CULTURE IN A SMALL COUNTRY: ROGER HORROCKS

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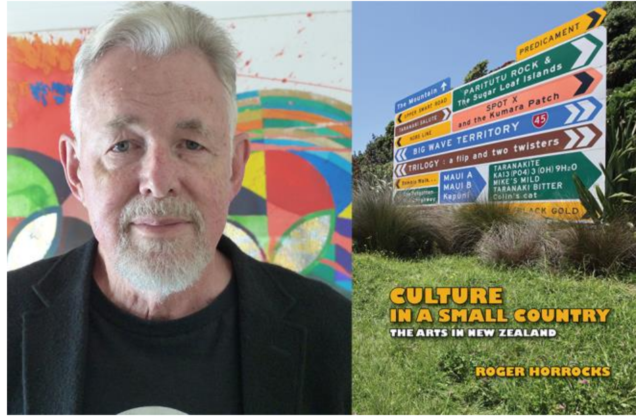

One positive effect of the Pandemic has been to clarify what's most important to us. In that spirit I've just written a book, "Culture in a Small Country," which is a history of the arts in Aotearoa New Zealand over the last 70 years, so it's essentially what I've seen and experienced in my lifetime. For me, our local history consists of some good stuff and some bad. What impelled me to write the book was the fact that the good stuff is not often enough celebrated and the bad is not often enough learned from. To sum up history in 30 or so minutes is a scramble, so I hope you'll excuse my tendency to generalise. For a fuller treatment, see my doorstopper of a book.

The first basic fact of life for our country is that it's often *not* an easy place for the arts. That may seem a strange claim to make at a well-attended festival, but if there are any writers in the audience, you'll know exactly what I mean. Or if you're a publisher, or anyone who is trying to make a living in the arts. This country has unique advantages, but also unique problems. The fact that our population is relatively small is a very important factor because it makes it hard for markets to reach critical mass. Funding, patronage and sponsorship are extremely valuable but locally their scope is limited. Also, the public at large seldom views the arts as a vital part of their lives, as I imagine that members of today's audience do. Just look at any local newspaper, television channel, or online news site, and it is clear that sport receives vastly more space. Sport and food are important, but wouldn't it be a pleasant change to attach equal importance to the arts, as many Europeans do?

In relative terms, the healthiest area of the arts financially are the *visual* arts. They have a special advantage because works can be re-sold, and it costs so much to import paintings for sale that our dealer galleries concentrate on local work. But even so, most of our artists have to live with a great deal of insecurity. The statistics on making a living in this country as an artist, or any kind of creative professional, confirm that most require a second job, a side hustle. On average, the annual income for creatives is only $15,000, though it rises to $32,500 when their day job is

added. In contrast, the average income for *all* NZers earning a wage or salary is $51,800. These figures come from a survey conducted in 2019 before the pandemic, and the situation is likely to have worsened since then. These are local facts of life which must give us pause. It's ironic that when people in the arts appeal for more support, there are columnists and politicians who accuse them of “snouts in the trough”. My book includes a number of interviews with artists in various fields who discuss not only their work but also the challenge of making a living.

For example, Don McGlashan, the great musician and song writer, recalls conversations he had with a former Mayor of Auckland who appeared to regard art as an ailment. In Don’s words, ‘His view seemed to be: “If we fund them, it will encourage them - they’ll come back with their hands out for more money!” Like, beware of art, it’s something that’s catching!’ Well, if only it was. The situation hasn’t stopped Don, who says: “Free lancing is a stressful lifestyle, but at the end of your life, with your last breath, at least you’re not going to say ‘Well, my house has always been tidy!’ or ‘At least I’ve never gone into the red with my credit card!”’

Among writers, artists and composers, that’s the staunch attitude that has kept things going, and a primary aim of my book is to chronicle all that our artists have achieved despite the problems. So it’s definitely more of a celebration than a grumble, though I reserved the right to wave a protest placard now and then.

It’s hard to get a good *overview* of our history, because our country has been through so much change. It feels as though I have lived through three distinctly different versions of “NZ” – or should I say “Aotearoa”? I’m not just talking about shifts of fashion, but profound cultural changes. By “culture” I mean our way of life, but I am particularly interested in the semiotic environment, by which I mean the context of words, sounds and images in which we live. I think context is hugely important for a writer. Even when a writer rebels against it, the context will shape aspects of their rebellion. So I’ve written a book to look more closely at what our situation is. Some aspects of this history will be very familiar to you, but I feel that we have not discussed the implications of the changes, the cultural upheavals, closely enough.

The first phase for me was when I was growing up in the 1940s and ‘50s. It was extremely British, and if you were born later, I think it’s hard to imagine just how colonial it was then. We were “a Dominion of the British Empire.” When you went to the cinema, you had to stand up for “God Save the Queen.” Our radio announcers and our actors had to use Received Pronunciation, imitating a BBC accent. There were no New Zealand feature films. At my high school, we were taught British literature and British history, without their local equivalents. Admittedly I’m grateful for having had that exposure to British tradition, far more of it than any student receives today. But if a student went to the school careers advisor in those days and said, “I’m interested in a career in the arts – acting, for example,” the advisor would smile and say, “So when are you leaving for England?”

Ours was a secure country but *culturally* it was other-directed, or second-hand. It was also behind the times. Even in universities, the arts effectively stopped at the end of the 19th century. When the photographer Marti Friedlander moved to New Zealand from London in 1958, she was shocked to encounter an old-fashioned, strait-laced culture, obsessed with the Royal Family yet not interested in hearing about contemporary developments in Britain. She said: “Although people were very kind and friendly on the surface, they really weren’t interested. Overseas it was said of New Zealand that when you arrived you put your clock back 20 years.” But she added: “I knew the country was changing, I knew it would have to change.”

When I discovered that there *was* literature and art which was both local and modern, I knew I had found the kind of community I needed. For me, the best art combined localness with modernism. The writers and artists involved became my heroes and heroines. In the 1950s and early '60s they represented a minority, a largely underground counter-culture, at war with the old-fashioned, Anglophile mainstream, and that gave a sense of excitement to our struggle.

The second phase was the great takeoff in the arts which began in the late 1960s. Our "sixties" was largely the '70s. The power of modernism and localness were now shared by many writers and artists. Change resulted from both a strong local input *and* a strong overseas input. Global stimulation came from more air travel and more media, and writers were attracted to different forms of modernism from those of the previous generation. Events were also powered by the global energy of "the sixties". Every global cultural shift has taken on a somewhat different character when it reached our country. Our "sixties" began late, but it lasted longer than other countries because we had so much catching up to do! Arguably, the best NZ art and literature has always displayed a lively combination of local *and* international energies.

The inventiveness and maverick spirit of the hippies helped stir things up, such as the way a film industry managed to get off the ground thanks to hippie communes who were willing to work for nothing, and bold enough to beg, borrow or steal what they needed. Culture sometimes comes from the wrong side of the tracks!

There was also a strong local impulse, produced by Britain's decision to join the EEC, the European Economic Community, in 1973. That big move was the opposite of Brexit – it was Brentry, so to speak. It meant that New Zealand was *forced* to become more self-reliant. It fostered a general desire to grow the local culture, as there were many gaps to fill. The period bought new publishers, public galleries and art dealers, literary magazines, record labels, modern dance and theatre groups, and at last a significant film industry. My history of the culture emphasises the importance of infrastructure. Histories of the arts tend to focus on creation, but a literary scene needs not only writers but also publishers, distributors, bookshops, websites, reviewers, residencies, prizes, and book festivals. The period also saw a big increase in the number of thoughtful readers, a payoff for the education reforms by the first Labour governments. And suddenly here was an abundance of local novels, plays, films and art shows. In their very localness, they had novelty value.

Our way of life became more dynamic and independent, with an increased interest in ambitious, challenging forms of art – experimental or high culture. The 1970s kicked things off and the 80s and 90s continued the cultural growth, with a great upsurge of Māori writers, women writers, and queer writers. That progress involved some formidable struggles which I do my best to document. By the '90s, "NZ" had frequently become "Aotearoa NZ", a name which combined two traditions, two whakapapa, a widening of the national tradition. There was still work to do, but the situation at the end of the 20th century felt like the culmination of three decades of progress in the arts - growth, greater diversity, more modernism, and larger audiences. Incidentally, this Writers Festival was founded by Stephanie Johnson and Peter Wells in that period, in 1999.

That an upsurge happened is a familiar fact, but it can't be overstated how important it was, and its recipes for growth need to be studied. Not that the period didn't also have its dark side. There was fierce resistance to the campaigns by women, by Māori, by Pasifika, by LGBTQ and other minority communities. The Vietnam war raged until 1975. Rob Muldoon was our conservative Prime Minister until 1984. And what replaced him was Rogernomics, the vanguard of a new, more aggressive style of capitalism. Large companies turned to populism (cultural fast food) as the best way to boost profits. They also engaged in a manic round of international company mergers which, for example, denied our long-established publisher Reeds even the freedom to continue calling itself Reeds.

Neoliberalism also brought a managerial revolution which reshaped our cultural funding bodies. In 1974 the Arts Council was given a neo-liberal makeover, and it became "Creative NZ," which – as Dennis McEldowney noted – is a "marketing name that writers had difficulty in using without 'shudder quotes.'" An artist was now a "brand," works of art were now spoken of as "products," and the arts became "the creative industries." Today, the websites, publications, and application forms of our cultural funding bodies take their style from the world of Wellington bureaucracy, rather than the world of writers and artists.

Despite these negative trends, if I had completed my history at the millennium, it would have been mostly a celebration of progress, progress which nobody expected to come to an end. But another shakeup, the digital revolution, had already begun. From the start of the 21st century the computer became an everyday tool, and that was not merely a helpful new piece of equipment but in some respects a Pandora's box.

It's an interesting coincidence that the biggest cultural revolutions have occurred at the beginning of centuries – Romanticism at the start of the 19th, Modernism at the start of the 20th, and now the Digital at the start of the 21st. Big technological changes tend to be a mixed blessing for small countries with limited resources and fragile infrastructure. For example, the coming of sound in 1928 destroyed the industry for silent film-making that New Zealand had been developing in the 1920s. Our small country could not afford the new sound technology, and our local film industry did not recover for nearly 50 years.

The digital revolution began with utopian enthusiasm. In 1996, John Perry Barlow (the early theorist of the internet, as well as a lyricist for the Grateful Dead) wrote a "Declaration of Independence of Cyberspace" which expressed the belief that "We are creating a world [a new digital world] that all may enter without privilege or prejudice" (everyone on an equal basis). The internet seemed ideal for our country as it could ease our remoteness. The computer was a wonderful tool for writers, publishers and researchers. Literary magazines could be launched online, and some writers welcomed the chance to self-publish their own e-books.

But there was a downside. The digital shattered much of the existing analogue infrastructure. Overseas corporations seized control of many areas of the digital world and sucked up much of the advertising revenue that previously sustained our newspapers and magazines. There were new jobs for some, but many established artists now found it even harder to earn a living. The new infrastructure still has many gaps, and we are still learning how to monetize the internet. Nevertheless,

some artists enjoyed the destruction because the old infrastructure had never supported their type of work – so they could feel *schadenfreude.* They hoped that something better would emerge. That has been realised, but only in part. The internet has been described as the world's best library combined with its most dodgy flea-market, a happy hunting ground for trolls, scammers, and the creators of fake news. It's a perfect medium for populism. Barlow's hope that it would be a world free of economic control is contradicted by the power of digital corporations such as those popularly known as the FANGS (Facebook, Amazon, Netflix, Google, and Spotify). It was bad luck for the internet that it had developed during an age of aggressive capitalism and rampant populism.

COVID-19 reached our country in February 2020, and one of its effects was to further promote the digital revolution. The pandemic magnified three trends already present in the arts – use of the internet, the decline of the established infrastructure, and the financial problems faced by artists. In comparison with other countries, the New Zealand government did some excellent work in managing the pandemic since it sought, and in most cases acted upon, the expert advice of the country's scientific communities. On the other hand, its support for the arts in what it acknowledged to be "the greatest economic shock [to the arts] in living memory" showed that its understanding of this area was limited - for example, its refusal to classify books as essential items during the lockdown, and some bizarre funding decisions by the Ministry of Culture and Heritage. The Chief Executive of Creative NZ has admitted that culture is "peripheral" or "on the budgetary margins" of what the government spends. I should acknowledge, however, that we have had earlier politicians who *did* take a strong interest in the arts – Helen Clark, Judith Tizard, and Chris Finlayson to mention three of them.

This Festival is also a happy exception to the problems, with its feast of printed books on the tables outside. It's a perfect context in which to celebrate the work of art as an object, a situation lost or diluted in digital culture. A recent film entitled *The Worst Person in the World* contains an eloquent but wistful speech by Askel, a writer and artist, about his previously happy years in a world where "culture was passed along through objects" – not only paintings but books, newspapers, magazines, comics, records, and so on. Askel speaks of the pleasure of living among these cultural objects - designing them, going shopping in search of them, and sharing the tactile and concentrated experience they provide.

There are also many positive aspects to the digital. In 2011 French philosopher Michel Serres wrote an excited book, *Thumbelina: The Culture and Technology of Millennials*, about the profound ways that the internet has changed the thinking of young people. His attitude was the opposite of Askel's. Young people, he said, "no longer speak the same language." He described them as impatient with teachers or experts because they were confident that their own phones held all the information they needed, and therefore in a classroom they were no longer prepared to "sit down, sit up and sit still." Observing the dexterity of their messaging, he said: "with my clumsy fingers, I have named them, with as much tenderness as a grandfather can express, Thumbelina and Tom Thumb." He was highly optimistic about the outcome of this digital "metamorphosis" because there were so many things wrong with our current society that "conditions are ripe for a Western spring." Serres, then in his 80s, added: "I would like to be eighteen years old [again], the age of Thumbelina and Tom Thumb, since everything has to be redone, everything still needs to be invented."

My book is an attempt to cover these and other aspects of our fast-moving history. I track the unfolding of the digital phase in detail, including some amazing new forms of art, but I see the earlier phase (from the late 1960s through the 1990s) as especially important because it offers an inspiring story of growth. It made our country more modern and more diverse. Since the millennium that story has been side-lined, considered old-hat. Back In 1991, Jock Phillips could say of the increased interest in local history, "The past in New Zealand has now got a future." His comment was made, however, during our expansion period, which peaked around 2003 with Michael King's *Penguin History of New Zealand,* which became one of the best-selling books ever published in this country. King ended his coverage with a section entitled "Posthistory" which warned that "a period of uncertainty and adjustment" was on the horizon. The index of his book did not yet include the terms "computer," "digital" or "internet" – not to mention COVID.

Teachers tell me that students are now inclined to think of the 20th century as remote ancient history (as though "BC" now means "before computers"). It's good that New Zealand history is going to be refreshed in schools. Education *is* a crucial factor. The reform of education by the first Labour governments made possible the expansion of the arts in the period from the 1960s on. But in our current phase, successive governments have shifted their priorities away from the arts and downsized them at all levels. Professor Peter O'Connor, who heads a centre of Education at the University of Auckland, has said: "We know that Aotearoa schools are killing creativity…. Recent research…details the manner in which the murder has taken place [including] the almost complete lack of arts in initial Teacher Education, and a poverty of resourcing in the arts in schools." University English departments have been shrinking. One bright spot is the boom in Creative Writing, programmes which are doing a great job, despite the general problem of scarce resources. In many areas, however, our culture is now missing a top floor, the kind of challenging work (or "High culture") still valued overseas.

The digital age has also reinforced local forms of ageism. Ageism has always been a problem for our writers and artists, for whom reaching mid-career is a difficult stage, and the generation gap has now grown more intense. Today the writers and artists of the past are frequently dismissed by commentators as "dead white guys." As Alan Loney comments, "What one *wants* to see is the canon *added to*, not dumped in the sea and allowed to sink without trace."

In February 2020 the mighty protest to Save Radio NZ's Concert station was a welcome sign that many people do still want high culture to be part of our way of life. On that occasion, even our government was implicated in the attempt to close down the service, which is our one and only station for the history of classical music and for contemporary local composers in that genre. Hopefully the station will survive the coming merger of Radio NZ with TVNZ.

There have been some positive changes in local literature in recent years, such as a huge boost for women's writing. Whereas the old days had a mostly male culture, the second phase saw more women writers coming into the spotlight (such as Fiona Kidman, Sue McCauley, Patricia Grace and others). In the latest phase, the centre of gravity has definitely shifted. Women are prominent in publishing, they outnumber men as award-winning writers and as book-buyers, and I think it's safe to say, as festival audiences. Now when a New Zealand publisher is assessing a new novel, the potential interest of women's book clubs is one of the factors taken into account

In terms of content, there has also been a trend away from realist writing about the local context towards fantasy, crime, romance, and other international genres. As Mary Varnham has described the realist fiction of an earlier wave: “Hesitatingly, the country embraced the novel: books about small towns, minor crimes, girls with babies, families with secrets.” Now digital culture has created new priorities. John Newton speaks today of “millennial writers for whom ‘New Zealand literature’ is barely on their radar. They find little incentive to read it…. They are conscious of different markets, institutions and rewards, [and] global publication…. In this setting, speaking to an inherited local context must (I imagine) appear as quaint as talking to your neighbour across the back fence.”

I’m told by writing consultants that young writers often now use American spelling and prefer overseas settings. Those settings are completely valid provided that writers have the knowledge to carry them off. Otherwise, we will be heading back to colonial days when writers spent their time trying to second-guess what an overseas publisher might want. It seems clear that the best work produced in this country has combined a deep knowledge of the latest overseas developments with a distinctive local perspective of some kind. It’s been neither insular nor globally formulaic. Its motto is “Read global but write local.”

Along with genre, a key term now is identity. Up to the 1960s writers tended most often to engage with class politics, for or against socialism. From the 1960s, there has been a shift to identity politics. That has fuelled many novels, films and plays and other forms of art. Identity politics tends to involve an individual struggling to find their “real self,” or a minority community that seeks to express itself, to be “empowered.” This has produced a very rich body of work. Sometimes, however, it has become essentialist or too cut-and-dried in its view of identity. It has even been argued that writers are not entitled to write about members of a group different from themselves. In contrast, those regarded as our leading writers - both Māori and non-Māori, male and female - insist on imaginative freedom, though they also strongly agree that writers must pay their dues and do a convincing job. Many of these writers are also focusing on identity, but they acknowledge its complexities – writers such as Eleanor Catton (in *The Rehearsal*) or Paula Morris (in *Hibiscus Coast*) who look at hybridity (the mix of ancestries that many of us have), or who see identity as a persona which we choose to perform.

It's not surprising that identity has become a dominant issue. An interest in Māori writing is having a large and positive influence on local publishing. In our fast-changing society it seems inevitable that identity will continue to be a major theme. Our situation is complex because – thanks to immigration - Aotearoa NZ is now (in Paul Spoonley’s words) “one of the most super-diverse [societies] of any globally.” Asian and Indian writers now have a strong presence in our literature. We need to make a success of that growing multiculturalism. Dame Anne Salmond has written eloquently about the need for our society to avoid “sharp edged silos,” and to respect every person’s whakapapa.

Well, that’s just to touch on some of the issues my book covers. They’re why I’m fascinated by history and the various waves of change, and by the ongoing struggle to sustain our arts culture and the careers of our artists.

Out in the foyer, there will now be a little launch ceremony for two of my books – the one I've been discussing (*Culture in a Small Country*), and one called *A Book of Seeing* which looks at the visual arts and other aspects of vision. Wystan Curnow and Peter Simpson will introduce the books. If you can stay for this event, you're very welcome, and there will be food and wine. Thank you for listening.