

GAY BUCKINGHAM

# Kākāpō Keeper



OneTree  
HOUSE

TEACHERS  
NOTES

# Kākāpō Keeper

by Gay Buckingham

## About the author

Gay Buckingham is a regional writer – her work is set firmly in southern New Zealand – and she revels in describing the coast, bush, wildlife and farming community of the area in which she grew up.

In 2013 she completed a degree in modern letters at Victoria University. This is her first novel.

## Synopsis of this work of historically accurate fiction

This highly engaging work of historical fiction centres on the remarkable efforts of conservationist Richard Henry and his young assistant, Andrew Burt, to save the ground dwelling birds of New Zealand from likely extinction. In 1894 the government appointed Henry to the role of Chief Conservator of the Dusky Sound area in Fiordland, one of the few places left in New Zealand with relatively large numbers of kākāpō and kiwi, and he made it his life mission to capture as many of these birds as he could from the mainland and relocate them to Resolution Island, an area free of the dreadful mustelid trio of ferrets, weasels and stoats, which even then were having a devastating effect on native fauna.

Sound somewhat earnest and predictable? Fear not. Buckingham cleverly tells the entire story through the diary entries of Andrew, who is a composite of the four actual teenage boys who served as Henry's assistants. Despite the one hundred and twenty-seven year gap, Andrew will be very relatable to today's teens. Readers will be amused as his diary entries progress from a litany of self-centred complaints about his lot in this lonely and sandfly infested wilderness, apprenticed to the infuriatingly quiet and methodical Henry, to a much more mature understanding of his boss and the vital importance of their work. He also develops a genuine love for the birds they work with, both ground and tree dwelling, especially the very loveable Kākāpō, and a heartfelt appreciation of the addictive beauty of his environment. Dog lovers will also enjoy the well described relationships Mr Henry and Andrew have with Lassie and Foxy, the two dogs who assist them in locating the birds. Buckingham deals well with the brutal dangers of this area, mostly weather related to do with travelling between the mainland and various islands in a small, shallow keeled sailboat, but there is also a serious earthquake and a landslide that could well have killed them both.

Some readers will probably be aware of the heart-breaking discovery Mr Henry and Andrew make of stoats eventually invading and causing havoc on their hitherto impregnable island fortress and the impact this has on them both. Buckingham does not shy from this devastating discovery. Some say Richard Henry never recovered emotionally from this event and carried the scars until his eventual death in 1929.

However the story ends on a strong, positive note when Andrew's good friend Arthur, with whom he is happy to reunite after almost two years away, tells him that although they were not able to carry out their dream of a predator free island, they have planted the seeds of the possibility of such a dream and they have raised the nation's awareness of the need to attempt to protect our most vulnerable species from the folly of not only introduced predators, but any species alien to this unique environment. We are all very much in their debt and this book is a welcome attempt to repay some of that debt.

## Themes / issues

The most obvious theme is to do with the fragility of the natural environment and the responsibility we all have to be caretakers and guardians of this taonga. This theme links to the associated idea that if we do our best to protect the environment, the environment will, in return, protect and nurture us. This is seen very clearly through the personal and spiritual growth we witness in Andrew who in relatively short time goes from a typical inward looking teenager to an empathetic and resilient young adult.

Without hammering the point the story also deals well with the biological balance that evolves in any natural environment and how introducing alien species can have a catastrophic impact on this precarious natural balance. This is seen very clearly by what happened when European settlers tried to control the exploding rabbit population by releasing three voracious mustelids – Ferrets, Stoats and Weasels.

There are some interesting social themes evident as well, the foremost being the emerging political and economic power of women in New Zealand. The events of the story take place only a matter of months after New Zealand became the first self-governing country in the world in which all women had the right to vote in parliamentary elections. Andrew is initially unsure of his sisters' enthusiasm for this monumental shift in social thinking but as he matures he becomes sympathetic to their ambitions, especially Nancy's desire to attend Otago University.

## Setting

As is to be expected in a well written work of this nature the power of the setting becomes as important to the integrity of the story as a main character. From Andrew's first descriptions of the turbulent seas, the cold and damp weather, the dense bush and the ever-present sandflies we are thrust into the hardships of his world. But as his confidence and understanding of his environment develops, so does ours and Buckingham ensures that we leave her story with a well-rounded appreciation of the rugged beauty of this wonderful part of our country. It is likely very few students, particularly those from the North Island, will have any personal experience of Fiordland but I am confident her story will whet the appetites of many of them to put a trip to this part of the world on their bucket lists.

## Characters

As in any first person narrative we learn a lot about our narrator Andrew Burt, but it is also constrained by that technique. We can only imagine how his initial impatience and self-centred lamentations will have impacted on Richard Henry, and most readers will sigh a breath of relief when Andrew begins to widen his vision and look anew at both his environment and the special qualities of his boss.

And Richard Henry does have special qualities. He was born in Ireland in 1845 and moved to Australia as a child where he developed a love for wildlife. In the 1870s he moved to New Zealand and eventually settled in Te Anou working as a carpenter, rabbitier, boatman and guide. But it is his tenacity

and moral integrity that made him perfect for the job of trying to save threatened bird species.

Kākāpō take centre stage in the story as well and are presented as very loveable birds. Several times Andrew refers to their endearing attributes but oddly it is their warm and comforting smell that seem to capture his heart most.

## Writing style

First person narrative in Diary format but don't be put off by any possibly negative previous experiences of this narrative technique. Buckingham begins every chapter with the traditional diary format but then seamlessly moves into a more flowing first person narrative.

Through the dialogue we experience the social formality of the times, although Buckingham loosens the strings on Andrews dialogue style and his vocabulary to make him more relatable to today's teens.

A strength of the writing style is the accuracy and descriptions of the environment, the birds and animals and their day-to-day equipment. This is wonderfully enhanced by a variety of beautifully drawn pencil sketches throughout the story.

## Year level suitability and application

This story has an unusually wide year level and subject suitability. I can see it being used successfully by experienced teachers from year 8 to year 12 and in high schools it could be used in English, geography, social studies, biology and outdoor education.

## Learning opportunities

### Before reading: Setting the scene

#### Reading the cover for visual/verbal clues:

- Students work in pairs to study the verbal and visual clues given by front and back cover of the book. They make a set of predictions on plot, character and setting based on those clues alone. Younger students will need specific coaching in this skill.
- While doing this, students can also make a list of statements that identify how they are being 'positioned' by use of colour, contrast, images, layout, font style.

#### Prior knowledge discussion / activities:

- Students share any personal experience they have visiting predator-free wildlife enclosures, such as Zealandia and Kapiti Island in the lower North Island and the extensive Mount Pirongia enclosure in the Waikato region.
- Get students to share any experiences they have of introduced species control such as rat trapping and possum control
- Wider discussion on how we in New Zealand promote predator and pest control and the contentious issues these raise, eg the ongoing debate over 1080 poison dropping.

## During reading: Understanding the content

*Answers may be written or oral*

### Chapter one:

1. What is it about the first diary entry that suggests Andrew is not an adult?
2. What bits of the equipment they unload tell us they are settling in for a long time?
3. What initially disappoints Andrew about their destination.
4. What very unsettling discovery do they make when they return to their gear in the morning?

### Chapter two:

5. What is the main reason Andrew wants to call this place Misery Sound instead of Dusky Sound?
6. What food do he and Mr Henry mostly eat?
7. Quote a sentence from Page 31 that shows a turning point in Andrew's attitude to his new environment.
8. What does 'Teacher' Henry say are the biggest threat to the ground birds?
9. What physical losses do they suffer in the earthquake and landslide?

### Chapter three:

10. Which of Andrew's injuries is probably the most serious?
11. In what ways is Lassie both a help and a hindrance?
12. What does Andrew like about the kākāpō?
13. How does Mr Henry explain Lassie's refusal to seek out kākāpō?

### Chapter four:

14. Why doesn't Andrew mention his injuries to Mr Henry?
15. What are three amazing social changes the sailors tell Andrew?
16. What changes of attitude to the environment are you noticing with Andrew?

### Chapter five:

17. Describe how the kākāpō make their strange drumming sound.
18. What does Andrew least like about the weather?
19. What are your thoughts about the replacement of Lassie?
20. Why is Andrew so annoyed with Mr Henry?
21. Why is Foxy a more suitable dog than Lassie?

### Chapter six:

22. Apart from the bird tally what is different about this latest diary entry?
23. Why are the kākāpō relatively easy to catch?
24. Clear up the confusion over Roa and Kiwi.

### Chapter seven:

25. What is unusual about the last four words in his diary entry?
26. What two things make Andrew nervous on the latest boating expedition?
27. What is it about bird catching that Andrew loves so much?

### Chapter eight:

28. What food do kākāpō eat and what do kiwi/roa eat?
29. Explain why a certain sentence on page 125 would not be politically correct today?
30. How would you feel about 'this strange and lonely life on Resolution Island'?

### Chapter nine:

31. Why are Nancy's academic aspirations unusual?
32. How does Andrew reply to the twins' 'lost tribe' beliefs?
33. Describe the danger posed by williwaws.
34. List all the birds that keep them company around the house and garden.

### Chapter ten:

35. What surprises Andrew about the tourists' views of he and Mr Henry?
36. Describe the relationship that develops between Andrew and Charlie.
37. How could the sighting of one weasel ruin all their work on Resolution Island?

### Chapter eleven:

38. What is Mr Henry's plan to catch the possible invader?
39. Explain Mr Henry's deep guilt about his previous activities while living in Te Anou.
40. How does he use weka to try and attract the weasel?

### Chapter twelve:

41. List all the special bird friends they have made.
42. What are Andrew's plans for the future?

### Chapter thirteen:

43. Why does Mr Henry have to collect certain bird specimens and how does he feel about this?
44. What terrible sight bring Mr Henry to his feet in the boat?
45. Describe the impact this sight has on him.

### Chapter fourteen:

46. Describe Andrew's emotions about having to leave.
47. In what ways are the ground birds and Mr Henry alike?

### Chapter fifteen:

48. What is overwhelming for Andrew when he returns to Dunedin?
49. What wisdom does Arthur offer to Andrew about the importance of the work he has been assisting with.
50. Which of Arthur's predictions come true?

## Post reading: Taking it further

### Theme analysis:

#### Activity one: Group work activity

Select two of the themes / issues listed earlier in these notes and get students to elaborate more on what the author may be commenting on and how she may be positioning them think about these issues. When considering the 'how' aspect senior students especially should closely consider writing techniques and character presentation.

A group spokesperson reports findings to the class.

#### Activity two: Individual work – NCEA level 1 Written text essay questions.

Attempt one of these questions from the 2017 level 1 Written Text external exam. Note that the first question works very well for this novel.

- Describe at least one challenge faced by a character in the written text. Explain how this challenge helped you understand the character.
- Describe at least one idea that changed your perspective or point of view in the written text. Explain how this idea changed your perspective.
- Describe a key moment in the written text that surprised or shocked you. Explain how this moment was important to the text as a whole.
- Describe a character that you disliked or admired in the written text. Explain how your feeling towards this character helped you understand the text as a whole.

#### Role play activities:

***(all role plays need to be handled with sensitivity and closely monitored by the teacher)***

- Monologue – adopt the role of Mr Henry or Andrew and speaking in character explain your relationship with another character. Discuss how the relationship evolves.
- Write and act out a TV or radio interview where Mr Henry and Andrew are asked about the successes and failures of their work – bending the rules on available technology somewhat but students are fine with this.
- Monologue - Speaking as Mr Henry or Andrew one year in the future, reflect on the events of a year ago and comment on how they have impacted on the person you are now.

## Beyond the text activities:

- Organise a class trip to your nearest predator free enclosure.
- Students design a digital or hard copy poster and/or make a short film highlighting what practical activities they can do to help protect threatened fauna in New Zealand.
- Read *Cuz*, by Liz van den Laarse. This exciting survival novel is set in roughly the same area of Fiordland will further develop students' interest in this powerful environment.
- Hold a class debate on the use of 1080 as a method of controlling introduced pests – warning: this is an unusually emotive topic and you may get flak from 'committed' parents.

Prepared by Denis Wright