

A Survey of Recent New Zealand Writing

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TO achieve any depth or spread in an article attempting to cover the whole gamut of New Zealand writing must be deemed to be a New Zealand madman's dream, but I wonder if it would be so difficult for people overseas, particularly in other parts of the Commonwealth. It would appear to them, perhaps, that two or three rather good poets have emerged from these islands. So good, in fact, that their appearance in any anthology of Commonwealth poetry would make for a matter of rather pleasurable comment and would certainly not lower the general standard of the book. I'll come back to these two or three poets presently, but let us first consider the question of New Zealand's prose writers. Ah yes, we have, or had, Katherine Mansfield, who died exactly fifty years ago. Her work is legendary — her *Collected Stories* (Constable) goes from reprint to reprint, and indeed, pirate printings are being shovelled off to the printing mills now that her fifty year copyright protection has run out. But Katherine Mansfield never was a "New Zealand writer" as such. She left early in the piece. But how did later writers fare, internationally speaking? It was Janet Frame who first wrote the long awaited "New Zealand Novel." *Owls Do Cry* was published in 1957. A rather cruel but incisive novel, about herself (everyone has one good novel in them), it centred on her own childhood experiences in Oamaru, a small town eighty miles north of Dunedin — a town in which rough farmers drove sheep-shit-smelling American V-8 jalopies inexpertly down the main drag — where the local "bikies" as they are now called, grouped in vociferous

bunches outside the corner milk bar. Where the colonists by and large desolately mused on war:

Until the six years finished. On New Year's Eve, perhaps, with the brown and white people standing outside the New Year, the same way people stand outside theatres and cricket grounds waiting for the films or the shield match to begin; and the mothers warning their children, Remember you must not laugh or play or swap anything. We are killing for six years. It is War.

Or when the children visit the rubbish dump to look at a fire in the hollow, Francie, the elder sister, is reluctant to go. She is growing up, and is quite perky about her other interests:

And then no one can describe exactly what happened, but it happened, and Francie tripped over a rusty piece of plough and fell headfirst down the slope, rolling, quickly, into the flames. And Tim Harlow's father, the Council man, tried to grab her, and leapt high, like a ballet dancer, to reach her, crying as he danced.

I won't go on into a deeper exposition of this, or of her many subsequent novels. It is enough to say that here was *The Last Picture Show*, as it concerned the forties — not so much the fifties. Here was no academic arguing over the expressiveness of the language. Here, there was no journalese, or argument over it but a sort of latent flashback to mother English expression in which "a bush fire was a fierce holocaust raging down stately corridors of ancient rimus."¹ This is the argument — that New Zealanders in their creative expression have always been about thirty years behind in the latest *ways* of expression, behind the commonwealth, especially England, and particularly behind the U.S.A., who with writers like Cummings, Pound, Olson, Bly, Ginsberg and Bukowski, have shown new ways to roll the life's experience round the tongue.

Frank Sargeson probably has more of his books on New Zealand library bookshelves than any other living New Zealand writer. Now in his seventies, Sargeson is by no means a spent force. A prolific writer, yes, and about whose style one could say, "Sargeson is New Zealand's Edward Elgar." In musical terms, very heavy, almost muddy and

sometimes indistinct; a plethora of slowly bubbling verbiage flopping over our heads and into our eyes. But he is very much an active writer, more thoroughly professional than any other, living through times which did not encourage professional writing. The variety and range of his writing is quite outstanding. But it is tempting, and perhaps rather easy, to bring new angles to bear on an analysis of his writing. It was Sargeson, first of all, who began to focus public attention on the Maori — as writer; as a human entity responding or otherwise to cultural harmony. This was refreshing, particularly in these days when New Zealand has gone almost overboard in deference to the sanctity of the “Maori way” regardless of the objectivity of races living together in human terms. An interesting comment of his concerns one aspect of the Maori/pakeha (white New Zealander) gradually coming together (perhaps for economic reasons more than anything): “I think as a country becomes more sophisticated, as what culture it has becomes more sophisticated and civilised, that you tend to get away from the naturalism.”² Sargeson’s influence outside New Zealand has been relatively small, but it is not easy to speak truly about New Zealanders and New Zealand and have an automatic audience overseas. That is, some writers aim for overseas audiences, particularly in these days of the McLuhan implosion: Sargeson has grabbed the people here; their ideals and their idealism. Perhaps, as George Steiner suggested, it would not hurt to write less, and when we do, to really speak to men. Sargeson has always spoken to man. The “Global Village” (another cultural trap?) was about two generations from his initial philosophical conception of man, qua man. Sargeson, tooling up for the third part of his trilogy of memoirs (*One is Enough* already published, *More than Enough* completed and ready for publication), will leave us this unique achievement, and I am sure, many more.

Maurice Duggan is one of New Zealand’s most prolific short story writers. *Immanuel’s Land* appeared in 1956.

Duggan's vision is somewhat more brash and outward than Sargeson's. Whereas Sargeson sees his characters through their own eyes, Duggan sees them through binoculars. Sometimes with imperfect (personal) philosophical notions as to what his characters are. I can't recall Duggan being an influence on other New Zealand writers, although he had some influence on New Zealand's academics, who continually write and talk about him. This is not the case with Maurice Gee, whose stories are rather more incisive, though fewer in number.

Roderick Findlayson writes about Maoris with far more sensitivity and reach than most other New Zealand writers. His first collection of stories, *Brown Man's Burden*, appeared in 1938, and a magnificent volume, with the same title, and containing more recent work, from *Sweet Beulah Land* (1942) and *Tidal Creek* (1948), appeared in 1973. His has been the almost singleminded pursuit of realising in his writing the splendid dignity and emotional wealth of Maori life, especially from the 1920's to the present day when the Maori has had to defend his uniqueness and gentility in the face of the rapid growth of industrialism, European wars, H-bombs, air-dropped fertiliser, American V-8 jalopies and the petrochemical inversion layers that shroud our cities. In his story "Great Times Ahead," he describes groups of Maoris in Queen Street, Auckland, waiting for the Land Court to open:

I don't see how people could lose their land. Land was something under your feet, there it was, and you stood on it. But I did know what losing was like. I'd just lost my mum. And losing makes the one who loses feel like lost. So then I knew why they looked sad and hopeless and lost.³

Maurice Shadbolt is a comparatively young writer, but with already an impressive body of work behind him. His first stories were published in 1955, mainly through the efforts of well-known contemporaries and editors, Charles Brasch, Monte Holcroft (then editor of *New Zealand Listener*), Phillip Wilson, and the late James K. Baxter. His

first collection of stories, *The New Zealanders*, was published in 1960. It was a faltering start. He himself said "*The New Zealanders* came close to being my tombstone."⁴ Maurice Shadbolt has had many problems to contend with, one of which, a lack of money, was and still is common to many serious writers in New Zealand. The New Zealand Literary Fund, established in 1946, was never adequate in providing sufficient money to authors to enable them to concentrate fully on writing for any length of time. There was, and still is, only one University Writers' Fellowship in New Zealand — the privately endowed Robert Burns Fellowship at Otago University — which Shadbolt held at one stage.

There are no Creative Writing Departments in New Zealand universities, and I cannot see that there will be, at least for another ten years or so. This may be a good thing. There are those who argue that at least New Zealand's writers have always been close to the people at large, and that this is especially important in such a multi-racial society. But on the other hand, many writers have been forced to double as journalists, and this certainly has had a detrimental effect on their creative writing. Shadbolt did his stint at journalism, but it was his tenure as Robert Burns Fellow that really gave him the right atmosphere and the time, free from financial worry, to attempt his magnificent novel, *Strangers and Journeys*. It is a novel of heroic proportions. To attempt even an outline here is quite impossible. But it is best described in terms of the general hostility of the environment — the physical environment (a common concern with writers here), and the cultural dislocation of the people (immigrants and those resident) from the mores and lifestyles of the West, particularly England. It is not often realised that New Zealand is more a "Far East" country than a "Far West" one. Geographically speaking, although modern communications make a farce of it, New Zealand is closer to China, Japan, Indochina, Malaysia, Singapore than to New York or Lon-

don. This "distance" problem had a great effect in the early days, and the hangups of the pioneers persist to this day. In *Strangers and Journeys*, Shadbolt says:

One's instinct is to grow what one can, no matter how obstinate and unpromising the ground. Our first instinct, perhaps; the dream of the garden. And perhaps that is what this country is really about, after all.⁵

But Shadbolt's style, typical of most New Zealand prose writers, is dour and decidedly unpoetic. There are many critics who feel that Shadbolt could have pruned the six hundred page opus down to at least two hundred pages. I would wish to agree with them, but I wonder how much of the richness and energy would have been lost. I do feel, however, that the book lacks a central core image; an inherent allegorical structure. This is a failing, if it can be called that, of most New Zealand writers, poets included. But if one wants to draw a loose line through the greater mass of New Zealand short story writing, looking for a set of symbols, or cymbals, one strikes the following conventions: "A country schoolteacher (always a female), a number of lengths of number eight wire, two, three, or four small Maori children (per formula — just as most American situation comedies start from a basis of 'three sets and a negro'), a tree — usually an ancient pohutukawa that the populace are trying to keep standing even though a motorway is scheduled to go through it, an uncle — uncles are very important — they are a little more distanced for plot and dialogue purposes than a mother or a father. No drunks, but there must be an old man smoking a pipe in it somewhere. A mountain. Mountains are important, so are sheep. Also a tractor which doesn't go for one reason or another."⁶ Representative of writers who write more or less within these bounds are Phyllis Gant, Warren Dibble, Michael Henderson and J. M. Wilson. There are others — mainly to be seen week by week with stories in *New Zealand Listener*, usually accompanied by rather gauche drawings displaying all of the above paraphernalia. To be fair, I would extract Warren Dibble from the list, and group him

with O. E. Middleton, Witi Ihimaera, Margaret Sutherland, and Noel Hilliard. O. E. Middleton is not a prolific writer, but he has a fine style and knows exactly what he is aiming at, and achieves the effect. His collection of stories, *The Loners*, was published in 1972. He is a spinner of tales and is not overbearingly committed to extract a state of philosophy of New Zealand anguish. He just loads his magazine with characters and situations and pulls the trigger. Witi Ihimaera is a young Maori writer, and in fact the only Maori prose writer to achieve any widespread recognition here. His first novel, and indeed the first novel by a Maori writer, *Tangi*, was published in 1973. In an introductory passage to the book he says:

This is *Tangi*, a vivid expression of the village family unity of rural Maori life. This is *Tangi*, written in the hope that such a life, and the value of that life, will never be lost.⁷

This states not so much a desire to preserve all that is Maori, whether it is good or bad, for its own sake, as a determination to avoid what is now creeping into pakeha western-style society: a mind-dulling materialism; a godless retreat to a fearful appliance-cluttered existence behind the battlements of the suburban residential four-by-two and planks quarter-acre plot. It is easy to brush Ihimaera's novel off as rather sentimental, but it is really quite hard-headed and very realistic. *Tangi* (the funeral feast) is about the young man and his father (not an uncle or a neighbour), and the son's return from the city for his father's funeral. It concludes with some affirmation: "The hands of the clock stand at the beginning of another hour."

Margaret Sutherland is, in my opinion, New Zealand's finest resident woman writer. New Zealand is woefully short of female poets, but this is not the case when it comes to prose writers — particularly female short story writers. In her stories she goes somewhat deeper into the human psyche than, say, Patricia Grace does, although the surface concerns and situations are similar. She explores human relationships in a more tactile sense:

There was a kind of reassurance in the brusqueness. But she said no more and Clodagh, watching beside the bed, thought that it was like looking at a map of old land as it quietly slipped away beneath the sea. Once she reached over to wipe away a spill of saliva; and then, to turn aside the bedclothes.⁸

It is necessary here to mention one of New Zealand's finest but most neglected writers of fiction, the late Ronald Hugh Morrieson. A victim, finally, to alcohol, Morrieson left two fine published novels, *The Scarecrow* and *Came a Hot Friday*, and a third *Predicament*, soon to be published. It is difficult to understand why his novels never achieved popularity in this country, except to say that their harshness and vivid portrayals, with his use of somewhat direct colloquial language, never fitted the milieu of the contemporary niceties of New Zealand prose. It would be fair to say that perhaps we were harbouring a Henry Miller, a Jack Kerouac, or more currently, a Charles Bukowski, in our midst without knowing it. It would not be unexpected to see a revival of his work in the near future.

Among younger prose writers, Barry Southam and Brian Turner, who both double as poets, stand out. Southam remorselessly describes the inner-city world of the dropout, the junkie, the lost, dispossessed, and how the city mind is destroying itself and the countryside without even knowing it. "Moving," a searing story, centres around a young female heroin addict surrounded by people passing through, exploiting her, and each other:

"Look! Look, a herd of wild horses over there! They must be one of the last in the country." He pointed them out to the other men, who stopped talking and stared out into the soft light.
 "Could get fifteen bucks each for each of those buggers for catsmeat if we could get close enough to get some shots in with a three o three," said Mac.⁹

Brian Turner is concerned more with country life, but brings the same kind of intense description to bear. In "The Eliminator," which is about a farm round-up of rabbits, the description of events is concise, unemotional, exact:

"See, sonny boy," the older man said, his eyes burning. He stretched the rabbit's neck, the eyes bulging, and

tossed the limp body against the netting. The pile began to build up.¹⁰

Both these writers have yet to put out collections of their short stories, but when they come, as they surely will, a new dimension will have been added to New Zealand prose writing: less of an over-riding concern with what is parochial and insular, and more with an international focus of philosophy — how things affect men everywhere. It seems to me that the place and uniqueness of New Zealand and New Zealanders will become clearer under this scrutiny.

A mention, finally, must be made of science fiction writing in this country — or whichever way it is preferred to describe this kind of writing; speculative fiction, perhaps. The most outstanding exponent of this form is undoubtedly Chris Else — a rose among thorns, or a thorn among roses, whichever way it is looked at. He has published so far at least half a dozen stories, the most outstanding of which is "A Novel Beginning . . .," which appeared in the *New Zealand Universities Literary Yearbook, 1972*. With the publication of a special issue devoted to international science fiction, *Edge*, a Christchurch based literary magazine, gave a number of New Zealand science fiction writers an opportunity to contribute their work. New Zealanders such as David Cheer, Chris Else, Trevor Reeves, D. S. Long, Bill Manhire and Arthur Baysting appeared alongside such renowned overseas writers as Rene Char, Vladimir Colin, Brian Aldiss, Guillevic, and Enrique Anderson Imbert, in what was emphatically a remarkable and historic publishing achievement.¹¹ Although the issue was received with some surprise and with a great deal of enthusiasm overseas, its local reception was somewhat less than charitable. There are a number of factors which contribute to this. Firstly, New Zealand literary magazines had traditionally featured local writing only — overseas writing having been deliberately excluded, and never encouraged at any stage. The appearance of two literary magazines in 1971 and

1972, *Edge* and *Cave*, which featured overseas writing of fine quality — including that of William Stafford, Robert Bly, Jorge Luis Borges, Pablo Neruda, Charles Bukowski, J. Michael Yates, John Haines, Bert Meyers, and many more — has created somewhat of an enigma for New Zealand's older writers, editors, and critics. This was "solved" to an extent with the almost en masse refusal of these writers to contribute to these magazines, and one can only speculate as to their reasons for this. H. Winston Rhodes, long a respected critic and friend and colleague of many earlier writers, wrote a "non-review" of the *Edge* SF issue, in *New Zealand Monthly Review*, which he founded in 1959, in which he suggested that science fiction writers don't even understand each other's work, so why should the general reading public (or respected former professors of English) be subjected to its obscurities. This reflects an important viewpoint within the context of critical New Zealand writing. Rhodes, any many of his colleagues, formed a group of people which could loosely be described as the "1940's radicals" — people of a strong leftist enthusiasm which flowed in the wake of the revolutionary and historic rise to power of the 1935 Labour Government, which brought in its famed "cradle to grave" concept of social services and benefits. It was this "close to the people — common man" philosophy which strengthened the flow of "realist" writing, especially in prose, in New Zealand. Artistic revolutions such as surrealism and dada never had any effect here; and only to a small extent in the visual arts. Science fiction writing, especially by New Zealanders, was treated as the leper of true writing. Rhodes' belief was that:

literature can restore and correct and can protect one against the depersonalisation of modern life, and the artist is the natural enemy of the Philistine, the bureaucrat, the technocrat, the efficiency expert and the computer.¹²

I would venture that Rhodes' criticism of science fiction in this context is somewhat misplaced, for technocracy and

computerisation are indisputable facts of modern life, and are "real" as such. To adhere to what some may describe as outdated socialistic concepts in the face of this could be seen as pure escapism — a *retreat* from the creeping paralysis of mindless technology, instead of facing it head on in an attempt through creative writing to analyse it and the reaction of people to it, in the hope that it might be "legislated" out of existence so the world might return to more of a semblance of natural living.

We must return to the original question posed at the outset of this essay. Are there more than two or three New Zealand poets who could comfortably be included in a projected anthology of Commonwealth poetry? First, let us look at the number of poets who have published work in North America (including Canada), at least. There are precious few. I name fourteen, and I doubt whether there are many more than that: D. S. Long, Peter Olds, Norman Simms, Gary Langford, G. J. Melling, Arthur Baysting, Robert Stowell, J. E. Weir, James K. Baxter, Mike Doyle, Trevor Reeves, Barry Southam, C. K. Stead, Allen Curnow, E. M. Bennett. Of these, four were born overseas and had work published overseas before arriving here, and of all of them, only four (Barry Southam, C. K. Stead, Allen Curnow and Peter Olds) are regarded here as leading New Zealand poets, still writing. So, inevitably, insofar as New Zealand work is known outside this country, the choices for an anthology would centre around James K. Baxter, R. A. K. Mason, Rex Fairburn, all of whom are now dead, and possibly Allen Curnow, who is still writing but who has remained largely silent (apart from a recent burst) for some twelve years or so. These poets have all been published in England, and there are a number of younger poets (all in their late twenties or early thirties) such as Bill Manhire, Ian Wedde, Alan Brunton, Kevin Cunningham, Brent Southgate, Anne Spivey and Kevin Ireland, who have been published in England, but not in North America. Relatively few poets have been

published in Australia — New Zealand's closest neighbour geographically; but not, I am afraid to say, culturally and artistically speaking. I intend here to talk about those poets who are actively writing now, with perhaps some brief references to earlier poets. Undoubtedly our most prolific and best-selling modern New Zealand poet is the Maori poet, Hone Tuwhare. His first book, published in 1964, *No Ordinary Sun*, created a sensation. This book has gone into over 6 reprints and some 4,000 copies, mainly sold in New Zealand. But he is not just a local star with a special and limited interest for New Zealanders alone. He has learned his craft well (from R. A. K. Mason, whom I regard as New Zealand's greatest poet). His are not strictly Maori or pakeha concerns, in that he glosses over the two still conflicting cultures. His is an involvement in both. Like Mason's his philosophy and his imagery are universal:

But if I
 should not hear
 smell or feel or see
 you

 you would still
 define me
 disperse me
 wash over me
 rain¹³

These are the last two stanzas from "Rain," which was one of sixteen poems he completed during his tenure as Centennial Burns Fellow at Otago University in 1969. His later book, *Sap-Wood & Milk*, in which he combines with internationally known Maori artist, Ralph Hotere, is a remarkable art object, and for a book of poetry and graphics in this country, with its small population, a phenomenal best seller. His style is easy and colloquial, on the surface, anyway. He is under no illusions:

I think you drifted away
 when I began the rhubarb-rhubarb
 about the creative process
 ("To a Girl Poet")

In this poem Tuwhare insists on the sanctity and unique-

ness of each individual — to preserve that, not as a selfish possession, but as a thing of wonder, to behold:

Hold it carefully:

your way of saying. Cup it to yourself:
the bated flame, diamond softness
and fire

(“To a Girl Poet”)¹⁴

Precious little of Tuwhare’s poetry has been published overseas. His first book, *No Ordinary Sun*, published by Longman Paul, Auckland, had a limited sale overseas, but it, and his later books, are now rapidly gaining greater popularity overseas.

Allen Curnow is probably New Zealand’s best known poet — in New Zealand. It must be said that he has been a major influence in the shape and strength of New Zealand poetry since the early 1930’s, and of the attitudes that went with it, until the mid-sixties, at least. But Curnow, whose first collection of poems, *Valley of Decision*, was published in 1933, is not finished yet. During the past year, two small collections have appeared from Catspaw Press, a small press in the traditional sense. The first was *Trees, Effigies, and Moving Objects*, excerpts of which were published in the much lauded first issue of a new quarterly, *Islands*, edited by Robin Dudding, former editor of *Landfall*, the long-established quarterly established by Charles Brasch in 1947. *Trees, Effigies, and Moving Objects* is a peculiar series of poems. Curnow even has a stab at “concrete” poetry. Some of New Zealand’s younger poets, perhaps in trust and deference to the old master, Professor Curnow, have been able to provide the average reader with a comprehensive structure for the sequence — a role of meaning and relevance. I simply sit, scratch my head and mutter “Here is A. E. Housman gone mad. What would Ezra Pound and Dylan Thomas say if they were still alive?” But for all that, the sequence is unique, and it is uniqueness that makes great poetry. We just have to wait until it hits home. Perhaps one of our earnest young poets is going to carry the message on to later generations, and

we will have a genuine New Zealand poetic genius worthy of inclusion in not only a Commonwealth anthology but a world one.

Dennis Glover, a contemporary of Curnow's, is a local identity of almost incredible fame and renown. Best known for his "Sings Harry" sequences, he has lately published two new collections: *To a Particular Woman*, a relatively personal and retrospective account of his later years, and *Diary To A Woman*, a collection of later songs and sonnets. He is probably New Zealand's finest lyrical poet since James K. Baxter — his younger (by ten years) contemporary — whose work is covered elsewhere in this issue.

A number of fine poets during the sixties have come and gone, some to greener pastures overseas (Louis Johnson, Mike Doyle and Richard Packer, among many). Richard Packer is certainly deserving of mention. His first book, *Prince of the Plague Country*, was a handsome collection, published by Pegasus Press, by far the most active publishers of poetry over the past twenty years or so. It could be said that he was born at a difficult time, and grew up in the 1950's, which, apart from a certain liveliness by such poets as Peter Bland, James K. Baxter, Dennis Glover, and a number of prose writers, was a cultural bog. But Packer, Alistair Paterson and Alistair Campbell were finding their way with some sensitivity and craft. Packer wrote with a certain earnest humour and irony. In "Through Dark Glasses," in which he creates a description of some very nubile girls he is watching, he concludes:

From such bleak mounting cancel me.
I hunch in wisdom and defeat,
retract my wish and steer off stage¹⁵

Packer left for greener or perhaps more burnished pastures in Australia soon afterwards. Packer's successor, in style certainly, is Barry Southam. Somewhat more direct in his poetry, but without loss of any contrapuntal levels of meaning, he gives us such poems as "For No Reason," an ac-

count of a tight-jean-clad girl at a drunken, mostly-male party where

The keg gurgles an obligato to each chorus
while she giggled over coke, until a drunken
hand slammed her against the wall . . . for no reason.¹⁶

It is not easy to write about this sort of thing, especially in this day and age. On the one hand it tends to be observed as "artless" (maybe because its subject matter is so sordid) by academic critics, and on the other hand it tends to get the censors' backs up — they fear a debasement of the language. But, of course, to use the language which is being used is quite valid as an artistic tool. One hopes for a general coming-together of all viewpoints, so that a consensus of objective criticism can be arrived at.

Sam Hunt, in his middle twenties, is probably New Zealand's first genuine "roving poet" — a poet in the professional sense, who reads his work at schools and elsewhere, for money. This Spenserian character is probably New Zealand's finest young lyrical poet. He moves to the rhythm and music of words as Dennis Glover and Baxter had done, before him. He is not seeking a "poetic breakthrough" in respect of craft and technique; he is seeking merely to entertain, to enlighten, to switch people on to the joys of poetry. It has been said that Sam Hunt has inherited Baxter's lyrical mantle, and should, one day, be as great a poet, or greater, than the legendary Jim "Hemi" Baxter, himself. But he has very little of Baxter's philosophical depth. His main concerns are booze, women, wine, women, and song (in that order). On the odd occasion he writes poems about dogs and pollution, but in a shallow way. He is reluctant to write more personally about himself, but this may come eventually. He sensitively scratches his head, hangs his toe out the window of his boathouse in Bottle Creek (he named it — it is registered with the Post Office as a genuine place name) and catches a four pound cod from the piece of string dangling. But if we are to consider his work for a Commonwealth anthology, let

me say that Hunt should appear; he has written at least half a dozen really outstanding poems, worthy of inclusion in any anthology.

New Zealand poets who have largely dropped by the way-side in recent years, though they had initially made quite an impression in the 50's and early 60's, are K. O. Arvidson, Marilyn Duckworth, R. G. Frean, Owen Leeming, Hubert Witheford and Jack Lasenby. A number of others have since left the country, and the fine poet Fleur Adcock is one of these. It is tempting to go into a deeper examination of the work of this London-based poet, but this is not the place for it. Worthy of passing mention is the resident New Zealand poet and anthologist Vincent O'Sullivan, for O'Sullivan's work achieves, in its best moments, a certain charm and uniqueness of observation within its context of minutely recorded incidents. Current reviewers, which include two of the most thorough and brilliant New Zealand has ever seen — Howard Batchelor (*Islands*), and Bill Dean (in *Cave*) — have been particularly harsh on his work. But while it could be said that such criticism is desperately needed, especially now, there remains the thought that possibly, in this case, a genuine poetic talent might be stifled and that New Zealand poetry may suffer as a whole. O'Sullivan's *Bearings* (Oxford/Auckland Press, 1973) is an interesting work. It is a little patchy, indistinct, and far too concerned with very minor matter in places, but there is a brilliant merging of myth, instinct, and ordinary current observation:

Danae keeps her armpits sweet as a
garden.
Nature she clips in trim like a hedge of
privet.¹⁷

Among the more dense and complicated of the older New Zealand poets, is Kendrick Smithyman. His work has been published by the major New Zealand quarterlies and some smaller magazines, such as the ill-fated *Lipsync*, over a great number of years, though his work is not generally known overseas. A reviewer in *Poetry Australia* was unkind

enough to say that her "mind boggled" at the task of getting into his verse and it is fair to say that many New Zealand writers find the digestion of Smithyman's verse similarly difficult. His work is deeply philosophical, but not, to me, in the sense that it is textbook philosophy rather than art. There is art there; it is just a matter of "seek and ye shall find." It is worth the effort. New Zealand's literary critical dagger, Howard Batchelor, says in *Islands* that "some . . . like 'A Lore of Storms,' are so introspectively serpentine that they think themselves to a standstill." But I do not think that Smithyman's verse would rightly make a Commonwealth anthology. A better candidate would be Peter Olds. His poems first appeared in *Frontiers*, the first attempt by John Weir and others to establish an international literary magazine. Since then Olds has published four books, the major one to date being *Lady Moss Revived*. Whereas Southam turns his binoculars outwards, Olds has them directed definitely inwards, but is artistic enough to create an aura and a situation in which to couch his person. Olds is a refugee from the tail-end fifties: the cultural bog; the McCarthy era; the V-8 boys; the booze, and the birds. He is a poet who has lived his poetry, but is not a self-conscious professional, like Sam Hunt is. He ends "Psycho" with:

But now, after 3 years & 8 hundred
gallons of illegal gas has been shoved down
your chronic alcoholic throat,
we watch you die under the shaking hands
of the carwrecker;
his hammer smashing into your stretchmarks.
while the people you educated, dragged . . .
thru fast narrow streets
stand by, dreaming of the next party.¹⁸

Of the older poets, a must for inclusion into a Commonwealth anthology must surely be C. K. Stead. Author of a fine science fiction, or perhaps, speculative fiction novel would be a better description, *Smith's Dream*, he has always been somewhat of an independent mind in the general

run of New Zealand letters. The opening lines of the first poem, "You Have A Lot To Lose," signify this, to a degree,

Hard. Bright. Clean. Particular.

But although some poems make it in a chillingly realistic sense, his sense of the tactile goes awry when the crushing responsibilities of "interpretation" descend on him:

Six months ago a Free Bomb fell on a school.
Forty-five children were changed.
They became a job for the cleaners.¹⁹

That is a bit gauche and it does not speak from real artistic involvement. However, quite a number of the 45 poems from this book, plus some from his previous collection in 1964, would readily make the anthology, surely.

In general, young poets have followed or established "movements," mainly by setting up magazines of their own. But an exception to this is David Mitchell. "All the poems in this book have been read aloud in public," he says in a brief preface to his book *Pipe Dreams in Ponsoyby*, which is the most interesting book of poetry to have appeared in the last twenty years in New Zealand. Certainly it was good enough to gain a commendation by the Commonwealth Poetry Award judges in 1972. With relatively few poems published in literary magazines then or since, Mitchell began "raving" to student audiences and in pubs, sometimes even in fancy dress, along with members of the "Freed" revolution, the movement which brought dada and surrealism, finally, to bear on New Zealand writing. Whereas the older poets were mundanely observing their own retreat from the onslaught of technology into the suburbs with brittle poems about hedges, motormowers and neurotic housewives, Mitchell was actually talking about physical and existential life:

tall buildings take
longer to demolish
than
low bridges
yet th bricks scream
as they fall
break

like
 old
 silences
 &
 'in their turn'
 . . .
 who would lean
 on th shoulders of th
 air
 sings to learn²⁰

These lines, from "Heavy Habit" are not untypical of many poems in the book. Here began the era, as James Dickey said, where the poet needs to be a "tough son-of-a-bitch." Bill Manhire's style is quite different. It too is truly original, but in a special way. It is quietly centred around a kind of surreal imagism involved in his description of personal relationships. Whereas Mitchell sings to learn, Manhire learns, then sings. As he says in an afterword to his first book of poems, "These poems are strategies for discovery." His output has been small, and a distinct mellow tone has been evident throughout. His poetry has been published in England, where he spent several years studying for his doctorate. It is hoped, now that he is back, that he will find enough time from the general academic round to concentrate on poetry again. At this juncture, anyway, there are at least five of his poems that would stand in any anthology.

Dennis List is one of the more unusual New Zealand younger poets. His work is truly distinctive, in that he is one of New Zealand's few allegorical poets. Consequently, his work, within the ever present critical milieu, has been received rather enigmatically. Maybe it propelled him to state in his introduction to *The Young New Zealand Poets*:

What I have written as nonsense has been received seriously, what I have written seriously has been received as nonsense.²¹

It was D. S. Long who really introduced "deep image" poetry to New Zealand. His work has been published liberally in small literary magazines overseas. His chief influences are Bert Meyers, John Haines, and especially Wil-

liam L. Fox, poet and editor of *West Coast Poetry Review*, who has been an influence in helping Long to introduce modern North American poetry into New Zealand. Long's style is free and vibrant. Whereas Dennis List will say:

At last I knew; there were two forebodings
each marked by a signpost to the other
and fools trudge to and fro between them
across the empty savannah²²

Long will say:

I fill my pockets with raisins
black as the gaps in a fence

but in another poem, the macabre sets in:

next week
we shall deal with coffins
and what you can do
with a few simple tools
and a friend²³

Ian Wedde was involved in the Auckland group which started the "Freed" revolution. Wedde spent some time overseas in the United Kingdom, and arrived back to take up a year's tenure as Robert Burns Fellow at Otago University. His poetry has been widely published in the U.K. and in New Zealand. There is a rather heavy, tactile feeling to his poetry. His prose exhibits the same characteristics. His longer poems are intellectual constructs rather than expansions from a central poetic core. Consequently there is much looseness in his work. In time, Wedde should have a body of work behind him from which one could hope a few poems could be taken for a Commonwealth anthology. A similar kind of poet is Alan Brunton. Brunton's work is far more exciting than that of Wedde. Brunton was one of the "Freed" quartet, along with Murray Edmond. Edmond felt the dispossession forced by a suburban Auckland on the poet, painter, son, father, man, in "Wood Street is Burning":

I pick up my steps
the petrol the hose the rows of yellow lights
have gone
the helping hand of my lover's brother
the dark visitor at the time of blood
has faded²⁴

Alan Loney is an interesting poet. It is sufficient to say that I consider him to be one of New Zealand's most promising younger poets. His first work was published when he was thirty. A late starter, he has had time to muse on the cultural dichotomies in New Zealand. It is translated, to me, into one brilliant image of Maori and mythical relationships:

We, who use Te Rauparaha's backbone
for a street²⁵

Te Rauparaha was one of the last great Maori leaders during the Maori wars of the 1860's and 1870's. The North Island of New Zealand was, in myth, a great fish that was hauled out of the ocean by a hook in its mouth: Lake Taupo.

A young New Zealand poet deserving of mention, and in fact considerably more critical attention than I can offer at this stage, is Tony Beyer. Beyer's work has not been published outside New Zealand, even though his work has been published in New Zealand since 1966 — but not in any of the quarterlies. He is a poet who would certainly be overlooked for a Commonwealth anthology. He is a maverick individualist. His word usage is incredibly good:

even the hanged men
in the willows bob
and bump each other
with this dour wind
snouting in their clothes

or,

here by the muttering fire
where rain from windward
beads my coat
with sparks of frost
flat against the soil
(“Guru Songs”)²⁶

At this point I must return to my opening statement. Who are the New Zealand poets for the Commonwealth anthology? If I am forced to name three, I would say R. A. K. Mason, James K. Baxter, and — but I leave it to you — you pick the third poet. New Zealand has always been rich in good writers of one sort or another. The trouble

is, their work has not been as available as it should have been overseas.

NOTES

- ¹Bill Pearson, *Fretful Sleepers and Other Essays* (Auckland: Heinemann, 1973), p. 14.
- ²Michael Beveridge, "Conversation with Frank Sargeson, II," *Landfall*, 24, No. 2 (1970), p. 148.
- ³Roderick Findlayson, *Brown Man's Burden* (Auckland: Auckland and Oxford University Presses, 1973), p. 129.
- ⁴Maurice Shadbolt, "The Making of a Book," *Landfall*, 27, No. 4 (1973), p. 275.
- ⁵Maurice Shadbolt, *Strangers and Journeys* (London: Hodder, 1973), n.p.
- ⁸Trevor Reeves, *Canta*, 1971.
- ⁷Witi Ihimaera, *Tangi* (Auckland: Heinemann, 1973), n.p.
- ⁸Margaret Sutherland, "The Fledgling," *Mate*, 22 December 1973.
- ⁹Barry Southam, "Moving," *Edge*, August 1972.
- ¹⁰Brian Turner, "The Eliminator," *Landfall*, 27, No. 3 (1973).
- ¹¹"SF Directions," *Edge*, 5/6 (Autumn - Winter), 1973.
- ¹²Bill Pearson, "A Tribute to H. Winston Rhodes," in *Fretful Sleepers*, p. 163.
- ¹³Hone Tuwhare, *Come Rain Hail* (Otago: University of Otago Bibliography Room, 1970), n.p.
- ¹⁴Hone Tuwhare, *Sap-Wood & Milk* (Dunedin: Caveman, 1971), n.p.
- ¹⁵Richard Packer, *Prince of the Plague Country* (Christchurch: Pegasus, 1971), n.p.
- ¹⁶Barry Southam, *Lovers and Other People* (Christchurch: Pegasus, 1971) n.p.
- ¹⁷Vincent O'Sullivan, *Bearings* (Auckland: Auckland and Oxford University Presses 1973), n.p.
- ¹⁸Peter Olds, *Lady Moss Revived* (Dunedin: Caveman, 1972), n.p.
- ¹⁹C. K. Stead, *Crossing the Bar* (Auckland: Auckland and Oxford University Presses, 1970), n.p.
- ²⁰David Mitchell, *Pipe Dreams in Ponsonby* (Auckland: The Association of Orientally Flavoured Syndics, 1972), n.p.
- ²¹Dennis List, "Introduction," in *The Young New Zealand Poets*, ed. Arthur Baysting (Auckland: Heinemann, 1973), n.p.
- ²²Dennis List, *Pathways Into the Brain* (Dunedin: Caveman, 1973), n.p.
- ²³D. S. Long, *Borrow Pit* (Dunedin: Caveman, 1972), n.p.
- ²⁴Murray Edmond, *Entering the Eye* (Dunedin: Caveman, 1973), n.p.
- ²⁵Alan Loney, *The Bare Remembrance* (Dunedin: Caveman, 1971), n.p.
- ²⁶Tony Beyer, *The Meat* (Dunedin: Caveman, 1973), n.p.