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Colourful tales abound in the South Island high country, as MIKE CREAN soon discovers on a conducted tour of **Molesworth** Station and its neighbouring territory.

Rabbits were overrunning New Zealand's largest station. The furry pests were eating and breeding all over the 180,000 hectares of **Molesworth** high country, in inland Marlborough. By the late 1800s the station's hills resembled the barren mountain slopes of Afghanistan.

Station management declared war. They sent in shooters with packs of dogs. They set traps. They laid cyanide poison. But the plague got worse. Thousands of square kilometres of grazing country were laid to waste. Weeds sprouted through the bare ground where grass had once grown. No sheep would chew on these weeds.

Station owner William Acton- Adams was desperate. He called for the heavy artillery. He ordered cats to be drafted into the battle.

Geoff Swift, who runs the **Molesworth** Tour Company, says Acton-Adams got the idea when he noticed his family cats executing a rabbit on the front lawn of the homestead.

He begged, borrowed and otherwise acquired cats from wherever he could get them and released them on his hills. He put advertisements in Christchurch newspapers, offering to buy stray cats from people who rounded them up.

Soon a brisk market in cats was operating. City kids went out with sugarbags and bundled up strays, which they delivered to collection points. Times were hard so the pennies paid were welcome, even at the cost of some painful scratches.

Cats became the new gold. Then Christchurch began to run out of stray cats. The market became a black market. Swift says people began to notice a drop in the population of domestic moggies. Householders started to complain.

The trade had to stop. Acton- Adams was urged to stop paying for cats, stray or otherwise. He did so, and his rabbits breathed easily again.

It is a hot, dry day as Swift spins this yarn to passengers in his luxury 4WD van, deep in **Molesworth** country. From his commentaries, you can tell he loves a good story, almost as much as he loves **Molesworth**. He has lived and farmed in the area for years. He has studied its history in depth. He has been all over the huge sheep and cattle station.

Swift speaks with near-reverence of legendary Bill Chisholm, who became station manager in 1942, a few years after the Government bought the station. "Big Bill" Chisholm was an innovator. He launched a new type of attack on rabbits, using aerial drops of poisoned carrots, and he introduced better farming practices. It was a long campaign but, bit by bit, land was returned to grazing, stock

numbers were increased, and black ink began to replace red in the station's accounts.

GETTING THERE

The road through **Molesworth** is open to the public each summer, but subject to closure because of fire risk or flooding - check with the Department of Conservation.

To travel north through the station, take the road from Hanmer Springs over Jollies Pass and turn right at the Clarence River. Follow the Clarence briefly, then cross it by the bridge at the Acheron River. Go up the Acheron Valley to Wards Pass.

Molesworth homestead is just over this pass. From here, follow the Awatere River down to Highway 1. If you are travelling south, you will find Awatere Valley Rd branching off Highway 1, about 3km north of Seddon. It is well signposted.

Tour operators have extended access to the road and offer a variety of tours. My advice is book a tour, and let someone else's vehicle get shaken to bits on the corrugated road.

The **Molesworth** road is only open to the public from December 1 to April 1, but the **Molesworth** Tour Company has special concessions from October 1 to May 31.

MIKE CREAN