take my place among them.

Down the rows we move, snipping bunches of purple-sweet pinot grapes into our hands, checking them for rot and bird peck and dropping them into buckets at our feet.

A tractor moves in front of us. Runners carry our buckets to its trailer, dumping them in, one after another, until the bins are quivering full of grapes.

By now the ni-Vans are getting up to full speed. Always in motion, their hands dart among the vines, lifting three or four bunches at a time, working in silence.

"When there's a big team in the vineyard it's amazing—all you hear is snip, snip, snip,"

"Every local, they live by gardening. If you have a dream and you want to try to make something, you can never earn enough money to start any project."

says vineyard owner Paul Wright. "They're here to do a job."

During their lunch break, the men sit in the van and pick at leftovers from last night's evening meal. They don't speak much. It's late in the season and there's just one thing that dominates their thoughts: home.

I get chatting to Jesse Tamar, who is slight and softly spoken, with a disarmingly gentle manner about him. Ever since he was a child, he tells me, he has nurtured a dream of returning to his family's homeland on the western edge of the island of Ambrym, where a village once stood. Lonwolwol was destroyed by a volcanic eruption in 1913, and most of the people living there relocated, never to return. Among them were Tamar's ancestors. "From a young age I just felt we belonged there," he says. "So since I grew up, I was thinking of moving back to that place and getting our relatives back there."

Such a move would require significant

capital, which is difficult to raise in the islands, where employment opportunities range from few to none.

"Every local, they live by gardening," says Tamar. "If you have a dream and you want to try to make something, you can never earn enough money to start any project."

In 2008, Tamar heard about the RSE scheme and applied, starting work in Central Otago that same year.

"My plan when I start here is that I have to do what I have been thinking about for so long," he says. "I just forget about everything and work."

After tax, airfares and accommodation are paid, the top-earning workers in the RSE scheme can take home up to \$30,000. By 2014, Tamar had raised enough to open a small tourist resort on Ambrym. He even bought a

speedboat in Alexandra and transported it back to the island.

Across Vanuatu, RSE workers return home with the cash to start businesses, buy land and build houses. Much of that money finds its way into community projects—roads, schools, market buildings and essential infrastructure, such as water facilities.

"It gets money to the people who earn it," says Dicey, "rather than to pseudo-government agencies, where it washes through corrupt or ineffective bureaucracies." He has visited Vanuatu several times to see first-hand the effect of the cash injection: "It goes direct to the people who need it, and right into their communities."

From 2007 onwards, researcher Rochelle Bailey followed a group of 22 ni-Vanuatu RSE workers, tracking the effects of the scheme over the years for her PhD.

"The biggest impact I've seen is that kids are now going to secondary school and

tertiary education," she tells me. "Of all of my research participants, none of them had gone past Year 6. This was the goal they had for their children."

"Four children from my small group alone have now gone through tertiary education—because of the RSE."

Bailey says a culture of migration has developed, with the sons of the first RSE workers following in their fathers' footsteps to New Zealand's vineyards and orchards.

"I remember in the first two years, the guys said to me they hoped to be here three or four years, then go," she says. "But now they're saying, 'This is our job. This is what we do'."

BACK AT THE hostel, Tamar and the other men heft supermarket bags out of the van. Their accommodation is functional but sparse—a dormitory of bunkrooms, a large kitchen and a communal area with a television blaring in the corner.

They prepare simple meals on gas stoves—mostly rice and noodles. Back home, women typically take care of the cooking and housework, so one of the first challenges for young men coming out here is learning to look after themselves.

Peter Bumseng has worked seasons in New Zealand for more than a decade, and now he's one of James Dicey's senior workers. Part of his role is mentoring younger men coming out for the first time.

"We give them tools for life," he tells me. "We help them manage their money—not to be tempted by the lifestyle here, the expensive phones and cameras. Make sure they save some money for their families."

"We ask them about their cause: 'What are you here for?' If someone knows about their cause, I'm watching, and if they lose track of the road I try to pull them in."

The men are forbidden from drinking while they're in New Zealand, and there are no second chances for workers who get sent home for alcohol-related misdemeanours.

"It's about the only thing that trips these guys up," says Dicey. "We have a 'don't come back' decision that we have to make."

After dinner, I watch the busking group rehearse, as they do almost every evening, the music warming the night like a bonfire. Jesse Tamar writes many of their songs, his lyrics speaking of the distant islands.

“Music is part of the ni-Vans,” says Bumseng. “We organise concerts to make them feel at home. I think with the concerts it’s really linked us with the community here. Sometimes we dramatise something about Vanuatu, so the community here knows just a little bit about who we are.”

While the ni-Vans are now an established part of the community in Central, small-town prejudices persist.

“Just last week, I saw someone swearing at the boys,” says Bumseng. “I think it’s come down a bit in the last few years. I think we now understand why it happens: people thinking the ni-Vans are here to take their jobs. But I haven’t seen many Kiwis on the vineyards and orchards, so why bother?”

In other ways, Otago locals have proven more than willing to pull together to help the

islanders, especially when the going gets rough—as it did three years ago.

In March 2015, Tropical Disturbance 11F blossomed into one of the most intense tropical storms ever recorded. It also earned itself a name—one that will remain etched in the mind of any living ni-Vanuatu. Cyclone Pam laid entire towns to waste and severed communication with outlying islands.

Bumseng was in New Zealand at the time. He remembers being on the phone with his wife, listening to the wind becoming stronger



Women prepare chapatis at the Sikh gurudwara in Te Puke. Many Indians in the kiwifruit business work seven days a week, and Saturday night gatherings at the temple provide an important chance to socialise after a long week amid the vines. Communally prepared food is an important part of these gatherings, and of course, no traditional Indian meal would be complete without sweets, right.



and stronger—until the line was cut. For the next two weeks, he had no idea whether his family were alive or dead. Many of his compatriots in the Otago vineyards were in the same situation.

“That was the worst time of my life,” says Bumseng. “We didn’t work for two days, but that was even worse, so we went back to work just to keep busy.”

Some men from the worst-hit island, Tanna, were not able to make contact with their families for almost a month. Faced with the dreadful uncertainty of not knowing the fate of their loved ones, the ni-Vans turned to the things that have always sustained them—community and music. They held concerts in Queenstown, Alexandra and Wanaka and raised more than \$130,000 for cyclone relief. An Alexandra-based charity organised a mission to Vanuatu to ensure the money raised found its way to where it was most needed.

Bumseng’s family now join him in Cromwell for a few weeks every year, a privilege he’s gained from years of service. But for most of the ni-Vans, long months of

homesickness and separation from loved ones are part of the deal.

THE DAY IS sparkling new on Redback Ridge, and the ni-Van men are hard at work, pulling in the last of the pinot noir. A hot, dry spring brought all the fruit on weeks early this year, and the region’s labour shortage became acute.

“This year has really validated my decision to start on the RSE scheme,” says Dicey. “We wouldn’t have gone through with just the backpackers.”

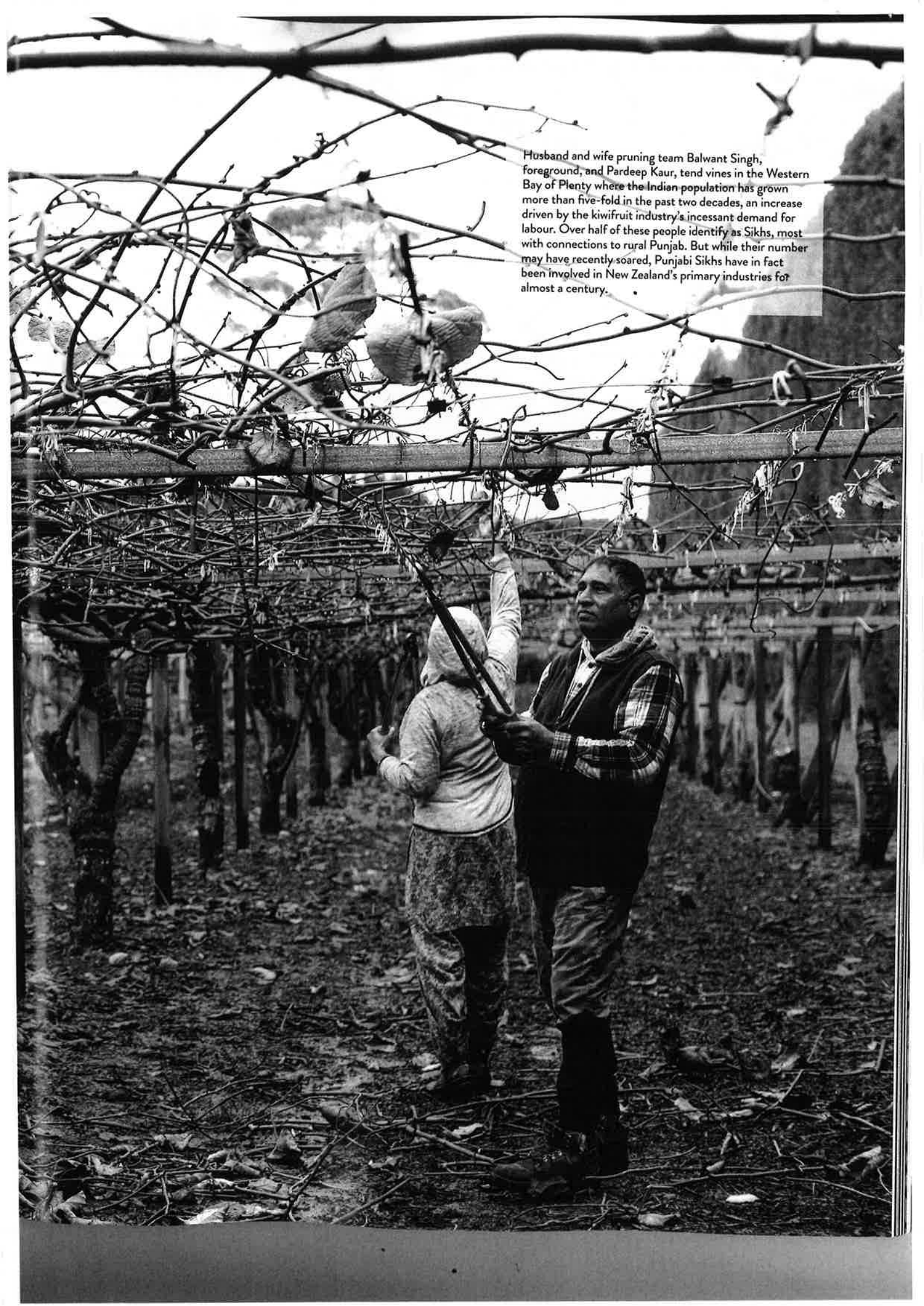
The RSE scheme caps the number of workers each year at 11,000, but Dicey would like to see that figure lifted. In areas such as Otago, he says, getting enough suitable labour locally is simply not possible. The national wine industry depends on it.

“We export \$1.7 billion of wine a year,” he says. “It would probably be half that if the Vanuatians weren’t here. It’s allowed us the confidence to grow our businesses.”

When the crew stops for a break, I find myself chatting with Edmund Sea, a burly, >







Husband and wife pruning team Balwant Singh, foreground, and Pardeep Kaur, tend vines in the Western Bay of Plenty where the Indian population has grown more than five-fold in the past two decades, an increase driven by the kiwifruit industry's incessant demand for labour. Over half of these people identify as Sikhs, most with connections to rural Punjab. But while their number may have recently soared, Punjabi Sikhs have in fact been involved in New Zealand's primary industries for almost a century.

bearded man who builds houses in Vanuatu when he's not in New Zealand. This is his tenth year on the RSE scheme, and in that decade, his three kids have grown up. Recently, his daughter had her first child, but Sea was in Otago at the time. These days the internet makes it easier to talk to family, but the separation is no less painful.

"They just want to know, 'When do we go back?' My wife's son wanted to replace me—he wanted me to stay back," he says, his deep brown eyes filling with tears. "I asked my agent two times to stay back but she said I should still come out. But I'm getting old now. I'm tired."

I'm taken aback by this raw emotion in a man I've just met, but am spared the need to respond by the sound of the tractor horn. Sea and the others pull on their gloves and head back to work. I watch the men vanish amid the leafy trellises, the vines heavy with a harvest that won't wait much longer.

WINTER

It's Saturday night and the Sikh temple in Te Puke is full to bursting with several hundred Indians from around the Bay of Plenty. Upstairs in the prayer room, the turbaned granthi reads from the *Guru Granth Sahib*, the Sikh holy book.

Downstairs, the main hall and kitchen are a whirl of colour and activity. People sit cross-legged on the floor, men on one side of the room, women on the other.

I scoop up spicy dhal with my chapati and talk to some of the young guys who have gathered around me—they're speculating on the All Blacks' prospects in the test match tonight.

To the casual visitor, Te Puke looks and feels like any small North Island town—one where farmers and orchardists kick off their muddy boots before entering shops, and locals spend weekends fishing for snapper or hunting pigs.

But look closer and you'll find spice shops open late on a Friday evening, or advertisements for a kabaddi tournament—a popular south Asian contact sport. Two-thirds of the

"Our lifestyle since childhood is in a completely different culture. We have very limited resources. We want to utilise each and every hour doing something productive."

shops on the main street are Indian-owned and there are two Indian supermarkets—one Sikh and one Hindu—with a third under construction.

The kiwifruit mega-sculpture on the outskirts of Te Puke is a reminder of what its fortunes depend on. The billion-dollar industry is the lifeblood of the Bay, and the labour it attracts has changed this town forever.

Since the early 1990s, thousands of Indian and Nepalese migrants have populated the area, mostly to work in the kiwifruit industry.

They have become a major economic and social force in the region, with many now owning businesses of their own.

From Amrik Singh's house on the hill, I admire kiwifruit orchards stretching away in every direction, the immaculately tended trellises marching across the landscape, each orchard separated by tall, neatly trimmed hedges. Singh owns most of what I can see.

His story begins in the flat, densely populated state of Punjab in India's north, the ancestral homeland of the Sikhs, and a region made fertile by rivers delivering rich, alluvial soil from the Himalayas.

"My grandfather

Amrik Singh's first job in New Zealand was in a factory. Now he owns several kiwifruit orchards, a contracting business, and two shops in the centre of Te Puke. His sons, Alamdeep Mahesh and Muskaandeeep Mahesh, in black and red shorts, play as part of Shran Bal Kabaddi Club Te Puke. Kabaddi is a contact sport where two teams face off, the aim being to tag the opposition without being tackled.



and father were farmers," he tells me. "My father grew wheat, potatoes, rice, veges, every single thing."

From a young age, Singh knew he wanted to leave India and start afresh—somewhere an astute businessman could get ahead.

"I love my country," he says. "But over there, the officers and ministers, they are corrupt."

His first job in New Zealand was polishing milking cups in a factory in Hamilton. He stayed there for two years, then moved to Te Puke and became a labourer in a kiwifruit orchard. At the time, there were only about 40 Indian migrants in the region.

"I love to work," he says. "Every day we were enjoying the job. The kiwifruit industry is a very good opportunity if you want to grow."

After ten years of labouring, Singh had

saved enough money to buy two sections in Te Puke. He built houses on the sections and sold them, generating enough capital to buy his first orchard.

"This was my start," he says. Within a few years, Singh had paid it off—but hard times were ahead for the industry.

In 2010, kiwifruit growers' worst fears came true when the bacteria *Pseudomonas syringae actinidiae* (Psa) arrived on New Zealand orchards.

Psa ruined crops, destroyed livelihoods and threatened an end to the kiwifruit industry.

"Everybody was scared and worried," says Singh. "People were running from the orchards."

With orchards being sold at rock-bottom prices, Singh saw an opportunity.

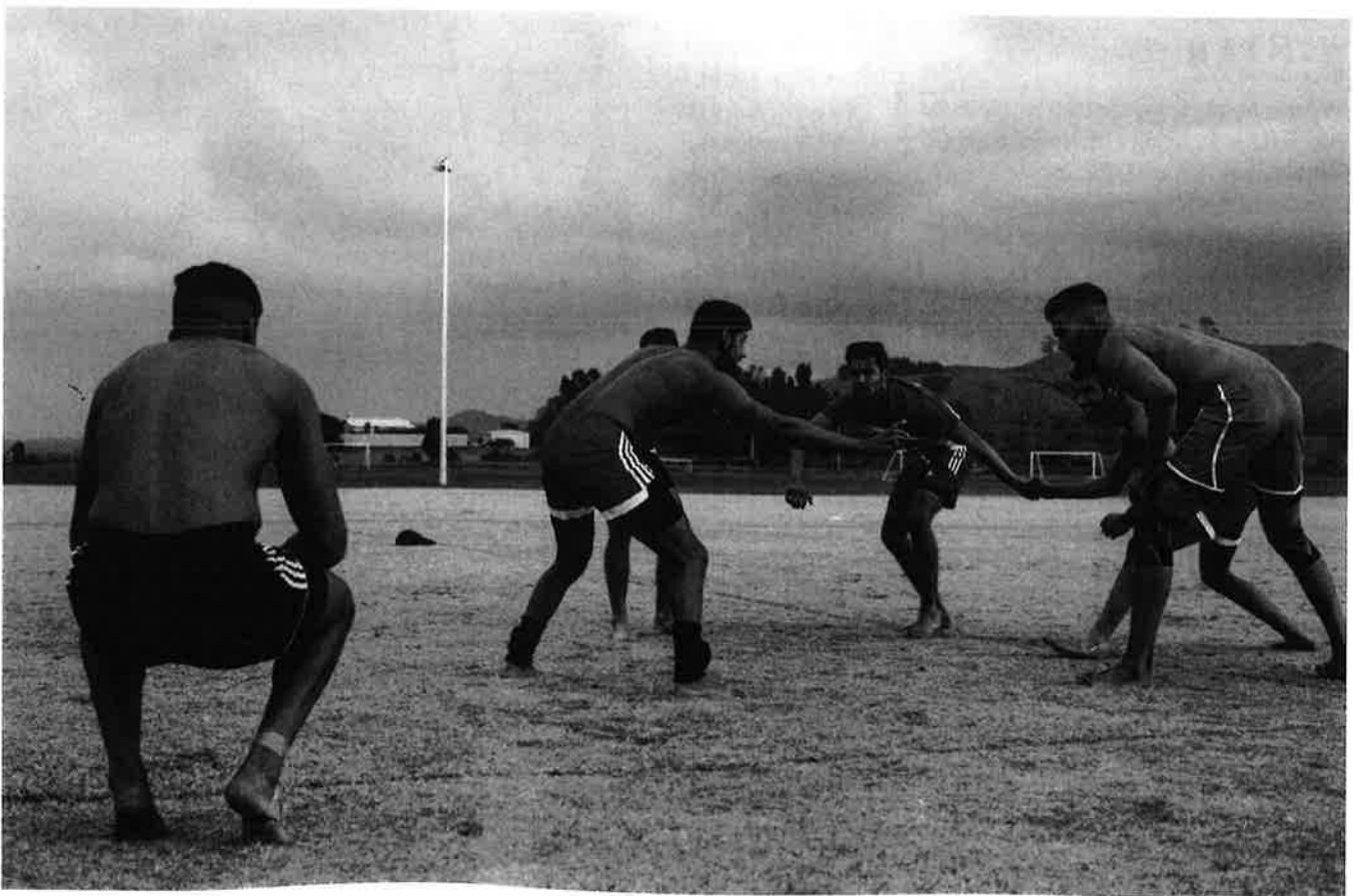
"My father and grandfather were farmers

and I learned from these people how life is in agriculture and horticulture," he says. "I thought the disease is coming and going and that's just life."

"I bought a very good property of over 30 hectares. Psa was very scary, but I bought it."

Singh paid \$4 million for the orchard. Meanwhile, the government and industry pumped tens of millions of dollars into research to combat Psa. One variety of kiwifruit, Gold3, was found to be more tolerant to the disease, and orchardists quickly began grafting that variety onto existing rootstock.

This, and treatment with copper-based sprays, has staved off disaster, and kiwifruit remains big business in the Bay of Plenty. While farmers around the rest of the country are building dairy sheds, here dairy farms are converting to kiwifruit.



Eight years later, Singh's gamble has paid off. He estimates his orchard is currently worth \$20 million, a five-fold appreciation on his initial investment. He is now one of the big players in the local industry, owning 45 hectares of vines as well as a contracting business. After a cup of tea, he shows us around. A gang of Indian workers move through the vines with pruning shears, their turbans and gumboots a striking combination amidst the greenery.

Many of these workers are Singh's relatives. Four of his brothers and three sisters have established themselves here, and the vines provide employment for many extended family members. Singh returns to India every five years or so, usually for a wedding or other family occasion.

"Still I'm missing my home country," he says. "I am missing my motherland. But New

Zealand is a better life. I'm glad we came. It was the right time. And the right place."

Later, driving through the streets of Te Puke, I stop at a shop to buy a box of Indian confectionery—brightly coloured and devastatingly sweet. Somehow, I'm not surprised to learn that Singh owns this store, as well as another on the main street.

I'm on my way to have a coffee in town with Singh's friend Bhakta Siwahang. In contrast to Singh's upbringing on the plains of the Punjab, Siwahang's childhood was cradled by the greatest mountains on the planet. Electricity and motor vehicles first

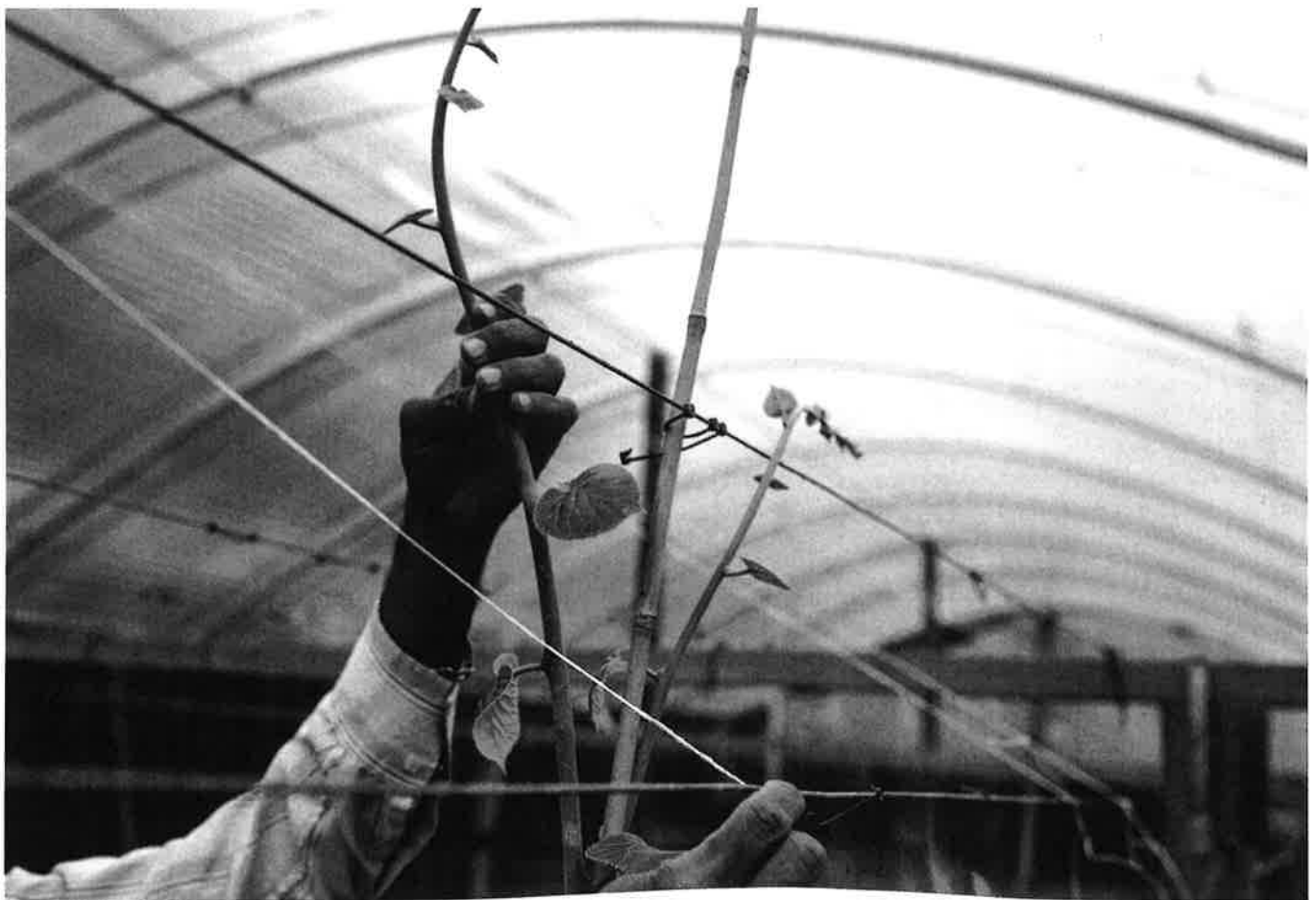
appeared in his small Nepalese village when he was 12.

"Culturally we are hardworking people," says Siwahang. "It's in our genes, our blood. We have seen our parents working very hard. I used to work 84 to 90 hours in the field."

After studying agriculture in Kathmandu, Siwahang came to New Zealand as a student and began working as a labourer in the kiwifruit industry.

"I started to dream of my own little piece of land," he says. "I didn't want to buy a house. I wanted to buy a piece of land. The house was second priority. So I kept saving every day."

Kiwifruit Growers Incorporated estimates the industry, currently worth \$2.1 billion, will generate \$4 billion of revenue by 2027. Kiwifruit is New Zealand's largest horticultural export, and production is forecasted to jump 54 per cent over the next decade. Yet already the industry lacks workers. In May 2017, there were 1200 vacancies, leading the government to declare a seasonal labour shortage.



Siwahang also asked for capital among his Nepalese and Indian friends, and with investors on board, he bought a scrappy orchard of nine hectares.

"It was on poor-quality land, but now we were growing our own kiwifruit."

In the decade since, Siwahang has greatly improved the soil and vine quality, and the orchard is now producing twice as much as when he bought it. In 2018, he harvested the first crop that he was really satisfied with. Like Singh, he also operates a contracting business, mostly employing migrants.

"Pākehā growers welcome us really nicely, because we do the job at the time they want," he says. "We are the key people to do the job. We are the manpower. Without manpower they can't get the good quality. We are happy to work in rain, and even to work at night.

to go on holiday or sit at home. They want to make money."

Former councillor Karyl Gunn-Thomas tells me 20 per cent of Te Puke's ratepayers are now migrants—mostly Indian. "We need them in the area, we need them in our community," she says.

Gunn-Thomas is planning to hold a multicultural festival in the town. She thinks there needs to be more opportunities for migrant communities and other locals to get to know each other.

"It's hard for the Indians to engage with the wider community," she says. "They really want to be part of the community, but they have their own ways of doing things and their own religion, so it has to be on a level that works for everyone."

Gunn-Thomas may be passionate about

intervention. He now holds a work-to-residency visa, which puts him on a pathway to full residency in two years, meaning Alvi's sister will be allowed to stay in the country when she finishes school.

Just past Gore, I take a back road to Winton. Beneath a sullen sky, I notice a lonely stone monument standing in a paddock, and pull over to read the inscription at its base.

This area is called Glencoe, named by Scottish settlers after their ancestral home on the other side of the world. It's a monument to a massacre that took place in Scotland in 1692, long before the settlers' arrival in New Zealand.

But it commemorates more than that. It expresses the need for migrant people to hold on to the heritage and culture of the place they came from, while building a new life in a distant land.

Those links may fade, but they'll never disappear, and this monument is a testament to that—it was built in the 1990s.

My great-great-grandfather, a shipping agent, and his wife arrived in Dunedin from Scotland in 1856 and were among the earliest European inhabitants of the city I now call home. They, just like the Filipino, ni-Vanuatu, Indian and Nepalese people I've met in the past year, came to New Zealand looking for a better life, and worked hard to achieve it.

Like an old film reel being rewound, this story of struggle, separation and sacrifice has been replayed time and again in New Zealand. These latest arrivals embody the same pioneer spirit as earlier migrants, and strive for the same goals, yet they face a quiet prejudice in the form of the assumption that they don't belong. Why do we hesitate to embrace them as New Zealanders? ■

Bill Morris is a documentary film-maker and freelance journalist. Lottie Hedley is a photographer based in Raglan.

These latest arrivals embody the same pioneer spirit as earlier migrants, and strive for the same goals, yet they face a quiet prejudice in the form of the assumption that they don't belong.

"Our lifestyle since childhood is in a completely different culture. We have very limited resources. We want to utilise each and every hour doing something productive.

"We are not drinking alcohol; we don't want to waste the money."

Both Singh and Siwahang are adamant the government should allow more migrants into New Zealand to meet the chronic worker shortage in the region.

Most Kiwi workers, they say, are just not prepared to do the work. It's a complaint I've heard around the country while researching this story.

"New Zealand people, they are doing a 40-hour-a-week job," says Singh. "When we have a busy season, like at Christmastime, New Zealand people, they are going on holiday.

"Indian people, they love to work. Seven days they are doing the job. They are not keen

Te Puke's cultural diversity, but she acknowledges that not everyone in the area is as happy about the changes.

"It depends who you talk to," she says. "Change is really stressful, particularly for the older people, because they tend to look to the past, not the future.

"But I think progress is all about looking to the future."

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SOUTHLAND IS IN the middle of a cold, wet winter. It's been almost a year since I first started on this journey, and I'm on my way to catch up with some of my Filipino friends, who have been milking cows through these long, cold months.

Their immigration sagas continue, albeit with some victories. Alvi Nanat's father appealed against his visa rejection and had the ruling overturned by ministerial

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