They told him he had to drink to be a man. Yet he became one, only when he stopped. They said nothing was more important than rugby. He hoped they were wrong, because rugby didn’t cure his troubles, it gave them oxygen.

Nev MacEwan was an All Black. He was also an alcoholic whose personal descent almost claimed everything he loved. But this cannot be just his story. This is also the story of a wife; a woman of courage and unfailing commitment. It’s the story of a son who wanted nothing more than to reunite his father with his past. And it’s the story of the jersey that made it possible.

by Eric Young
pictures: Andrew Cornaga
MANAWATU PRISON SQUATS GREY AND COLD, ON THE FLAT NEXT TO THE
Linton Army Camp. The landscape isn’t especially welcoming but isn’t that the
point? Places like this should repulse. Yet, as we approach the front entrance,
a gate swings open. You expect someone to be watching from somewhere, but
this is something more. It’s a courtesy to an old friend.

For 16 years, Nev MacEwan was Chaplain here. He doesn’t know how many
lives he changed, but he knows it was plenty, and he’s convinced one was his.
He retired more than a year ago, though he’s still much admired and he’ll
always find a welcome. You get the feeling he’ll never find himself in front
of a closed gate.

Inside, Dave smiles as he takes our names, and escorts us down a
collection of bland, brick passageways to the room I’d asked to see.
Somewhere there’s bound to be an office with a desk and a phone, but
it is this functional eight by 12m concrete space where Nev really
did his thing. It’s the Chapel.

Forget anything you might have heard about the gates to the
house of God always being open. By my count we’ve already
gone through five locked doors just to get to this; another
one, and behind it is a place almost breathtaking in its
ordinariness. There’s an overhead projector, a small
library of self-help texts and, for some reason, a drum
kit. Outside, a tiny courtyard tries, and fails, to add
colour to this grey Manawatu day.
YOU LOOK INTO HIS FACE. THE TURNED- 
down mouth beneath the platinum moustache 
and the eyes, flicked with flint and a lifetime 
of sadness. They can still dance though. They 
can still hold a room. 

It is strangely unlined, this face. The man 
behind it turned 73 last month. 

The face has a story, many stories. The All 
Black. The drunk. The Chaplain. The thief. 
Which to tell? They all played a part, and 
all left their scars; recurring roles in the intricate 
drama of a complicated man. 

Some of those stories are reasonably well 
known. Nev's been quite generous with them 
over the years, sharing them with anyone he 
believes they will help, and doing it with a 
missionary honesty which never fails to make 
his son Angus uncomfortable. 

But that's just because he loves the man. He 
knows what Nev went through because he was 
also in the room. He knows the price, because 
the family paid it. His instinct for protection is 
both understandable and predictable. 

When I point out Nev's story is essentially 
a parable of redemption, and therefore with 
much to offer, there's a silence down the line. 
Without much enthusiasm, he says: "I just 
say to Dad 'why would you want to bring all 
this stuff up again?'" 

Another beat. "But he does. It is, after all, 
his story." And Nev was the first to write it. 
As part of his therapy, he was encouraged to 
note down his thoughts. Thoughts became 
sentences. Sentences became chapters; 
characters became a personal history: When 
The Crowd Stops Roaring. 

You are moved first by its message, but 
mostly by its honesty and one passage in 
particular stands out because it seems to go 
to the heart of everything. 

"Is a lot of it came," Nev writes, "of trying to 
be a man. 

"When I was a kid, I liked to smell flowers. 
When someone found out about this and 
asked what my favourite flower was, I said 
'peonies,' and got called 'Penny Mac.'"

"It hurt. Then, when I played rugby, they 
said: 'He's more rugged.' Then after the game, 
youth said a man had to drink his pint. So I 
drank my pint. The alcohol certainly helped 
me to face the world, after their image. 

"It gave me the wings to fly. But it took 
away the blue sky." 

Finding the blue sky would become 
Nev's new addiction. But first, he had to 
lose the wings. 

YOU FIND THIS MAN AT THE END OF A 
LONG driveway. Keep on going, past the 
place on the right where his daughter 
lives with a talented husband and two 
happy children. You find him with Jeannette 
in a simple home with little trace of his 
previous lives. There's the striking All Black 
portrait, arms folded chin out, and that's 
about it. 

He shows you to a room above the garage 
he calls The AB Studio; a concession to one 
of those lives, but also a false clue to the man 
who built it. There's nothing remotely rugby 
about this room until the man arrives, and fills 
it with his doorway. 

Even now, more than 50 years after he first 
were that famous black jersey with the iconic 
silver slash, he is imposing. He has promised 
control. My whole life was out of control, so 
hesitation in letting it go. 

"It gave me the wings to fly. But It took 
away the blue sky." 

If a South African tour is, then, a series of 
skirmishes, one of its most impermeable 
citadels is Boet Erasmus in the unremarkable 
coastal sprawl of Port Elizabeth. Nev played 
there twice during the tour; in the final test 
lost 8-3, and an earlier match against Eastern 
Province during which he led the All Blacks 
for the second time. It should have been a 
moment of enormous pride. It was not. 

"It was just an absolute brawl. It was almost 
possible that he'd gone so far as if that side had 
gone even further to maim as many All Blacks as possible. 

"At halftime I was reported as saying to 
the team: 'keep cool, keep focused; the game 
is important.' 

"That's not what I said at all. What I said 
was 'every man for himself, and I'll see you back in 
the dressing room after the game'. It was just 
shock. Rugby wasn't the winner. Nobody 
really came out of it with any credit. 

"Ten days later, after the All Blacks had 
levelled the series with an 11-3 win in Cape 
Town, Nev's increasingly obvious drinking 
found a new level. It was called the top shelf. 

"After that second test, I collapsed from 
exhaustion, and on doctors' advice left the 
team to recuperate. I actually went to stay with 
Basil Kenyon, who was the then the convenor of the 
South African selection panel, at his place in 
East London. Talk about living with the enemy. 

"The advice I was given was that I needed 
to relax a bit more, and not to take myself so seriously. 

"In 1960 South Africa, "relaxing" meant 
drinking, and during those few days with 
Basil Kenyon, Nev was given an alcoholic 
master class. 

"That's when my drinking really started 
from the top shelf. And of course alcohol 
was so cheap over there. You can't blame 
Basil, and I don't. I could have walked away 
from it and didn't. From then on it was a 
slow steady process. 

Nev rejoined the team, but would never 
again feel the need to hide his drinking. "In 
that culture, nobody would have picked it up 
anyway, that I was drinking too much. But isn't 
that the best place to hide a drinker? Among 
other drinkers?"
But Angus is just such an incredible prankster,” says Nev, “I thought it was one of his leg pulls. Until his wife called me the next day, and asked me what I thought of the trip.”

As a boy, Angus had watched helplessly as his father, increasingly angry with rugby and what he saw as its role in his fall, traded away his past, his jersey. Sold. Mementos? Given away. Rugby meant drinking which meant pain, which meant darkness. Rugby would give him stature and pride, yet hide the addiction which undermined both.

Angus knew it had a place, and it wasn’t his. He took the jersey he wore that day for 14 years, until his wife called me the day his alcoholic father came home in the handcuffs of his own addiction, though he wasn’t just any drunk. No, he couldn’t slip because he knew these men on a level they couldn’t. He’d notice a story in the paper, or a conviction rate, or a little more forwardness, a bit of alcohol, and he’d be there.

He’d noticed a story in The Dominion Post about an alleged thief brought down by AA. The convicted thief was by no means one of our larger provincial centres, but cities aren’t measured by population alone and Palmy turned its collective back on the man it had once feted.

“I VOWED AND DECLARED I WOULD NEVER, EVER DRINK. I WAS FIVE. AND OF COURSE IT WAS TO DESTROY ME. THE VERY THING THAT I HATED, WAS THE VERY THING I WAS TO BECOME.”

A paternal paradox if ever there was one. Yet Ian MacEwan wasn’t just any father, as he wasn’t just any drunk. No, he couldn’t slip from the handcuffs of his own addiction, though he wasn’t just any drunk. No, he couldn’t slip because he knew these men on a level they couldn’t. He’d notice a story in the paper, or a conviction rate, or a little more forwardness, a bit of alcohol, and he’d be there.

His was a conviction and a $500 fine. He’d need to be someone who was truly team. A genuine tool for the job, though he couldn’t slip because he knew these men on a level they couldn’t.

But the battle with his father’s disease. When the crowd stepped forward as one, the All Black was disappearing by the day. He now accepts the attempt on his life was more a statement than a suicide, and he woke to a second chance in Ward 5 at Palmerston North Hospital. The detox unit. It was 1979, the first detox from a destructive path had been on his whole life. He’d pause again in the telling. He says, this wasn’t a detox. This was a seismic shift. Alcohol had always been a part of my life. Long before I learned to drink.

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“DURING MY FIRST EVER VISIT, THESE GUYS STARTED TO COME IN, AND THEY WERE JUST PEOPLE LIKE ME. AND IN THAT MEETING, AN ABSOLUTE PEACE I’D NEVER EXPERIENCED CAME OVER ME. I KNEW I HAD TO GO BACK.”
I WENT AWAY HEALING. THAT NIGHT I TOOK AWAY MUCH MORE THAN I GAVE. THE JERSEY WAS JUST A SYMBOL OF A GREATER PART OF ME THAT I HAD REFUSED TO ACCEPT.

It hangs on a wall in the lounge but it certainly don't touch what he really did. Nothing that he did in rugby matters, not even the same one that brought him such glory.

He wrote back to the young Mac Ewan, then 17, perhaps with a little more restraint. He wasn't exasperated, but he was excited by the trip, but recovering the jersey he'd lost was a matter of pride.

There were two rugby histories in New Zealand. There's the official version, which lists the games played and the men who played them. It is deliberately, sometimes purposely, anachronistic and often the facts in no way reflect the truth.

The first was Kaitoke Prison. I'd been invited there that night will forever be of more consequence than a plane heading north.

The second was an evening in the lounge of a Wellington hotel. The air was heavy with anticipation and anxiety, as if the All Blacks were somehow concerned about the outcome of the next day's rugby union match.

And that was the start.

The man Jeannette married, replaced the one she had endured. The late 1980s, Nev's informal attempts at connecting with inmates were in the past. He was now on the payroll.

We left an hour or so later, and I wonder if there was any rhyme or reason to the day's events. There wasn't. It was just another day in the life of a man who had dedicated his life to rugby.