

# Inhospitable HEIGHTS

Remote Lilybank Station treats all unexpected visitors as potential armed offenders. **BY BRUCE ANSLEY**



**T**his is becoming a mission. Rain has turned the narrow road dark grey and squishy and the car wants to go off on its own. Gaunt rock crags show above the clouds, so that the road feels walled in and the Automobile Association seems a very long way away. Only Lake Tekapo is reassuring, bright in the gloom, as if lit from inside.

The long thin road cuts deep into the mountains to Lilybank Station, whose manager, Gerard Olde-Olthof, is to meet me at its end. Olde-Olthof's inascibility is legendary. He is particularly acid towards reporters, who are inveterately curious

about the station's owner, Hutomo Mandala Putra, fabulously rich youngest son of ousted Indonesian president Suharto. Olde-Olthof is unpredictable. A few weeks ago he invited Christchurch *Press* reporter John Keast to Lilybank and, at the end of the long drive, informed him that he did not like the stories the *Press* had been running about him, so Keast could jolly well go home again.

I'm thinking about this as the road passes the toppling steel gates of the abandoned Round Hill skifield and, growing lumpier, passes through the scattered buildings of Mt Gerald station. I had called Olde-Olthof from Tekapo, sus-

**Gerard Olde-Olthof and Lilybank: "What I want to remove off our land is up to me."**

piciously. Come on up, he said. "How's the river?" I asked. "Wet," he replied, in jolly mood, but not a problem.

I arrive on the banks of the Macaulay River, the moat which, with the Godley River, makes Lilybank impenetrable to all but the well equipped. Dr George Aditjondro, an Indonesian exile lecturing at Australia's University of Newcastle, dangerously waded the river earlier this year and was close to the luxurious Lilybank Lodge before being stopped and ordered off. I see a Land-Rover in the

riverbed. It flashes its headlights at me and starts to move – back to the lodge. Bigger. Suckered. Olde-Olthof, I decide, is still exacting revenge on the media.

Back in Tekapo, I telephone him from a call-box. “I thought you said you wouldn’t do this to me?”

“There’s no way I could safely get you across the river without drowning you. And I wouldn’t want to do that, not after bringing you all the way down here.” No trace of irony. I arrange to interview him by telephone the next morning, without any real hope. Surprisingly, though, he talks.

**T**wo issues dog New Zealand’s fabled high country: ownership and public access. With some 2.5 million hectares of scenic landscape occupied by only 340 lessees, friction between runholders, conservationists and high country users has increased.

Now runholders are being allowed to freehold part of their pastoral leases in exchange for surrendering the remainder to the conservation estate. The recent Crown Pastoral Lands Act eases the process, but arguments continue over how much of the high country should move into private ownership. Recreational users want the government to keep half of it, fearing that runholders will exclude them and that much of the high country will end up in foreign hands.

Lilybank neatly sums up the debate. Once a famous, 120-year-old high country sheep station, it was sold not only to a foreigner, but to one of a certain notoriety. Hutomo, or “Tommy”, has had business interests ranging from offshore drilling to the Indonesian domestic airline, the Lamborghini car company to a clove monopoly. His interests form part of a family empire that, according to the *Far Eastern Economic Review*, has accumulated wealth of \$60 billion.

More pressing, though, was the matter of public access to Lilybank’s wild country. Hunters had already clashed with the station’s previous owners. Its new management intensified friction with recreational users.

The situation was complicated by a wrangle over exactly what Tommy had bought. The station was advertised for sale with 27,500ha. But, under a deal with the Crown in the late 70s, taxpayers paid some \$300,000 to improve the better, lower country on the farm in exchange for 25,500ha to be surrendered. It took almost 20 years for that surrender to be completed. Lilybank’s new owner, who apparently thought he had bought the full 27,500ha, resisted handing over most of his new acquisition; users, notably the Federated Mountain Clubs (FMC),

insisted that the government should not back down. In December, 1996, the land was finally handed over.

The acrimonious struggle left scars. Shortly before it surrendered the huge tract to the Crown, Lilybank’s new managers did one thing in particular that led to lasting resentment: they burnt down three huts that for 70 years had sheltered musterers, trappers and hunters alike. Says the Department of Conservation’s (DOC) regional conservator Mike Cuddihy: “Knowing those areas were to be handed back to the public, the huts were destroyed. It didn’t help create a harmonious relationship, either with recreational users or the high country community.”

Olde-Olthof’s defences are in a constant state of readiness against intruders now. His complaints, about trespassers especially, keep Senior Constable Bill Apes, the Tekapo policeman, busy. Apes issues warnings under the Trespass Act to errant hunters; but, despite the variety of complaints flowing from Lilybank, he says he can remember only one prosecution. “These niggly things are going on all the time,” he says. “I do know that some guys [hunters] have him on. He rises to the bait, no trouble at all.”

**M**any of Lilybank’s problems begin in Indonesia. Olde-Olthof says he has had 11 bomb threats, through mail and Internet. He blames the media, as he does for many other things. “If you print something incorrect, I consider it a death threat to myself, family and staff.” And all media stories about Lilybank, he says, have been incorrect. He does not give interviews, he says, and it is not clear why he has agreed to this one. He is recording the conversation; he says he tapes all calls.

Olde-Olthof is a former professional hunter who has served with the military and DOC. He seems to believe, genuinely, that he, his family (his partner and his brother) and lodge staff are in real danger, particularly from people who have an axe to grind with the Suharto regime.

In fact, Olde-Olthof claims, Tommy has visited Lilybank only once, presumably on the famous occasion when he flew into Queenstown over protests about his unsilenced Boeing 737. Moreover, according to Olde-Olthof, Hutomo is the station’s owner in name only; he put up the money to buy the station, and Olde-Olthof says he is buying out the Indonesian. He claims his lodge has a 30 percent occupancy rate (it sleeps 16 people at \$1120 a night), most coming simply to enjoy the peace and quiet and do nothing.

Olde-Olthof reels off a list of incorrect allegations against him, investigated by

the police and other state agencies: that prostitutes frequented his lodge, that private Lear jets were using secret runways, that armed guards patrolled the grounds. A large sign on the premises warns of “electronic surveillance and security personnel”, but Olde-Olthof declines to be more specific.

He produces a string of complaints: a hunting party of army and police trespassing on his land and the police, when he complained, not doing anything about it. (Sergeant Noel Brown, Fairlie policeman, says he investigated and no offence was committed.) An American crew filming people who subsequently proved to be Rangiora accountants, he says, “thieving our animals”. Someone “borrowing” a \$100,000 tractor from his land, presumably to haul out a vehicle stuck in the river, where the tractor was left. (Police confirm the complaint.)

Certainly he burnt the huts, although he denies filling a fourth hut’s long-drop with boulders. “What I want to remove off our land is up to me. I can do whatever I like. I don’t have to justify that.”

A locked gate barring entry to a public road with a \$200 charge for the key? The local council intervened and had the lock removed. No one could produce any evidence, says Olde-Olthof, that he was responsible.

Does he really charge \$1000 for the use of his telephone if someone gets stuck in the river? “We offer no assistance on the advice of the police. Because in the past we’ve been threatened with firearms. Our telephone is not available to anyone except our paying guests. I don’t talk to anyone, deal with anyone, but look out if you get in my way, and that’s what I say.”

He says that Lilybank staff have helped 11 injured climbers and hunters, but his view of the passing parade is a bleak one. “Police advice is that we are dealing with potential armed offenders. They have weapons and you must assume they’re going to shoot you. Ninety percent of the people who walk past your front door are likely to commit an offence on you when you live in the country.”

Contrast that with traditional high country hospitality. Mountain guide Gottlieb Braun-Elwert recalls taking a ski party to the Godley Hut, then on Lilybank Station, before Tommy bought the place. Snow began to obliterate the track in and, to save his party from being stranded, Braun-Elwert drove his vehicle down to Lilybank homestead. He arrived at 10.00pm. Before he started the long journey back on foot, Susan Joll, one of the then partners in Lilybank, insisted on cooking him a full roast meal. “I was quite embarrassed,” says Braun-Elwert. “But that is what they did.” ■