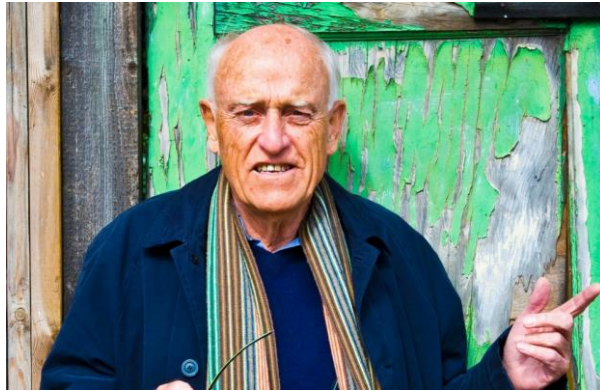


HISTORY OR GOSSIP?

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How do literary history and literary gossip differ?

On p. 386 of his biography of Frank Sargeson, Michael King reports that in 1972 Frank 'had another spirited exchange of letters with Karl Stead when Stead reported that [Charles] Brasch had visited him in Menton.' I had more or less accused Brasch of being an old fake and asked why everyone was so pious about him. In terms of what it was acceptable to say about Brasch at the time, when he was well known as almost the only wealthy benefactor the Arts in New Zealand had, this was outrageous – and no doubt unfair and unjust. Brasch was a good man who did his best for literature and the visual Arts. But he was irritatingly precious, and snobbish – not the snobbishness of wealth and social status, but of 'good taste'. He suffered from an overload of discriminations and dismissals – and these had no doubt provoked my 'spirited' (to use Michael King's word) outburst in the letter to Frank.

Frank wrote back to me, 'Look you simply can't write things like that.' He reminded me that his correspondence was being bought by the Turnbull Library – in other words his papers were becoming literary history, and if he had not rescued me by sending my letter back, I would have gone on record as having said *Bad things about Brasch!* King records that my reply was, 'I wrote to you, Frank, not to the Turnbull Library, or to The Future.'

But this was a reminder that when you put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard, if you are an aspirant to literature, you may be committing literary history. Someone in the future may be waiting to pounce on your words and make something of them, not necessarily something you would want. I didn't mind going on record as someone who had been less than totally respectful about Brasch. But I was aware that a lot I'd written in letters to Frank had been naïve and unguarded, and I didn't welcome the idea that whatever I'd put down on the spur of the moment was going to be freely available to researchers in the future.

I hasten to say I was truly fond of Frank. He was a mentor who became a friend. He was a living legend. He had done for New Zealand fiction what Henry Lawson had done for Australian, and what Mark Twain had done for American: he had written stories in a Kiwi vernacular. He had wrested our fiction away from the language of middle-class Britain and given it the talk and the thoughts of jokers and sheilas, of the Bills and Kens and Freds, who sometimes but not always had a frowning Missus. Currently he was moving on, changing the language of his stories from the vernacular to what he called his 'Mandarin' style. And he was making courageous attempts, as Curnow was too, to write plays and bring a local theatre into existence. Whatever Frank Sargeson did as a writer was part of the unfolding story of what we were learning – partly because of him – to call 'New Zealand literature'.

During those middle years of the 20th century our writers were attempting to create a literature not dependent on Britain for sanction or hungry for British approval. There was an assertive independence in the air; I was going to say a *sturdy* independence, but assertive seems more accurate, because we were all still colonials, trying not to be but uncertain of success. Sargeson, Curnow, Fairburn, Robin Hyde, Denis Glover: they were giving our writing (in Shakespeare's lovely phrase) 'a local habitation and a name'. The National Library had begun to buy up their correspondence and manuscripts, as well as the surviving literary papers of Katherine Mansfield, creating the beginnings of a literary historical archive. Whatever these writers put on paper was going into the record. Much of it was gossip – but gossip might be significant and could become part of literary history.

The other significant fact about Sargeson was his homosexuality. He'd had a criminal conviction as a young man for a homosexual offence, which had cost him his job and his profession, and would have earned a prison sentence if he had not, perhaps dishonestly, put

all the 'blame' on the older man he was involved with. This had left him guilt-ridden I suspect, and certainly anxious – feeling unsafe, because his secret homosexual life was his emotional centre. It couldn't *not* figure in his writing; but it had to figure obliquely, secretly, so that sophisticated and liberal-minded readers could perceive it there, and the rest could read the stories 'straight' (so to speak), missing their secret centre. That fact was probably part of his reason for wanting to eliminate from the record my angry and derisive remarks about Charles Brasch. Frank valued Brasch as a benefactor; but he also recognized him as a closet homosexual, one of the brotherhood Frank signalled to by, for example, always writing on green paper. He kept up international literary contacts with homosexual writers like William Plomer, John Lehmann and E.M. Forster. He was a devoted reader of W.H. Auden, and knew a great deal about him derived from private sources.

Even late in his life, when homosexual acts ceased to be crimes, Frank was still not inclined to 'come out' publicly and seemed unsympathetic to the idea of 'Gay Pride'. He was like a member of a secret society who valued the secrecy, the signals and covert recognitions, and even possibly the element of danger and risk – all of which may be a way of saying he was too old to change. But he gave gay identity (a word he refused to use) importance in the New Zealand literary scene. He tried to help Bill Pearson get over his unhappiness about being gay; and it must have given younger writers like Peter Wells and Witi Ihimaera confidence to know he was there, and gay, and that he was recognized as important.

When Frank died and I was interviewed about him and referred to him as homosexual his sister wrote protesting and asking me what the word meant. I thought her question probably disingenuous, but I answered it honestly. I didn't however tell her what Frank had told me, that he had always been in love with her husband.

But Frank's gay identity was perhaps of less general significance than his identity as a New Zealand writer who was making a life of it, a living from it, simply by staying put and writing about what was going on around him. Frank became, perhaps an inadvertent but certainly not an unwilling, symbol, an icon, an inspiration to us all. And he was such a wonderful host, such an interesting man, and his little fibro bach-house such a centre of books, literary conversation, good food, gardening and gossip. To me, when I went overseas and had some academic success and job offers which meant I could stay and be an academic

there, where everything seemed more 'significant' than it could ever be in New Zealand, Frank was one of the reasons I came scuttling back. He and Allen Curnow, the two mentors of my youth, had given me an unrealistic idea of what it was to 'be a New Zealand writer', and I wanted to join them and continue with the good work. This was a sort of literary romanticism. The actual experience for me, no less than it had been for them, was to be hard, with many set-backs, with as much shadow as sunshine.

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I got to know Curnow before I met Sargeson. In fact when I made the launch speech for his last book of poems, *The Bells of St Babel's* in March 2001 just six months before his death, I was able to say it was half a century almost to the day since I had first set eyes on him in March 1951, myself an 18-year old enrolling first year student, he a 39-year-old newly appointed lecturer from Christchurch. By my second year I was a member of his Stage II tutorial, a group of ten or twelve, and for one of our meetings Allen had chosen Shelley's poem 'Epipsychidion'. It was about an escape Shelley dreamed of making from the horror of conventional marriage (he was already on his second) in which a partner for life is chosen and each, with 'one chained friend perhaps a jealous foe / The weariest and the longest journey go'. This was clearly to Allen's taste at that time, when he was probably on the brink of his affair with Jeny Tole who would be his second wife – but of course I was not to know that. The phrase 'the longest journey' was one E.M. Forster had used as a title for his second novel, no doubt with the same idea of conventional marriage as a ghastly bondage. Shelley's romanticism goes into full-blown overdrive at the thought of his escape with the beautiful young woman, Emilia Viviani.

Emily

A ship is floating in the harbour now ,
A wind is hovering o'er the mountain's brow;
There is a path on the sea's azure floor,
No keel has ever ploughed that path before;
The halcyons brood around the foamless isles;
The treacherous ocean has foresworn its wiles;
The merry mariners are bold and free:

Say, my heart's sister, wilt thou sail with me?

And he goes on to describe the lovely 'isle under Ionian skies' they will escape to.

Tutorials were supposed to be a conversation, but Allen's notion of conversation was exactly like James K. Baxter's – he talked and you listened. So his tutorials were monologues, which made them easy if you were shy and preferred not to speak in class. But it happened on this occasion that the young Stead had something to say. I was a convert to Donne and the Metaphysical poets, and felt Shelley was a bit slack and sloppy, so I became impatient as Allen ran on at such length and quite uncritically about the beauty of this poem. Also, I had read a British Council booklet on Shelly by Stephen Spender in which Spender suggests the poem doesn't so much end as suffer 'a collapse' after the pursuit of the unobtainable. He's referring to the lines that come close to the end of the poem: 'Ah woe is me!

The winged words on which my soul would pierce
Into the height of Love's rare Universe
Are chains of lead around its flight of fire –
I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire!

The only chink in the armour of Curnow's monologues was his pipe, which he had to stop now and then to stoke and relight, and into one of these moments I stuck my oar. I suppose I said 'Excuse me', or something like that; and then, 'Stephen Spender says the poem collapses.'

Allen blinked his lizard blink and said 'What?'

I repeated that Spender had said the poem collapses; and added by way of illustration, 'I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire!'

Allen looked impatient. Of course he knew this was supposed to be a tutorial and he should welcome any contribution from a student, but irritation won the day. 'Oh why,' he said, 'doesn't Granny Spender get on with her own knitting?'

Some might have felt that was a 'put down'. I thought it was marvellous – spontaneous Curnow at his clever best. Stephen Spender was famous as part of the Auden group of poets – the MacSpaundays as Roy Campbell had called them – but he was indeed a bit of an old granny. So was this moment, and my

relating it here, gossip or literary history? There are so many literary elements – hetero Shelly, gay E.M. Forster, ambiguous Stephen Spender, Allen Curnow on the brink of the affair that would produce the great poems of 1955 – ‘Spectacular Blossom’, ‘A small room with large windows’ – and finally Stead, who would become Curnow’s first real literary critic, and a writer in his own right. It looks like Lit Hist to me – but only time would tell.

Allen’s affair with Jeny Tole began in 1954, but he for some years he went on living at home with his first wife, Betty. In fact he didn’t make his escape until 1961, when he went off on a sabbatical leave, and didn’t return to the family. It must have been some time during that year or the year before, 1960, that Kay and I drove Allen and Betty home from a party at the Lowreys. Allen invited us in for ‘one for the road’, as you did in those boozy days, and then, after half an hour’s conversation (largely Curnologue, but very entertaining) he said it was ‘time to shake the bantams out of the macrocarpa’ – he and I would do that while Betty, at last given a chance to say something, could talk to Kay. So out we went into the night, the poet and his willing acolyte, and began to swing on the branches in which the bantams were roosting, shaking them, squawking and complaining, down around our heads and on to the lawn. A decade later when I was writing a series of open (i.e. unrhymed) sonnets in the style of James K. Baxter, I remembered this event and it became the principal subject of one of them. But the sonnet came not only from that memory but from a set of circumstances which I will explain before I read it.

By this time (early 1970s) I knew the North Shore writers, Keith Sinclair, Ken Smithyman and Maurice Duggan very well, despite the fact that they were each exactly ten years my senior; and in the manner of that pre-texting and pre-e-mail time, which in retrospect seems so quaint, we wrote and posted letters and quick notes to one another constantly. One such came to me from Maurice Duggan, and he signed it Maurice, and then with a triple bracket: Gee with a cross, Shadbolt with a cross, and Duggan with a tick. So when I replied I signed mine K.S. with a triple bracket and Sinclair with a cross, Smithyman with a cross, and Stead with a tick. All that was on my mind when I wrote the sonnet recounting the adventure with the bantams ten years before. The sonnet began with a parody of the famous lines from Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;

And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. ...

And it ended with a parody of the lines from Shakespeare's *Henry IV* (part I) quoted on Katherine Mansfield's grave: 'But I tell you, my lord fool, out of this nettle danger we pluck this flower safety.' So now here's the sonnet:

To Maurice and to Maurice and to Maurice
Duggan, Shadbolt, Gee, how they load us down with fictions

And all our yesterdays maybe have lighted fools
The way to Dostoyevski. How many years ago was it

That Curnow's bantams roosted in his macrocarpa,
And he and I one midnight crept under the moon

And swung on the branches bringing those feathered half-wits
Down around our heads with a flapping and a squawking

That echoed over Big Shoal Bay? Do good poets
Make bad professors. Do many Maurices

Make light work, as one Sargeson made a summer?
How many K.S.'s could the North Shore harbour

Before the Fall? I tell you my lord fool
Out of these nettle prophets we still pluck our safety pins.

To go back now to the early '60s: just a few months after the bantam-shaking occasion, Kay and I, again in our little Ford Popular drove Allen and Betty, and Allen's meagre luggage, to the wharf to see him off on his sabbatical – none of us apart from Allen himself knowing that he had no intention of returning to Betty and the children. But Kay and I noticed, and we had to suppose Betty did too, that although Allen returned again and again to the rail to wave goodbye to us down on the wharf, he kept disappearing, presumably to wave to someone else in another part of the crowd. This could only have been Jeny, 'the mistress' as Betty had called her when she'd told me about Allen's infidelity. As the ship began to move away with vibrant bass hootings, and the streamers stretched and broke, and the crowd sang the usual plangent 'Now is the hour', I suppose Betty was fairly sure Allen was going to come back to her. After all, this affair with whoever she was had gone on so long. The only anxiety she expressed to us was the fear that Allen didn't

have any clean underpants. Alas, the truth was she would never have to worry about his underwear again.

There is undoubtedly a merging of literary history and gossip here. The literary historian could talk about the emergence of a new northern region Curnow in those Jeny-inspired poems of 1955-56 – and the developments of Curnow's poetry that were still to come. The underpants, and Betty's soon to be disappointed hopes are gossip – and yet they too are part of the Curnow story, and with overtones even of tragedy.

But what the literary historian might prefer to fix on here is Curnow's role as anthologist and creator of a nationalist myth about New Zealand poetry – and how that myth was to be challenged two decades later by the other bantam-shaker, the young acolyte now waving at the dock-side.

Curnow was best known for two anthologies of New Zealand poetry. He had presented each of these with a strong introduction, making a case for the national character of our poets and poetry. These introductions had been the starting point for every significant discussion of our poetry; and although I had at first defended Allen when he was attacked, because I considered him by far our best and most important poet, I had gradually become weary of the terms of the debate, feeling more and more that nationalism was an unworthy and even dangerous rallying cry, and that we needed a different set of terms.

Academically I was by instinct and by training a literary historian; so what I proposed was that our poetry should be looked at historically as it related to poetry written in English in other parts of the world; and what this revealed was essentially a loyalty to, or if not a loyalty perhaps a preference for, British models in Curnow's generation, and a shift to American ones in the generation of Ian Wedde. Both chronologically and in literary preferences I was myself somewhere in the middle, with elements of both, so I could look dispassionately at either. These were tendencies only, and there would be exceptions in the detail. Lit Hist is a rough guide, not a precise science. All I was proposing was that we should stop banging on about what Curnow had called 'the New Zealand thing, the regional thing, the real thing' and look instead at where our preferences placed us in the bigger picture of poetry in the English language.

This was a lecture I gave at the Wellington Writers Festival of 1979; and I gave it a clever title. Allen had named his first-born Wystan, after the British poet W.H. (Wystan

Hugh) Auden; and Ian Wedde had named his first-born Carlos after the American William Carlos Williams. Auden and Williams were the outstanding examples of the two kinds of poetry I was talking about. So I called the essay 'From Wystan to Carlos: Modern and Modernism in recent New Zealand poetry.' It attracted a lot of attention and did shift the terms of the discussion of our poetry – and it did this without in any way undermining what I saw as Curnow's deserved pre-eminence as a poet.

That doesn't mean however that everyone liked it. Alex Fry in the *Listener* described the lecture as 'surpassingly elegant ... a superb performance'; but he noticed 'most of [Stead's] auditors felt uneasy'. I don't think it's true that most did; but some, yes for sure. I noticed this too. Lauris Edmond sat with Hone Tuwhare, both looking displeased – and Hone made a grumbling contribution at question time. The point was that I hadn't mentioned either of them – and that was the basis for a lot of subsequent complaints. It was as if I'd acquired a status which obliged me to mention everyone; to say how deserving they all were. Not to be mentioned was to be slighted. Kevin Ireland complained in the next issue of *Landfall* (no. 135) that I had *omitted* to discuss a group of 'well-published names' who happened to be my contemporaries. He of course was one of them. 'Somehow things have come to a pretty rum state' he grumbled, 'when a noted critic can go to some trouble to lecture at us then publish his rulings on N.Z. poetry today, yet omit to mention poets of mature distinction like Vincent O'Sullivan.'

Expressing firm opinions in the NZ literary scene has never been a road to popularity, and for a number of years I seemed to hear varying murmurs, sometimes rising to an insistent buzz but never really a deafening clamour, of discontent and even dislike. I published my fiction abroad for safety and reassurance as well as for income – especially necessary after I left the university at the age of 52.

This was the time when I expressed some cautious reservation about Keri Hulme's *The bone people*, a sacred text in that it had won the Booker Prize; and when I reviewed the 1984 Wedde/McQueen *Penguin of New Zealand Verse*, the first to include poems in Maori with translations in footnotes. I quoted some of these translations – this for example:

There's some famous butter.
Nati is its name,
The place where they make it
Is Ruatoria!
Welcome Prime Minister!

You have come to perform
The opening ceremony
For this food-producing work!

I argued that either these were bad translations or they were bad poems. Since I knew no Maori I couldn't say which was true – but neither, I pointed out, could the editors, since neither of them knew Maori either. All this was true, but it was perhaps insensitive, certainly unacceptable, and it led Michael King to suggest in *Metro* that I was advocating 'the ethnic cleansing of New Zealand literature'. This was a loaded term at the time when ethnic cleansing was in the news because it was going in the Croatia and Serbia.

King at this time was registering strong dissatisfaction with what he called New Zealand literature's 'old-boy network', and I suppose he'd decided I was now part of it. My response was to suggest that he might be hoping to replace the 'old-boy network' with a 'good boy network', of which he would be undisputed leader.

Stirring times!

But Michael and I must later have been reconciled because in 2001 he dedicated his last book of essays to me with the ambiguous 'To Karl Stead, who like a hanging concentrates the mind.'

Curnow and Sargeson were the old men in my literary life, Allen 20 years my senior, Frank 30. So let's switch to a contemporary, Maurice Shadbolt, both of us born in 1932. I have to say I learned a lot I'd since forgotten from Volume One of Philip Temple's Shadbolt biography. Maurice and I, and our wives Kay and Gill, were friends together in London in the late 1950s. We ate together, went to plays and drank in pubs, and argued about politics. We discussed endlessly the old Kiwi question of when and whether and if at all to return to New Zealand. I read and annotated the typescript of his first collection of short-stories, *The New Zealanders*. I thought it was a bold and challenging collection with a bold and challenging title, but that it contained too much bad or indifferent or overblown writing and that no respectable publisher would take it. When it was taken by the eminently respectable Victor Gollancz, and I said all this in a letter to Sargeson, Frank told me I was jealous. I was of course – or rather I was *envious* – but I wouldn't have pretended I thought a lot of it was bad writing if I didn't really think that. If I'd admired it I would have wanted to

claim him as a friend and ally and fellow-writer. That was always going to be my problem with Maurice. How could I be his friend if I didn't admire everything he wrote?

Soon after I got back to Auckland I was invited to give a lecture in the University's first Winter Lecture series. The theme was 'the effects of remoteness on New Zealand'. My subject was our literature; and one of the points I wanted to make was that one effect of our sense of remoteness was a kind of romantic exoticism in describing the scene – an attempt to impress readers – English readers especially – with *difference*; and some of the examples I took came readily to hand because they were from Maurice's book which I'd recently read so attentively and annotated in typescript. I might have got away with this more or less unnoticed if the lecture hadn't been published, and then won a prize; so of course it came to Maurice's attention and must have seemed to him a kind of treachery.

He was to have his revenge, however, with his first novel, *Among the Cinders*, in which the young narrator's older brother, D.K. Flinders, a balding academic who writes pretentious and unintelligible literary criticism, was (to quote Philip Temple) 'a scarcely concealed characterisation of C.K. Stead'.

I was in London again when the novel was published (this was 1965) and the exchange of letters between me and Maurice about it, which Temple records, I found really surprising. Temple observes that 'everyone in the literary world knew that "Derek" was a caricature of C.K. Stead'; and he goes on:

Stead was amicable enough in a letter from London. First there was the domestic connection between them and Stead responded to Maurice's news of twins [...] But [he] quickly moved on to *Among the Cinders*. He had 'devoured it in a day and a half, reading impatiently through the bits in which D.K.F. did *not* appear, and then rather irritably through the parts where he *did*.' As the one caricatured [Stead] was not the best person to judge but he wondered if the 'slight element of spleen (quite justified in personal terms no doubt) that crept in, didn't throw the whole thing out of balance... The important – and difficult – thing is to keep going, isn't it? – whatever the bastards (me in your case, you in mine) say.'

I find that pretty good – and surprising; and Maurice matched it in reasonableness. In a letter back he wrote, 'D.K. Flinders' solemnity about literature seemed to be mine too; that

is, I often felt I was satirising myself. There is something in him of most New Zealand writers.'

How did we manage to be so civil? Could it be that we'd both taken on board that early lesson: that when you put pen to paper you may be committing literary history, so it's best not to show your weaknesses. But the question remains: Will *Among the Cinders* continue to be a matter of *literary* interest as time goes by? What I found when I read Vol One of the Temple biography is that it's very difficult to think about Shadbolt's novels separate from Shadbolt the man. We have so much material about his life – you might say too much – all the wives and girlfriends, and the dedications which didn't seem able to keep up with the rapidity of the turnover, and became sometimes a kind of free verse. The dedication to *An Ear of the Dragon* for example, reads

To Sheena for living
Beverley for loving
And Barbara for caring

Another favourite of mine was the one for *Season of the Jew* which goes

With great gratitude to Bridget
all the wild way

(Notice the alliterations.) The three Bs in those two dedications – Beverley, Barbara and Bridget each had a turn at being Mrs Shadbolt; and the other one, Sheena, it seems missed out only narrowly. The novelist Marilyn Duckworth aspired to the role and has put it all memorably on record in her autobiography *Camping on the Fault-line*; but complications with arrangements for looking after the eight children they had between them (four each), plus the intervention of one of the Bs, I think it was Beverley, prevented it, so for Marilyn Marriage and Maurice and its lovely alliteration remained a miss – a near-miss but as good as a mile.

All this is gossip at one level; is it more than that? The promotional material for this lecture says

More than ever these days, writers festivals and literary interviews encourage readers to interest themselves in the lives and thought processes of novelists and poets whose work they read. Recently for example the first volume of a biography of Maurice Shadbolt has been published. Most of the material

contained in it could be considered gossip, but at what point does gossip become literary history?

This elicited a prickly question from Philip Temple. He first thanked me for my distinctly favourable review of his book in *NZ Books*; but then went on

I see that you are giving a lecture at the May writers festival, and the blurb for it states that 'most of the information' in my book 'could be considered gossip'.

The postulation that years of intensive research can be distilled as gossip intrigues me and [...] I'd be glad of a transcript after you have given the lecture.

My reply was brief

I think the point might be that it's all gossip until time determines that the writer in question is of sufficient significance for it to be considered literary history. In other words the thoroughness of your research – always beyond question, Philip – is not the determinant of the importance of the subject.

If I return to Shelley for a moment: when he wrote that poem 'Epipsychidion', subject of the Curnow tutorial, he had abandoned one schoolgirl wife, Harriet, who had then, pregnant with their second child, drowned herself in the Serpentine. He had run off with another 16-year old, Mary (who would later be the author of *Frankenstein*) and with Mary's half sister Claire Clairmont, also 16. In Switzerland they met up with Byron. Claire had an affair with him and a daughter which Byron took charge of and handed over to a convent where a few years later she died. Slightly later Claire seems also to have had an affair with Shelley and given birth to a child which Shelley and Mary registered as their own and had adopted out in Italy, so it was never heard of again. And meanwhile, as if all this wasn't enough, Shelley was dreaming of escape with Emilia Viviani. Emily

A ship is floating in the harbour now,

A wind is hovering o'er the mountain's brow...

Shelley's sexual adventuring, without the advantages of the pill or antibiotics, make Shadbolt's, with all those conventional weddings – every wife a wedding! – look relatively sedate. But Shelley's are *still of interest*, and for one reason only: because *what he wrote, and what Byron and Mary Shelley wrote, continues to be of interest*.

So whether all this detail about Shadbolt is gossip or literary history can't be determined yet. As Martin Amis likes to say, 'Judge Time will decide.'

*

Let's move away from the turbulent past to something present and perhaps more reassuring. Recently Witi Ihimaera had an interview in the *Herald's Canvas* magazine in which he described as a secondary school boy in 1959 reading a story by Douglas Stewart about a young Pakeha who is invited into a Maori village and stays the night with an old couple in a flea-infested whare. Ihimaera says 'the whole story is very dark and the descriptions of the Maori are very demonic, as if these people have invited him for some sinister purpose. This was anathema to me as a Maori because I never thought of our marae as full of fleas and people who would take advantage of strangers. I threw the book out of the window and was caned for it. I made a vow that if I ever became a writer I would write a book about Maori people that would be an antidote to these kinds of stories and it would be placed in front of every school child in New Zealand.'

I was struck by this for several reasons so I read the Douglas Stewart story and e-mailed Witi.

Kia ora Witi

Your interesting piece in the Canvas sent me in search of that Douglas Stewart story, which I probably hadn't read before. It's interesting – much less sensitive to Maori feelings than any writer now would be, but possibly more honest, do you think? The Maori community he's writing about must have been almost half a century before any you would have experienced, and at a time when Maori were at a low ebb. It feels as if he's reporting it just as he experienced it, and is puzzling out why the old couple appear to want him to stay. The fleas are a mystery. Could Maori have been partly immunised against them by constant exposure? Kay's grandmother remembered walking into an abandoned Maori whare on land her husband had bought at Omokoroa wearing a white muslin skirt and when she looked down it was black with fleas. The old woman in the story keeps promising to do something about the fleas but doesn't get around to it. When the narrator leaves he writes them a very nice apologetic note; and the tone overall is not disrespectful. More than anything puzzled – which might be an accurate reflection of the (intelligent) Pakeha view of Maori at that time.

Of course none of us learned much of NZ history and nothing of NZ lit – so we were all colonised; but you were doubly colonised. And I can see how a Maori boy would have been offended by the story – or perhaps embarrassed by it – embarrassment seems more likely. But I found the bit about your throwing the book out the window and being caned for it and resolving to write a book about Maori people that ‘would be placed in front of every school child in NZ’ all rather improbable – a case of gilding the lily. Of course you *have* done that, and you fully deserve every accolade it has brought you – but the idea that you foresaw your own success is positively Shadboltian! Am I wrong to be such a skeptic?

Witi replied almost at once:

Kia ora Karl,

What was really uncanny about your email today was that it arrived as I was checking the final publication draft of my next memoir, *Native Son* - at the point that I refer to the Douglas Stewart story. [...] So ... I wonder if I could include your email in the memoir to give an alternate view of Stewart’s story and to allow me to hint at the whole idea of the writer as an unreliable narrator?

[There was more, personal interchange – and then...]

Thanks for writing to me Karl! I really appreciated it.

Nga mihi mahana,

Witi

The bit about himself as the ‘unreliable narrator’ seemed to confirm my suspicion about gilding the lily. I replied:

Kia ora Witi, and thanks for your prompt reply. You are more than welcome to use my e-mail.

[There was much more in this exchange – about the memoir I was writing and about swimming, and about Witi having been a student in Curnow’s, Pearson’s and Stead’s classes at Auckland University – and then I concluded...]

Kay and I both admired and enjoyed *Maori Boy* so much and we’re looking forward eagerly to the sequel.

Nga mihi

Karl

What I want to suggest about this exchange is that for me, at the age of 86 and looking back over quite a long writing life, it does have the feel of a step forward – something that I don't think could have happened half a century ago – because at that time there was no Maori writer with the ease, confidence and sophistication Ihimaera displays; and I suppose equally at that time I would not have been so at ease exchanging ideas with a Maori writer in potentially sensitive areas.

Literary history is sometimes seen as the measure of history on the larger scale: political history, social history. Ezra Pound called writers 'the voltmeters and steam-gauges of their time.' Ihimaera it seems to me is the Maori version of Curnow's 'child born in a marvellous year' who 'will learn the trick of standing upright here.' I can't make claims for myself, but let's hope we're both 'standing upright' here. If we are, it's a small matter but more than gossip: it's some kind of historical marker.

C.K. Stead

16 May 2019