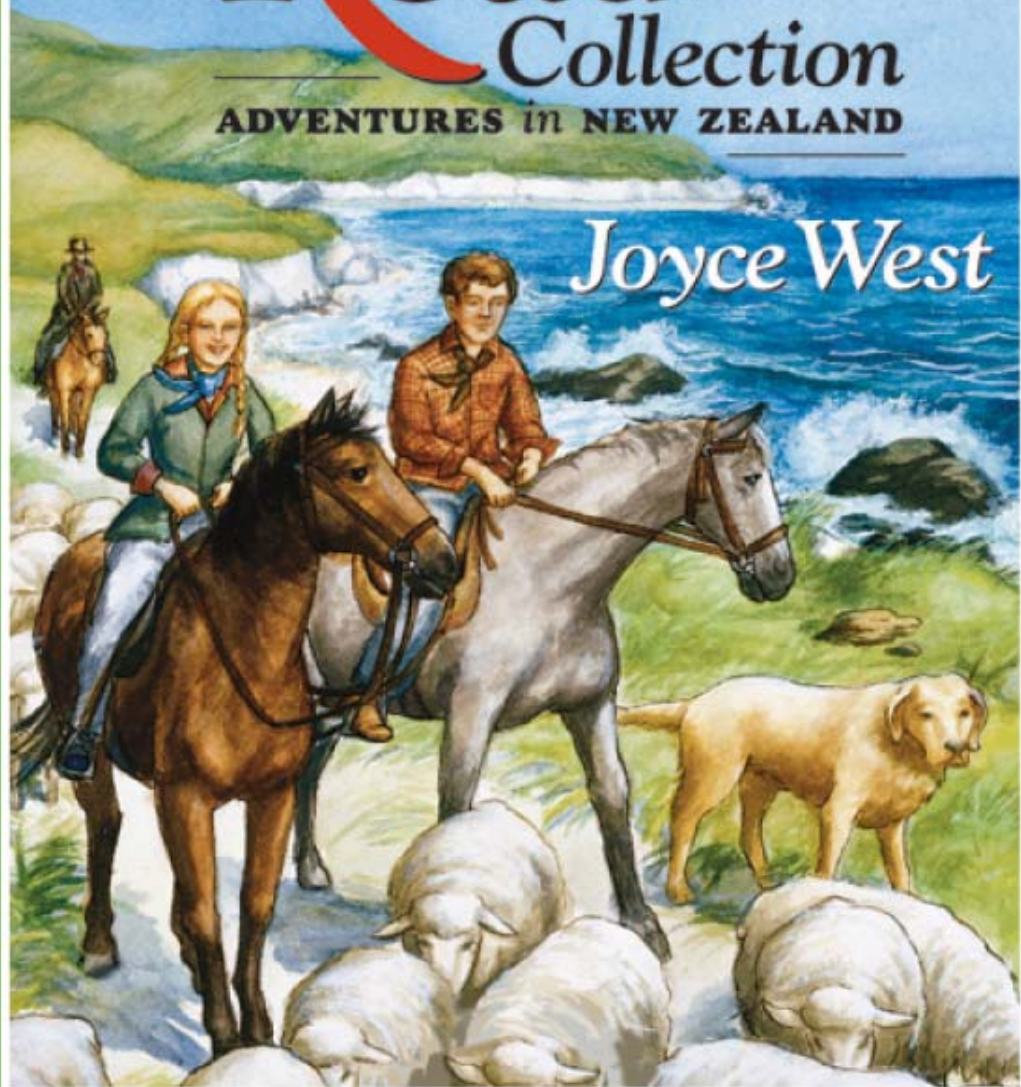


# The Drovers Road Collection

ADVENTURES in NEW ZEALAND

Joyce West



Book 1 • Drovers Road

# **Drovers Road**



**by Joyce West**

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# 1. The Story of Drovers Road

I have made up my mind that while I lie here waiting for my sprained ankle to mend, I shall write a book. It will be about ourselves, the Allan family, about Drovers Road and all our adventures here, and then when we are grown up we can read it, and remember how happy we were.

Drovers Road is a sheep station, away back in the hill country. Our nearest town is Gisborne, almost a hundred miles away. Ninety miles of the distance is by motor road, but from the little township of Renny's Crossing, on the Wainui River, only a narrow twisting stock track crosses the hills. It is the old bridle track by which sheep and cattle were driven northwards in the early days of New Zealand. The homestead is called after the station.

At Drovers Road we are circled by hills. The homestead stands at the head of a great valley carpeted by white shingle, with the blue waters of the creek winding like a twisted silk ribbon. All around us are the hills, rising and falling like the waves of the sea. In springtime they are green, like the sea; in summer they look as if they were covered with pale-brown velvet. Always the sheep are moving and crying, and the far sound of their voices is like bells coming down the wind.

The homestead is an old, low, wooden building, with French doors opening on to a wide veranda. It is painted green and white, and there are grapevines growing up the veranda posts. The windows look across the valley, and behind the house there is a tall plantation of native pines which break the south wind and shelter Aunt Belle's rose garden. Aunt Belle calls it her rose garden, but almost everything grows there. There are lilacs and camellia bushes, and daffodils in the grass, and there is a rockery, and a lawn, and a fishpond without any fish, and a wisteria arbour full of spiders and flying insects.

In books you may have noticed that people always talk about "the master" of a big place, and I think it sounds very nice and impressive. My Uncle Dunsany is the master of Drovers Road. He is a big dark man with a brown skin and eyes so blue that I have seen strangers stare in surprise when he looked at them. We are all

frightened of Dunsany when he is in a rage, but when we see his eyes beginning to laugh we know that it is quite safe to laugh too.

We don't call him Uncle Dunsany because he is not old as proper uncles should be. None of us four children really belongs to him, but he looks after us all, and Aunt Gertrude Allan says that we are an awful burden for a young man to have to carry. Eve, Merry, and Hugh are the children of his eldest brother, Hugh; Uncle Hugh and his wife were killed in a motor accident, and there was nobody but Dunsany to take the children. My father was the middle brother, Hilary. He and my mother quarreled and separated, and my mother went back to England. My father went to South America to look for emeralds. Which was why I, as a very small child, came to Drovers Road.

I have seen a photograph of myself in Aunt Belle's album, taken about that time, and if I really looked like that, so cross and sulky and ugly, with fair straight hair sticking out all round my head, I do not wonder that neither of my parents minded leaving me. I am not so bad as that now, although I am not pretty like Eve. My hair is still straight and fair, and sticks out in a short plait behind either ear, and my skin is brown, and I am straight and skinny. I was christened Gabrielle, which sounds lovely, but every one calls me Gay. Except Dunsany when he is angry.

Eve's real name is Evelyn, and she is nearly a young lady now. She is very pretty, and thinks herself prettier still. In fact she thinks a great deal about her looks. Hugh is the quietest of the family, and the cleverest. Merry is really Meredith; he is one of those people who spend their lives in and out of trouble, but he is always laughing. He and I are almost the same age, and we do most things together. Even our names seem to go together, Gay and Merry.

So there we are, the Allans, and that leaves only Aunt Belle, who is the most important member of the family. As you can imagine, when my poor Uncle Dunsany collected this tribe of children he needed someone to help him look after them, so he begged Aunt Belle to come. Aunt Belle is not really exactly our aunt; she is Dunsany's cousin, only quite a bit older; we always call her aunt. She had just finished looking after another old cousin who had been ill for years and had died. So she came to make her

home at Drovers Road with us, and when people like Aunt Gertrude make remarks about us as “poor motherless children” it makes me very angry indeed. So long as we have Aunt Belle we can’t possibly be poor motherless anybodies.

There are other Allans too, more distant relatives, around the Wainui district; there are the John Allans at Renny’s Crossing, and Aunt Gertrude, and Cousin Emmeline, and Cousin Ben, and Aunt Katherine who married Philip Sands, and lives between here and the Crossing, on Moerangi station. Sometimes I wish that some of them lived farther away, especially Aunt Gertrude, who considers it her duty to give Dunsany good advice about us.

We ride over five days a week to Moerangi, to the household school there. About sixteen children attend the school: ourselves and the Sands, and the children of the married shepherds and station hands. Only Merry and I go now from Drovers Road; Hugh is away at boarding school and Eve is just home after nearly two years at a young ladies’ college. It was fun when we were all four going together, and I suppose it won’t be so very long now before Merry and I are old enough for boarding school. It is very sad the way people grow up.

Our teacher is Susan Leigh, and she seems very young to be a schoolteacher. She is rather a small person, neatly made, with short fair hair curling all over her head, and a round face and laughing grey eyes. At home, in an old frock or in riding clothes, she seems just like one of us, and not much older than Merry and me. But at school we call her Miss Leigh, and behave very properly to her.

She and her mother live in a cottage in the Moerangi valley, quite close to the Sands where the school is. Mr. Leigh is dead now; he was an artist and painted pictures and read books in foreign languages (so Aunt Belle says), but he did not leave much money behind him when he died. Mrs. Leigh is crippled with arthritis and sits in a wheelchair, and Susan has to do everything for her and can never get away for holidays as other people do. Yet Susan is always cheerful and ready to laugh.

Dunsany and she have been friends almost ever since she came to the school. Merry always brags and says that it was through him and the frogs that we got to know Susan so well.