GCS Address to the 10th Anniversary dinner of the Wakatipu Wilding Conifer Control Group,
Hilton Hotel, Queenstown

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I've known **E**ion and Jan Edgar a long time. In fact I've known them longer than they have known me. I've known them since I was a teenager, a first year student at Otago, when Jan was a willowy and ace netball player, and Eion I can still see now : where I was naive and uncertain and timid in my duffel coat and jeans and jersey knitted by a loving mother, Eion was a senior student, a tweed jacketed adult, often in a tie –a pipe possibly ? – and to me, he was all maturity and worldly experience and certainty, already old and wise – as he is now. He looks just the same.

I knew him, and them, but they didn't know me. I was a child in that world of adults, watching from a safe distance.

And it begs the question, that if Eion looks exactly the same to me now as he did then, is it because back then in the late 1960s he already looked this old ? Or is it because now, fifty years on he still looks that young ?

I won't ask you to raise your hands and condemn yourselves with one answer or another.

But where way back then, when Eion was the symbol of maturity and wisdom, and I was so very self conscious and lost and feeling sorely out of place, there were just one or two things I was sure of : I was certain, for example, that I wanted to be a painter more than anything else – even more than being the architect I'd planned to be all through my high schooling days.

A well-tested and entrenched inability to understand the language of maths put paid to that architectural ambition, even with the after-school tutoring I was given, me staring bewildered at the simplest of algebraic equations, let alone what abstract notions like sines and cosines

might mean. I managed a heroic 32% for School Cert maths in 1965, and torpedoed any chance of becoming an architect.

I well remember a maths puzzle which left me utterly mystified at the time and does to this day : it was a story about an old American farmer who died leaving his herd of 17 cows to his three sons, apportioned according to how he felt about the boys and how they'd manage the stock as farmers. So in his Will he left the oldest boy, his favourite , half of his herd; the middle lad got one third; and the youngest one ninth.

The three sons got together and sat down to work out their father's legacy : one half, one third and one ninth. But you can't halve 17 cows, nor can you divide 17 by three, or 9.

So they were stuck. It just won't go.

Then an uncle of theirs came along and hearing their dilemma said he'd give them one of his cows. So suddenly they had 18.

And one half of 18 is 9; one third of 18 is 6, and one ninth of 18 is 2.

And 9 and 6 are 15 plus 2 adds up to 17.

The oldest son took his 9 cows, and the middle son took his 6 cows, and the youngest walked off with his 2 .

So they gave the uncle his cow back.

I couldn't work it out then, and I still can't. Its something to do with maths, and its why I'm not an architect today.

I fell in love with this district in the late 1950s when the first of our Dunedin neighbourhood families bought property in Arrowtown, and I was invited to join them on summer holidays. The long, twisting, lurching drive through the Gorges in a tobacco-smoke car was usually accompanied by the Dark Angel of projectile vomiting, but it was always a joy to wake up the next morning in what felt like – was really a different country to the grey, damp , windy coastal hometown Dunedin.

Arrowtown then was the poor man's Queenstown – small, sleepy and cheap. In

1961 my Dad bought ¼ acre of long grass for 300 pounds and put on it a crib, one step up from a caravan, and a dumping ground, as cribs were then, for all the old, exhausted furniture and bedding and crockery you no longer needed at home.

We loved it, and so began a life of hot summer days 'up the Arrow' glistening with coconut oil, peeling in skeins of sun burnt skin, teetering along the dangerous and often slippery pipeline to some new swimming hole or secret gold panning site.

And me going out on my bike, painting watercolours of Mill Creek – where there was a shambles of decaying sheds and a deserted wooden house, or Arrowtown's main street houses, mostly empty and decaying at the time, or sometimes the ruin of Thurlby Domain along the empty gravel road of Speargrass Flat, or Lake Hayes and its tiny handful then of holiday cribs.

I remember a local family of long-standing in Arrowtown called the Feehlys. The small hill behind the cemetery we often climbed up in the evenings was named after that family – it was called Feehly's Knob, something entirely

lost on me at the time. Always the innocent.

Innocent too – plain ignorant more likely – when I persuaded a crew of about six of us teenagers that we should climb Brow Peak one summer day. Brow Peak is the highest one overlooking Arrowtown, along the ridge from Coronet Peak – quite an ascent.

We all met at Mr Hamilton's store in the morning and I managed to persuade the party that the best possible energy food we could take with us was liquorice – I'd read about its health-giving properties somewhere, and thought that meant energy. Plus my mentioning that I understood Ed Hillary ate nothing but liquorice on the slopes of Everest was very convincing.

Well, we spent all our money on liquorice and set off up Brow Peak, hqppily reaching for more whenever we needed a boost. We got to the top by lunchtime – more liquorice, and on the way down one or two of the group started to feel pretty crook, dashing off to the side for the squatted privacy of a matagouri bush or tall tussock. Pretty soon we all had caught the same bug – we thought it must be some vicious

flu or something, and by later afternoon when we got down we were all walking very slowly indeed, not at all well, our stomachs churning and feeling as hollow as a barrel, each of us privately wondering how Ed coped.

No-one thought to point the finger at me, fortunately; but every time I look up at Brow Peak now I'm sure I hear the sound of distant groaning.

Obviously just wind.

After University I had 2 years teaching at Cromwell District High – before the dam, 90 kids, 5 permanent staff plus part-timers, me teaching English and coach of every boys team summer and winter, painting after school work towards my first solo show at Moray Gallery December 1972

Then a month or two later off to the UK foolishly hoping to become a real painter.

I had to leave to learn where I belonged. It's the oldest cliché in the book. In my poverty and gloom in London, so far removed from what I

realized I loved and cared about most of all, I had vivid Dreams of Central Otago – blue skies, golden grass, dry, silent, still, wide, where a man felt so insignificant, and was generally alone. I came home in May 1974 to try again to be a full-time artist here, where I now knew I belonged – an Otago boy at heart, hoping to paint those London dreams.

My so-called career is now in its 46thyear, thanks to a great deal of support and unimaginable visits from Lady Luck.

Unexpectedly, many of those early paintings have experienced an altered interpretation : so rapid have the changes been in this area, some of them are becoming historical documents, depicting a landscape and a rural culture now forgotten, dissolved in an acid solution of a very few years. Where then the visual palette was yellow and brown and brittle and dry, we now have irrigated, chemically-induced green, an artificially promoted lushness defying the seasons and Nature's intentions.

Or suburban sprawl eating away the open fields and from the air turning what was natural grass into a uniform dark grey roofscape, a seemingly unstoppable devouring of the

passages of peace and tranquility between settlements.

What a pity there is no will to establish – as they do in Switzerland and Italy, for example – definite and inviolable limits to any town's boundaries, beyond which no housing or development is permitted. So we get the insidious creep and crawl of low level housing, each new development a handy precedent for the next, and in far less than a lifetime – more like a single generation – the charm, the magic which made a place so very desirable and memorable, is lost, consigned to blessed memory.

And instead we have traffic snarls, rampant irritability, and the magnificent Remarkables now boasting a foreground of an orange Megastore, the lurid sickly yellow of Pak and Save, and the blood Red Warehouse, where everyone gets a bargain. Who would ever have guessed it ?

I know who would have : Warren Cooper. I can still clearly recall Warren being interviewed in his days as Mayor and MP here, confidently assuring the reporter that his dream was that one fine day the Wakatipu basin would be

home to 96,000 people…. For me then it was a nightmare vision, but I put it down to Warren's misguided and foolish fantasy. Mr Cooper's dream is steadily, inexorably coming true.

Another unlikely visionary, by the way, was Vincent Pyke, the Superintendent of the Dunstan Goldfields during the 1860s. In 1873 Vincent Pyke wrote about the now tragically obliterated gorge between Clyde and Cromwell,

He wrote , in those days before cars were even imagined,:

"But picturesque savagery hath its attractions. The Dunstan Gorge is a scene such as Salvator Rosa would have loved to paint; and if it were brought within the reach of cheap steamboats or Parliamentary trains, it would be thronged with artistic visitors, and vulgarised by gaping tourists."

That written in 1873.

I'm starting to sound like a grumpy Old Man here, but stuff it. At this age I'm allowed to be grumpy. I'm 71 now, unbelievably – but, as James Thurber once said, if there were 15 months in each year I'd only be 56.

By the way do you know that lovely poem about growing old by Alan Bennett ?

“Here I sit, alone and 60,
bald and fat and full of sin.
Cold the seat, and loud the cistern,
As I read the Harpic tin.”

My writer friend, Owen Marshall, once wrote a short story entitled “ The Divided World.” In it Owen listed a sequence of delightfully observed opposites, sometimes witty, sometimes poignant, sometimes acerbic: “ The world is divided between those who are tolerant and wise, and their husbands. The world is divided between those in authority, and those resentful of it. The world is divided between those who have shifted to the North Island, and those passed over for promotion…..” It is four pages of typical O Marshall brilliance.

He might have added : the world is divided between those who care and worry about environmental degradation and try to do something about it – like Wilding control groups - and those

who don't.

Baldly put, most New Zealanders simply don't seem care much about the big issues with which one might expect an intelligent society to be engaged : concepts of The Greater Good – the things which are bigger than our own private needs and greeds, the questions which will resonate far beyond our own lifetimes, the decisions which will affect not us in the short-term, but those unborn descendents who will inherit the legacy of our brief tenure.

My guess is that the majority of suburban residents of greater Auckland, for example,
don't care a bit about what is happening to South Island landscapes - they never think of it. Why should they ? Most never go there, have no need of it, probably have no time to care. Its nothing to do with their daily life and survival.

We live today in an unsustainably over-populated world. The majority of the world' s people today live in one box, usually high-rise, spend their most productive and alert hours in another box named "Work", and travel between the two in a third box with wheels. Nature, raw naked Mother Nature has

little or no part in their lives – more often than not these days, they experience nature only on a screen, a second-hand digital experience at best. Little wonder they don't care

Who does care ? Not many. A small minority. As Owen Marshall wrote, " The world is divided between the few now, and the great majority on the other side."

And with this carelessness and cavalier attitude towards the natural environment, something very significant is happening.

One of the most attractive characteristics of New Zealand in the eyes of the rest of the world is its extraordinary and very distinct patchwork of landscapes, a virtual continent's variety anywhere else on the planet here packed into a tiny pocket handkerchief of a nation - from steep and dripping Fiordland rainforest to vast, semi-arid tussock plains like the hallowed McKenzie Basin and Central Otago just over the backbone ranges, not 50 kms away ; from the subtropical delights of the far north to the fractured splendour of the Southern Alps. From the drowned valleys and bush-clad sounds at Marlborough to the volcanic grandeur and boiling mud pools of the Central

Plateau. What other country could boast such a fabulous jigsaw puzzle of radically unlike landscapes within three small islands half the size of France ?

We southerners know that the North Island is a different country, and quite recently I recall hearing a Stewart Island resident proudly declaring that once or twice a year she crosses Foveaux Strait to go to New Zealand.

But I believe that right now our extraordinary range of regionally distinct landscapes is being steadily eroded, and with that loss, so much of what makes us attractive and different is disappearing.

In recent years that natural pattern**** of distinct geographic separation, the very regional uniqueness which used to fuel our Provincial pride in sports, has been irrigated, fertilised and bulldozed into near-oblivion as we are pushed and bullied by the fundamentally illogical Growth mantra, by the dream of doubled primary industry exports, by intensification, and by rating GDP figures over quality of life and community contentment ratings.

The true essence of New Zealand's magnetism – its visual and geographic diversity - is being diluted into one monotonous, toxic green uniformity from top to toe.

Those landscapes have a power and a meaning far beyond any temporary economics. Landscapes are the natural theatres of our personal experiences our dramas and memories, and they perform a symbolic and emotional function miles beyond their economic or geographical rationale. They feed our souls if you like, and help us understand where we belong. Have you ever thought hard about why it is you love being HERE ?

In his contribution to the High Country Landscape Management Forum in September 2005, a paper entitled " The Lakes District Dilemma" Queenstown's then Mayor, Clive Geddes said " What is the Lakes District dilemma ? It is safeguarding the district's sole asset… and the district's sole asset is its landscape.

"The bungy jumping, the jet boating, the sky diving, the skiing, all of them are activities you can do elsewhere in New Zealand. The rafting . the winter

ice hockey, everything you can think of you can do elsewhere. Why are they special here ? They are special because of the landscape."

Nearly 15 years ago Clive went on to say that the chief threats to that landscape were urban development and rural development. Look around and judge for yourself how successful those efforts to safeguard "the District's sole asset" have been.

That comforting belief in The Greater Good has been supplanted by an era in which individual and corporate profit reigns supreme. It is a given now that power is no longer in the hands of the people or the politicians – it is corporates who run the show.

As Owen Marshall warned, " The world is divided above all, while we sleep, beneath our noses, and before we notice."

And this Queenstown too : what do we want this place to look like? What is going to separate this place, this fabulous setting and the fortunate people who value it, from everywhere else and

other rival destinations? Is it in the landscape, as Clive thought ? Is it in the built environment we impose on the land ?

It's the same challenge any artist faces : in a market crowded with creative people pushing paint around, especially a small market, its imperative that an artist works more than anything else to develop what I can best label as an " identifiable authorship," so that in any company, in any environment, his or her work can be instantly recognised as being by them – their signature is all over it, like no-one else's.

Maybe it's a style, maybe a persistent theme or fixation or subject matter, maybe a particular way of doing things, but it has to be theirs and theirs alone, unmistakable in any company. Its done partly by instinct, but also by recognising intelligently what makes an artist – me for example – different to the rest, and deliberately exaggerating what you believe to be the reason. Taking risks, backing yourself, knowing and aware – or at least suspecting - what might be your own point of difference.

And, in my book, too, the immense value of being

Hard To Get.

Not easy to get – if you're easy to get no-one wants you.

Well, the same applies when it comes to recognising what it is you've got in any one region, like here. What makes this different to the rest ? What is here but nowhere else ? What is it which separates us ? Makes us unique – and so desirable ? Certainly not ever more tourists, nor hotels and shopping mall precincts and commercial zones – they're the same in any town or city the world over. If you're inside any of them anywhere in the world you wouldn't know where you were by the way they look and feel and operate. They have no discernible regional personality . They're inseperable, neutral, characterless worlds unto themselves beyond the flavour of any nationality.

In my professional life, I've always admired most of all the paintings which grow out of an artist's deep connection to a beloved place, where they come from : Vermeer and Rembrandt are so inescapably Dutch, Constable so ridiculously English, Stanley Spencer thought his tiny village of Cookham was Heaven on earth and painted it all his life.

I'm a paid-up Regionalist myself. I have always been completely unmoved by art without a country, international movements with no anchoring in a discernible place – only that nebulous. Woolly

kingdom of the intellect.

I love how Spanish Spanish paintings look, how English are the great English paintings, how terribly Dutch the lowlands paintings are…. Even their portraits somehow LOOK Dutch, or Spanish, or English. Looking at them we know where they're from.

In the same way, NZ travellers always notice that when in a Spanish village for example, you know you couldn't be anywhere else but Spain; or in a French township, or a Swiss town, or an Italian or Greek location, or in Aspen – you know very well exactly where you are – you couldn't be anywhere else. Its peculiar character, its obvious personality is all around you, and a source of pride to the locals in every place. You can feel it every day.

What is the NZ equivalent ?

Regrettably, in this country, the built environment is notable for its lack of particular regional character - we have no discernible built environment aesthetic – unlike those places we all enjoy so much overseas. Its would be a rare soul indeed who would admit to being charmed walking around our cities and towns, as we are over there.

The charm is in the recognisable, separate character.

Is the absence of it because we are too young a nation to have a tradition we respect and believe in and which guides our sense of self, our separate identity ?

Mayor Geddes suggests its all in the landscape - well, what about the landscape ? What can we exaggerate, draw attention to, and make the most of, what needs to be protected from change, what needs to be enhanced ? What is it we should be most proud of and value most, that other districts, other regions in NZ don't have ?

Clearly the Wilding Control Groups are acting on their beliefs, playing their significant part – even if so many hardly notice. They'd notice if the work

wasn't being done, because we'd look like so many other places – and who wants that ?

I know it sounds simplistic, but its vital. In my book, what Queenstown – and all of NZ - should be doing is making it harder to get here, more expensive, not cheaper and easier. Making something more exclusive makes it more desirable. This region is being buried in tourists, but that's not making the best of what we've got, or valuing it. Gross numbers don't tell the story of sustainable success.

Make it harder to be here, more expensive – not less. I myself prefer a nationwide $5.00 per night tax collected on departure to a local bed tax, but a substantial fund is desperately needed for infrastructure and the conservation estate, and to invest in enhancing our main points of difference. And if a tourist is going to stay away because of the cost of a cup of coffee for each day spent here , that's not the sort of tourism we should be attracting.

Be hard to get, and the appreciative, high value customers will come, and they'll love it all the more. We all can and do moan about what has been lost. What matters is what we do next.

The Wilding control groups across the country are doing their bit to preserve the natural state of the priceless landscapes, protecting the native ecology from invasive species which would obliterate them - none more effectively or energetically than this Wakatipu group. I watch its work with admiration and envy, both for the quality of its people, its planning, its community involvement and the outstanding support it receives from the Queenstown Lakes District Council, and other funders.

We in Alexandra look upon you with a longing and despair, wishing we had a local Council as committed and understanding, and a budget as generous.

You have done and are doing brilliant work, preserving where you can what makes this corner of our country so special, and so different to all the rest.

It is work crucial to the maintenance of your own regional distinction, your own long-term appeal.

And I thank you Peter, and Briana, and all your colleagues committed to this vital project, for your

vision and your tireless dedication.

Now, finally, an art story to finish .

As an artist I'm very fortunate that I can spend my life trying to give permanent visible form to the places and people I love most, to what I never want to forget – like Central Otago, and my beautiful wife. It's a privilege I'm aware of every day.

Artists are lucky in so many ways. Here's a story about a lucky Irish painter :

He was no scholar but he was exceptionally gifted at painting in oils and especially portraits and well-dressed figures. His fame spread throughout Ireland then beyond.

One day a beautiful blonde arrived in a flash limousine all the way from London and asked him to paint her in the nude. She offered him 20,000 pounds in cash if he would agree.

The Irish painter was embarrassed at the thought of it, she was so gorgeous; and because he hadn't been married long and he thought his wife might get jealous of him painting another gorgeous woman in the nude, so he said to the blonde that he'd need to talk it over at home to save any subsequent trouble.

It didn't take long when he informed his wife that there was 20,000 pounds in it for them and he came back smiling and told the lady he'd got the wife's blessing..,

"There's just one thing though," he said, a little sheepishly, "will it be okay with you if I wear my socks so I've got something to wipe me brushes on?"

That’s it from me. Happy 10th anniversary, all you Wilding Warriors. I wish you continued success, and a good evening.

And by the way, if anyone wants to be painted I’ve got a clean pair of socks and I’m ready to go.

Grahame Sydney

6 June 2019