

## WEST COAST MEMORIES

By J. D. Mahoney

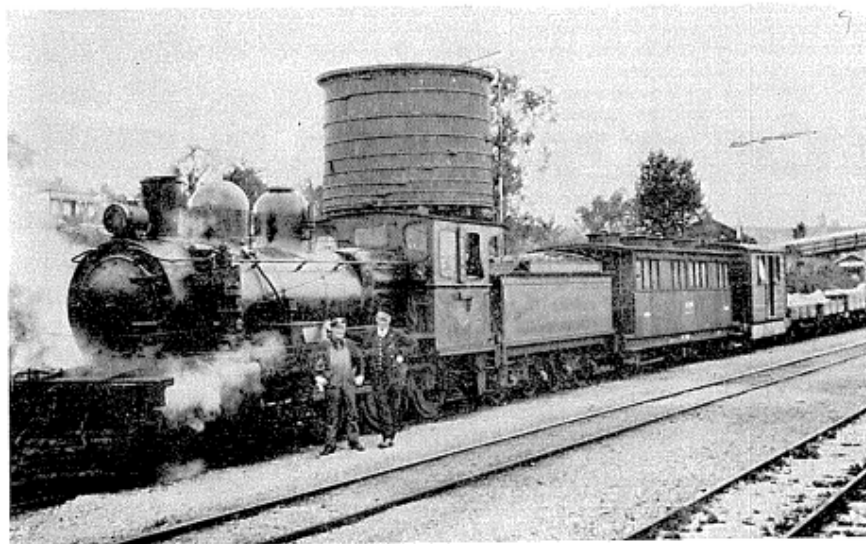
THE West Coast, that remote yet well known strip of the South Island, sandwiched between the Southern Alps and the Tasman Sea, is looked upon as a special place, a world apart, all of which it is. Its distinctiveness springs from its unique scenery and the well known characteristics of its inhabitants, the "Coasters". One writer speaks in good humour of "an enclave, a piece of New Zealand which is with it but not of it. It is loosely called the West Coast . . ." The National Resources Survey 1959 comments: ". . . to the average New Zealander, mention of the West Coast conjures up visions of rugged mountains, forests, rain, gold, and coal".

Likewise, there has always been something different about the railways on the West Coast. This was especially so in the "isolated section" days before the Otira Tunnel was opened in 1923, but it lingered on. The 5½-mile tunnel, providing the only rail link with the wider outside world, seems only a tiny pinhole in the vastness of the mountains, and by no means dispels the illusion of isolation. The West Coast railways, in a way, constitute a small self-contained system based on Greymouth. Greymouth to Otira could be termed the "main line", with Greymouth-Hokitika-Ross and Stillwater-Westport as "secondary lines", and lines to Rewanui, Rapahoe, Blackball, Seddonville and Mokihinui Mine, and Conns Creek as "branches" (the short branches to Blackball and Conns Creek having been closed in more recent years). Before a connection was completed through the Buller Gorge to Inangahua Junction in the early 1940s, the Westport-Seddonville line had in its turn been an isolated section for many years.

The writer was fortunate to have lived in Greymouth during the decade from

1926 to 1935, a period which is now seen as part of the last phase of the golden age of railways. Although motor competition had made its presence felt in the 1920s, and had intensified in the 1930s, the railway was really unchallenged as the carrier of passengers and freight. Civil aviation, later to play havoc with long-distance rail travel, was virtually unknown in New Zealand. To travel over the Southern Alps by motor car was an expedition undertaken only by the adventurous few, but in any case not one family in a dozen owned a car.

The steam passenger train was at a peak of development and prestige. The introduction of new locomotives and passenger cars on the main lines of both Islands in the 1930s were huge steps forward from previous standards. Despite the facts that electric traction had proved itself to be useful and efficient in special circumstances (as at Otira and Lyttelton) and that the diesel-electric locomotive had made a tentative appearance overseas, no one thought seriously of a world without steam locomotives.



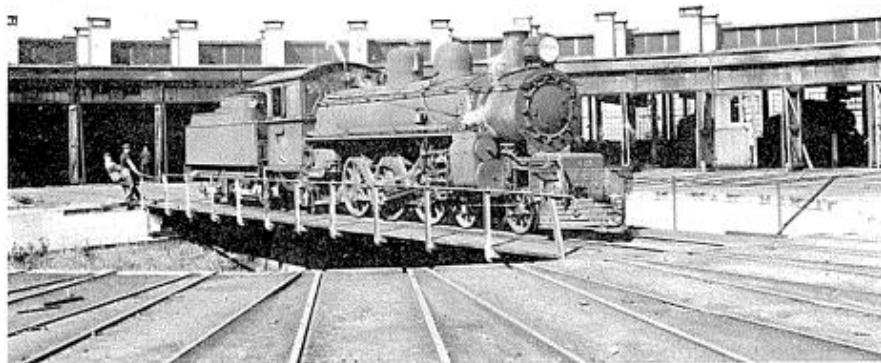
Photograph: D. O'Sullivan (courtesy D. L. A. Turner).

A "Uc" class 4-6-0 locomotive with a goods train at Moana on the Greymouth-Otira line about 1930.

Back in Westland, these were years when, despite the advent of the Otira Tunnel, locomotives and rolling stock retained a high degree of local identity. Not only did the locomotives of the former isolated section remain, but the "Uc" class 4-6-0s became West Coast engines when all ten were transferred from Southland. At the same time, seven "Q" class Pacifics, also from Southland, achieved a special distinction on the Coast by being the last of their class to run in express service. Until replaced in 1934 by "A" class 4-cylinder compound Pacifics, the "Q"s were solely responsible for express workings between Greymouth and Otira. Apart from this change, the roster remained more or less stable for the whole of the period under review, and for a long time later too. Like the locomotive roster, the passenger timetables also seemed reassuringly permanent; in fact, I cannot recall a single major change during the time I was there. There seemed no reason in those nostalgic days why favourite locomotives and trains would not run forever.

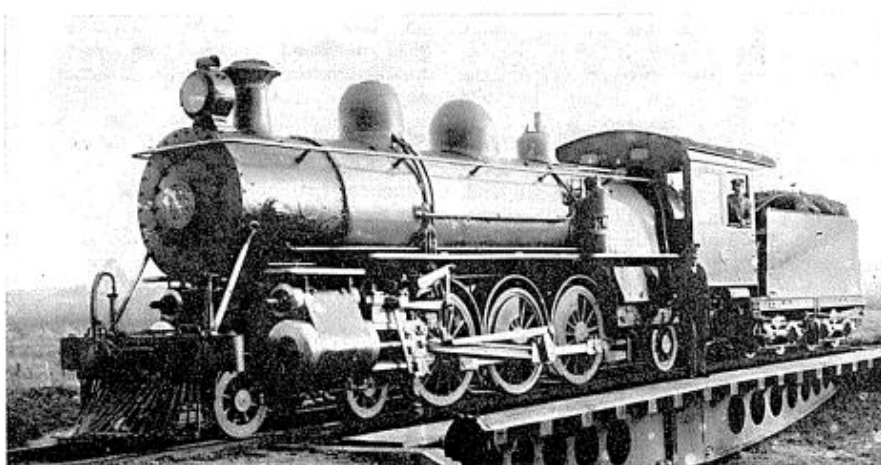
These were years, too, when the newness of the tunnel had not yet worn off, and it still seemed a novelty to read CHRISTCHURCH on destination boards on the express. No self-respecting express in those days, of course, left its terminal without destination boards. Services between Greymouth and Westport still belonged to the future, Inangahua Junction (a junction of roads and rivers, not railways) being a lonely outpost on the system, and did not eventuate until the Buller Gorge rail link was finally made in 1942. It is interesting to speculate on what form the service might have taken had the link been made in the 1920s instead of 20 years later. Would we have seen a Westport Express of three or four cars hauled by a "Uc"? The "Q"s could not be used on this line because of old and light bridge structures between Stillwater and Reefton.

My family moved to Greymouth in 1926, my father having been appointed Foreman of Works there. One important job with which he was associated was the erection of the locomotive depot at



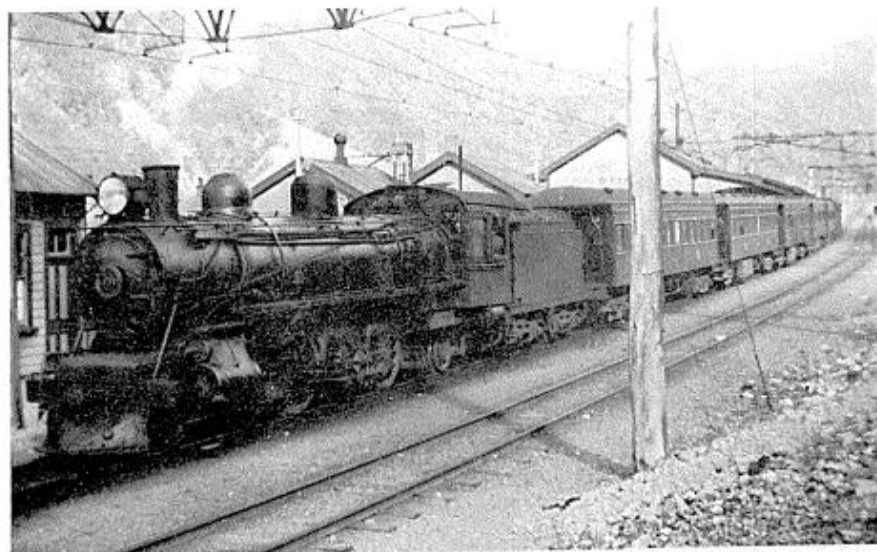
Photograph: L. J. Hostick.

"A" class 4-6-2 No. 423 on the turntable outside Greymouth's Elmer Lane roundhouse on 12 January 1950.



From the W. W. Stewart Collection.

A 72-ton "Q" class 4-6-2 locomotive photographed about 1910. Thirteen of these locomotives were built by the Baldwin Locomotive Works for New Zealand Railways in 1901.



Photograph: J. D. Mahoney.

Class "Q" 4-6-2 No. 341 prepares to work the 10 a.m. Christchurch-Greymouth express over the final 50 miles from Otira.

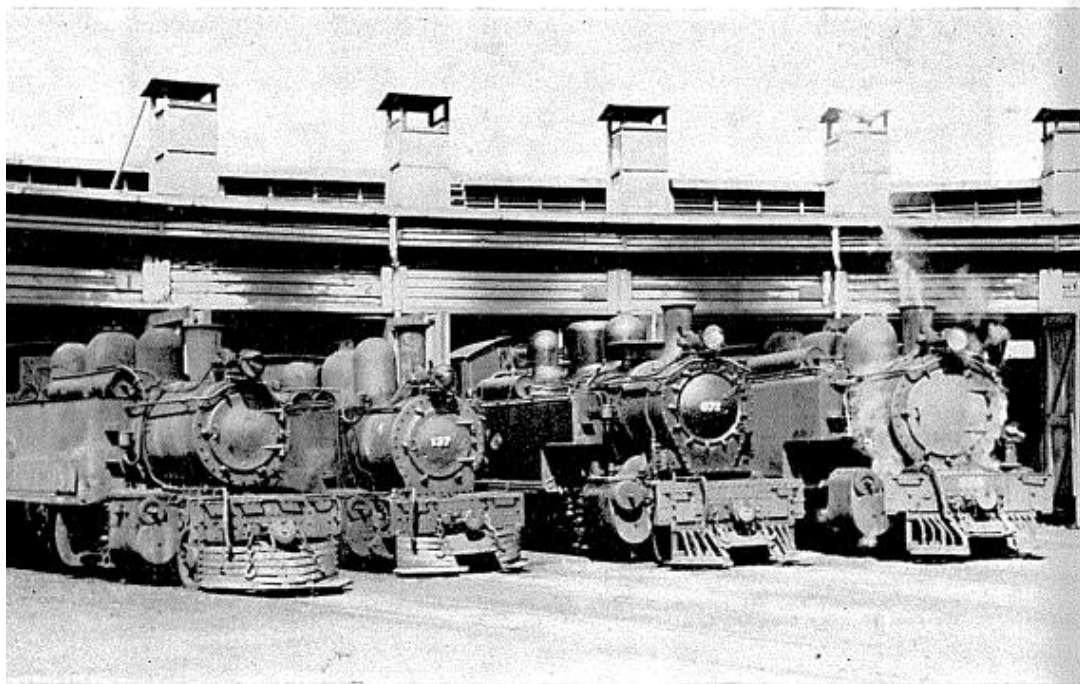
Elmer Lane, Greymouth. This structure, opened on 4 June 1928, was one of only three true "roundhouse" depots in New Zealand, the others being at Invercargill and Lyttelton. The central turntable was always an excellent place to watch locomotives as they moved in and out of the shed; it was an imposing 70ft. structure, then a fairly new type in New Zealand. A "Q" class coal hopper being lifted bodily up the side of the 50ft. coaling tower was also a sight to be remembered. The Elmer Lane depot, incidentally, replaced an older shed at the northern end of the Greymouth station yard.

I first travelled to Greymouth on train 149, the Christchurch-Greymouth or "Coast" express, in December 1926 at the close of the school year. Still marvelling at the experience of my first passage through the 5½-mile Otira Tunnel, I saw a "Q" class Pacific locomotive for the first time. Standing outside the Otira running shed in the summer sunshine, it was a case of "love at first sight". The "Q" had a beauty of line

and proportion, plus a certain style somehow lacking in the more functional "Ab"s on the Canterbury side of the mountains. These qualities seemed to stem from the attractive Baldwin number plate on the smokebox door, the buffer beam tie rods, the Bissell trailing truck with inside bearings, the third small dome housing the safety valves, and the handsome cab sitting back at a slightly rakish angle to the boiler.

I also preferred the rectangular tender to the cylindrical Vanderbilt variety on the "Ab". The latter type looked well on certain massive American locomotives, such as those of the Southern Pacific Railroad in particular, when they were of like proportions, but on the "Ab"s their restricted dimensions made them look slightly ridiculous.

Later I was to learn that the "Q" class locomotives, built in 1901, were distinguished in railway circles as being the first of the "Pacific" or 4-6-2 type in the world. Some have said that the term "Pacific" was derived from New Zealand's situation, but other opinion



Photograph: D. L. A. Turner.

Four classes of tank locomotives at Greymouth on 10 February 1963: "Wf" 2-6-4T No. 383, "Wa" 2-6-2T No. 137, "Ww" 4-6-4T No. 672, and "We" 4-6-4T No. 376.

holds that the name originated from locomotives of similar arrangement built in 1902 by the American Locomotive Company for the Missouri Pacific Railway. Actually, the first locomotive with the 4-6-2 wheel arrangement was a "Mother Hubbard" type named **Duplex** of novel boiler design built for the Lehigh Valley Railroad in 1886, while some 4-6-0s later had a pair of trailing wheels added temporarily for weight distribution purposes, thus technically making them 4-6-2s. However, there seems little doubt that our "Q"s were the first true class of Pacifics as the term is generally understood today.

Another highlight of that first overland trip was the quaint sight of an ex-New Zealand Midland Railway 4-4-0T (classified "La" by New Zealand Railways) standing on the Mawhera Quay

crossing as No. 149 drifted into Greymouth. The circular cab spectacles and cab louvres stand out in memory, but I do not recall seeing one of these interesting relics again. I understand they were scrapped or sold soon afterwards. I was interested to discover recently that one actually found its way to far-off Northland where it was used by the freezing works at Moerewa in the Bay of Islands.

By degrees I became familiar with the Greymouth locomotive stock, this being facilitated by the unusually close integration of the town and the railway. The "Q"s, represented by Nos. 338-342, 344 and 346, were in the process of having their Baldwin boilers replaced by "Ab"-type boilers. They never to my knowledge ventured away from the Greymouth-Otira line while they were on the

Coast, and on this line they monopolised all traffic, express, mixed, and goods. The "Uc"s, which were largely confined to the secondary lines to Reefton and Hokitika, would occasionally "fill in" as far as Dunollie on the Rewanui branch, running tender first out of Greymouth.

Tank engines were well represented at Greymouth. There were "W" and "Wa" class 2-6-2s, "Wd" and "Wf" 2-6-4s, and the "We" class 4-6-4T locomotives Nos. 198 and 376. These two always looked particularly massive when seen from Mawhera Quay as they ran along the elevated Grey River embankment. Of the three "Wa"s at Greymouth, No. 289 stood out with its twin air reservoirs on the cab roof. But I always considered the Baldwin "Wd"s the most intriguing of all the tank locomotives. They were so very American in appearance, and the tall slender stack, elongated domes, and high cab, reminiscent of a ship's bridge, gave them a special kind of stubby elegance.

At that stage the "Wd"s were in the twilight of their days, and it was a sight to see one struggling out of town with the Hokitika portion of the express

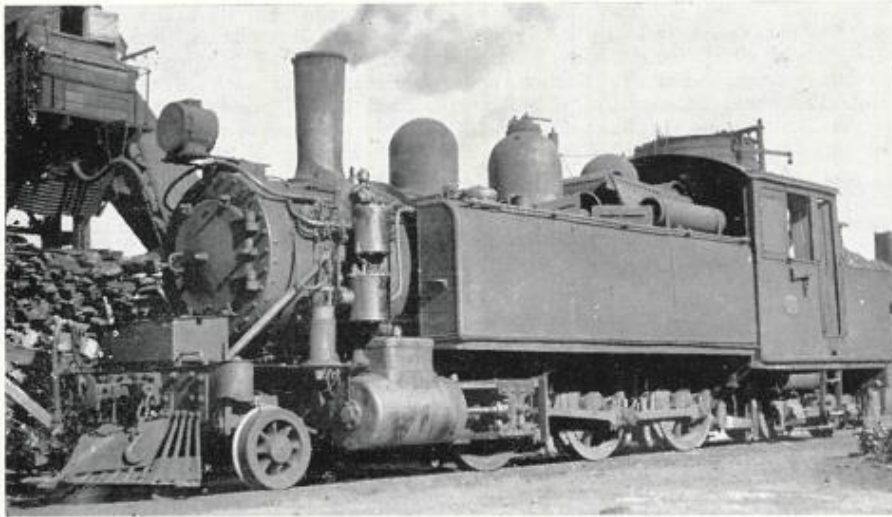
at 4.45 p.m. For this last leg of the run from Christchurch, two cars were usually taken off at Greymouth, leaving four cars (two each of first class and second class), guard's van, and a "Zp" roadster. Ahead of these cars, was usually added a string of goods wagons, mostly empty "U" and "Ub" class flat-tops returning for more loads of timber from the numerous sawmills scattered along the line to Ross. The little "Wd" always put up a very spirited show, with clouds of black smoke erupting straight up into the sky from its long, slender, stovepipe funnel, and the engine itself hunting violently from side to side as if elbowing its way along. The modest speed of the express cars trailing along sedately at the rear always seemed an amusing anticlimax.

I can also recall the arrival at Greymouth of the return express connection due in at 10.05 a.m., this time with full loads of timber at the head of the train. Perhaps it was a few minutes late, and the arrival would be quite fussy with the high-loaded wagons vying with the little tank engine in liveliness. There would be a jingling noise from

Class "Wa" locomotive No. 217 with a Blackball-Greymouth train (left) waits at Ngahere for "W" 238 to arrive with empties for Blackball. This was in the mid-1950s.

Photograph: B. Wheelbell.





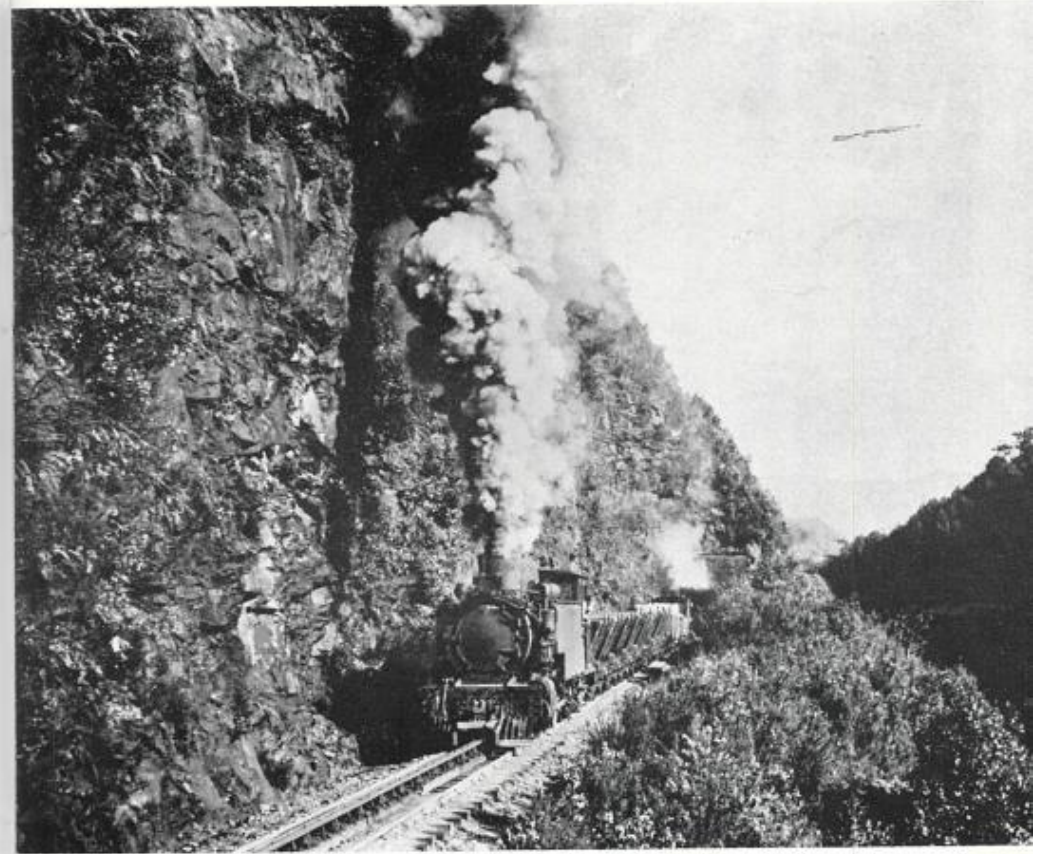
Photograph: W. W. Stewart.

Eighteen of these 2-6-4T locomotives supplied by the Baldwin Locomotive Works in 1901 became New Zealand Railways' "Wd" class.



Photograph: D. L. A. Turner.

An "A" class Pacific leaves Greymouth with an afternoon mixed train for Hokitika in February 1965.



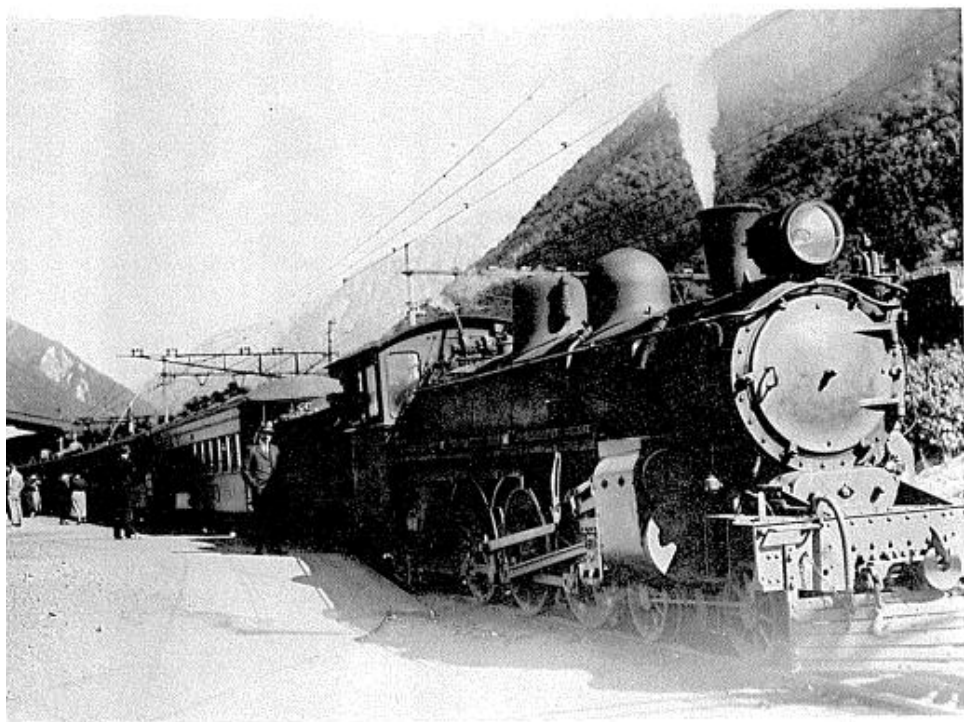
Photograph: D. L. A. Turner.

Working hard on the 1 in 26 gradient, "We" 375 climbs the Rewanui Incline in 1965 with empty coal hoppers for the mine to load.

the bogies and the bond chains, and much dust. Immediately on arrival, the "Wd" and wagons were quickly hustled off to leave the stage clear for the "Q", the "Wd"s more celebrated Baldwin relative, which was waiting with the usual two Greymouth cars to raise the status of the train to that of full express. I do not recall the "Wd"s being used anywhere but on the Hokitika line, and the Greymouth district never saw anything of the lighter "Wb" class 2-6-2Ts that were for so long associated with the

Westport Section. I believe the Greymouth "Wd"s were Nos. 317, 322, 325 and 355. They disappeared before 1930, and the railways of the West Coast lost a lot of colour with their passing.

Apart from some shunting at Greymouth, the two "W"s (Nos. 192 and 238) and the "Wa"s were used exclusively on the Rewanui and Blackball coal branches. They were adapted for use on the centre-rail inclines between Dunollie and Rewanui, where the gradient varied between 1 in 26 and 1 in 30, and



Photograph courtesy N.Z. Railways.

**ABOVE:** The Christchurch-Greymouth express at Otira about 1936, with an "A" class 4-cylinder compound Pacific preparing to leave.

**RIGHT:** The compact station yard at Rewanui in February 1965. The mine loading bins can be seen in the right background.

between Blackball and Roa, where the gradient was 1 in 25. The "We"s were confined to the Rewanui line, and spent the greater part of their time "working the hill" from Dunollie up to Rewanui. The "Wf"s were more ubiquitous. I remember them on the Hokitika line in the late 'twenties, and there is a photograph of one working a Reefton train reproduced in a 1927 *New Zealand Railways Magazine*. I also saw them working occasional trains as far as Dunclie in the 1930s. Somehow the "Wf" never seemed to appeal to me; it seemed a rather nondescript design.

Other locomotives remembered were the inevitable "F"s, working away in the background among the rakes of "Q" wagons on the coal wharves. I remember

how cramped a very tall fireman friend of mine looked in the confined cab of an "F". Ambitions of a career on the footplate were dimmed a little by thoughts of a similar apprenticeship before the cab of a main-line engine could be attained. Then there were the "B"s, which worked regularly on the Rewanui branch as far as Dunollie, and appeared to handle all workings on the Rapahoe branch.

The "Q"s, after reigning supreme on the Otira main line for a glorious decade from 1925 to 1934, began to be replaced by the "A" class compounds as the latter became surplus in the North Island following the advent of the "K" class 4-8-4s, and were relegated to secondary



Photograph: D. L. A. Turner.

duties and suburban work around Dunedin. The "A"s maintained the express workings between Greymouth and Otira until the advent of diesel railcars in 1956, but the express never seemed to display quite the same stylish air once

the "Q"s disappeared from the scene. It was the end of an era. One became conscious of the impermanence of things, just as a later generation is now facing up to the incredible loss of the steam locomotive altogether.