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Kingsbury, Anthony Leicester

Poetry in New Zealand

1850-1930
A Thesis submitted for the degree of doctor of philosophy at the University of Auckland by Tony Kingsbury in December 1968.
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our failure is to form habits: for, after all, habit is relative to a stereotyped world, and meantime it is only the roughness of the eye that makes any two persons, things, situations, seem alike.

Walter Pater, *The Renaissance*
PREFACE

There are few literary occupations more depressing, and less rewarding, than the study of New Zealand verse before 1890.

J.C. Reid, Creative Writing in New Zealand

Poetry in New Zealand, nearly everyone agrees, came to birth around 1920, or 1930, or 1940; in fact, round about when those who are now the grand old men of New Zealand letters were boys. No doubt future generations will see it as beginning in 1950, or 1960, or 1970. In any case, no attempt will be made in this work to upset such a widely-held belief — my researches are unashamedly foetal, a chronicle of the first faint heart-beats, the first weak kicks, and a whole lot of morning-sickness. It is something less than a 'study' of poetic pre-history; to try to consider New Zealand poetry before 1930 'in depth' would be like practising diving in a mangrove swamp. On the other hand, although I have quoted extensively, it is something more than an anthology. Its purpose is to review the course of poetry in this country since it began, so that those who are interested in colonial verse can get some idea of what would have been its 'development' if it had developed, without having to wade through the four hundred or so volumes in which it is embalmed.

It is not, nor could it have been, a detached, objective survey of the period. To read bad verse in any quantity is in itself dangerously weakening to the brain — to do so without the sustaining prop of myopic prejudice would be suicidal. Then again, I have, I hope, resisted the temptation to poke fun at the often indecorous postures in which history has mummified these poetic corpses. The only advantage we have over them is time, and no doubt in a hundred years our taste
and pre-occupations — thesis-writing among them — will look as silly.

Except in the earlier period I have made no effort to be inclusive, but have concentrated only on those poets who seemed to me to be for some reason 'significant'. I have dealt with them in the order of the date of their first published book, which has in some cases led to the work of younger poets being considered before that of older ones, but since I was not interested in charting 'influences', chronology was not all that important, and it did have the advantage of allowing me to include Ursula Bethell, whose first book came out in 1929 — and who is the only poet considered whose work is still read today. R.A.K. Mason and A.R.D. Fairburn also came within the limits I proposed, but so much has been, and is being, written about these two that I felt that the subject would lure me into a polemic from which the rest of the work is largely free.

For this reason, too, although my debt to them is both great and obvious, I have avoided, as far as possible, referring to the work of earlier writers in the field, notably Dr. E. H. McCormick, whose survey of New Zealand literature has been an invaluable guide, Dr. Curnow, whose critical writings have provided many of the presuppositions on which this study rests, and Professor Reid, whose warning quoted earlier I should perhaps have heeded. Since it has not been my intention to 'prove' anything, or to debate the merits of various poets, I have been content that where we disagree our opinions should lie side by side. Where we agree, I hope I have avoided at least the appearance of plagiarism.

I must thank the staff of the libraries of the universities of Auckland and Wellington, the Auckland Public Library, the Library of the Auckland Institute and Museum, the Turnbull Library in Wellington, and the Hocken and Public Libraries in
Dunedin, for their expert and patient assistance.

Finally my thanks are due to Mac. D. P. Jackson, for a vast amount of cheerful encouragement, without which it is unlikely that the work would have been brought even to its present lack of conclusion, and to my wife for ungrudging assistance in ways too numerous to mention.
I. THE LUGGAGE

Nineteenth Century Attitudes to Poetry

Poetry, when employed in conveying and enforcing truth, demands attention and respect; and we have no doubt, with proper care, might be rendered much more beneficial and useful to mankind than it hitherto has been; but when it is employed ... in virulent satire and to gratify malignant and improper passions, the mischiefs which it produces are incalculable.

_Guy's Pocket Encyclopedia, 9th. ed., 1829._

The study of Poetry, while it tends to humanize and enlarge the heart, imparts vigor and brilliance to the imagination, and exercises, amuses, and improves the mind; but, it is to be deplored, that high poetic genius has sometimes been degraded by levity, and depraved by immorality; and that the youthful reader, while with interest and delight pursuing his course where nothing should find a place but the graceful and pure, not unfrequently risks contamination from the blandishments of vice, or disgust from its deformity.

_The Gift Book of English Poetry, 1850._

An age that was a ferment of questions, doubts, and contradictions will not submit easily to generalisation, and to summarize adequately the concepts of poetry that competed for a hearing in nineteenth century England would be difficult, if not impossible. Beneath the froth of intellectual controversy, however, certain currents are discernible, and these we will briefly look at, with a view to determining, if only vaguely, the range of attitudes towards poetry that a hypothetical emigrant might have possessed.

As the quotations above suggest, the audience of the time was very conscious of the power of poetry, both for good and evil. It was something that could be used, but at the same time something that needed to be controlled.

John Henry Newman was one of the most fluent and persuasive of those who asserted the usefulness of poetry. In an early essay,
Poetry, with Reference to Aristotle's Poetics, published in 1829, he sees it as intermediate between Nature and the beatific vision.

It delineates that perfection which the imagination suggests, and to which as a limit the present system of Divine Providence actually tends. Moreover, by confining the attention to one series of events and scene of action, it bounds and finishes the confused luxuriance of real nature; while, by a skilful adjustment of circumstances, it brings into sight the connexion of cause and effect, completes the dependence of parts one on another, and harmonizes the proportions of the whole.¹

'Poetry' here is obviously a power in its own right, an instrument for recapturing prelapsarian vision that has only the most tenuous relationship with any particular poem. Its social function seems to be to console fallen man with the thought that the thorns and thistles he has gained are less real than the Eden he has left, and that if he focuses on a distant prospect of paradise he will soon cease to see the flaming sword in the foreground.

... while it recreates the imagination by the superhuman loveliness of its views, it provides a solace for the mind broken by the disappointments and sufferings of actual life; and becomes, moreover, the utterance of the inward emotions of a right moral feeling, seeking a purity and a truth which this world will not give.²

As might be expected, the character of the poet who manages so successfully to ignore the truth of 'this world' is semi-divine.

It follows that the poetical mind is one full of the eternal forms of beauty and perfection; these are its materials of thought, its instrument and medium of observation. It is called imaginative or creative, from the originality and independence of its modes of thinking, compared with the commonplace and matter-of-fact conceptions of ordinary minds, which are fettered down to the particular and individual. At the same time it feels a natural sympathy with everything great and splendid in the physical and moral world;
and selecting such from the mass of common phenomena, incorporates them, as it were, into the substance of its own creations. From living thus in a world of its own, it speaks the language of dignity, emotion, and refinement. 3

As a description, this sums up pretty well what Professor Dowden called the transcendental mode in nineteenth century poetry. 4 As a prescription, however, it is likely to lead to religious verse of the most turgid kind, with young intending poets grimly ignoring anything real they might encounter, lest it contaminate their vision of 'the eternal forms of beauty'. Although, mind you, if they ever did get around to writing anything, they were sure to be good poets.

We do not hesitate to say, that poetry is ultimately founded on correct moral perception; that where there is no sound principle in exercise there will be no poetry; and that on the whole (originality being granted) in proportion to the standard of a writer's moral character will his compositions vary in poetical excellence. 5

'Poetry' for Newman is obviously a very wide concept indeed, capable of plugging very large holes in a rather leaky teleological universe, and far removed from the pragmatic 'best words in the best order' of Coleridge, but he does not shrink from extending it further. It becomes not a pastime, or a human need, but a Divine need, and therefore a human duty:

With Christians, a poetical view of things is a duty - we are bid to colour all things with hues of faith, to see a Divine meaning in every event, and a superhuman tendency. Even our friends around are invested with unearthly brightness - no longer imperfect men, but beings taken into Divine favour, stamped with His seal and in training for future happiness. It may be added, that the virtues peculiarly Christian are especially poetical - meekness, gentleness, compassion, contentment, modesty, not to mention the devotional virtues; whereas the ruder and more ordinary feelings are the instruments of rhetoric more justly than of poetry - anger, indignation, emulation, martial spirit and love of independence. 6
At the same time, he is aware of an irrational element in poetry, which may lead to 'the wantonness of exuberant genius' that he noticed in Homer and Aeschylus and which he later sees as a part of poetic eloquence, which consists, first, in the power of illustration; which the poet uses, not as the orator, voluntarily, for the sake of clearness of ornament, but almost by constraint, as the sole outlet and expression of intense inward feeling.

The effect of Newman's essay on the ordinary reader would probably be no more than to confirm him in his belief that 'good' in the phrase 'good poem' meant the same as in 'the good life' or 'the good book'. It would lead him to look with favour on verses that illustrated an easily recognisable moral, and confirm him in his belief that poetry was a two-edged sword. An impressionable aspirant to poetic honours, on the other hand, might be forgiven for concluding that if he kept the commandments, tried to see a divine meaning in every event, and eschewed independence, indignation, anger, emulation and martial spirit in favour of meekness and its related virtues, then he could hardly fail (originality being granted) to achieve his ambition. It is worth noting the terms that Newman uses to describe the objects and effects of poetry: perfection, connexion, harmonizes, superhuman, solace, purity, truth, great, splendid, dignity, refinement, correct, unearthly, meekness, gentleness, compassion, contentment, modesty, devotional. In varying combinations, these words constitute the soft core of what might be called the Victorian middle-class poetic, which endured, in this country at least, until well into the present century. It is easy to dismiss Newman's view by pointing to the poetry that seems to have been tailor-made to his measurements, the tremendously popular work of Martin
Tupper and Mrs Hemans, for example, but in fact it seems to have done for a huge audience exactly what Newman thought poetry should do - provide solace for the mind broken by the disappointments of actual life. The mind is not solaced by independence, by anarchy, by realism, by revelation of the unknown, but by seeing what it has always seen, hearing what it has always known, in short, by the 'eternal forms of beauty and perfection' and it may be that we see the fiery sword that flickers in the best Victorian writing all the more clearly for the mountain of drab piety and blind idealism that looms behind it.

The poet-emigrant cannot help but be consoled. Since he must consider the real world only as a point of departure, not of arrival, and since the eternal forms are as portable as his bible, it hardly matters where he locates himself. The change in environment may make some difference, but not much.

... a poet may make natural history or philosophy the material of his composition. But under his hands they are no longer a bare collection of facts or principles, but are painted with a meaning, beauty, and harmonious order not their own. . . . It is the charm of the descriptive poetry of a religious mind, that nature is viewed in a moral connection. Ordinary writers, for instance, compare aged men to trees in autumn - a gifted poet will in the fading trees discern the fading men. 9

Since the 'meaning, beauty, and harmonious order' are part of the 'gifted', or religious poet's equipment, and are to be imported into the landscape rather than discovered there, he need have no fear that the natural history of the land to which he is going will be insusceptible of poetic treatment, although he may wonder whether the trees in autumn will so readily yield the image of aged men in a country so remote
from normal ideas of 'harmonious order' that the clouds were popularly considered to be green.

If our emigrant had in his trunk the works of John Stuart Mill, he might be tempted to see the latter's condemnation of those readers who 'dare not enjoy until they have felt satisfied themselves that they have a warrant for enjoying; who read a poem with the critical understanding first, and only when they feel that it is right to be delighted, are willing to give their spontaneous feelings fair play' as particularly applicable to Newman.

Mill, like Newman, has a concept of poetry that extends far beyond the limited existence of mere poems, and, like Newman too, he uses the concept in a moral context.

That ... the word "poetry" does import something quite peculiar in its nature, something which may exist in what is called prose as well as in verse, something which does not even require the instrument of words, but can speak through those other audible symbols called musical sounds, and even through the visible ones, which are the language of sculpture, painting, and architecture; all this, as we believe, is and must be felt, though perhaps indistinctly, by all upon whom poetry in any of its shapes produces any impression beyond that of tickling the ear. To the mind, poetry is either nothing, or it is the better part of all art whatever, and of real life too; and the distinction between poetry and what is not poetry, whether explained or not, is felt to be fundamental.

Here rears New Zealand 'mid a sea of storms
Her hills that threaten heaven like Titan forms
Where the long lizard on the herbage lies
And clouds of emerald beauty paint the skies.

T.K. Hervey, Australia 2nd ed.1824.
Mill, too, is conscious of the power of poetry, but he is less concerned with the question of 'power for what?'; his definition includes a measure of freedom: 'What is poetry, but the thoughts and words in which emotion spontaneously clothes itself?';\(^{12}\) and it is obvious that the need which he brings to literature is radically different from Newman's; 'poetry, which is the delineation of the deeper and more secret workings of the human heart, is interesting only to those to whom it recalls what they have felt, or whose imagination it stirs up to conceive what they could feel, or what they might have been able to feel had their outward circumstances been different.'\(^{13}\)

This, for Mill, is what the poet does, but it is not what he must do. In his famous distinction between poetry and eloquence, he declares that the poet has no duty, because, ideally, he should be conscious of no audience.

Poetry and eloquence are both alike the expression or uttering forth of feeling. But if we may be excused the antithesis, we should say that eloquence is heard, poetry is overheard. Eloquence supposes an audience; the peculiarity of poetry appear to us to lie in the poet's utter unconsciousness of a listener. Poetry is feeling, confessing itself in symbols, which are the nearest possible representations of the feeling in the exact shape in which it exists in the poet's mind. Eloquence is feeling pouring itself out to other minds, courting their sympathy, or endeavouring to influence their belief, or move them to passion or to action.\(^{13a}\)

For our hypothetical emigrant this must be some consolation; it is unlikely that in a sparsely populated country the demands of his audience will be too pressing, and 'moments of solitude' should not be lacking; but he may wonder wryly what likelihood he had of being overheard across twelve thousand miles of ocean, and whether distance might not tempt him into eloquence.
Robert Browning, in his *Essay on Shelley* of 1852, posits a kind of dialectic of poetry, in which he distinguishes between the 'objective' poet,

one whose endeavour has been to reproduce things external (whether the phenomena of the scenic universe, or the manifested action of the human heart and brain) with an immediate reference, in every case, to the common eye and apprehension of his fellow men, assumed capable of receiving and profiting by this reproduction. It has been obtained through the poet's double faculty of seeing external objects more clearly, widely, and deeply, than is possible to the average mind, at the same time that he is so acquainted and careful to supply it with no other materials than it can combine into an intelligible whole.

and the subjective,

gifted like the objective poet with the fuller perception of nature and man . . . impelled to embody the thing he perceives, not so much with reference to the many below as to the one above him, the supreme Intelligence which apprehends all things in their absolute truth,— an ultimate view ever aspired to, if but partially attained, by the poet's own soul. Not what man sees, but what God sees — the *Ideas* of Plato, seeds of creation lying burningly on the Divine Hand — it is towards these that he struggles. Not with the combination of humanity in action, but with the primal elements of humanity he has to do; and he digs where he stands, — preferring to seek them in his own soul as the nearest reflex of that absolute Mind, according to the intuitions of which he desires to perceive and speak. . . . He is rather a seer, accordingly, than a fashioner, and what he produces will be less a work than an effluence.

Both these poets are rather grand types, god-like in their own way. The time is still far distant when writers will feel that their strength lies in their weakness, the confusion and dirt of the rag and bone shop against the prim, knowledgeable suburb. But the
interesting part of the essay is Browning's assumption of the necessity of dialectic.

There is a time when the general eye has, so to speak, absorbed its fill of the phenomena round it, whether spiritual or material, and desires rather to learn the exacter significance of what it possesses, than to receive any augmentation of what is possessed. Then is the opportunity for the poet of loftier vision, to lift his fellows, with their half-apprehensions, up to his own sphere, by intensifying the import of details and rounding the universal meaning. The influence of such an achievement will not soon die out. A tribe of successors (Homerides) working more or less in the same spirit, dwell on his discoveries and reinforce his doctrine; till, at unawares, the world is found to be subsisting wholly on the shadow of a reality, on sentiments diluted from passions, on the tradition of a fact, the convention of a moral, the straw of last year's harvest. Then is the imperative call for the appearance of another sort of poet, who shall at once replace this intellectual rumination of food swallowed long ago, by a supply of the fresh and living swathe; ... 16

Writing as a poet, Browning knows the futility of attempting to prescribe for poets. The only practical conclusion that our aspirant to Parnassus could glean from this is the obvious one that a poet must take care to be in tune with his times. But for the emigrant, time and place are complicated. A voyage of a few weeks might leave him in a literary climate twenty years behind the times, or in a social structure twenty years ahead of them. Micawber, having subsisted so long on the shadow of a reality, wakes in Australia to find himself a magistrate, and others were likely to find themselves confronted with a Nature more savage than she had been in Somerset for two thousand years.

Browning implies that the first movement of the dialectic must be the objective, the attempt to assimilate the environment to poetry, and only when this has been accomplished will the subjective poet 'of modern classification' 17 come into his own; but what will
happen when the literary world, in which the poet must publish and find most of his audience, is separated from the world that he 'possesses' by a considerable body of ocean, and when its needs, as an audience, are likely to be out of phase with his needs as a poet? In a passage that seems to echo down the crooked corridors of colonial poetry, Browning complicates the issue still further:

the objective poet, in his appeal to the aggregate human mind, chooses to deal with the doings of men, . . . while the subjective poet, whose study has been himself, appealing through himself to the Divine mind, prefers to dwell upon those external scenic appearances which strike out most abundantly and uninterruptedly his inner light and power, selects that silence of the earth and sea in which he can best hear the beating of his individual heart, and leaves the noisy, complex, yet imperfect exhibitions of nature in the manifold experience of man around him, which serve only to distract and suppress the workings of his brain.

It would seem that, as a physical environment, New Zealand is going to draw the poet towards subjectivity, while, at the same time, as a social environment, it is likely to insist that he write objectively, that it is his task to show his fellow-colonists, insofar as they approximate to an 'aggregate human mind', that the fresh and living swathe which their voyage to the ends of the earth has cut for them does constitute the 'intelligible whole' which the New Zealand Company propaganda had led them to expect.

He might find either prospect exhilarating, and the aim of setting himself up as the bard of a rural community struggling towards some kind of corporate self-consciousness was, at least partly, realisable. But the poet who thought to contemplate the seeds of creation in the wilderness was to find that his solitary intercourse with the god within collapsed more often than not into spiritual masturbation,
and that in the silence that brooded over the hills and bush of his adopted country the beating of his own heart became in the end more numbing and distracting than the noise and complexity of the urban society he was leaving behind.

In his preface to the poems of 1853, Mathew Arnold defines the objects of poetry with rather more modesty:

What are the eternal objects of Poetry, among all nations, and at all times? They are actions; human actions; possessing an inherent interest in themselves, and which are to be communicated in an interesting manner by the art of the Poet. 19

He locates the distinguishing feature of poetry, not in its effect, as Newman had done, but in its content, and by reasserting the distinction between a poem and its 'subject', tries to revive the primacy of the poet's will over both his imagination and his emotions. A poem is not, as it had been for Mill and Browning, an action itself, a meaningful gesture, but the representation of an action, and the poet is seen as less a maker than a medium who must,

be perpetually reminded to prefer his action to everything else; so to treat this, as to permit its inherent excellences to develop themselves, without interruption from the intrusion of his personal peculiarities: most fortunate, when he most entirely succeeds in effacing himself, and in enabling a noble action to subsist as it did in nature. 20

"Noble" here is as question-begging as "in an interesting manner" above, but it is obviously a quality corroded by the cult of subjectivity;

the modern critic not only permits a false practice; he absolutely prescribes false aims. - "A true allegory of the state of one's own mind in a representative history," the Poet is told, "is perhaps the highest thing that one can attempt in the way of poetry." - And accordingly he attempts it. An allegory of the state of one's own mind, the highest problem of an art which imitates actions! No assuredly, it is not, it never can be so: no great poetical work has ever been produced with such an aim. 21
He is solidly behind Newman in his demand that poetry should be a solace:

Any accurate representation may therefore be expected to be interesting; but, if the representation be a poetical one, more than this is demanded. It is demanded, not only that it shall interest, but also that it shall inspirit and rejoice the reader; that it shall convey a charm, and infuse delight. For the Muses, as Hesiod says, were born that they might be "a forgetfulness of evils, and a truce from cares"; and it is not enough that the Poet should add to the knowledge of men, it is required of him also that he should add to their happiness. 22

But the comfort is for the audience, not the poet, who must wrestle with the problem of discovering great human actions in an age of such confusion and doubt that it hardly bears comparison with the splendour of an antiquity purified by the passage of centuries; and the stirring conclusion to the Preface, with its emphasis on wholesome regulation, points out to the neophyte that, in the absence of any noble actions, the constipation of an objectivity lacking an object is both more honourable and less distressing to the world at large than the diarrhoea of a capricious subjectivity:

if it is impossible for us, under the circumstances amidst which we live, to think clearly, to feel nobly, and to delineate firmly: if we cannot attain to the mastery of the great artists - let us, at least, have so much respect for our Art as to prefer it to ourselves: let us not bewilder our successors: let us transmit to them the practice of Poetry, with its boundaries and wholesome regulative laws, under which excellent works may again, perhaps, at some future time, be produced, not yet fallen into oblivion through our neglect, not yet condemned and cancelled by the influence of their eternal enemy, Caprice. 23

John Ruskin's Modern Painters, published between 1843 and 1860, contains much that is relevant, both to the situation of the poet-emigrant, and to the critical debate, the study of which has whiled away the weeks of his long sea voyage.
In Volume III Ruskin makes a frontal attack on the problem 'What is poetry?'. Showing more practicality than most theorists before or since, he examines a poem, with a view to testing the distinction made by Sir Joshua Reynolds between history and poetry, and concludes:

Instead of finding, as we expected, the poetry distinguished from the history by the omission of details, we find it consist entirely in the addition of details; and instead of being characterised by regard only of the invariable, we find its whole power to consist in the clear expression of what is singular and particular!

This, while it disposes of Sir Joshua, is not an adequate definition, however, so Ruskin proceeds to give his own:

'I come, after some embarrassment, to the conclusion, that poetry is 'the suggestion, by the imagination, of noble grounds for the noble emotions'.'

Like his earlier definition of greatness in art as 'that which conveys to the mind of the spectator the greatest number of the greatest ideas . . . .', this suffers from the vagueness of the key term, although he does try to body out the concept of nobility:

I mean, by the noble emotions, those four principal sacred passions - Love, Veneration, Admiration, and Joy (this latter especially, if unselfish); and their opposites - Hatred, Indignation (or Scorn), Horror, and Grief, - this last, when unselfish, becoming Compassion. These passions in their various combinations constitute what is called "poetical feeling", when they are felt on noble grounds, that is, on great and true grounds.

This narrowing of the range of the effects by which poetry can be recognised would seem to imply a concomitant determination of the means by which they are to be achieved, but this he is anxious to avoid:
Now this power of exciting the emotions depends of course on the richness of the imagination, and on its choice of those images which, in combination, will be most effective, or, for the particular work to be done, most fit. And it is altogether impossible for a writer not endowed with invention to conceive what tools a true poet will make use of, or in what way he will apply them, or what unexpected results he will bring out by them; so that it is vain to say that the details of poetry ought to possess, or ever do possess, any definite character. 28

The humility of the definition is refreshing, although he elsewhere makes it clear that he is not so uncharacteristic of his age as to allow 'richness of imagination' to stand as an absolute value.

Let it be understood once for all, that imagination never deigns to touch anything but truth; and though it does not follow that where there is the appearance of truth, there has been imaginative operation, of this we may be assured, that where there is appearance of falsehood, the imagination has had no hand. 29

His later distinction between fancy and imagination makes it clear that 'truth' here is not just a matter of moralizing, or purveying what is recognizably true, but more a wholeness and clarity of vision, sustained by some steadiness of purpose.

... the imagination being at the heart of things, poises herself there, and is still, quiet, and brooding, comprehending all around her with her fixed look; but fancy staying at the outside of things cannot see them all at once, but runs hither and thither, and round and about to see more and more, bounding merrily from point to point, and glittering here and there, but necessarily always settling, if she settle at all, on a point only, never embracing the whole. And from these single points she can strike out analogies and catch resemblances, which, so far as the point she looks at is concerned, are true, but would be false, if she could see through to the other side. 30

But the problem remains - and remained for the rest of the century - 'Where do we locate the centre, the heart of things?'. Those who accepted Browning's definition of the
'subjective' poet had no difficulty — the centre was the self-consciousness of the individual artist. Although this gave a certain appearance of tidiness to the problem, it was clearly inadequate. The concept of a wholly subjective poetry was unsatisfactory for the poet (although it was calculated to appeal to those of his audience who looked to poetry to broaden their emotional and spiritual horizons rather than to deepen their piety): it placed an intolerable strain on his originality, and failed to supply him with that semblance of an absolute justification which he needed to give him at least the illusion of occupying a position of importance in a society which was as afraid of the practice of creative freedom as it was fond of the principle, and which tolerated the gyrations of ineffectual angels only out of a conviction that no void should be left unfilled.

For Ruskin himself, a not very clearly defined morality takes the place of Newman's insistence upon religion. In Volume II of Modern Painters he writes: 'the Imagination is in no small degree dependent on acuteness of moral emotion; in fact, all moral truth can only thus be apprehended . . . .'\(^{31}\) and in Volume III he says of the artist: 'it does not matter whether he seek for his subjects among peasants or nobles, among the heroic or the simple, in courts or in fields, so only that he behold all things with a thirst for beauty, and a hatred of meanness and vice'.\(^{32}\)

Although this sort of piecemeal quotation does little justice to either the complexity or the confusion of his thought on a subject which, throughout the age under consideration abounded in both, it indicates sufficiently that in spite of his distaste for rules and prescriptions, his insistence that art must be unfettered, he could resolve the problem of the conflict between art and
religion, creation and conservation, only by asserting
that it didn't exist, that the opposition was more
fanciful than real. I don't think that this compromise
satisfied anybody.

Ruskin's discussion of the importance of the artist's
environment, with its strongly implied nationalism,
would probably worry our emigrant more than these
confused questions of evaluation. In Volume I he is
quite dogmatic: 'no man ever painted or ever will
paint, well, anything but what he has early and long
seen, early and long felt, and early and long loved';
and further on: 'of this I am certain, that whatever
is to be truly great and affecting must have on it the
strong stamp of the native land. Not a law this, but
a necessity, from the intense hold on their country of
the affections of all truly great men'. Towards the
end of Volume III he elaborates his theme in terms which
leave little hope for a colonial literature except of
the most frightful kind:

the charm of romantic association can be felt only
by the modern European child. It rises eminently
out of the contrast of the beautiful past with the
frightful and monotonous present; and it depends
for its force on the existence of ruins and
traditions, on the remains of architecture, the
traces of battlefields, and the precursorship of
eventful history. The instinct to which it appeals
can hardly be felt in America . . . .

We can take it for granted, I think, that our colonist
is by now heartily sick of his voyages, in both time and
space, and more than anxious to exchange his cramped
cabin for his bush section, and, time permitting, the
theory of poetry for its practice. Unless he is going
to bury himself completely in the back-blocks, he is likely
to follow with interest - at an interval of a few months -
literary doings in an England that has suddenly become 'Home',
and will shudder at or delight in the verbal excesses of
Swinburne, and the verse, equally verbal and equally excessive, of Martin Tupper. We can even imagine him in his raupo whare, with the sweat from his labours at the plough or with the axe still on his brow, reading by the light of a smoking lamp the finely-wrought exhortation to burn always with a hard, gemlike flame, and thinking rather wistfully that such incandescence, like a will-o-the-wisp, appears only against that darkness of a decaying civilization on which he has so resolutely turned his back.

Possibly because of the predominantly middle and working class character of the emigrants, and the speed with which the latter adopted the prejudices of the former, the idea of art as an extension of life never really caught on in New Zealand, with the result that the debate between art and morality has never been a very lively one. In any case, the artist can always seem to win his point by admitting that he has lost it, and reversing the process of emigration so as to liberate himself from the unconfident tyranny of the new, compared to which the sophisticated conservatism of the old appears the ultimate in freedom.

One problem, however, is intensified, not solved, by migration, in whatever direction - that of the importance of nationality in art about which Ruskin had been so dogmatic, and from the beginning this tended to occupy the minds of colonial writers. In the long run, although it lacked the news value that characterized the struggles of middle-class artists to escape from the net of middle-class taste in the England of the eighties, it proved as effective a smoke-screen for the activities of the creative artist as any that were developed in older countries, although the smallness of the nation has sometimes resulted in a pettiness of dispute that verges on the farcical.
2. ibid. p.64.
3. ibid. p.64-65.
6. ibid. p.76.
7. ibid. p.66.
8. ibid. p.77.
11. ibid. p.201.
12. ibid. p.223
13. ibid. pp.204-5.
15. ibid. p.673.
16. ibid. p.675.
17. ibid. p.673.
18. ibid. p.674.
20. ibid. p.10.
22. ibid. p.4.
23. ibid. pp.16-17.
25. ibid. p.11.
26. ibid. 1857, I, p.11.
27. ibid. III, p.11.
29. ibid. 1856, II, p.156.
30. ibid. p.165.
32. ibid. III, p.23.
33. ibid. I, p.121.
34. ibid. p.122.
35. ibid. III, p.299.
II. AN INDESCRIBABLE PECULIARITY

Poetry and New Zealand Intersect.

"I wonder if I shall fall right through the earth! How funny it'll seem to come out among the people that walk with their heads downwards! The Antipathies, I think - . . . - but I shall have to ask them what the name of the country is, you know. Please, Ma'am, is this New Zealand or Australia?" (and she tried to curtsey as she spoke - fancy curtseying as you're falling through the air! Do you think you could manage it?) "And what an ignorant little girl she'll think me! No, it'll never do to ask: perhaps I shall see it written up somewhere."

Lewis Carroll, Alice in Wonderland.

The scales of custom dropped from their eyes, and they beheld all nature with a splendour upon it, as of the world's first morning.

Principal Shairp, Studies in Poetry.

New Zealand, it is generally agreed, is remote, but one thing it has never been very remote from is Poetry. No sooner had the country been claimed for England, than it was acclaimed as new pasturage for the English Muses. Andrew Kippis, in his A Narrative of the Voyages Round the World Performed by Captain James Cook, published in 1788, wrote 'Captain Cook's Voyages, among other effects, have opened new scenes for a poetical fancy to range in, and presented new images to the selection of genius and taste. The Morais, in particular, of the inhabitants of the South Sea islands, afford a fine subject for the exercise of a plaintive Muse.' ¹ and already Anna Seward, in her Ode on the Death of Cook had rejoiced in the gifts of civilisation that the navigator had brought to these uncultured shores.

To these the hero leads his living store,
And pours new wonders on th'uncultured shore;
The silky fleece, fair fruit, and golden grain;
And future herds and harvests bless the plain.
O'er the green soil his kids exulting play,
And sounds his clarion call the bird of day;
The downy goose her ruffled bosom laves,
Trims her white wings, and wantons in the waves;
Stern moves the bull along th'affrighted shores,
And countless nations tremble as he roars.²

Miss Helen Maria Williams, in the course of a decorously
undistinguished ode on the same subject, entitled
'The Morai', struck a note that was to echo for a while
in the work of colonial poets:

Ye lonely Isles! on ocean's bound
Ye bloomed through Time's long flight unknown,
Till COOK the untrack'd billow pass'd,
Till he along the surges cast
Philanthropy's connecting zone,
And spread her loveliest blessings round.³

Later, the religious annexation of New Zealand, as
symbolised by the appointment of Bishop Selwyn, was
celebrated by the Rev. W.C.Cotton in verses both pious
and turgid.

Art thou another island throne,
New Zealand! eminent, alone,
Where Britain, mild and true, shall shew
How kings should rule and serve below?

Australian oceans meet to lave
Thy tempered breast with various wave;
The Line, the Pole, reveal to thee
The secrets of the southern sea,

And on the surf with sullen roar
Or waters heaving to the shore,
Say, sleepless, hast thou never seen
The vision of thy coming queen?

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\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots\ldots
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Upon the mountains - by the hills -
Beside the streams, and countless rills -
Adown the valley, o'er the lake -
Athwart the fern-tracks, bush, and brake,
How beautiful, O Marsden! beat
The echoes of thy coming feet—
The feet of him that meekly bears
Salvation, and a God declares.

As the settlement of New Zealand got under way, more able rhymesters were quick to exploit the sentiment inherent in the act of emigration. Mrs Hemans, for instance, included in 'Songs of the Affections' two effusions on an emigration theme, in which she seized unerringly on the most obvious advantages and disadvantages of the venture:

Song of Emigration

There was heard a song on the chiming sea,
A mingled breathing of grief and glee;
Man's voice, unbroken by sighs, was there,
Filling with triumph the sunny air;
Of fresh, green lands, and of pastures new,
It sang, while the bark through the surges flew.

But ever and anon
A murmur of farewell
Told, by its plaintive tone,
That from woman's lips it fell.

"Away, away o'er the foaming main."
This was the free and the joyous strain,
"There are clearer skies than ours, afar,
We will shape our course by a brighter star;
There are plains whose verdure no foot hath pressed,
And whose wealth is all for the first brave guest."

"But, alas! that we should go,"
Sang the farewell voices then,
"From the homesteads, warm and low,
By the brook and in the glen!"

"We will rear new homes under trees that glow
As if gems were the fruitage of every bough;
O'er our white walls we will train the vine,
And sit in its shadow at day's decline,
And watch our herds, as they range at will
Through the green savannas, all bright and still."
"But woe for that sweet shade
Of the flowering orchard-trees,
Where first our children played
Midst the birds and honey-bees!"

"All, all our own shall the forest be,
As to the bound of the roebuck free!
None shall say, 'Hither, no further pass!'
We will track each step through the wavy grass
We will chase the elk in his speed and might,
And bring proud spoils to the hearth at night."

"But, oh! the gray church-tower,
And the sound of the Sabbath bell,
And the shelter'd garden-bower,
We have bid them all farewell!"

"We will give the names of our fearless race
To each bright river whose course we trace;
We will leave our memory with mounts and floods,
And the path of our daring in boundless woods;
And our works unto many a lake's green shore,
Where the Indian's graves lay, alone, before."

"But who shall teach the flowers,
Which our children loved, to dwell
In a soil that is not ours?
Home, home and friends, farewell!"

The stage-prop's of grey churches, gardens and flowers
left behind, are going to clutter up poems of exile
for at least another sixty years. Martin Tupper
embroidered the same emotions with the same vague
sincerity in poems like 'The New Home':

Pent in wynds and closes narrow,
Breathing pestilential air,
Crushed beneath oppression's harrow,
Faint with famine, bowed with care,-
Gaunt Affliction's sons and daughters!
Why so slow to hear the call
Which The Voice upon the waters
Preaches solemnly to all?

Hark! Old Oceans tongue of thunder
Hoarsely calling bids you speed
To the shores he held asunder
Only for these times of need;
Now, upon his friendly surges
Ever, ever roaring Come,
All the sons of hope he urges
To a new, a richer home!
England and her sea-girt sisters
Pine for want in seeming wealth;
Though the gaudy surface glisters,
This is not the hue of health.
Oh! the honest labour trying
Vainly here to earn its bread,—
Oh! the willing workers dying,
Unemployed, untaught, unfed!

And behold! the King All-glorious
Unto Britain tythes the world,—
Everywhere her crown victorious,
Everywhere her cross unfurled!
God hath given her distant regions,
Broad and rich; and store of ships;
God hath added homeborn legions,
Steep'd in trouble to the lips!

Join then, in one holy tether
Those whom God hath put aside,
Those whom God would link together,
Earth and labour well applied:
Hail! thou vast and wealthy nation,
Wing thy fleets to every place,
Fertilising all Creation
With the Anglo-Saxon race!

Then the wilderness shall blossom,
And the desert, as the rose;
While dear Earth's maternal bosom
With abundance overflows:
Then shall Britain gladly number
Crowds of children, now her dread,
That her onward march encumber
With the living and — the dead!

and 'New Zealand', which was reprinted in colonial newspapers:

Queen of the South! which the mighty Pacific
Claims for its Britain in ages to be,
Bright with fair visions and hopes beatific,
Glorious and happy thy future I see!
Thither the children of England are thronging,
There for true riches securely to search;
Not for thy gold, California, longing,
But for sweet home, with enough, and a Church!
There, a soft clime, and a soil ever teeming
Summer's December, and Winter's July,
The bright Southern Cross in the firmament gleaming,
The Dove, and the Crown, and the Altar on high —
There, the broad prairies with forest and river,
There, the safe harbours are bidding men search
For Thy best blessings, O heavenly Giver!
Home, with enough, and an Englishman’s Church!

Fifty years hence,—look forward and see it,
Realm of New Zealand, what then shalt thou see?
(If the world lives, at The Father’s So be it)
All shall be greatness and glory with thee!
Even should Britain’s decay be down-written
In the dread doom-book that no man may search,
Still shall an Oxford, a London, a Britain,
Gladden the South with a Home and a Church. 8

The optimism, and the rational substructure of this
vision of Creation improved by Anglo-Saxon insemination,
obviously derive from the propaganda put out by the
New Zealand Company, anxious to foster the illusion
that the colony was another Eden. New Zealand, by
Mrs Robert Wilson, published in 1851 shows a similar
dependence on Wakefield’s theories: in a lengthy
introduction she is eloquent on the subject of
colonization:

The interesting country which is the subject of the
following little poem . . . seems calculated to
attract colonists from Great Britain, from a variety
of causes. Foremost among these is its mild and
bracing climate. All English vegetables and fruits,
among others the gooseberry,—which has been called
the English vine,—flourish in its atmosphere;
this last being one that refuses to grow wherever
either the heat or the cold is excessive. This
humble little shrub, so dear to every English child,
will bear, we can imagine, with its unassuming
blossom, the promise of peaceful years to come,
and enable the heart of the stranger, in his adopted
land, to feel strange no more, but to blend with
earnest hopes for the future the precious memories
of the past. Another feature which recommends
New Zealand to those who meditate a change of
country is, its insular position, by which the
independence which Britons prize so highly, seems,
by nature, secured to them. 10
To us, with the advantages of hindsight, it may seem that the insularity of New Zealand has been as effective in ensuring her independence as the unassuming gooseberry was in ensuring 'peaceful years to come', but at least Mrs Wilson's prophecies are distinguished by a certain boldness - she goes on to say,

It is, . . . most desirable, that at the antipodes England should perpetuate an image of herself, and plant a nation possessing all the experience of the old World, amid the vigour and freshness of a newer era. . . . The laws and constitution of England, - the slow growth of centuries, - will be transplanted thither to "take root downwards and bear fruit upwards" and New Zealand seems destined, in another hemisphere, to be a centre from which shall diverge rays of happiness and civilisation to the countless islands of the Pacific Ocean.  

The poem itself lacks the vigour of E.J. Wakefield's Adventures in New Zealand, on which it draws heavily for detail, and is little more than a versification of the introduction:

Fairest and last adopted child, we turn
To thee, New Zealand! What, though rough and stern
Thy mountain scenes, old Scotia's annals show
The children of such lands ne'er fear a foe,
Nor e'er desert a friend. Changeful thy skies,
And cool and healthful; seen with English eyes,
Thy ever-verdant land is almost home.  

From England, New Zealand looked, or was made to look, like Utopia - all domestic plants were said to grow in profusion, cabbages grew to four feet across, and weighed twenty pounds, 13 the Maoris were the noblest of savages, and were more than willing to give up their land for the blessings of civilisation, including poetry, for which they 'yearned', 14 and so on. The view from this side of the water was, as John Miller 15 and others have shown, very different. Miller reproduces a document that should suffice to indicate the disparity between Utopian dreams and pioneering reality, a petition presented in 1843 by the labourers at Nelson to Captain Wakefield:
We the working men of Nelson earnestly request you to take our case into your consideration. You Sir are well aware that we have been seduced by the flattering pretensions of the New Zealand Company. We have endured considerable hardship and exposed to the dangers and perils of the deep and briny ocean both ourselves and family's where many people have lost their children and children their parents. Is this not to us a most unfortunate Enterprise merely to Gratify the Ambition and add to the wealth of the New Zealand Company? We are now cast upon a miserable and barren soil Inhabited for ages only by Canibals. . . . Now Sir we are not total strangers as to the somewhat unpleasant nature of the situation you hold, placed between the working class and the pretended landowners. Poor unfortunate victims they have fell a sacrifice to the flattery about this Splendid Country as well as we have. . . . But alas for them as well as for us. Their hopes are Vanquished on beholding the shore, for instead of finding Elysian fields and Groves adorned with every beauty of Nature they have found unsightly and barren Hills and Mountains covered with fern. 15

New Zealand, once reached, proved as incapable of instantly providing for the most elementary needs of the spirit as it was of providing work for the 'working class' - some capital had to be established before either was possible. R.C.Joplin, the first poet to publish a book in the colony, complained of 'an indescribable peculiarity of sameness and monotony'. 16 Even those who, like Samuel Butler, prospered, sometimes felt that the material gains hardly outweighed the disadvantages. Part of the trouble was that the scales of custom had not been dislodged from their eyes by the voyage, and where they could not see what they were accustomed to seeing, they were conscious only of emptiness. Butler, for instance, writes to his aunt from his sheep station:

I don't draw at all. For one thing there is nothing to draw and, for another, I find very little time - for another, it is almost always blowing from some quarter or another, and there is no shade or shelter.... Colour is very scarce here. The flowers are few and ugly - decidedly ugly - poor imitations of our
English ones. I do not know a single really nice flower that is natural to the place. 17

One of the first things that struck those settlers who wrote verse was the omnipresence of Nature. It worried, and to some extent grieved them, and they looked forward to the time when it should not be so. Nature, in the sense of the physical world, was of comparatively little importance to the Victorians in their theorizing about poetry, although it bulked large in Ruskin's theories about art in general. It was a value, but a value by opposition, in contrast to the ugliness of industrial civilisation. It was something that everyone in some sense 'knew', something to be recaptured from childhood rather than discovered. In an urban society too, the separateness of Nature was made obvious - it was something that one escaped to, something which, paradoxically, was different from one's 'normal' environment. Ruskin, for instance, emphasizes the gap between ordinary people, as distinct from artists, and nature.

Though still forced, by rule and fashion, to the producing and wearing of all that is ugly, men steal out, half-ashamed of themselves for doing so, to the field and mountains; and finding among these the colour, and liberty, and variety, and power, which are forever grateful to them, delight in these to an extent never before known: ... 18

Indeed, for some, the very act of beholding 'Nature' became a poetic one. 19 This was, however, Poetry by convention, a form of blindness rather than something seen, and such devotional exercises were rarely productive of more than platitude. The act of emigration, on the other hand, was 'poetic' in a different sense. Like Tasman and Cook's voyages, it was more a leap into the unknown than an act of will, a leap that, once made, was for most irreversible, and it was an effort, equivalent to Browning's 'cutting a supply of fresh and living swathe', that seemed to lead to a kind of imaginative
exhaustion in those who undertook it. Like the boa-constrictor, they bit off more than they could chew, and many years of torpor had to elapse before the glazed look left their eyes, and they began to derive any spiritual nourishment from it.

For the first time for most of them, Nature became more than something that one enthused over on excursions: nature in New Zealand was just where one happened to be at the time, and, as we shall see, they found it a disturbing presence. The general appearances of things were much the same, but the particular details were nearly all different, and for a long time the settlers, accustomed to seeing in Nature what they knew her to contain, consoled themselves with the general similarities, and ignored the specific differences, unless they were sufficiently novel to appeal to the curiosity of those at Home. Their job, as they saw it, was not to learn the depth or the length, or the breadth of their new inheritance, but to persuade themselves, and their audience, that the voyage had, after all, been worthwhile, to readjust the balance between the ideal and the real, the expectation and the reality, and to prove that the apparent loss - civilisation-, was only apparent.

Mary Taylor, writing from Port Nicholson to her friend Charlotte Bronte, graphically described the tensions inherent in the colonial situation for one who was interested in intellectual matters.

I can hardly explain to you the queer feeling of living, as I do, in two places at once. One world containing books, England, and all the people with whom I can exchange an idea; the other is all that I actually see and hear and speak to. The separation is as complete as between the things in a picture and the things in the room. The puzzle is that both move and act, and I must say my say as one of each. The result is that one world at least must think me crazy.20

For a poet, the situation was further complicated by the problem of locating his audience. Was he to write for his fellow-colonists, and resign himself to small sales and
smaller fame, or should be try to succeed with the vast audience in England. If he chose the latter, he would be strongly tempted to exploit the novelty of his situation, in an attempt to compensate for its disadvantages.

E.C. Stedman's comments on the situation of the American poet in 1885 applied with equal force to the younger colony:

The Old World has drawn its countries together, like elderly people in a tacit alliance against the strength of youth which cannot return to them, the fresh, rude beauty and love which they may not share. There is, also, something worth an estimate in the division of an ocean gulf, that makes us like the people of a new planet; and when those on the other side hear us sounding the changes upon familiar themes, with voices not unlike their own, they may well feel as if the highest qualities of our song were not full compensation for its lack of "something rich and strange." A response may fairly be expected to the search for novelty, to the curious yearning of those who look to us from across the seas.  

Yet another complication that arose in writing for an English audience, was the disparity in association between an old language and a new country. The denotation of such elementary words as 'Spring', 'farm', 'bush' and so on, had changed, but their connotation, the area in which poetry flourishes, remained stubbornly rooted in centuries of English rural life, so we find often in letters from the colony Butler's despairing 'you would never understand it'.

Subjected to pressures such as these, a settler-poet could not, even if he had wanted to, contemplate his situation, or his surroundings, with that detachment which Panofsky was to see as the primary condition of aesthetic vision.* There was so much detachment built in to the exile's situation that it was to be a long time before anyone was to achieve any

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* It is possible to experience every object... aesthetically. We do this, to express it as simply as possible, when we just look at it (or listen to it) without relating it, intellectually or emotionally, to anything outside of itself.  

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conscious aesthetic distance from it. Instead, he had little option but to become a 'magician', in Collingwood's sense of the term, **working spells for himself, for his fellows, not just as a poet, but as a poet-in-a-situation, as a German philosopher might say, and his nationality became an important part of his image of himself as a poet. Every achievement, real or fancied, in the sphere of poetry, helped, if only a little, to turn what had been his hope as an emigrant into what was to become his boast as a New Zealander - that culturally, as in every other way, appearances not withstanding, this was God's Own Country.

** A magical art ... evokes of set purpose some emotions rather than others in order to discharge them into the affairs of practical life." 24
2. Quoted by Kippis, p. 369
3. ibid.  p.403
7. *Southern Cross*
10. Mrs Robert Wilson, *New Zealand and Other Poems*. 1851, pp.5-6
11. ibid.  p.7
12. ibid.  p.17
15. Ibid.  p.121
19. cf. almost any 'straight', i.e., non-correlative, description of nature in Dickens.
III. THE LUTE IN THE SWAMP

The Work of William Golder (1810-76)

I remember once asking a very clever man what he would do if put down on the mother earth in a new country, with all to begin and everything to do for himself. It was years before I had to do the same thing for myself, and as I had a hankering for emigrating, I was curious to hear what he would say. "My boy," the old man said, "I should sit down and cry."


'Tis well should we with sense of the sublime, 
Endeavour information to increase 
From Nature and her works! 'Tis well though we 
Should excavate our knowledge from earth's depths, 
Or glean it from the surface, where such signs 
Protrude themselves, as 'twere unwittingly, 
To prompt th'enquiring mind t'interrogate 
Appearances around!

William Golder, New Zealand Survey.

Born in Scotland in 1810, William Golder had already one book of verse to his credit when he arrived in New Zealand in 1839. It is customary these days to dismiss him as a writer of doggerel - even as early as 1906 Alexander and Currie could find no place for him in the first representative New Zealand anthology - and it must be admitted that what interest his works still retain is largely historical. Nonetheless, we should accord him some respect for his ambitions, if not praise for his achievements.

His intentions as a poet were both practical and, to a certain degree, honourable. He had few illusions about the possibility of a working-class audience for his verse, and in the Preface to the first book he published here, New Zealand Minstrelsy, he dedicates 'this little work' to 'the Nobility and Inhabitants in general of Port Nicholson.' His aims were pretentiously 'magical', in Collingwood's sense:
Yet now, as it must be, in appearing again as an author, it is not, I confess, without some slight hope that this little attempt in the matter of song may tend not only to add to the literature of our Colony, thereby extracting some of the sweets which lie hid among the many asperities of colonial life; but also to endear our adopted country the more to the bosom of the bona fide settler; as such, in days of yore, has often induced a people to take a firmer hold of their country, by not only inspiring them with a spirit of patriotic magnanimity, but also in making them more connected as a people in the eyes of others.  

Essentially practical, too, is his approach to nature. He makes the usual noises of appreciation, but reserves his real rapture for daydreams of the potential harvest. The last sentence of the following extract from the Preface to *The New Zealand Survey* (1867) would, I am sure, have come as a surprise to Wordsworth, if not to his Victorian admirers.

It may well be said that New Zealand is the land for scenery; such that it contains a vast amount of grandeur and picturesque beauty; not only so, but it also contains much that prompts enquiring wonder, when first is seen its lofty ridges covered with evergreen forests, and its deep ravines from which issue its many purling brooks, all beckoning and inviting the reflective mind to go far into the past of time, there to witness scenic phenomena [sic] which language almost fails to describe. But when we ascend a hill, which seems by some fortuitous cause to have been unproductive of trees, although clad with various kinds of fragrant shrubs, and other flowering plants of native yield and beauties; from such a height to overlook an extensive valley filled with one dense mass of forest, the mind is filled with awe to contemplate the amount of labour required before such can be subdued.

Then, as if feeling that this is perhaps a little bald, he indulges in a page or so of conventional ecstasy, distinguished only by its grammatical and orthographical eccentricity, before rather quaintly reverting to his theme.

Such is but an imperfect description of first impressions or of those feelings which are apt to preside in the
breast of the admirer of Nature's loveliness, as seen in her pristine solitudes. But again with no small interest too can we regard the approach of Enterprise and Industry, each, as with bridegroom integrity, come to divest Nature of those solitary weeds in which she has long been arrayed in order to deck her with the garb of art, thereby adding fresh beauties to her native comeliness.4

Later poets, although equally addicted both to pristine solitudes and literary voyeurism, were less easily taken in by the appearance of 'bridegroom integrity', and were to see as violent rape the consummation for which Golder so devoutly wished.

Lest his readers should suppose that he composed either capriciously or luxuriously, Golder includes an account of how the title poem came to be written, and in what surroundings:

In regard to the leading poem . . . it was while assisting in the survey of the Mungaroa Swamp, and at first while passing over the hills that divide it from the Upper Hutt Valley, and sitting down to rest and ease me a little of the load I carried; while thus reclined enjoying the mountain view I involuntarily repeated some of the lines of the poem as an ejaculation, as I contemplated the scene before me; nor could I resist the force of a flood of ideas, so to speak, rushing upon me, compelling [sic] me to clothe them in words during my leisure hours, after the toils of the day, as I lay in an old native shed in a corner of the swamp, during the month of April 1865.5

Considering the circumstances, it is not surprising that the greater part of the poem's seventy-odd pages consists of an exploration of the hypothesis that at some stage in its geological history the whole of New Zealand was under water.

When we come to consider the products of this furor poeticus, we find that Golder's pioneering Muse was of a distinctly pragmatic turn of mind. The main theme of the volume New Zealand Minstrelsy is the material blessings of settler life, and the rewards of honest toil. Poems such as 'Come to the Bush':
Come to the bush, my boys,
Where Fortune's way's before ye;
Leave the city's idle joys,
And follow fame and glory.

By sweat of face the human race
Was doomed to gain a living;
So let us till the fertile soil,
Nor be in doubts misgiving.

- to be sung to the tune of 'March to the Battlefield' -
were obviously aimed at encouraging the 'bona fide settler'
and the same theme is taken up in a number of others.
None of them retain any power to move today, but it is
possible to imagine them recited and sung, and bringing
some kind of community of feeling to the settlers. As
Collingwood says, magical art 'may be good or bad when
judged by aesthetic standards, but that kind of goodness
or badness has little, if any, connection with its
efficacy in its own proper work.' 7 'The Plough', for
instance, although never rising above the level of
mediocre versifying, seems an honest attempt to catch
one of the 'sweets that lie hid among the many asperities
of colonial life', and in Golfer's community, honest
simplicity was - and, for that matter, still is - more
acceptable than anything more highly worked and 'poetical'.

The Plough

(Tune -- 'Buy a Broom')

To sing of the plough, and the joys thence arising,

With labour made easy, how welcome, I trow;

For long I've been sharing hard labour, preparing

My lands for the pleasure of using the plough.

Of using the plough, of using the plough;

My lands for the pleasure of using the plough.

My grubhooe has long had hard active employment,

In clearing the roots from the old forest ground;

But now, at its leisure, it may rest with pleasure,

Its work is completed which once did abound.

Which once did abound & co.
How hard, in the outset, to clear off a forest,
With back often aching, and sweat bedewed brow;
Such labours got over, I now can discover
How pleasing indeed 'tis to follow the plough.

Other poems in the book fulfil more traditional social functions. Some are vaguely religious, others commemorate odd events in the early years of the colony, although in the latter his honesty is more often than not overwhelmed by his consciousness of the dignity of his position as unofficial laureate, as in 'Mr. T's Dirge to the Memory of W. Cook, Drowned April 10, 1847.' — to be sung to the tune of 'The Flowers of the Forest' — which commences, rather improbably:

Awake! to a measure, my lute, to give pleasure
To my aching heart, while a loss I deplore;
All comfort refusing, I long have been musing,
The fate of my friend, whom I'll never see more.

At times his anxiety to convey a tragic emotion causes his often shaky poetic logic to give way altogether, as in the second stanza of 'Wairau; — or Col. W's Dirge to the Memory of his Brother':

But chiefly I mourn thee, my own dearest brother!
And shrinks at the thought of thy mangled remains;
The loss I sustain can be felt by no other,
As long as thy mem'ry my bosom retains.

The title poem of his next volume, The Pigeon's Parliament, is a prolix satire on the state of the colony in the year 1845, which is redeemed only by the pleasantly readable prose of the twenty-odd pages of explanatory notes that accompany it. The 'discerning reader' was expected to perceive that the work was 'a compound of the satirical, allegorical, and descriptive, with a little sprinkling of the sentimental by way of relish'; but the dish has gone a little mouldy in the intervening century or so, and although it has in places a certain exuberance, the poem as a whole is too laboriously contrived to be of much interest to any save the social historian.
Although, judging by the notes in this volume, Golder had a good eye for flora and fauna, especially if they were likely to contribute to, or threaten, his material prosperity, it was no part of his purpose as a poet to give a detailed account or sympathetic interpretation of his environment. Although he approached Nature, as we have seen, with bridegroom integrity, he was more interested in ploughing than in dalliance, and had a disconcerting habit, in his verse, of returning to agricultural themes. In 'Thoughts on the Wairarapa', a companion poem to the satire, we have a record of one of his most sustained poetic confrontations of the landscape: he first of all contemplates the scene, describing it with more pomposity than vigour:

Far in the distant south, from where I stand,  
The Rumahauunga rolls with rapid sweep,  
Its greyish flood; while, winding on its course,  
In serpentine sublimity, scooped out,  
Receiving every tributary stream,  
Of no small import; adding to its force,  
Chafing the base of many a lofty cliff  
Of rock-like clay, the which (though frowning high  
With perpendicular steepness o'er the deep,)  
Oft sapped below, must fall with fearful plunge. 12

and then, predictably, goes on to philosophise. He congratulates Grey and Maclean for persuading the Maoris to part with their land, and thus conferring on them the blessing of having nothing to fight among themselves over, and then muses on Britain's angelic mission in the Pacific:

'Tis thus o'erruling Providence is seen  
To bless each effort British power puts forth  
As Heaven's messenger, diffusing peace,  
And op'ning up new fields of outlet, where  
Britannia's enterprising sons might come ... 13

When he returns to the natural scene it is more the absence of civilisation that he sees than the presence of Nature:
Oh! is the time far distant when these hills
And plains extending shall be parcelled out
To active owners? — when their flocks and herds
Shall wake the dull air with their living sound? —
And when this great monotony of scene
Enlivened be by towns and hamlets fair
With church-spires pointing upwards, as to guide
The thoughts of man to heaven! . . .
. . . Aye! sure 'tis thus
The desert will be gladden'd, and exchange
An aspect dull to that of grateful joy.  

What he wants is a landscape which will approximate to the
cliches that are the stock-in-trade of the 'magician', the
poet who 'solaces': instead of the 'dull air', he wants the
'lowing herd', in place of 'this great monotony of scene'
he would like dim-discovered spires. As we have seen, the
Auckland poet Joplin felt the same way about the 'sameness'
of the landscape, and even those who had no poetical axe
to grind were depressed by a landscape without sign of
human habitation. William Colenso, for instance, wrote in
his journal of an excursion into the centre of the North
Island in 1841:

notwithstanding the pleasurable height to which my
imagination had been raised whilst engaged in
contemplating the magnificence and extent of the
prospect before me, it soon sank below its ordinary
level on finding that not a human being dwelt in
all that immense tract of country on which my eager
gaze then rested. The grass grew, the flowers
blossomed, and the river rolled, but not for man.
Solitude all!  

The sentiment was to be echoed by many later writers.

Even when Golder sets out to sing the glories of a particular
place, his descriptions are completely conventional, as in
'Erratonga':

Through Hutt's vale the Erratonga
Smooth and clear meandering glides,
Where wild nature blooms in beauty,
Clothes with grandeur both its sides;

. . . . . . . . .
'Twas beside this lovely river,  
Where it gently winds its way,  
'Mong the willows lean'd a lover,  
Mourns his dearest far away: -  

"Ever may ye flow, sweet river,  
Bliss diffusing round," he cried;  
"Ye remind me of those pleasures  
I with my true love enjoyed  

"Oft, by such a stream as thou art,  
Fondly we our joys expressed;  
Vowing true love to each other,  
As I strained her to my breast.  
etc. 16  

What matters, for the poet, is not that this is a particular river, but that it is a river, and thus capable of evoking a generalised emotion by dint of second-hand associations. Similarly, in 'The Bushman's Harvest Home', a large part of the point of the poem lies in the fact that the scene described could be anywhere:  

The sun sinks low  
Behind yon western hill;  
Clouds gilded glow,  
The evening dews distil,  
The twilight shades in haste succeed,  
So sobered all become;  
The busy bushman quits his toil,  
To seek his harvest home.  

Chorus — His harvest home . . . etc.  

The ev'ning breeze  
Its coolness breathes along;  
While from yon trees  
The nightbird croaks his song.  
The clearing, filled with golden grain,  
Declares its time is come,  
To crown his toils, to cheer his soul,  
And bless his harvest home. 17  

The only jarring note is uttered by the morepork, but even it is carefully generalised into 'nightbird', lest the reader be distracted from the sentiment by any suggestion
that the happy scene is really at the antipodes.*

Golder's most extensive published work was The New Zealand Survey, a tedious seventy-page account of the geological history of the colony, interspersed with descriptions of the countryside, of which the following is a fair sample:

Now turning from the valley, let us view
Another scene behind us, worthy note:
This swamp of Mungera - the long arm -
Which well its name imports! - (and may not such
Well others represent?) - seen from this height
Attention would demand! There, toward the north,
A wooded vale a goodly distance runs,
Where flows a rapid stream, meandering wide
And contrary to Erratonga's course,
Which southward flows; so that where both unite
A double distance is the fate of this,
Compared to that, ere reaching to the sea.
Behind yon eastern hills which rises [sic] from
This spacious swamp, and stretching toward the south,
- Whose range is to its summit gaily clad
With other vegetation, than obtains
Upon the western Hutt, which indicates
Some other kind of soil, which there abounds
Much differing from the west! 13

The vision of the future with which the poem concludes has a
style about it which suggests that Golder might have achieved
even greater eminence in politics than in Poetry:

The ultimate design of providence
In peopling earth, subduing desert wilds,
Is now in progress; where a clearing's formed,
A good beginning's seen, preclusively
Of happier events to be brought forth,
Though still in future hid; as harvests good,
Of plenteous return, are the results
Of industry in spring; so future things
Indicative of great events to come

* That Golder was acquainted with the local name is clear
from a reference in Pigeon's Parliament, 'Ogling the moon
he loud did croak/ His humorous ditty of "more pork"'. 22
Of course, he may have another bird in mind here - the
point remains that he prefers not to be specific.
In the still further future, are results
Of small beginnings buried in the past! 19

It might be argued that, as a poet, Golder suffered from
what C. K. Stead has called a 'certain isolation from
experience'\textsuperscript{20} - in thirty years residence in New Zealand he
had never been more than sixty miles from Wellington\textsuperscript{21}, and
his occupations appear to have been almost exclusively
farming and surveying - but in fact he seems to have kept well
informed of all the newsworthy events of the day, and to have
been undeterred by his antipodal situation, although very
conscious of it. In his 'advertisement' to a poem on the
Crystal Palace he reveals how little stimulation his
opportunistic Muse requires:

In regard to the poem on the Crystal Palace, I beg to
offer an introductory remark, viz., That though living,
I may say, at the ends of the earth, I yet feel a deep
and lively interest in whatever takes place in
fatherland, [sic] when the object of the movement or
occurrence tends (or is so meant) to the great and
beneficial advancement of man in his social capacity.
Thus I could not but regard the project of the great
exhibition, with some admiration, feeling convinced
that its ultimate results might lead to great moral
revolutions, all tending to the welfare of the human
family at large. Such were my conceptions of the great
scheme when I first heard of it, and such do I still
regard it, esteeming it as a precursor of great moral
events yet to take place in the history of the world.
To me such sentiments presented themselves when
contemplating a picture of the Crystal Palace.\textsuperscript{23}

I hope I have not seemed to imply that there is any causal
relationship between the exigencies of settler life and
Golder's quality as a poet. A Kipling under the same circum-
stances would have worked a much more potent magic. It is
possible, however, that the colonial situation may have
ddictated to some extent the kind of versifying he attempted,
and since both the situation and his books are what might be
called the fountain-head of that rather muddy and often
subterranean watercourse 'The New Zealand Tradition', he
cannot be ignored entirely. At the risk of exposing my own
negligence I might even venture the hope that some day a
researcher more assiduous than myself will locate and make
available for scholarly consideration those unpublished poems
of which Golder offered a prospect in 1867:

If all is well, by the next new year may be expected
another offering, containing 'A Descant on Thought',
a poem in two cantoes; also 'The Great Problem of
1861' ... "The Teapot and the Brandy Bottle", an
allegory; with ... 'The Progress of Piety', a poem
in fifteen cantoes. 24
2. ibid. p.v
4. ibid. Preface.
5. ibid. Preface.
7. Collingwood, *Principles of Art*, p.69
8. *N.Z. Minstrelsy*, p.33
9. ibid. p.27
10. ibid. p.24
12. ibid. p.97
13. ibid. p.100
14. ibid. p.100
17. ibid. p.12
19. ibid. p.64
24. ibid. Prospectus.
IV. **GREEN GROW THE FLAXES OF**

The Bard of Craigieleee, John Barr (1808-89)

These therefore can I pity, placed remote
From all that science traces, art invents,
Or inspiration teaches; and enclosed
In boundless oceans . . .  

*Cowper, The Task.*

When days are short and nights are lang,
I sit me down to write a sang
   In namely Scottish jingle;
It helps to break a weary thought,
It reconciles me to my lot,
   And to my homely ingle.

*John Barr.*

Another Scot, John Barr, emigrated to Otago in 1852. Unlike his compatriot he wrote most of his verse in the Scots vernacular, a fact which no doubt contributed to his popularity in a province that was co-founded by a nephew of Robert Burns, and which retained for some time a distinctively Scottish character. He was much more an Otago/Scots poet than he was a New Zealand one, and in the days when the quickest way of getting from Dunedin to Auckland was likely to be via Sydney, it meant something to be a community poet. Barr, certainly, seems to have aimed at nothing more. The first edition of his *Poems and Songs* (1861) was sponsored by a group of Dunedin businessmen and farmers, and the second was launched with a public Benefit, which the *Otago Witness* reported thus:

The complimentary benefit to Mr John Barr of Craigieleee, in aid of publishing his intended new work, was given on Tuesday at the Masonic Hall under the auspices of the Mutual Improvement Associations in and around Dunedin, and the patronage of the Mayor and Corporation, and the Caledonian Society of Otago. His Worship the Mayor presided, and the Hall was filled. The selections of music were generally well chosen, and gave great satisfaction.
So it is obvious that, in Otago at least, there was strong support for local poetical productions. T.M. Hocken, in his Contributions to the Early History of New Zealand remembers the esteem in which he was held:

Barr came out in the Dominion in 1852, and thereafter constantly contributed a lilt to the Witness, all marked by the richest Scotch, perfect versification, and much sweetness . . . Barr was a general favourite, and had a face as soft and sweet as his poetry. At a gathering, he was pretty sure to come down and sing one or two of his new compositions for the good of the company.

For Barr, as for Golder, poetry was a consolation. In the Preface to his book he writes:

With regard to the pieces comprised in this little volume, many of them were composed when the Author was busily employed upon his ground, clearing with his axe, and many a long and sad thought did they help to beguile, both by night and by day; the writing of them out being, for a considerable time, his greatest recreation after his day’s labour. If the reader derives as much enjoyment from their perusal as the Author had in composing them, he will have no cause to regret having patronised the collection.

The poems, in general, are more polished productions than Golder’s, but more repetitious – too many of Barr’s maidens have ‘bonnie blue een’ and ‘hair as dark as a raven’s wing’. Most of the poems in the book are celebrations of the joys and woes of courtship and marriage – indistinguishable for the most part from third-rate ‘domestic’ verse of any kind, although Barr tends to see his minute dramas through rosetinted spectacles where later poets have generally preferred grey.

When, however, he is satirising something or dramatising a scene, instead of particularising a general emotion, his verse seems to come alive, as in ‘Rise Oot Your Bed’:
Rise oot your bed, ye worthless wretch,
The sun's far in the lift,
I never kent a drunken man
    That e'er cam muckle thrift;
See, I've been up since morning grey
    Among the dirt and weet,
It takes it a', I weel I wat,
    To gar the twa ends meet.

O, woman, will ye haud your tongue,
    My throat is like to crack,
Fling here my breeks, they're at the fire
    Hung ower the auld chair back.
What time did I come hame yestreen?
    It was a fearfu' nicht;
For Guidsake gie's a nobbler,
    'Twill maybe put me richt.

O weary on your nobbler's,
    Your drinking, and your splores,
And weary on your town exploits,
    Amang your drunken cores,
Ye'll sure be in the newspapers,
    And that ye'll see ere lang,
Thet needna say Tam Maut is dead
    As lang's ye're fit to gang.

Noo steek your gab, ye've said enough,
    And what ye've said's no true,
A pretty pickle ye'd be in
    But for mysel' and pleugh.
Let's see a glass, or haud your tongue,
    I want nane o' your strife,
'Tis pity ye've got sic a man,
    And I've got sic a wife.

And wha's the warst ane o' the twa,
    Ye'll maybe tell me that?
It sets ye weel to lie up there,
    And see me deepin' wat,
Wi' feching 'mang the sharney kye,
    Mang glaur up to the kuits,
Wi' scarce a sark upon my back,
    My taes clean oot my buits.

O swear awa, just swear awa,
    Ye canna bear the truth;
Ye'll what? ye'll rise and tak your nieve
    And gie me ower the mouth:
But, Guidsake, here comes Craigielee,
    Lets a' oor faults conceal;
"O come awa, ye're welcome here,
    Our Johnnie's no that weel."
In his satires Barr is very conscious of the social function of the poet, and inveighs with some wit and humour against the evils of drink, laziness, materialism, and the dangers of old men marrying young wives. He is not sparing, either, of general moral advice, such as 'Be Kind to Thy Father' \(^6\) and 'Grannie's Advice to Her Grandchild' (which is 'never tell a lie'?), and includes an ironical poem on the necessity of education, to which he felt obliged to append a note lest the prevalence of the attitude he was attacking should cause the irony to pass unnoticed:

> In this satirical poem the author intends only to represent in his own ironical style, the selfish and grovelling feelings of those who, without education themselves, see no necessity for imparting it to others, and devote all their energies to the mere acquisition of money, of which there are many in a new colony like New Zealand, where labour is often of more account than learning.\(^8\)

In his anti-materialism he is the reverse of Golder, who, as we have seen, regarded the opportunities for material advancement afforded by the colony as almost its only recommendation – this again may be due to the fact that Barr lived in a closely-knit community where traditional values seem to have been preserved as Wakefield had hoped they might be, up until the time when the gold-rushes blew the orderly scheme of the Scottish settlers apart.

As a popular laureate, Barr had ample opportunity and incentive to produce 'magic' of a sort useful to a young community. In 'The Beagles They Came Round About' he shows the typical settler's scorn both of the town-dweller and the central government:
The beagles they came round about,
And at our doors are calling 0,
To see how many dogs we hae,
Or cats a-caterwauling 0.
Green grow the flaxes 0,
Green grow the flaxes 0,
Gae cast your coats and thrash your cats,
Its a' to pay the taxees 0.

The strong they trample on the weak,
And honest worth o'er raxee 0;
For worldly goods, thro' fires or floods,
The longest arm aye catches 0.
Green grow, &c

There's some sae big they will not dig,
Tho' scarcely worth a stiver 0;
They think it best to tak their rest,
And live upon their neighbours 0.
Green grow, &c.

There's some would lick the very dust
To keep them free from labour 0;
And to the great they'd cringe and sneak,
To get a glance of favour 0.
Green grow, &c.

O shame upon the lazy drone,
When days are warm and sunny 0
When others strive to stock the hive,
They only lick the honey 0.
Green grow, &c.

But here's to every honest man,
May plenty still be near him 0!
And in his need find friends indeed,
To back him and to cheer him 0!
Green grow, &c 9

In 'Cheer Up, My Jolly Boys', his tone is very much that
of a cheer-leader at a football match. He has no time
and no inclination for subjectivity - the seeds of creation
that he contemplates in his verse are wheat and corn, not
Plato's Ideas:

Come, cheer up, my jolly boys,
They say there's work to do,
And by the powers they may say that,
For every word o't's true;
There's work enough to do, boys,
And more than can be done,
By every woman in this place,
   And every mother's son.
There's work enough to do, boys,
   And that same work is rough;
There's ploughing, and there's ditching,
   From Waitaki to the Bluff;
There's shepherdings and shoemaking,
   There's splitting posts and rails,
There's threshing by the bushel,
   Both by bullocks and by flails.

There's work enough to do, boys,
   In that we all agree,
A deal of work must stand forment
   The sugar and the tea;
The storekeepers don't work so hard,
   For each one is a gent,
And so they may, for all they sell,
   Yields more than cent. per cent.
   etc. 10

and in 'When to Otago First I Came' he presents a slice of
biography as a moral fable - obviously with his eye, like
Golder, on the 'bona-fide settler'.

   When to Otago first I came,
      The truth I'm bound to tell,
   I thocht I never would get on,
      And maest gaed by mysel'.
   The season was both cauld and wet,
      The like had ne'er been seen;
   For at the end of harvest time,
      The stocks were growing green.
Awhile I grumbled nicht and day,
   Misca'ed Otago weel;
   I didna blame kind Providence,
      But faith I blamed the Deil
   For bringing me sae grey a gate,
      To ruin wife and wean;
   I wad hae gien my very sark,
      To be at hame again.

   I thocht upon my native land,
      And on the crystal streams;
   And often I returned again,
      While slumbering in my dreams.
   My wife, puir body, wasna weel,
      And whiles she took a greet;
The bairns were runnin' thro' the town,
Wi' bare and bluidy feet.

At last I plucked up my heart,
And tackled to the wark;
I rose up wi' the mornin' sun,
And knocket off at dark.
Wi' toiling at the grubbin' hoe,
I got a pickle wheat;
I'll ne'er forget as lang's I live,
How sweet the bread did eat.

At lang and length I got a cow,
She yet is to the fore;
I got another by and by,
And now I've twa three score.
Ten acres was my little farm,
That's no the way o't noo;
I wark nae mare wi' grubbin' hoe,
But whistle at the pleugh.

So come along, my jolly boys,
You're welcome ane and a';
Ne'er fash your thumb tho' ye be poor,
You'll soon be bein' and braw.
We a' were poor as weel as you,
And tho'cht it nae disgrace;
So dinna ye doun-hearted be,
Or rashly judge the place.

Barr is essentially a social poet; he makes no pretensions to 'vision' and seldom takes up any theme but human relations, domestic or provincial. Nor is he ever original in his handling of the themes he chooses - any distinction that his verses have comes from the originality of his situation. Not, however, that he is very conscious of Otago as a place; in perhaps his best poem about the province, 'Otago Goes Ahead My Boys', he sees it almost exclusively as a community:

Otago goes ahead, my boys,
In country and in town;
There's not a snugger bit of land
Beneath the British crown.
It is indeed a favour'd spot,
The Emerald of the South;
There's peace and plenty in her gates,
There's bread for every mouth.
With steady hearts and willing hands,
From day to day we toil;
The bread is sweet that labour brings,
Where 'tis our own the soil.
Then why should men remain at home,
Who live from hand to mouth?
Why don't they leave the sterile North,
And seek the balmy South?
'Tis not a place for those whose hands
Are only made for gloves;
The eagle's nest is not a home
For nightingales or doves.
'Tis British blood and British bone
That only can succeed;
The sluggard or the exquisite
Is but a noxious weed.

Then come along, my merry men,
Our fair Otago see;
It is a glorious retreat
For honest poverty.
It is a place of health and strength,
No workhouse to be seen;
And honest men soon stand upright
That bowed down have been.12

That Otago is a Utopia traditionally conceived is underlined by the conventionality of the metaphor — 'The eagle's nest is not a home for nightingales or doves.' The conventional 'poetic' image is used, although there are as many eagles in Otago as there are nightingales. In fact there are no indigenous flora or fauna mentioned in Barr's verse except those that interfere with his digging — ferns and 'toot-roots'. Insofar as he is aware of nature at all, it is a vague presence, and with a vague pleasure. He rarely particularises beyond 'wild-flowers' and the occasional rose, and is more at home with ravens and doves than he is with bush-pigeons and kakas. His 'brooks' are always 'wimpling' and the bush, when it obtrudes into his consciousness at all, is registered only as 'fragrant'. This in itself is not surprising: his sense of social purpose obliged him to look elsewhere, and his
audience was more likely to favour, and pay for, verse that reassured them that society and social values had been effectively transplanted, than any which forced them to a consciousness of how unique was their situation, in time and in space, in the 'balmy south'. Barr was, in any case, too close to Nature to see it as relevant to his verse. A poetry based on convention and a strong national tradition, and which is seen, besides, as a consolation and a recreation, will not readily assimilate an association marked by unremitting labour, nor will it willingly relinquish the solace of looking back to a native land dignified by history and redolent with memories, for the sake of looking about it at a new and raw country to which few of the conventions and fewer of the traditions have any relevance. The Janus-like stance of the Scottish settlers in the antipodes is summed up pretty well in Barr's 'Grub Away, Tug Away':

The birds gang to rest when tir'd wi' their warblin',
But rest I get nane frae the mornin' sae early;
For either I'm mawin', or thrashin', or sawin',
Or grubbin' the hills wi' the ferns covered fairly.
Grub away, tug away, toil till you're weary,
Haul oot the toot roots and everything near ye;
Grub away, tug away, toil till you're weary,
Then take a bit dram, it will help for to cheer ye.

It's no very pleasant this rough way o' livin'
Sic tuggin', sic ruggin', it makes my banes crazy;
And aye when I rest me the wife's tongue besets me,
Wi' 'Gang to your wark, man, and dinna turn lazy.'
Grub away, &c.

O for the wings o' the swift flyin' eaglet,
Quick ower the sea I would hurry me early,
To the land of the heather bell, mountain, and foggy dell,
Land of the brave that my heart lo'es sae dearly.
Grub away, &c.

Haste away, fly away, home to my fatherland,
Land of the thistle, and mountain, and river
Haste away, fly away, home to my fatherland,
There, on her [sic] bosom, I'd rest me for ever.
Grub away, &c.
It seems to me rather a pathetic illustration of the power of association, and to throw some light on the absence of any real sense of his environment in Barr's poems, that he should look back nostalgically (if somewhat ambiguously) to a Scotland characterised as the land of 'mountain and river' as if New Zealand were a flat and arid desert. In a sense, of course, he was right. As far as poetry was concerned this country was a desert. Its physical features had hardly begun to filter through the screen of conventions, presuppositions and expectations through which poets viewed their new possession, and they were far more conscious of what it was not, the stubborn angles that snagged most roughly on the stereotype they tried to impose, than they were of what it was. As a result they tended rather shiftily to look at the past, and cast hopeful glances at the future, and to ignore as much as possible a present that they seemed to find a little embarrassing. They lacked the exuberant confidence of a Whitman, proclaiming 'The Americans of all nations at any time upon the earth, have probably the fullest poetical nature. The United States themselves are essentially the greatest poem.'

They knew that Poetry was lurking somewhere around, but were afraid to look too closely for it. An apologetic reviewer writing on Barr's Poems and Songs in the Otago Witness put it this way:

It is a mistake to suppose that the life of a settler in a new country is devoid of poetic colour. The struggle to carve out a home from the wilderness - the singlehanded conflict with the inexorable forces of nature has in it something grand and heroic when regarded in the aggregate, although on closer scrutiny the details may appear prosaic and commonplace - just as the most picturesque landscape, if dissected, will be found to be made merely of common earth, water, grass and trees. Rightly regarded, a new country is the very land of poesy, and the life of every pioneer of civilisation an epic poem; but yet in most instances, the beauties of nature have remained uncelebrated, and the epics have remained unsung.
We cannot blame Barr for declining to scrutinise a landscape that he knew from hard experience was very much a matter of earth and trees, or for contenting himself with the modest ambitions of consoling himself and amusing others. Some of his poems are still amusing today, and all of them are honest and unpretentious.

2. Otago Witness. Sept. 24th., 1870

3. T.M. Hocken, Contributions to the Early History of New Zealand. 1898, p.200


5. ibid. pp.131-3

6. ibid. p.196

7. ibid. p.35

8. ibid. p.198, Note.

9. ibid. pp.208-9

10. ibid. pp.68-9

11. ibid. pp.223-5

12. ibid. pp.212-3

13. ibid. pp.149-50


15. Otago Witness. Feb. 3th., 1862
V. PREGNANT WITH DIM FUTURITY

The Poetical Career of Charles Bowen (1830-1917)

Some day you must do a design ... a young man looking into a strange crystal that mirrors all the world. Poetry should be like a crystal, it should make life more beautiful and less real.

Oscar Wilde, Letters.

Misty but graceful are the myths that hang Around the life-work of the mighty dead; They tell of long-forgotten bards who sang To listeners pale with wonder and with dread; They hang like mosses round the fountain-head, Concealing yet adorning it...

Charles Bowen, The Argonauts.

Bowen was born in Ireland in 1830, and educated in France. He came to New Zealand when he was twenty, and his first, and only, book of verse was published here in 1861.

If Barr and Golder could be considered to be 'objective' poets, Bowen is very much the subjective idealist, and makes large claims of a transcendental kind for his muse:

But he whose larger soul Burns ever with a bright clear flame, in which All earthly things are purified, until The nobler and diviner part appear, He is the poet, sole, pre-eminent.

and later he describes the function of this exalted being in terms scarcely less exalted:

Oh! tell me not the poet is the man Who can but picture what is seen — whate'er The grace with which he wields the poet's tools. The poet is the maker! — he who builds To reach as near as he may hope to do Some fair ideal of his inward mind, Which ever stands above him on the height Up which he climbs with longing pain and toil.
He ne'er may hope to reach it. The great soul
That far above his fellows stands has still
To climb for ever in this world of toil;
But, as he gazes downward on the slope,
He sees some fond idolater that hugs
The goal he aimed at; and he pities him²

It might be possible to 'explain' the contrast between Bowen's attitude to poetry and that of his colonial predecessors by reference to his social position, his superior education, his literary models, or even to see it as simply the arrogance of youth contrasted with the canniness of middle-age. Any one of these answers, however, would beg more questions than it solved.

As we have seen, the distinction between the subjective and the objective poet was well established in Victorian criticism, as was that between the 'ideal' and the 'real', although Ruskin had made a determined attempt to solder the latter two back together again, and it was perhaps natural that a young man, faced with the pressures of colonial life, should have indulged in what Hulme called 'the sentimental escape to the infinite'.³ Whatever the reasons may have been, it is obvious throughout his Poems of 1861 that Bowen saw little virtue in 'picturing what is seen'. He cherishes instead the 'fair ideal of his inward mind', although he is slightly embarrassed about the existential status of his ideal visions, and goes to some trouble to establish their links with the 'normal' world.

In the long poem 'The Argonauts' with which the volume opens, he purports to record a vision within a dream, in which a 'sweet voice' spoke to him:

As then I heard it, now I tell the tale.
Ye who of elder days and realms would hear,
Nor evermore of present self, all hail!
I care not now for critic or for sneer,
For step by step I cast off doubt and fear;
Again the scene comes flashing o'er my brain,
Again that voice is ringing in my ear . . . ⁴
He tries, in fact, to make his vision dramatically probable as an event, and by so doing to establish his credentials as a seer; similarly, in 'The Spectre Ship' he relates a dream and claims for it the autonomy of meaning of a vision:

You ask to what my vision tends?
   Alas! I cannot tell;
   But if you fear not ghostly dreams,
   Then pause and ponder well.

I lead thee to the shadowy brink —
   The confines where we stand; —
I tell thee not my thoughts, my friend,
   Each has his own dream-land. 5

Many of the other poems in the book have an equally tenuous connection with 'reality'. Nearly all of his verse can be summed up in his own words, 'misty but graceful' — the mistiness stemming from a determination not too look at anything too hard, lest vision decline into mere sight, and the grace from his predilection for colouring everything with a vague and mysterious emotion. The general effect is one achieved with monotonous regularity in a certain type of Hollywood romance, in which the cameras tend to get misty-eyed through purple filters whenever they close in on one of the film capital's ageing nymphets.

Very occasionally his ideal world clothes itself in something more than dreams as in this stanza from the 'Argonauts':

Onward, still onward! On Bebrycia's shore
There was a forest, in whose bosom lay
Dark fearful secrets ne'er revealed before.
The tangled tree-tops broke the light of day
And sent it quivering down, save where a grey
Cold twilight reigned for ever in the shade
Of the primeval forest; and decay
Ran riot o'er the fallen trunks that made
A natural sepulchre of every wooded glade. 6
but such moments are few and far between. Not surprisingly, he is conscious of a ragged edge separating the real and his ideal world. The finite reality of any one of his poems jars with the infinite ideality of the Poetry he professes, and he feels impelled to apologise:

The tale was ended, and the voice was still.  
But all too weak my mortal tongue has been  
To utter forth the burning words that fill  
My dreams with beauty, or to paint the scene  
That flits e'en now before my mental een.  
For oft within our inmost souls arise  
Visions of heavenly beauty; but between  
The inner and the outer world there lies  
The barrier of sense to foil our earthly eyes.

The poet who commences by vaunting his divinity, ends by apologising for his humanity; the world has come between him and heaven.

Not all his poems were of this kind, however. He too is aware of the social function of the poet, although the emotions which he sought to release into practical life were different from those of his predecessors. In the poem 'The Battle of the Free', he expresses a colonial sentiment that was to prove particularly durable:

To Arms! To Arms!  
Hark! what trampling hoofs resound  
On the glassy slopes around  
The many-masted seaports of the Island of the Free.  
What is this gathering of horses that I see?  
Those riderless horses from the park and from the lea?  
England, exult!  
For their horseless riders are coming o'er the sea.  
In their wild far distant home  
They have heard thy call and come,  
With red spurs and loosened reins,  
Sweeping o'er Australia's plains.  
They have left their reeking steeds on the wide Pacific's shore,  
Whose wild waves rolling surdly [sic] the sounds of battle bore,
The drumbeat, and the shouting, and the cannons angry roar;
And ever through their music the gallant tidings ran
Of the rugged heights of Alma, and the glens of Inkermann.
Oh, England, land of horsemen!
Bring thy noblest steeds of war
For thy sons, the gallant riders,
Who are sailing from afar.
They are coming - they are coming -
To bestride the horses of the Island of the sea,
And to fight in the Battle of the Free.

To Arms! To Arms!
When the battle rages fierce,
And the deadly volleys pierce
The small outnumbered army of the Island of the Free; -
When her dauntless hearts have chosen either death or victory; -
Where her warriors are fighting, as the bravest only dare;
For the birth-places of freedom and the liberties of man;
Then New Zealand shall be there,
In the van.
Young New Zealand shall be there, -
Her rifles from the mountain and her horsemen from the plain
When the foeman's ranks are reeling o'er the slain
Few in number - stout of heart -
They will come to take their part
In the dangers and the glories of the grave,
To share in their triumph or their blood-stained grave.
England, exult!

Bowen, or, to give him the title he later acquired, Sir Charles Bowen, wrote other useful and morally improving verse besides, such as 'The Gentleman':

There's a title, high and holy,
Shedding round no common grace;
And the great man and the lowly
Each may bear it in his place.
Thousands, that high title claiming,
Daily in the world I see,
Their unworthiness proclaiming,
Few that bear it worthily.
Trebley blest is he who can
Be justly dubbed a Gentleman.
But as magic they are not likely to have been as potent as Barr's efforts in a similar direction - he is too conscious all the time that what he is writing is 'literature'. Too conscious, and at the same time often not conscious enough. The fidelity with which he adheres to his models is often distracting, as in 'The Spectre Ship', an intolerably Coleridgean vision of Cook in the 'Endeavour':

    I could not speak. I could not think.
        No power was in me then.
    I seemed to slide adown the cliff
        To join those strange seamen.

    And silently and solemnly
        They pulled me o'er the sea;
    I sat behind that strange steersman,
        But never a word spoke he.

    We reached the ship; - I touched the deck; -
        That steersman stood by me; -
    Against the masts the large white sails
        Were flapping silently.

    He raised his hand; the tall masts bent;
        The white sails bellied free;
    I felt no wind, I heard no sound,
        As we glided o'er the sea.

    etc. 10

and in 'The Ideal':

    Oh! friend,
    The longing for we know not what, that fills
    Our souls in gazing on yon mountain heights,
    Is heaven-implanted, to inspire us here
    With some vague knowledge of a nobler world,
    Our former and our future home. I would
    That we saw further! This, indeed, I know,
    For 'tis an inborn knowledge. He is lost
    Who in this life can reach his highest aims.

    See! yonder glory fading from the hills
    Beckons us towards it. Now it melts away.
    And should we climb yon height to gaze again
    Upon the vision that we saw but now,
'Twould be far distant in the western skies,  
Robed in the halo of the setting sun.11 *

The one poem by Bowen that has caught the fancy of later generations is 'The Old Year and the New' - largely I imagine because the lines 'We - the children of a far land/ And fathers of a new' are a happy simplification of the ambiguities inherent in the colonial situation - but its sentiments are very vague; as yet no poet can offer an intelligible hope for islands, only optimistic platitude:

... our sons will see the glory  
Of the young and springing year;  
Where the green earth tells the story  
Of a younger hemisphere.

And the eve will lose its sadness  
In the hopefulness of day, -  
In a birth so full of gladness, -  
In a death without decay.

But for us the morning's garland  
Glistens still with evening's dew; -  
We - the children of a far land,  
And the fathers of a new.

For we still, through old affection,  
Hear the old year's dying sigh,  
Through the sad sweet recollection  
Of the years that are gone by.

While, through all the future gleaming,  
A bright golden promise runs,  
And its happy light is streaming  
On the greatness of our sons.

Pray we, then, what' er betide them -  
Howsoever great they're grown -  
That the past of England guide them,  
While the present is their own.12

* Bowen of course was unfortunate not to live in an age like the present, when colonial derivativeness, far from being considered reprehensible, is gloried in as a voluntary subjection to 'influences'; as, for example, when Louis Johnson commends Baxter and Bland for their ability to take hints dropped by Lowell, and praises Doyle for "moments when a Stevens-like subject matter emerges with a treatment from the area occupied by Robert Creeley." (Poetry Yearbook 1964)
2. ibid. p.66
5. ibid. p.64
6. ibid. p.29
7. ibid. p.53
8. ibid. p.74-5
9. ibid. p.78
10. ibid. pp.60-1
11. ibid. pp.67-8
12. ibid. pp.137-8
VI. THE IRRIGATED HEART

Frederick Napier Broome (1842-96)

I scanned eternity from heights immense
Breaking beneath my feet in awful glory,
I stood upon life's utmost promontory;
And said, once looking in those fairest eyes,
"Tell me a mortal man thy wondrous story,
Oh Spirit what exalted destinies
Dost thou fulfil?"

Frederick Napier Broome, Egeria.

"Was you thinking at all of poetry?" Mr Wegg inquired, musing.
"Would it come dearer?" Mr Boffin asked.
"It would come dearer," Mr Wegg returned. "For when a person comes to grind off poetry night after night, it is but right he should expect to be paid for its weakening effect on his mind."

Charles Dickens, Our Mutual Friend.

Over the Poems from New Zealand of Frederick Napier Broome we need not linger long. They are 'from' New Zealand, but not of it, and the country seems to have been included in the title as a further exotic decoration to a volume already so exotic as to be, in Silas Wegg's terms, distinctly 'weakening.' As Alexander and Currie were to remark forty years later, he was 'caught - only too surely - by the pre-Raphaelite mannerisms of the 'sixties' ¹ and indeed almost the only distinction of the volume is the extent to which Broome managed to reduce the antipodal cultural timelag to a matter of years instead of the more usual decades.

Like Bowen, he has a high idea of the poet's office. 'Egeria', a poem which takes up about a third of the book, although it begins with a panegyric on Thackeray, and ends with chants of angels, and in between ranges very confusedly among antiquity and the Italian struggles for independence seems to be largely about the nature of poetic inspiration.
For Broome too, the poet must reject the world, and concentrate on visions:

The poet loves not from himself to roam,
Secure in his own mind, and ill at rest
From hence; there meditation more at home
Delights to find the food it loves the best

There he beholds the awful forms pass by
And visions, whose deep spells he dared no break
By language, lapped in liquid ecstasy:-
For this what can the world give to his inward eye!

For him each day an inward grace sublimes,
And ever on him presses the keen sense
Of an immortal soul within; at times
This passes by with lightning flash intense,
While each swift wheel of life its course suspends,
Until existence, like a dying dream,
As with a thin, yet undrawn veil offends
The spirit's vision - till his thoughts but deem
This being a rock to break the smoothness of their stream.  

Unfortunately, his pretensions are not matched by his power, and the higher be aimed, the harder he fell. His verse is nearly always diffuse and aimless, as if he felt that any concentration would 'offend the spirit’s vision', as in this chant of angels, in which the clearest image is a slightly ludicrous aqueous eruption:

Like a wave which silently emerges
From the wind-pressed bosom of mid ocean,
And passes with a swift and cloud-like motion,
Across the waters to their utmost verges,
The while repressing its impatient surges,
Unbroken, till at last they pour
Their volume all upon the shore
Where their unwasted strength for ever urges;
A voice from yonder faint earth-star.

Like most 'visionary' poets, whose infinite visions are usually just a mirror image of their dissatisfaction with the limits of 'reality', he tends to prefer words to either things or emotions, and packs them together in such a way that it is difficult to see anything very clearly:
Being, and manifold mother, laid upon life like a dream,
Fleeing to thee for another, a mightier thought and a
theme,
I come to a spot well known, beloved of both,
Nigh unto none but thine own green trees and growth.
Take me to thy beautiful bosom, thy bountiful breast,
Make it bare to the exquisite blossom, suckle me there
with the rest:
Thy beauty becometh full orbed, drawing all things to it,
I, shall not I be absorbed when the time shall be fit. 4

When he abandons early Swinburnian flabbiness, it is often
only to achieve late Swinburnian bathos, as in 'Song', which
commences:

There is a love of saints above,
So very pure and cold,
That 'twould be silly to mix its chilly
Gems with mortal mould. 5

At times, too, his anxiety to appear original by outdoing his
models leads him into some curious strainings. 'Cleopatra:
A Fragment', for instance, begins:

Seen of the sun in the south, languid for love of the
shade,
Queen! from the mint of thy mouth coin of kisses for
kings there was made;
Sharp-struck, clean cut from the press; and stamped
with a tone
Harp-like, and keen to excess, didst thou give of thine
own.
Sweet and strongly strung, and loosed like an arrow,
Fleet and rapidly rung, and dividing the marrow;
Winged kisses transfixed with double heart, a lute
Stringed and smote betwixt the lips with a note acute
Shutting swift kisses that slay, drawn across like a knife,
Cutting the soul away from the foundering wreck of life;
Little wounds for the body of Love before it be slain,
Brittle thorns to a chaplet wove to prove it of pain. 6

Not even Swinburne attributed to the serpent of the Nile such
deviously voluptuous osculation. Like so much of his master's
work, Broome's verse is a series of cadenzas without a concerto,
verbal autoeroticism, the main difference being in the
virtuosity of the performers: even at his worst the earlier
poet would never sink to the level of:
Thus in that dusky hour I sat me there,
And my breasts' portals of themselves did part
To the twain influences of earth and air
Which swelled so high around them, and my heart
Was quickly irrigated by their art. 7

1. Alexander and Currie, New Zealand Verse, 1906, p.xviii
2. Frederick Napier Broome, Poems from New Zealand, 1868, p.36
3. ibid. p.59
4. ibid. p.114
5. ibid. p.135
6. ibid. p.130
7. ibid. p.16
VII. EMBALMED FOR EVER IN HIS COUNTRY’S BREAST.

Thomas Bracken (1843–98)

..........A rich soul-feast,
At which Imagination revelled free
In Nature’s arms, and whispered in her ear
Its secret thoughts.

Thomas Bracken, Ocean’s Answer.

No unfamiliar stare came to trouble him in his games.

Jean-Paul Sartre, What is Literature.

With Bracken we come to the first of New Zealand’s major
minor poets. As far as popular appeal is concerned, his
achievement is probably unmatched in this country, and, at
least in volume, he is what one might call a ‘considerable’
poet. He seems to have been one of the first to become
aware of the alienation of the poet in a predominantly
materialistic colonial society, and in the Preface to his
first book of verse, Behind the Tomb (1871), he voices
his discontent in a somewhat dubious image:

In a go-a-head, money-grabbing community like ours,
it is not surprising to find that the divine maiden —
Poetry — should be compelled to stand aside, leaning
on her weeping lyre, unheard and unfelt by the worldly
crowd . . . .

In the volume that followed he is more explicit about his
relations with the divine maid:

Poetry has been a kind preceptress to me since my
boyhood. I have loved her for the lessons which she
taught me; and, though not indifferent to poetic
fame — shadowy though it may be — I have poured out
my freshest emotions in song, because I found it the
most congenial way of expressing what I felt.

So far, in trying to strike a balance between ‘lessons’ and
catharsis, Bracken is in the main stream of Victorian
theorizing about poetry. However, he goes on to claim
something more for his verses. Like Barr and Golder, he realises that the fact of his residence in New Zealand might be useful in spiking the guns of his critics, but goes further than they did, to suggest that it might be easier to warble native wood-notes wild in a wild country well provided with woods, with the implication that an original setting might be expected to produce an original poetry which is likely to be found wanting when judged by old standards:

The flowers which I now offer at the shrine of the Southern Muse have sprung spontaneously from the garden of the heart. They are not exotics upon the cultivation of which a large amount of care has been expended, but simple wild bush blossoms, that have received but slight attention in their growth; and therefore, the critical floriculturist may expect to find a number of weeds clinging round the stems of many of them.³

With a humility rare in colonial poets, he makes it quite clear that it is an antipodean Parnassus up which he hopes to make the grade:

If the modest offering be allowed to hang on the Golden Harp of the South beneath the sweet wreaths of Kendall, the ever-green garlands of Gordon, the tropical roses of Stephens, and the Maori chaplets of Domett, I shall be amply repaid for the time I have spent gathering them.⁴

This should not be taken as implying any widespread community of literature between Australia and New Zealand at this stage. Bracken had only recently arrived from Australia, and many of the poems in his first two books had been written there, so it is natural that he should look forward to an Australasian 'Great Tradition', but it is doubtful if many New Zealanders would have heard of the first three poets he mentions.

Twist Pope's formula to 'what oft was felt but ne'er like this expressed', and Bracken would probably qualify as a
neo-classical poet. The idea – a New Zealand Victorian Augustan – is not quite as far-fetched as it sounds; as I hope to show, the two main strategies by which Bracken tries to establish the 'poeticality' of his compositions have more in common with neo-classicism than with nineteenth-century romanticism. Not, of course, that he was unique in this – the very worst poetry of any age is much more likely to be a dilution of the best work of the age preceding than an attempt to mimic contemporary successes.

To indulge in one of those antitheses without which no thesis could ever grind into dialectical gear, if the English poets of the eighteenth century were the poets of Reason and Understanding, Bracken is the poet of 'Not Understood'.

The first, and most obvious, point of resemblance is Bracken's constant reliance on personification. In one poem alone, Light, Peace, Freedom, Fame, Justice, Truth, Past, Present, War, Darkness, Progression, Pacific, Nature, England, Wisdom, Spring, Summer, Autumn, Ocean, Concord, Art, Science, Austral, Plenty, Democracy, Empire, and Commerce are all personified; in fact, the poetry resides in the personification – there is little else to distinguish it from prose. The personifications do not, however, become anything more than gestures in the direction of 'poetry'; they do not interrelate, nor do they achieve the status of visual images or symbols. They rely for their effect on the emphasis given by capitals, and the misty sense of cosmic order that comes from attributing consciousness and willpower to abstractions:

The virgin rose, her dreaming days were o'er,
Destined to sleep in solitude no more;
New life and vigour filled her joyous heart
As Nature from the Old World beckoned Art
To her assistance, and Religion came
To kindle here the Gospel's holy flame;
And Commerce followed, dressed in snowy shrouds;
And Science brought her treasures from the clouds.

etc.
In a sense, however, Bracken can be seen to be lumbering in the direction of a poem. If, as can hardly be denied, one part of a poet's task, or privilege, is to bring things to consciousness - his own, and other people's - then he must not only separate experience from experience, idea from idea, and emotion from emotion, but also detach word from word, so that minds battered by words from all directions will be forced to notice. Bracken, like advertising men before and since, discovered that the simplest way to give a word the solitary importance demanded by its function in 'poetry' was to dignify it with capitals. Like advertising men too, he thrashes capitals to death, and the magic wears a little thin.

A mind accustomed to associate figures of speech with visual images would probably deny that it ever could have worked, arguing that a witchdoctor with his flybuttons undone is not likely to be very impressive:

I gazed through the open bodice of Spring, and saw her bosom
Swelling with rich nutrition and pouring Earth's milk in streams prolific over hedges, meads and orchards,
Leaving its perfumed cream on the hawthorn;

. . . . . . . . .

I watched her swinging her golden censers to the azure dome,
And as the fragrant incense mounted high
The mighty organ, worked by Ocean-sprites, boomed grand and solemn . . .

Considered as an image, this is more curious than moving. Visually, Bracken's garden of Eden, although sticky, has come unstuck, and the result is bathos bordering on (unconscious) obscenity.

Another aspect of Bracken's predilection for personification, and one which may explain the diffuse and cloying emotion with which his poems are permeated, is his attribution of femininity -
or, more devastatingly, maternity — to the most unlikely objects and ideas. This is part of his poetic strategy of removing all problems to the realm of childhood, as a recoverable paradise, a world uncluttered with intelligence. Sentiment, taking one step backward for every two that art or Wordsworth advances, goes back beyond childhood to infancy, finding there the image of blissful dependence that it seeks in all art — the result is that Bracken has a fixation on bosoms. Not in the modern American manner, as I will show; he doesn’t care at all about the look of them, but as an idea with implications of fecundity, maternity, and as the ideal ‘big’ to which we can all be little. We have already seen him peeping through the bodice of Spring: Earth is endowed with similar, if less spectacularly lacteal charms:

Loving harp! the truth is told,
Mother Earth is true and tried.
In her bosom’s faithful fold
Slumber soundly, side by side, 8
Peer and peasant, young and old

— a funereal decolletage worthy of Dali! Similarly, in an 'Address: spoken by the Author at the Opening of the Oamaru Theatre, March 16th., 1883.' he invokes the Bosom in an effort to turn a prosaic platitude into a poetic one:

Pacific deep
Knows not the sounds of those wild waves that leap
‘Gainst coasts afar; she never heard the strain
Of sweet Euterpe, — 'twas the classic main
That drank Olympian euphony, and felt
The wealth of Shakespeare on her bosom melt. 9

and in 'The March of Te Rauparaha' he takes time out for a virtuoso piece:

The dazzling points
Of morning's lances pierced the bursting hearts
Of all the flow'rets on the fertile slopes,
And waked the red Kowhai's drops from sleep
And shook the dew-beads from the Rata's lids,
Until its blossoms opened up their breasts
And gave their fragrance to the early breeze. 10
With fewer overtones of sadism, but equally interesting, is the following:

Glory and fame to thee,
Lovely young land of the orange and vine.
Plenty's prolific streams,
Melted by golden beams,
Flow from thy bosom in freshness, and shine. 11

One might be tempted, at this stage, to think that Bracken is being merely capricious, and that his fixation, like his personifications generally, is merely superficial, a sentimentality of texture rather than of structure. It is true that these personifications become ridiculous only when we look at them. Bracken is obviously using the bosom magically - drawing on the energy latent in the idea, rather than the visual impact of the image. Shelley was doing much the same thing in "The Sensitive Plant"

"Which unveiled the depth of her glowing breast
Till, fold after fold, to the fainting air
The soul of her beauty and love lay bare." 12

As was Francis Thompson in "The Poppy"

"Summer set lip to earth's bosom bare
And left the flushed print in a poppy there" 13

- the difference is that Shelley certainly, and Thompson probably, was consciously exploiting the erotic overtones of the image, where Bracken seems to be doing it in his sleep, and not just by way of incidental ornament, but as a fundamental principle of structure. If we look at the whole of the poem from which the last lines quoted from Bracken were taken, we find that the lactation image, far from being just an accidental felicity, has been very carefully prepared for, and is in fact the logical conclusion of a highly worked pattern of imagery. The poem is called 'The Golden Jubilee', and celebrates the Sydney Exhibition of 1879. Its theme is that, through the exhibition, Australia has not only come of age as a nation, but proved herself to be productive as well. At the beginning, Australia is a girl
being shown off by her mother:

Room for another nation! Britain leads
Her sunny daughter 'mong her proudest peers;
Robed in the glories of her heroes' deeds
She reaps the harvest of a thousand years.

The reason for the celebration is that the daughter has
at least some progeny to display, and the matrons rejoice:

The married oceans leap for joy, and bear
Upon their heaving breasts fleet after fleet.

And even the husband(s) are remembered in the general festivities
in words reminiscent of Tupper:

The kingly souls who spread the precious seed
Of future glory for our royal race.

Can we forget the noble men who made
A breach for Justice, and for Truth a gate?

The husband seems to be the spirit of British manhood, and
in Bracken's eyes the marriage was certainly made in Heaven:

But not for Spain nor Holland was the prize
Reserved by God: His hand, which ever works
For future good, possessed the promised land,
And held it for His special pioneers -
A race of noble races, formed to rule
And build up nations for the world at large.

Having shown that other suitors did not have a chance, he
gives the history of the successful love-affair:

At length the time arrived for opening up
The treasuries where Nature long had stored
The fruitage ripe of her prolific prime;
And God sent forth a man to break the spell,
And wake the sunny virgin from her trance.
0 day of days!

The unfurling of the Union Jack provides the equivalent of
a marriage ceremony:

when first the British flag -
That silken shield of justice - waved on high
Above the peaceful coast, to consecrate
Our giant island for the use of man;
0 day of days!

As yet, however, the newlyweds were too young, or too
innocent, properly to fulfill the duties of their new
condition. There was some amorous dalliance, correlatively
described:
Where gorgeous sunsets sink in evening's lap
And melt in golden dreams on ocean's breast.

and as the relationship continues undercurrents of passion appear:

Years followed years, and soon the mighty pulse
Of life, and love, and happiness, and hope
Began to throb throughout the wilds and wastes.

But the marriage is not consummated until God's chosen ones
realise that virginity is essentially unprofitable:

Again, again years followed years, and lo!
A grander transformation meets our gaze:
Earth yields the golden magnet hidden long
Within the deep recesses of her womb,
And tens of thousands of the noblest hearts
That ever beat in British breasts are drawn
Across the swelling sea-slopes ...

This is the climax of the poem, and the natural consequences
soon follow, in the form of the lines quoted earlier:

Plenty's prolific streams,
Melted by golden beams,
Flow from thy bosom in freshness, and shine.

which are thus shown to be neither accidental nor unintelligible,
but part of a poem that is in a very real sense organic.

A full-scale survey of mammary imagery in Bracken, although
of course a desideratum, is beyond the scope of this essay.
It is obvious that they are not images at all, but structural
devices, ways of reducing the world to easily manipulated
formulae. Had he actually seen an image such as:

An Empire built of Nations, young and old,
Which gather round the central heart, and cling
In unity together, and enfold
Earth's swelling bodice in a golden ring.

or:

Old Ocean hoarse
Ejects with force
His foaming tongue to lap the beach

he would, I am sure, have been highly embarrassed - he was,
after all, a respected Member of the House, as well as the
most popular poet of his day.

Bracken also makes constant use of periphrasis. The sun,
for instance, is unlikely to appear in one of his poems simply as
the sun; it is one of a class of objects which he seems to think particularly susceptible of poetic treatment, so it appears as 'the day-god', 'glorious King of light', 'day’s bright pendant' (predictably located dangling 'o'er the bosom of the grateful earth'), 'Sol', 'the eye of day', 'day’s purple chief', 'bright orb', 'the golden shield of God' etc. In the same way, death is, among others, 'the mystic vale of rest' or 'the hidden mystic sea'; the stars are 'the gems that sparkle o'er the azure span' and 'the fire-spears of heaven'; the sky is 'Heaven’s grand refulgent sphere' or 'the blue ethereal arch', the sea becomes 'the sea-god’s swelling prairies', 'Ocean’s yawning cave', and so on. The device seems to be a deliberate attempt to inflate common elements of experience, so as to turn them into poetry, as an alternative to writing poems about them. They can also be seen as part of his effort to domesticate experience, to see the universe in teleological terms; in the list of periphrases for 'sun', for example three of them involve the idea of high authority, and three see the sun as part of a larger personification. Where Bracken differs from eighteenth century practice, of course, is that he uses the figures independently of any context of belief. They are thus reduced to being only 'poetry', and have to be considered as ends in themselves, pointing, insofar as they point at all, not to any truth, or context of meaning, but to the cleverness of the poet in thinking of them.

Sometimes he is not content with inventing these periphrases, but develops them, more capriciously than logically; sunset, appears as:

Last eve I watched day’s purple chief
Embrace a giant wave. 16

or:

The glorious king of light,
Arrayed in gorgeous robes of brightest hues,
Was sinking in his golden bath ... 17
No degree of clammy discomfort seems to have deterred Bracken when he was on the track of a metaphor. Not quite so garish, but a good example of the way verbal decoration can take the place of both idea and emotion in Bracken, is the description of a shower of rain in 'A Christmas Reverie':

'Tis evening, and fair Summer softly rests
   On hill and valley, sprinkled with the tears
That, but an hour ago, have fallen from
   A silver cloud that melted in a shower
Of pearly beads, when warmly kissed to life
By golden sunbeams ere they hid themselves
   Beneath the gorgeous canopy that fades
In rainbow coruscations in the west.18

There is something reminiscent of the later work of Louis Johnson in the way Bracken exuberantly piles metaphor on metaphor without bothering whether they are likely to coexist peacefully or not - in the way, for instance, that in this extract the cloud, having been 'kissed to life' promptly and obtrusively 'melts'; Johnson's sentimentality is of course vastly different in content from the earlier poet's, but there is something very Brackenish about a poem like 'Ceremony of Attrition', for example, which begins:

Coming up out of the bog I saw the bedbugs of
   ourselves at each glazed door polishing their practitioners' signs like experts in the matter
of the wringing-out of hearts.19

Like many confidently second-rate poets, Bracken prefers to rely on words that have a built in emotional charge, achieving his effects by accumulation rather than discrimination, rather in the manner of back-blocks foresters who fish for trout with gelignite. In the last passage quoted it is obvious that 'softly', 'tears', 'silver', 'melted', 'pearly', 'kissed', 'golden', 'rainbow' function only as emotional clichés, and have very little to do with the scene being described. Not that one can object to them as words - any or all of them could be included in a good poem, so long as they were, if only partly, detached from their traditional associations, and allowed to function as words in their own right, as part
of an experience, rather than as elements in a construction.

The divorce between connotation and denotation in Bracken at times seems absolute. In 'Waianonui', for instance, he describes a landscape in these terms:

When all the scene is tinted with the blood
Of dying day, then is the silver sheet
O'erlaid with nameless glories, - then the bloom
Of koromiko groves seems richer, and aglow
The rata flushes, and the sweet perfume,
That floats from where the rich tawhiris grow,
Embalms the sunset treasures as they fall
And melt upon the lake's clear bosom deep.\(^{20}\)

At first the lushness of the adjectives almost deceives the inner eye, but on closer examination the sensuousness begins to look like an undertaker's delirium - day bleeding, treasures being embalmed as they fall, and finally melting on a bosom. The confusion is absolute. A similar frenzy of sentiment leads him in "Affinity" to almost metaphysical excesses:

Our souls are sisters! I have felt a thrill
Of wildest joy rush through my every sense,
When from thy liquid orbs my soul did fill
Affection's cup, and quaffing it until
Intoxicated with its influence,
She offered at thy shrine, heart, mind, and will,
Consuming them with passion's fire intense.\(^{21}\)

A definition of sentimentality in art might be that it represents one limit of man's attempt to domesticate his experience, to persuade himself that 'reality' approximates to the most consoling generalisations. Timid souls, neutralized by education, are apt to convince themselves that the proper business of art is to 'order' or 'define' or 'give meaning to' Life, and to see in that its justification. They are not 'sentimental' - most of them would reject the imputation with scorn - but they are the advance guard of sentimentality. The sentimental man rejoices, not, as they do, in the struggle to reduce the universe to manageable proportions, but in the delusion that the struggle is over, and the battle won. The 'intellectual', happy in his conviction that art is
an extension of morality, the 'key' to life, and the sentimentalist he detests, are facing the same way. They meet the artist, if they meet him at all, face to face, and as they trip gaily down the hill he has to climb, they wonder at the sweat on his brow.

Most 'magical' poetry is essentially sentimental - it operates by blurring the distinction between life and art. We have seen some of the ways in which Bracken's magic works, but they have been more textural than structural, although it should be obvious by now that the Bosom is an essential part of many of his prefabricated shelters for minds broken by the disappointments of life. More fundamental is his habit of insisting on the ' littleness' of things:

Sabbath bells are tolling, tolling:
"Come and worship, come and pray."
Ocean's mighty voice is rolling
Solemn chants from far away;
Rills and brooks and birds are singing
Nature's psalms and hymns and glees,
And the morning breeze is swinging
Censers on the orchard trees.
Little churches, little steeples,
Little souls and little hearts,
Little nations, little peoples,
Actors playing little parts;
After all we're very little,
Very little after all.
In the Temple of Creation,
Brothers, we are very small. 22

The easiest way to pretend to see things whole, is to see them small - and what can be more consoling than the thought that, after all, everything except a hazily conceived 'Temple of Creation' is really insignificant. While this is bad, it is not positively immoral - at least, no more immoral than most popular devotional images. But in other poems, such as 'Up-A-Daisy', his rejection of responsibility is so complete as to be reprehensible:
Up-a-daisy! said his mother
  When the babe was three months old;
"Up-a-daisy!" and she'd lift him
  From the rug whereon he rolled.
Soon the boy began to prattle,
  And his lips would strive to say
"Up-a-daisy!" but he couldn't
Master more than "Up-a-day!"

Babyhood is manhood's mirror:
  Joys and sorrows, smiles and tears
Find their birth-place in the cradle.
Growing stronger with the years;
"Mother!" is our cry in spring-time;
But, when Winter holds his away,
From the depths we raise our voices —
"Father, Father, Up-a-day!"

Ah! the time will come, my darling,
  When the hearts that shield thee now
Shall be silent, and Time's furrows
Will leave traces on thy brow
When the shadows fall upon thee
  Turn thine eyes from Earth away
Lift thy voice and cry with fervour —
"Father, Father, Up-a-day!" 23

On the level of 'magic' this is the equivalent of an emotional laxative.

Bracken, although hooked on mammary and befuddled with the innocent teleology of childhood, was essentially an opportunist, less interested in poems than he was in achieving the status of 'poet'. In this he differs from Barr and Golder, who were, if little else, transparently honest, and lines up with Bowen and Broome. His anxiety to please all tastes comes out strongly in 'A Christmas Reverie':

Alone with God -
  Or Nature, if you will - I stand and strive
To find expression for the love and praise
That rise within me ... 24

The presence with which he is 'alone' rather obviously doesn't matter; the feelings that rise within him seem
to be those of one who wishes to write a poem, and must find an acceptably vague occasion for the sentiments he knows he must seem to feel.

An Irishman by birth, he won the Caledonian Society of Otago Prize Poem competition in 1869 with 'The Exile's Lament' in which he revealed more nostalgia for heather and glen than he had ever shown for a shamrock, and followed this up with 'Guallin a Chiel' which, probably by dint of one or two strategic Scotticisms, won the same prize two years later. Similarly, with little knowledge of, or feeling for the Maoris, he made a determined attempt to exploit their history and legends as raw material for poetry. His 'Lays of the Land of Maori and Moa' (1884) * contains a number of poems on Maori themes, the most ambitious of which is 'The March of Te Rauparaha'. It shows that a determined attempt to come to grips with Maori material could have had a strong influence for good on Bracken's style, although for a reason that hardly does him any credit. It seems to have been unthinkable to him that the native inhabitants of the country could have spoken, or thought in, 'poetry' as he knew it. As a result, whenever he put words in their mouths he felt obliged to abandon his favourite poetic devices, and to adopt a deliberate simplicity and harshness:

* The essentially touristic attitude to the Maoris revealed by the title is reminiscent of the words of a historian of the period, who regretted the imminent extinction of the Maori because 'his presence in the country imparts a warmth, a variety, a piquancy to its fields and forests far superior to that shed by red deer or any noble game.' 25
Moan the waves,
    Moan the waves,
Moan the waves as they wash Tainui,
Moan the waters of dark Kawhia,
Moan the winds as they sweep the gorges,
Wafting the sad laments and wailings
Of the spirit that haunt the mountains —
Warrior souls, whose skeletons slumber
Down in the caverns, lonely and dreary,
Under the feet of the fierce volcano,
Under the slopes of the Awaroa! 26

This is not good, but it is better. However, he seems to
think his readers are not getting their money's worth,
so he interpolates a poetic-pakeha intermezzo into his
Maori chant:

Beneath the purple canopy of morn
That hung above Kawhia's placid sheet
Of waters crystalline, arose on high
The golden shield of God, on azure field,
With crimson tassels dipping in the sea!
And from its burnished face a shower of rays
Shot up the hills and girt their spires and peaks
In lambent sheen, until the turrets seemed
Like precious ornaments of purest gold
On mighty altars raised by giant priests
In olden times, to offer sacred fire
As sacrifice unto the Fount of light,
From whence the planets and the myriad stars
Drink their effulgence. 27

and, having given his impression of the scene which the
Maoris are leaving, he allows them to take their own,
rather simpler farewells:

    Oh! Kawhia, remain,
        Cavern, gorge, and bay,
    Valleys and hill and plain,
    We are going away.

    Oh! Kawhia, remain,
    Take our tears and our sighs;
    Spirits of heroes slain,
    Rise up from Reinga, rise, etc. 28

That the events and places he was describing did not mean very
much to him is clear from a letter he wrote to Sir George
Grey in 1878, in which he writes:
Knowing little or nothing of the Maori race, never having mixed amongst them, nor travelled in their country, I labour under a considerable disadvantage, and this fact will account for the many blemishes which you, no doubt, will find in "Te Rauparaha". 29

One field with which Bracken is only peripherally concerned is the relation of the New Zealander to his environment. It is likely that, as his letter suggests, he knew very little of the country, and certainly his career as a journalist and later as a politician would not have given him the opportunity to observe 'Nature red in tooth and claw' enjoyed by Golder in his shed in the swamp, or Barr on his bush section. So, although Imagination in Bracken's poems is much given to revelling in Nature's arms," the mist of sentimental tears through which he(?) regarded her prevented him from seeing the object of his attentions very clearly, and there was always an element of uneasiness in the relationship. When he does see, his vision often clashes with what he feels he ought to see, as in 'The Colonist', one of his few attempts to deal with a specifically antipodean landscape. It starts off in best Brackenish style:

Morn's crimson banner floats across the East,  
And bounteous Nature spreads her harvest feast;  
The eye of day is peeping o'er the plain,  
His silvery glances kiss the golden grain;  
Sweet flowers, awaking from their dewy dreams,  
Look up and smile beneath his warming beams;  
The sparkling creek laughs brightly 'neath his rays,  
And woos the lambkin with its babbling lays. 30

Then he makes a mild mistake. Remembering some smoke he had once seen, or perhaps just imagining again, he writes:

* See 'Ocean's Answer' at the head of the chapter.
From yonder homestead in the river bend
Blue wreaths of smoke in snake-like folds ascend;
The connotations of 'snake-like' obviously jar with the idyllic picture he is painting, so, without erasing it, he supplements the image:

They seem like spiral stairs by angels given,
That fireside prayers might mount their steps to Heaven.
and then goes on, unaware that he has left image and emotion, what he sees and what he feels he ought to see, cohabiting as uneasily as snakes and angels.

Another poem of interest in this connection is 'April Here and April There', in which he deals with a theme that was to remain in poetic currency up until Fairburn's 'Dominion':

Through the realms of coral fairies,
Down the ocean's swelling sides,
O'er the sea-god's sloping prairies
There are lands where Spring abides,

Linnets singing,
Bluebells springing,
Fragrance melting on the air;
Friendly meetings,
Kindly greetings —

April here, and April there.

April here is robed in shadows,
Heralds of impending gloom;
April there sheds o'er the meadows
Yellow, white, and purple bloom.

Here, clouds flying,
Nature sighing,
On her brow a shade of care;

Wintry traces,
Dreary places —

April here and April there.

There, the lark's grand song is swelling
O'er the blue, ethereal arch;
And the am'rous dove is telling
Love-notes on the elm or larch.

Daisies gleaming,
Cowslips teeming

With rich nectar pure and rare;

Holly shining,
Ivy twining —

April here and April there.

Bursting o'er yon flax-clad mountain,
Sadly groans the dark-browed blast;

Fitful streams from Heaven's fountain,

Driving torrents fierce and fast.
Ravines rushing,
Rivers gushing,
Tall reeds rave in mad despair;
Breakers foaming,
Ever roaming,
April here and April there.

April there, warm showers descending,
Bearing gifts from Heaven to earth;
Buds and new-blown roses blending,
Thanks to Him who gave them birth.
Old age talking,
Lovers walking,
Round the grey stile's mossy stair;
Lilac drooping,
Lilies stooping —
April here and April there.

But we'll have a season here, too,
Borne on Earth's prolific breast —
Effusive, beautiful, and clear, too,
As reigns now where our fathers rest.
Darkest sorrow
Hope should borrow —
Winter should not bring despair;
Spring will follow,
Grief is hollow —
Look up! the brightest April's there.31

It is obvious that although Bracken is 'here' he sees 'April there' much more clearly than its antipodean counterpart; or rather, he knows the poetic counters that stand for Spring in England, and cannot invent many for Autumn in New Zealand. He lists fourteen particulars to denote 'April there': linnets, bluebells, fragrance, blooms, larks, doves, daisies, cowslips, holly, ivy, warm showers, budding roses, lilacs, lilies. He can think of only five for 'April Here': shadows, clouds, the gale over the flax-clad mountain, tall reeds, breakers. They are all very vague, none of them particularly characteristic of the month, and the most particular image, that of the 'flax-clad mountain', is obviously concocted — at least, if there is such a mountain I have never seen it. Similarly, it is to the season in the old land that he can attach his
floating 'poetical' emotions, irrelevant though they be: 'friendly meetings', 'kindly greetings', 'old age talking', 'lovers walking', 'giving thanks to Him who gave them birth' - as if in a New Zealand autumn old people could not talk, there were no friendly greetings or meetings, and no lovers walked. He can think of nothing but the conventional 'Nature sighing' to characterise the month here. Bracken, in 1877, is still at the stage of describing this country negatively, in terms of what it is not. Physically in New Zealand, he, and, we can assume, his readers, clung to their English cocoons, which they mended and re-mended every time reality made a breach. Some gaps were unavoidable - the differences between the old and the new were so obvious that they could not be disguised - and these were laboriously ornamented, and made to seem part of the pattern. Even the most conservative reader, however, demands 'originality', and since he could not locate it in his subject matter, Bracken seems to have felt obliged to add it in lumps, in the form of grotesque images. Underneath this, his message is, in effect, that New Zealand is only the cocoon in the process of being blown up to the size of a little country, in which the illusions that Englishmen have cherished for centuries will be at last made real. So 'April Here and April There' ends with the consoling certainty that Spring - not just any spring, but a recognisable one, such as 'reigns now where our fathers rest' - must in the end come to New Zealand, and even if it doesn't, the good Lord will make up for the deficiencies of colonial life in Heaven.

Bracken also produced a quantity of more conventionally 'magical' verse - 'God Defend New Zealand', for example, and 'The Emigrant's Welcome', which starts off with the palpable untruth:
We greet you, stranger, to this land
Where slaves have never trod.\textsuperscript{32}

and then, in images rather grubbier than usual, outlines
the capabilities the new settler must have if he is to be
made welcome:

We greet you, stranger, if you can
    Turn up the maiden field,
And garner the prolific wealth
    Our virgin soil will yield
If you can search earth's bowels,
    And her treasures bring to view
Or fashion in the shop or forge,
Then, friend, we welcome you.

But, stranger, if you come to spurn
    The gifts which God has sent,
To pass your days in indolence,
    Or brood in discontent;
With soul and body chained in vice,
    Unfit for honest gear,
Then let us tell you plainly, friend,
We do not want you here.

No wretched dens, nor crowded lanes,
    Where squalid starvelings hide,
Disgrace our pure untainted plains —
    The road to wealth is wide.
The blessing which great Heaven bestows
    On man are here to spare,
Come join us, true and noble souls
We offer you a share.

Arcadia, or the inflated cocoon, has worn well. As late as
1929 there was a move afoot to form a 'Bracken Fellowship
Club' \textsuperscript{33} and quite recently a short biography of him has
been published. In his own day, his reputation spread far
beyond New Zealand, thanks to the efforts of the entertainer
Mel.B.Spurr, who recited what is perhaps Bracken's most
famous poem, 'Not Understood' in theatres throughout the
world, accompanying his performance, rather improbably, on
the zither.\textsuperscript{34}

On the whole it seems that for Bracken the Victorian
dilemma didn't exist; he and his poetry were so wholly
on the side of the angels that the secret and mysterious
sins which floated wanly in the miasma that shrouded the
intercourse of art and life in the last twenty years of Queen Victoria's reign would, in all probability, have caused him to shudder. He took upon himself the difficult task, not of feeling, but of manufacturing ready-made feelings. His raw materials were neither experiences, nor words, but clichés, and these he patiently and often colourfully combined and recombined. His constructions may not suit our taste now, as they did not suit the taste of men like Sir George Grey in his own day, but they achieved a popularity that is almost certainly without equal in New Zealand's history. For every Mill who says: 'Sentiments and imagery which can be received at once, and with equal ease into every mind, must necessarily be trite,' there is a Newman demanding solace, and if lesser poets find it difficult to provide the one without indulging in the latter, it would be stupid to blame them, although we may choose to withhold our praise.

Bracken seems to have been, and to be, a source of comfort to many. It is still possible, or it was a couple of years ago, to buy a recent edition of 'Not Understood', complete with illustrations, the one opposite the stanza:—

Not understood. How many breasts are aching
For lack of sympathy! 36
being particularly poignant in depicting a very miserable young lady clutching at the offending portions of her anatomy, and in schools throughout the country 'God Defend New Zealand' is still taught as a national song by teachers some of whom would no doubt be shocked to learn that close scrutiny of other works by the bard proves them to be anything but wholesome. It is not for us, however, to probe into the murky depths of the sources of Bracken's creativity; we shall conclude with an extract from his 'In Memoriam', which, although it can hardly be said to equal the Laureate's, does at least sum up
pretty well the situation and condition of his own poetic corpus:

And such was he who lately passed the gate
    That Godward leads to everlasting rest;
But though he's gone, his memory will wait
    Embalmed for ever in his country's breast.37
1. Thomas Bracken, **Behind the Tomb: and other Poems.** 1872, Preface.
2. Bracken, **Flowers of the Free Lands.** 1877, Preface.
3. ibid. Preface.
4. ibid. Preface.
5. Bracken, **Lays of the Land of Maori and Moa.** 1884, p. 56
6. Bracken, **Musings in Maoriland.** 1890, p. 27
7. ibid. pp. 66-7
8. **Lays of the Land.** p. 87
9. ibid. p. 127
10. ibid. p. 21
11. ibid. pp. 60-1
14. **Lays of the Land.** p. 52 et seq.
15. ibid. p. 54
16. **Flowers of the Free Lands.** p. 68
17. **Musings in Maoriland.** p. 133
18. **Lays of the Land.** p. 78
19. Louis Johnson, **New Worlds for Old.** 1957, p. 40
20. **Musings in Maoriland.** pp. 104-5
21. ibid. p. 268
22. ibid. p. 68
23. ibid. pp. 273-6
24. **Lays of the Land.** p. 78
25. David Blair, **History of Australasia.** 1878, p. 246
26. **Lays of the Land.** p. 16
27. ibid. p. 20
28. ibid. p. 23
29. Sir George Grey, **Correspondence.** Auckland Public Library, Grey Collection.
30. **Flowers of the Free Lands.** p. 40
31. ibid. p. 51
32. ibid. p. 5
33. G. W. Otterson, Memoirs of Thomas Bracken. n.d. (1929?)  
   Author's Note.

34. ibid. p.5


   1906, p.8

37. ibid. p.99
VIII. A HETACOMB OF BROILING BULLS

Alfred Domett (1811-87)

"Hallo, Pooh," said Rabbit.
"Hallo, Rabbit," said Pooh dreamily.
"Did you make that song up?"
"Well, I sort of made it up," said Pooh. "It isn't Brain," he went on humbly, "because You Know Why, Rabbit; but it comes to me sometimes."
"Ah!" said Rabbit, who never let things come to him, but always went and fetched them. "Well, the point is, have you seen a Spotted or Herbaceous Backson in the Forest at all?"

A.A. Milne, The House at Pooh Corner.

Domett . . . is a student of the intense, or Carlylean school, who is always delighted to talk to us about books. His notions about religion, philosophy, politics, appear to be utterly dreamy and unsettled, and his reasoning powers to be by no means of a high order, but he has some taste and capacity for writing.


In following the career of Bracken we have been obliged to pass over the most impressive single volume of verse yet produced in this country - Alfred Domett's 'Ranolf and Amohia', which was first published in 1872. It is impressive both in its length, twenty-five cantos, nearly five hundred pages, and in its pretensions, which range from a history of world philosophy to a description of pig-sticking. Allen Curnow has feelingly written of its cantos that they are 'piled at the door of the New Zealand verse tradition. They have to be tunneled through, there is no way round'; yet if one has a few days to spare, and is not too impatient of a story that takes one step forward for every two that it slides back into metaphysical speculation, the digging can be pleasant enough, although what it brings to light is more the difficulties encountered by Domett at the beginning of the 'New Zealand Verse Tradition', than any success he had in overcoming them.
The intention behind the poem is revealed in the sub-title 'A South-Sea Day-Dream', and is made more explicit in the 'Prelude' to the second edition of 1883:

From our life of reality, - hard, shallow-hearted,
Has Romance - has all glory idyllic departed -
From the workaday world has all the wonderment flown?
Well, but what if there gleamed, in an Age cold as this,
The divinest of Poets' ideal of bliss?
Yea, an Eden could lurk in this Empire of ours,
With the loneliest love in the loveliest bowers -
In an era so rapid with railway and steamer,
And with Pan and the Dryads like Raphael gone -
What if this could be shown? 2

The story of the day-dream is quite straight-forward. The hero, Ranolf, after spending several years at sea as a youth, during which he acquires self-reliance and some vague notions of cultural relativity, is recalled home by his father, and given an intensive education in Classics and Philosophy. The latter study, which included the history of Eastern as well as Western thought, makes an indelible mark on his mind, and he is ever after subject to strange fits of metaphysical speculation, which come upon him in the oddest situations, and which cannot be denied. Having taken a liberal draught of education, he considers the various professions in turn, but his inbuilt scepticism obliges him to reject them all. He is saved from this dilemma by the death of his father, which leaves him comfortably prosperous, and he returns to his first love, the sea. In the course of his travels he is shipwrecked off the coast of New Zealand, and rescued by natives. He learns their language, although he can never accustom himself to its simplicity, and is fortunate enough to rescue a Maori princess, Amohia, from a fate worse than death. They fall in love, elope, and enjoy a blissful few months' honeymoon in the bush, with all their wants provided by Nature in collaboration with an indefatigable and devoted Maori servant, until news comes that her father has forgiven
her for not marrying the husband of his choice. They return to the pa, and Ranolf (Ranoro in Maori) helps repulse an attack by an enemy tribe, after which they settle down to a life of domestic bliss. However, Ranolf, whose philosophising is usually greeted with uncomprehending affection by Amohia, and dumb astonishment by the rest of the tribe, begins to feel a craving for 'intellectual food' that his apparently idyllic existence cannot satisfy. Amohia soon comes to sense this, and realises that she would never 'fit in' in England.* At about the same time, news comes that a mighty Northern tribe, whose chief Amo had slighted when she ran away with Ranolf, is arming for revenge, and she resolves to give herself up to him, to save her lover's life, and to give him a decent excuse for going to England without her. On her way North she is swept away while crossing a river, and everyone presumes she is drowned. Domett at first intended the poem to end with Amohia's death, and with Ranolf's return to the congenial company of philosophic minds, but, as he wrote in a letter to Grey, he felt obliged to bring her to life again. 'I hope you will not disapprove of poor Amo's resurrection from the dead. It seemed to me to throw a gloom over all the idyllic part.' The two are joyfully reunited, and they set sail; their destination is rather vague, but it appears to be Truth and Reason.

As a story this does not seem too forbidding, and the reader unacquainted with Domett's style might wonder how he managed to spin it out to five hundred pages. In the

* The most depressing prospect being the corset:

Ah! what a sin to screw a shape like this
Into some flaunting wire-and-whalebone screen
Of beauty-blighting frippery, that combines
In dull extravagance discordant lines-
Sharp angles - shooting arcs and cutting curves -
Each form fantastic from true taste that swerves
In hideous freaks of fashionable dress!
No!
'spinning out' lies the key to the failure of 'Ranolf and Amohia' as a poem; to use an overworked distinction, it is all 'texture' sustained and informed by little or no 'structure', rather like a cake without baking powder, and the resulting concoction tends to impose more than a little strain on the intellectual digestion. Domett himself realised that his book was a little 'heavy', and that it was a terrible bolus that would need 'gilding in every way' before the public could be induced to swallow it, and certainly the second half of the book is much easier going, although whether this was a concession to the reader, or a reward for his perseverance is hard to tell.

The first indication the reader gets that this is to be no ordinary daydream comes when Domett, after describing the hero's rescue of Amohia, says deceptively, 'But this "Ranoro" - Ranolf - who was he? - Let us a brief while turn aside and see.' The 'brief while' occupies sixty pages, and consists of an exhaustive history of the young man's life and opinions. His early life is described in a somewhat derivative manner:

Such sights and sounds inspired the growing Boy
With wondering exultation; and the joy
Of deeper thought and loftier feeling lent
To the mere gladness of temperament. etc. 8

However, when the lad, after his sojourn at sea, embarks on Philosophy, the verse deteriorates somewhat, in fact it gets distinctly gritty:

"All possible ideas are mere sensations,
Or our reflections on them" Locke insists;
"But half the first are Sense's own creations,
No faithful types of what in truth exists;
Not in the rose the red, nor in light rays
Its texture splits, but in the eyes that gaze." etc. 9
Drama comes on the scene with Hume:

But Hume came sliding in with smiling face,
Veiling the grimmest strength in easy grace;
The pleasant playful giant — gentle chief
Of sceptics, dealing blows without a sign
Of effort — slashing with a sword so fine —
Killing with lightning strokes bright and brief;
So wise, so good; whose adversaries found
His silken glove a Cestus iron-bound,
When staggering all the gladiator press
He proved — or seemed to prove — to their distress
And ours, that Thought itself, and Consciousness
Had no such base as Mind — etc. 10

Then he leaves the English to sport with Brahma, Kapila,
Spinoza, Sakyamuni, Kasyapa, Kant, the last of whom
arouses some emotion in the young sailor:

But, O conclusion lame and impotent!
O rage of vigorous reasoning vainly spent!
Those great ideas — Time, Space and Cause — 'tis plain,
 Though notions connoted with the nascent brain,
Have in essential fact no solid ground —
Only within the human soul are found;
Though necessary bases of our thought
Are from no prototypes beyond us brought. 11

He then graduates to Fichte, Reid, Brown, Schelling, and
Hegel, whom he greets with a perfect Paroxysm of Poeticising:

Thoughts are the same as things; and what is true
Of one must be so of the other too;
So Non-existence, as a thought, must be
Like pure Existence, a reality.
Of being absolute, and uncombined
With qualities of any form or kind,
What can we know or predicate aright?
Is Non-being in the self-same plight?
The positive and negative described
In all things, must be these and nought beside;
For each Idea or Object (which you please —
Both are the same) develops into these;
But these destroy and shut each other out,
A negative is all they bring about;
But as the idea is there, and must remain,
That negative must be denied again.

etc. etc. 12
When one considers that most of the first eighty pages in the book are taken up with this kind of verse philosophy lesson, the cautious qualification in William Pember Reeves' judgement on the poem sixty years later seems more than justified: ' . . . among academic people it was possibly the most important poem connected with New Zealand.'

Philosophy temporarily takes a back seat after Ranolf is finally washed up in New Zealand, and the thin plot is bodied out with elaborate descriptions of the life of the Maoris and the natural wonders of the country, interspersed with numerous legends and songs. Like Bracken, he seems to have had little knowledge of the Maori that was not gleaned from books, and little sympathy for them as a race - his complacency about the intellectual and cultural superiority of Ranolf becomes more than a little irritating as the book proceeds - and, unlike his fellow M.H.R., his attempts to come to grips with Maori material do not seem to have been an influence for good on his verse. He too is convinced that the Maori language is too primitive for Poetry, but instead of reproducing their myths in a simple form, he translates them into a 'Poetry' that he feels will be acceptable to his readers. So we find him apologising:

An ancient legend she began to tell
Of one God-hero of the land,
Of which our faithful lay presents
Precisely the main incidents,
Diluting only here and there
The better its intent to reach,
The language, so condensed and bare,
Those clotted rudiments of speech.

and explaining that he has to paraphrase a waiata rather than render it literally, because:

... the simplicity of that rude stave
Was so severe, its literal words made known,
Were almost gibberish in their brevity:
Only dilution can lend any zest,
Or nutriment a stranger could digest,
To song in short-hand, verse so cramped - comprest,
The very pemmiccan of poetry.¹⁵

Most of the Maori material in the book comes from Grey's
**Polynesian Mythology**, and the dilutions do not stand up very
well to comparison with the 'clotted rudiments'. In Grey,
for instance, we have this passage from the legend of Tawhaki:

> At last dawn had broken - at last the sun had shone
> brightly on the earth, and rose high in the heavens;
> and the old man called out "Ho, Tatau there; is not
> it dawn yet?" And she answered, "Yes". And then she
> called out to her children, "Be quick, pull out the
> things with which you have stopped up the window and
> the door." So they pulled them out, and the bright
> rays of the sun came streaming into the house, and
> the whole of the Ponaturi perished before the light;
> they perished not by the hand of man, but withered
> before the sun's rays.¹⁶

This is translated by Domett as:

> And the snoring goes on roaring; or if any Sleeper
> yawning
> Turned him restless, thinking, 'Surely it must now be
> near the dawning,'
> Growling, 'Slave, is daylight breaking? are you watching
> are you waking?'
> Still the Mother answered blandly, 'Fear not, I will
> give you warning -
> Sleep, O sleep, my Ponaturi - there are yet no streaks
> of morning!'

> So the snoring goes on roaring; Now above the
> mountains dewy,
> High the splendour-God careers it - great Te Ra the
> Tama Nui.
> Sudden cries Tawhaki's Mother 'Open doors and windows
> quickly!
> Every stop-gap tear out, clear out! On them pour the
> sunbeams thickly!'
> Through the darksome mansion - through and through
> those suns of darkness streaming
> Flash the spear-flights of the Day-God - deadly-silent -
> golden-gleaming!
> Down they go, the Ponaturi! vain their struggles, yells
> and fury!
> Like dead heaps of fishes stranded by the Storm-spray,
> gaping - staring -
Stiffened - so astonished, helpless, lay they in the sunbeams glaring:
Fast as shrink upon the shelly beach, those tide-left discs of jelly;
Fast as leathery fungus-balls in yellow dust-clouds fuming fly off.
So they shrink, they fade, they wither, so those Imps of Darkness die off! - 17

Grey's prose, although not especially distinguished, is at least simple and clear. Domett, striving for poetic effect, manages only to make the story ridiculous and pompous. More pompous still is Ranolf's speculation on the legend as archetype:

"More myth and deeper" - murmured he
As Amo rose and bid them wait
Her quick return: "But how translate
In German style the mystery? -
Shall Hapae our Urania be?
The 'meaning not the name' were she? -
And if Philosophy Divine
Whose radiant features wont to shine
With heavenly splendour, hopes so rare,
To Man's enfranchised Soul resign
Her charms celestial; - if their ChildIGHT Science seem at first defiled
With taint its infancy may wear -
Materialism - foul Despair -
Shall be the wondrous birth despise?
Perhaps of those imperial ties
With Reason, free Enlightenment,
That marriage made in heaven, repent -
Until his fair Urania flies
Despondent to her native skies?
No, but from her he cannot sever -
Can ne'er resist the lofty lure
Of those aspiring eyes so pure! 18

- and so on, for another eighty lines or so, until he is interrupted by the return of Amo with some food. Then, having refreshed himself with crayfish, and other delicacies, including the Maori story of creation, which makes him smile, he determines to beat the myth-makers at their own game, and impress the beautiful princess with his verbal facility - although Domett is cautious to observe first 'we must sprinkle / With phrases freer and more flowery / than match the rudeness of his simple Maori.' 19 - and launches into an ironical tirade:
There's a God they call MOTION; a wonderful Being, Omnipresent, omnipotent! thinking and seeing, All life, birth, existences, creatures, conditions, Of his versatile skill ever-new exhibitions, Are but phases his phantasy, subtle or simple, Condescends to assume; from the faintest first dimple He indents in the vapour that veils him — beginning As he slides to a pirouette graceful and winning, Such a whirl of Creation, such Universe-spinning — To his last of developments dense or ethereal, When as Consciousness crowned with a halo imperial, Though but grovelling in granules and cells ganglionic In the brain of Mankind sits the grant histrionic!

etc.

It would be rather interesting to hear Ranolf get this across in 'simple Maori', especially the last two lines. Whatever it may have sounded like to them, the Maori audience in the poem did not get the joke, as Domett records, with one of his rare flashes of humour: 'To this effusion nought replied /
The listeners.'

It should be obvious by now that an important ingredient in Domett's 'poetry' is expansion. The poem proceeds cumulatively, rather than organically, increasing by simple addition rather than according to any law of its being, so that the story is lost in a welter of elaboration. He literally drowned his poem in words, not, as some later poets were to do, out of a desire to hide the paucity and triviality of his subject-matter, but because he believed that this verbal profusion was the hallmark of poetry.

Where it did not take the form of philosophic comment, this expansion was usually achieved by Domett in one of two ways. He indulged either in an extended simile of epic proportions, complete in itself, but with only the most tenuous relation to the rest of the poem, or in a succession of equally gratuitous but disparate images. One of the most blatant examples of the latter kind of padding occurs when Amo is swimming across the lake to join Ranolf. Tired, she stops to rest on a stump half-way across, and Domett, as afraid of a moment's silence as
a disc jockey, hastens to improve the occasion with an interlude, and indulges in sixty lines on the natural history of the stump. Some time later, she becomes tired again, turns over on her back to float, and with the laboriousness of any philosopher disposing of Non-Being before attacking Being, Domett, without a word of apology, tells us what she did not see, before moving on to what she did:

But when at once right o'er her swung
The whole enormous lighted dome of Heaven,
What feelings in her bosom sprung? -

Not fraught indeed for her the glorious vision
With all the myriad miracles 'tis given
Our tutored sight to marvel at therein -
Thickstarred immensities - to which all fields Elysian,
Softwarded glooms of Paradise
Fire-streaked with glancing lovelit eyes -
Or that pure Empyrean where the bards divine -
Of Albion or the Florentine,
In world-entrancing everliving dreams,
Saw jacinth-downs and topaz-sporting streams
And uplands opaline;
Champaigns of sheeted pearl with rosy-green
Reflections shot, and mildest rainbow-sheen,
Where snowdrifts of blest angels spread and swarm
And scatter, on the rolling grand Hosanna-storm
Uplifted - floated - borne away!
Or rounded to a snowy world-wide rose
With golden heart where God's own brilliance glows; -
All seem but tinselled stagework - transient - mean -
Poor craft of some mere mortal mechanician!
- Nor could her fancy science-guided stray -
From those bold fires that here and there
Like vanward sentinels low hovering hung,
Rejoicing in some kingly trust, - 20

and so on for a hundred and fifty lines of stellar gibberish, until he returns to Amo, still paddling on her back:

(underlining mine)

Well - though there rose not to the Maiden's mind,
Such visions with such thoughts entwined,
She could not fail
Awestruck to mark how vast a bed
Of brilliants was above her spread,
As 'twere the sediment and golden grail
By some great Sea of upper Light deposited:
Nor all the finer showers of gems that far away
Fused into fainter light-wreaths lay
Marbling the mournful depths of solemn blue:
Nor how across it all meandering wide
Went a pale luminous smoke that swarmed
With sparks, as from the unseen fires it rose
Of some vast spectral beings that performed
Their unimaginable rites outside:

etc. 21

Whether it is evidence of good taste, or simply lack of imagination - Domett's patronising tone suggests the latter as the most likely explanation - Amo's rhapsody dribbles on for only seventy lines, before, not surprisingly, 'by the glorious vision more deprest / Than strengthened' she turns again to her swimming. This reader at least was grateful that she managed to struggle to shore without pausing for another 'rest'.

These digressions are not, however, the chief cause of the fatigue that sets in whenever one attempts to read more than a few pages of the poem at a time - they can at least be skimmed over. But if one attempts to skim over the epic similes with which the poem abounds, one is likely to wake up in the middle of an extended description without having any idea of what it refers to, as in Canto Nine:

As through the land when some dread Earthquake thrills,
Shaking the hidden bases of the hills;
Their grating adamantine depths, beneath
The ponderous, unimaginable strain and stress,
Groan shuddering as in pangs of world-wide death;
While their long summits stretched against the sky
Rough-edged with trackless forests, to the eye
A double outline take (as when you press
The eyeball); and the beaten roads below
In yellow undulations roll and flow;
And in broad swamps the serried flax-blades lithe,
Convulsed and tortured, rattling, toss and writhe,
As through them sweeps the swift tremendous throe:
Beasts howling run, or trembling, stop and stare,
And birds, as the huge tree-tops swing and rock,
Plunge scared into the more reliable air: -
All Nature wrung with spasm, affrighted reels
Aghast, as if the heavy chariot-wheels
Of God in very truth were thundering by
In too intolerable majesty:
Then he who for the first time feels the shock
Unconscious of its source, unguessing whence
Comes flying o'er him with oppressive sense
Of irresistible omnipotence,
That boundless, strange, o'erwhelming influence,
At once remote and in his inmost heart
Is troubled most, that, with this staggering start
All the convictions from his birth upgrown,
And customary confidence, o'er thrown,
In Earth's eternal steadfastness, are gone:
Even such a trouble smote in that wild hour
Our Maiden - 22

The patient but unwary reader is very likely surprised to find,
on reaching the end of the passage, that what is being described
is not an earthquake, but the shock of falling in love. Even
if he has noticed the 'as' with which the simile commences, he
will have forgotten it long before he reaches the punch-line.
When we turn to Domett's source-book, we discover that the
thirty-odd lines are a dilution of a simple and effective
image in Grey:

So she sat down upon the ground to rest; and then
soft measures reached her from the horn of Tutanekei,
and the young and beautiful chieftainess felt as if an
earthquake shook her to make her go to the beloved of
her heart. 23

Something of the idea of poetry which caused him to go in
for things on such a grand scale, can be gleaned from a letter
he wrote to his friend Robert Browning in 1878, in which he
commends

especially that tender and magnificent 'Saisian' which,
I think, beats all you have done during these few latter
years. I have been really delighted with its long rolling
peals of vigorous melody - both of thought and expression -
lke batteries of artillery thundering out an oratoric
of Handel's. 24

The same ghostly bombardment re-echoes throughout Ranolf and
Amohia, with the result that the reader, although he knows that
Music is the object of the exercise, begins to feel that his
sensibility is some beleaguered cultural outpost that must
fall sooner or later under a crushing barrage of similitude.
When it comes to describing New Zealand's scenery, Domett's attitude is essentially that of a tourist. He is conscious of the fact that he is writing for an English rather than a colonial audience, and so he concentrates on evoking the strangeness of all that he sees, its difference rather than its essence. He seems to have always had a penchant for the exotic; forty years before, he had recorded in his Canadian Journal: 'A gardener or the keeper of rare and exotic plants is the only tradesman or maker of money whose occupation I ever envy. . . .

Even the pedantry of botany, the jargon of the Latin nomenclature, is amusing. The names are generally given because of some fancied resemblance or interesting association.'

In writing Ranolf, however, he came up against the problem that the more rare and exotic the object one attempts to describe, the more elaborate the description has to be, and the greater the danger that the description will swamp the 'poetry'. If, as Victorian theorists seemed to agree, the poet's business with Nature was to discover either God's grandeur or his own feelings in her, then description should be largely subordinate to the main business of the poem; it should be sufficient merely to indicate the object that was providing the stimulus. But where exotic flora and fauna are concerned, this will not work; they have to be made real to those who have never seen them; they have, in other words, to be 'domesticated', or translated into things that the audience does know. If this domestication is achieved by contrast, the result is what I have called 'touristic'; if on the other hand it proceeds by way of establishing similarities, it is ultra conservative, and likely to do less than justice to what Sartre has called the 'density of existence' of the object it is considering.
Domett wavers between the two; on the one hand, aware that the philosophic loading of the poem is unlikely to appeal to the crowd, he is anxious to add interest by exploiting the exotic scenery of the country to the full; on the other, as if aware that this pandering to vulgar curiosity is hardly Poetry in the highest sense, he attempts to see a 'meaning' in everything he describes, and to colour it with general emotions. Unfortunately he can seldom bring the two into focus, and he is left with a blurred image; so we find similes like:

that strange asphodel
On tufts of stiff green bayonet-blades,
Great bunches of bloom up-bore,
Like blocks of sea-washed madrepore. 27

This is a double exploitation of the exotic, since it is unlikely that his readers will be acquainted with either term of the simile; they will gain only a confused idea that this must be a very wonderful plant indeed. The description is a poetical end in itself, pointing to nothing beyond the poem apart from a vague exoticism. It is of little use in the poem, it is the poem. If we compare this with a later poet writing for a New Zealand audience, we find that he can afford to take the fact of the cabbage-tree (which is what Domett was describing) for granted:

These songs will not stand -
The wind and the sand will smother.

Not I but another
Will make songs worth the bother!

The rimu or kauri he,
I'm but the cabbage tree,

Sings Harry to an old guitar. 28

Instead of being embarrassed by the homeliness of 'cabbage-tree', he can use it for his own purposes. Free from the necessity to establish it in his readers' consciousness as an object, he can say not 'This is a cabbage-tree' but 'This cabbage-tree', and allow the associations that have collected around it to resonate without interference, so that from being a pressed
leaf in a visitor's collection, it becomes a vital image in its own right. We can hardly blame Domett; the problem is still a very real one today, as is evidenced in a recent novel, Bill Pearson's Coal Flat (1963). At one point he seems suddenly to become aware of the possibility that an audience beyond New Zealand might not know what he is talking about:

Joe and Arty inspected the two whitebait traps which were already in the hut; they had arranged to hire them from the farmer. . . .

The whitebait is a delicacy, eaten fresh or from a can. It is the young of a minnow, that lives in the upper reaches of rivers; the young is like a tiny white eel, almost transparent, almost boneless, two or three inches long . . . etc. 29

- this is the only example in the book, but the fact that a good novelist, in 1963, should feel it necessary to take time off to educate his audience in this way, highlights the difficulties faced by Domett almost a hundred years before.

Whenever, on the other hand, he is particularly anxious to establish the emotional correlative of the flora he is describing, Domett resorts to more conventional means, but the result is often confusing. For example, when he is describing the grotto in which the heroine hides herself after her long swim, and is anxious to squeeze as much emotion as possible out of the setting of the lovers' meeting, he describes it like this:

There was a deeply-scooped recess
In the rock-side's ruggedness,
Hollow and arching: you discern
Through the moon-illumined gloom,
Mantling it above, below.
Wondrous work of Nature's loom,
Delicate broidery like a bride's -
Traceried wealth of many a fern.
Some are filmy-fine and soaking wet,
By the ever-oozing lymph
Matted to its dripping sides;
Some are thatch-like thicklayered - some plume-like and free;
Some like fingers outspread, that caressing and fond
Would clutch at all comers whoever they be;
Some soft, silver-woven, down-pointing and broad,
Like Seraphims' wings when their eyes they would shade
From the shock of that Robe-Skirt's ineffable load
Of splendour that else the high heavens dismayed!
But finger-like, feather-like, wing-like - each frond - 30

The periphrasis 'that Robe-Skirt's ineffable load' is almost
Bracken-like in its tortuousness, and the description as a
whole is so vague that it could refer to almost any kind of
vegetable. When he is less interested in squeezing sentiment
out of the scene, however, he reverts to his exotic comparisons,
as in this description of a tree-fern:

The stately tree-fern leaned aside
For languor, with its starry crown
Of radiating fretted fans,
And proudly-springing beauteous crest
Of shoots all brown with glistening down,
Curved like the lyre-bird's tail half-spread,
Or necks opposed of wrangling swans,
Red bill to bill - black breast to breast -31

In this case neither the black swans, which I imagine would
seem exotic to English eyes, nor the lyrebird add very much
to the description. They seem to be included so that we will
recognise the tourist value of the tree-fern, its similarity
to other 'sights'.

In spite of his verbal facility, he has little confidence
in his descriptive powers, and will often remorselessly pursue
his object until he has trapped and smothered it in a web of
simile, as for instance, when he tries to describe Amo's teeth
towards the end of the first canto:

All things that most of whiteness boast
Are dim beside them! The far wreath
Of snow upon those peaks eternal;
The sea-foam creaming round the coast -
The wave-bleached shell upon it tost -
No, none of these - perhaps the kernel
Of a young cocoanut when newly broken
Would best their blue-white purity betoken.32
A.R.D. Fairburn has tried the same technique on occasions, as in 'To a Friend in the Wilderness':

I would come again
Like a shot from a gun, like a train,
Like a stallion with streaming mane,
Like a woman wild with the pain
And the joy of love.\(^{33}\)

Both poets are afraid of, and yet anxious to show off, their originality. They are afraid that the image will seem too 'far-fetched', so they prepare for it by proposing, and rejecting, the most obvious clichés — 'white as snow', 'like a shot' etc. — but this same manoeuvre, while it appears to justify the image finally arrived at, at the same time leaves the reader uneasily aware that it is neither as original nor as appropriate as it is made to seem.

Again, like Fairburn, Domett delights in conceit, and is often prepared to let the poem take its own course while he develops one. The well-known simile in the later poet's 'Disquisition on Death' of 'the far / golden hills like mice embalmed in honey' \(^{34}\) is matched in 'Ranolf and Amohia' by such strange figures as this, describing a storm:

| Or if the tumult for a moment stopped  
| You heard the torrent rain how loud it hissed,  
| As if a hexagon of bulls at least  
| Were broiling for some sacrificial feast;\(^{35}\) |

or this, as he tries to find an exotic correlative for the feelings of lovers about to part:

| Just then the ill-omened Moon withdrew behind  
| A sable cloud-stripe, sudden, as if dropped —  
| Dead Nun! into a coffin snowy-lined.\(^{36}\) |

— the self-congratulatory exclamation mark is eloquent; or this, describing a skiff on a lake, which must have been suggested to the poet by the similarity of the words 'skimming' and 'skinning' — I can think of no other explanation:
The light skiff . . .
Came skimming the blue calm, and still
With sharp keel seemed to slit the thin
Glazed surface of the shining Lake
That shrank apart in widening wake
As shrinks beneath the sacrificial knife
Some forest victim's opening skin
Discoated of its fur and warm
From the last pants of its wild woodland life. 37

Images such as these strike us as ludicrous, not so much because they are far-fetched, but because their justification lies in a single point of resemblance. In the last example, for instance, the two images of boat and animal intersect only in the action of slitting; beyond that they contribute nothing to one another, and the more one sees of the animal being gutted, the more distracted one is from the image of the skiff on the water.

Domett is not, as might appear, simply capricious in his descriptions, although he does tend to let himself get carried away. He was, in fact, extremely concerned about their accuracy. He provided a scientific Note on every native plant, tree, bird and insect that he mentions, with a care that throws Mr Curnow's solicitude over a geranium on a wet bank quite into the shade 38, and in a letter to Grey he shows his concern for truthful representation:

I revisited the Lake country of New Zealand in June 1871 - after our visit to Kawan. The consequence was I had to rewrite some of the descriptions - and added many things to make them more true. 39

and when he is content simply to describe, without trying either to saturate the scene with emotion or to make it like a guide-book, he often manages to paint quite a lively and 'true' picture, as in this description of the sea-shore:

[He] would mark the swarming sea-birds o'er the waste Tremble across the air in glimmering flocks;
Or how, long-legged with little steps they plied
Their yellow webs, in such high-shouldered haste
Pattering along the cockle-filled sandbanks,
Some refuse daintly of the Sea to taste;
Or standing stupefied in huddled ranks
Still rounded up by the advancing tide -
White glittering squadrons on the level mud
Dressing their lines before the enclosing flood. 40
or this of a lake scene:

The minnows leapt the liquid plain  
In shoals - each silvery-shivering train,  
A sudden dash of sprinkled rain!  
The wild-duck's black and tiny fleet  
Shot in-and-out their shy retreat;  
The cormorant left his crowded tree  
And stretched his tinselled neck for sea;  

He obviously has a keen eye for detail, and some flair for the  
telling word or phrase. His chief limitation is that his  
particular descriptions are usually made to subserve a general  
emotion; in so far as they are specific, they are simply  
surface decoration, and are never allowed to become an integral  
part of the poem. A further comparison might make this clear.  
In the eighteenth canto, Domett describes his lovers resting  
under an old pohutukawa in bloom. The scene is intended to  
evoke a generalised emotion, a mood of idyllic happiness that  
does not focus on anything in particular, but suffuses the  
whole landscape:

'Tis burning Noon: from heat and glare  
How sweet the bower the lovers share!  
A Lakeside cleft - a rock-recess  
Of soft sun-chequered quietness,  
A nook for lovers made express.  
Like birds in some umbrageous tree  
Girt round with leaves they seemed to be,  
A hollow globe of greenery:  
For twisting, arching, overhead  
Dark serpentining stems were spread;  
And arching, twisting, down below,  
Stems serpentining seemed to grow;  
While on a plane of light between,  
Suspended lay those skiffs serene.  
Sunbathed arose the dome-like roof  
A strangely-splendid wondrous woof;  
Whose dark-green foliage seemed  
Thick over-showered with shining snow,  
Except where blood-red masses gleamed -  
Such luminous crimson - all aglow!  
White buds and opening leaves the first,  
With silvery-sheening velvet lined;  
The last, rich-tufted bloom that burst  
Bright-bristling with the sun behind;  
As if whole trees, 'mid heaped snow-showers  
Were turning into burning flowers!
The final exclamation-mark is again significant; it is an exclamation of wonder, firstly at the fact of the pohutukawa, secondly at the felicity of the poet's own description of it. As we contemplate the scene, we are told what we must feel—'sweet', 'strangely-splendid', 'wondrous'—but at the same time we are obliged to pass over words which we would normally expect to carry some emotional charge, such as 'blood-red' and 'burning', as being, in context, almost entirely neutral. For Domett, the tree was simply part of the furniture of the Garden of Eden, so admirably fitted by its strangeness and beauty to shade the rest of his daydream lovers that to demand anything else of it was unnecessary. In this, of course, he was betrayed by the prodigality of Nature, lured into an emotional dead-end. She herself had been the poet, and had evolved such strange fantasies as the kiwi, the cabbage-tree, boiling mud-pools, pink and white terraces, the pohutukawa. Where single sight and simple description were sufficient to accommodate the wonders of the new world to Poetry, why should he venture further? When originality was the essence of what was seen, who would demand a new way of seeing? It was all very well for Mill to praise Tennyson for avoiding simple description* and for creating scenery instead, but where God had been so lavish in creation, it took some temerity, and more strength of will than Domett possessed, to turn his back on His productions and indulge in creation on his own account.

* Of all the capacities of a poet, that which seems to have arisen earliest in Mr. Tennyson, and in which he most excels, is that of scene-painting, in the higher sense of the term: not the mere power of producing that rather vapid species of composition usually termed descriptive poetry—for there is not in these volumes one passage of pure description; but the power of creating scenery, in keeping with some state of human feeling; so fitted to it as to be the embodied symbol of it, and to summon up the state of feeling itself, with a force not to be surpassed by anything but reality.
For A.R.D. Fairburn, writing in the nineteen-thirties, there was no longer any danger of confusing New Zealand with Eden. The day-dream was no longer a self-sustaining, self-perpetuating weed: reality took root in older ways of thought:

in summer . . . the coasts
bear crimson bloom, sprinkled like blood
on the lintel of the land. 44

This is the second stage of the growth of the pohutukawa as an image in indigenous poetry. The Victorian poet assimilated it to the eye, fitted it in to a pattern of seeing; Fairburn assimilates it to the mind, fits it into one among many possible patterns of significance. In the most powerful and moving poem in which it has appeared, Allen Curnow's 'Spectacular Blossom', it transcends both of these, and becomes an image in its own right, putting on power and complexity as it shrugs off the simplicity of assimilation:

Mock up again, summer, the sooty altars
Between the sweltering tides and the sin gardens,
All the colours of the stained bow windows.
Quick, she'll be dead on time, the single Actress shuffling red petals to this music,
Percussive light! So many suns she harbours
And keeps them jigging, her puppet suns,
All over the dead hot calm impure
Blood moon tide of the breathless day.

Are the victims always so beautiful?

Pearls pluck at her, she has tossed her girls Breast-flowers for keepsakes now she is going For ever and astray. I see her feet Slip into the perfect fit the shallows make her Purposefully, sure as she is the sea Levels its lucent ruins underfoot That were sharp dead white shells, that will be sands. The shallows kiss like knives.

Always for this
They are chosen for their beauty.

Wristiest slaughterman December smooths
The temple bones and parts the grey-blown brows
With humid fingers. It is an ageless wind
That loves with knives, it knows our need, it flows
Justly, simply as water greets the blood,
And woody tumours burst in scarlet spray.
An old man's blood spills bright as a girl's
On beaches where the knees of light crash down.
These dying ejaculate their bloom.

Can anyone choose
And call it beauty? — The victims
Are always beautiful. 45

The poem is not about the tree, or the girl. The tree is the poem, in the same way as the old man is the tree. Curnow takes the tree as much for granted as he does the cliche 'dead on time'. It is not something to describe or even to see the 'significance' of, but something to be used. Thus Curnow achieves obliquely what Domett failed to do by a frontal attack — to make of the fact of the pohutukawa an image that could be detached from its context. The reader might express his bafflement at such lines as 'woody tumours burst in scarlet spray', but his bafflement is irrelevant to the poem, and reveals, not his ignorance, which is equally beside the point, but his inability to make an imaginative leap, to create a tree in the image both of a young girl and an old man. The poem does not depend on the pohutukawa, but henceforth, for many readers of Mr Curnow's poetry, the pohutukawa will depend on it, or at least be modified by it: we see as much with our imaginations as with our eyes. Domett's comparative failure, historically necessary as it may have been, stems partly from the fact that he relied too much on his eyes, as if trying to compensate for the blindness of readers at 'Home'. As description his lines are far more 'accurate' than either Fairburn's or Curnow's. 'White buds and opening leaves . . . with silvery-sheening velvet lined' and 'rich-tufted bloom that burst/ Bright-bristling with the sun behind' are quite precise word-pictures, but precision and accuracy lead us only towards what is known, towards, in this instance, the
establishment of the pohutukawa as a fact of experience, so that the point where Domett's poetical ambition ends, is the point where Curnow's begins. Domett even registers the essential ambivalence of the pohutukawa that enables Curnow to polarise age and youth, male and female, in terms of it - the silver-grey of the buds compared to the rich colour of the flowers - but, since he has no use for it, he contents himself with the inappropriate 'snow-showers' and 'burning flowers', satisfied simply to have recorded the fact.

Ranolf and Amohia, in spite of its excesses - and it is perhaps one of the most excessive books ever written - had readers in its time. The much-quoted encomium of Browning:

I am sure it is a great and astonishing performance, of very varied beauty and power. I rank it under nothing - taken altogether - nothing that has appeared in my day and generation, for subtle yet clear writing about subjects of all others the most urgent of expression and the least easy in treatment. 46

while no doubt dictated by a friendly courtesy that did not anticipate the assiduity with which Domett would disseminate it, is unlikely to have been entirely dishonest, and Alexander and Currie, although aware of the faults of the poem, were perhaps not entirely unjustified in attributing 'greatness' to it:

As far as mere word-painting goes, nothing has ever been done in Maoriland that surpasses Domett: some of his pictures of the Bush come as near to being great poetry as pure description can, and he is incomparably the greatest of the poets represented in this volume. 47

'Greatness' in literature is an essentially Victorian concept and one which has as much to do with the extent of a writer's pretensions and the physical size of his productions, as with the quality of his work, and I do think that Domett can be called the only really 'great' New Zealand poet. There is something pathetic, but at the same time essentially 'right' about his suggestion to Grey in 1878 that Ranolf and Amohia should be put up as 'collateral' for a knighthood, 48 although one can hardly quarrel with the viceregal decision that the poem wasn't quite up to it.
Ranolf and Amokia was a dream that edged New Zealand to the brink of reality as far as poetry was concerned. It was a failure, but it was such a massive failure that it had its effect on the attempts of those who came after. After Domett, no-one with serious pretensions as a poet attempted to view this country, as a whole, as 'the divinest of poets' ideal of bliss'. There was to be much more nestling in the womb of Infinity, more retreat into the cotton-wool of solipsism, constant refuge in sentimentality of the most glutinous kind, and later, the escape to 'Home', but Domett's labyrinthine failure ensured that never again would poets escape to New Zealand from the disappointments of life.
6. ibid.
7. *Ranolf and Amohia*. 1st.ed. p.20 (All subsequent references are to this edition)
8. ibid. p.21
9. ibid. p.32
10. ibid. pp.33-4
11. ibid. p.38
12. ibid. p.46
14. *Ranolf and Amohia*. p.120
15. ibid. p.407
18. ibid. pp.127-8
19. ibid. p.135
20. ibid. pp.178-9
21. ibid. pp.183-4
22. ibid. pp.162-3
31. ibid. p.7
32. ibid. p.18
34. Fairburn, *Strange Rendezvous*, 1952, p.30
35. Ranolf and Amohia, p.94
36. ibid. p.152
37. ibid. p.155
40. Ranolf and Amohia, p.232
41. ibid. p.301
42. ibid. pp.310-11
44. A.R.D. Fairburn, *Three Poems*, p.27
45. Allen Curnow, *A Small Room with Large Windows*, 1962, pp.73-4
46. Quoted by Allen Curnow in the introduction to *The Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse*, 1960, p.33
IX. SORROW BLEEDING

from

BEARDED BOUGH.

Far out in the dark a gramophone winds its words
Round and round like a giddy intestine:

Louis Johnson, My Wife Doesn't Understand Me

... weary flowers began to weep
Their od'rous tears in their silent sleep.


There were a number of less considerable poets writing and
publishing in New Zealand between eighteen-fifty and eighteen-
eighty - the Book of Canterbury Rhymes edited in 1866 by William
Pember Reeves assembles seventeen of them - but their dalliance
with the Muse was usually frivolous and sporadic. One or two
of them struck off a poem that won a place in later anthologies,
such as James Edward Fitzgerald's 'The Night Watch of the
Charlotte Jane', or Dean Jacobs' 'The Avon', with its
Goldenish conclusion:

A little while
Shall see thy wastes grow lovely. Not in vain
Shall England's sons dwell by thee many a mile.
With verdant meads and fields of waving grain
Thy rough, uncultured banks ere long shall smile;
Heaven-pointing spires shall beautify thy plain.

Others, such as E.J. Wakefield in 'Past and Future', are
interesting in the way they explore the possibilities of
an indigenous poetry without themselves making any contribution
to it. He bewails New Zealand's history:

Our country boasts no history
   No relics of the past;
Old age no honoured mystery,
   Around her name has cast.

He is distinctly dubious as to the poeticality of the native
inhabitants:

Coward in worship, mad in fight,
   Cruel to wife and slave,
The savage knows no law but might
   Nor spares the weak and brave.
Few are the deeds that they have done
Are worthy of record;  
Small theme does glory they have won  
To poetry afford.

But consoles himself that:

Wherever in this onward world,  
Floating o'er land or sea,  
Britain's proud flag is once unfurled,  
Some poetry must be.

William Jukes Steward ('Justin Aubrey') was a prolific poet of the time. He arrived in New Zealand in 1862, at the age of twenty-one, and five years later he published a large (350pp.) volume of verse, *Carmina Varia*, most of the pieces in which would seem to have been hastily composed. 'On First Viewing the Canterbury Plains' is a fair sample:

Hail, pleasant hills of heart-reviving green!  
Welcome! thrice welcome to my hungry een  
That long have gazed with faint and weary glance,  
Upon the ocean's wide and drear expanse.

Hail glorious gorse! with golden splendours spread,  
That proudly sunwards rear'st thy royal head,  
The undisputed monarch of the vale,  
And load'st with fragrance ev'ry passing gale.

The pleasure with which he greeted the country seems, however, to have been nothing compared to the exclamatory ecstasy with which he left it, if his poem 'Homeward Bound' is any indication:

Homeward bound! homeward bound!! homeward bound!!!  
As our little boat is skipping o'er the waves among the shipping  
The oars with measured dipping seem to sound, seem to sound.  
Now the vessel lies before us with her white sails reaching o'er us,  
And the sailors sing in chorus, 'Homeward bound, homeward bound.'

Possibly the 'glorious gorse' mentioned above had something to do with it. At any rate he seems to have become reconciled to his adopted land, and went the way of many early poets, into politics. Without attaining to Domett's eminence, he enjoyed
a successful parliamentary career, finally becoming Speaker of the House in 1890. It may reflect something of his talent for politics that many of the poems in his first volume get by without any discoverable content whatsoever. 'The Dying of the Day', for instance, seems to be a verbal concoction that 'says' absolutely nothing about anything:

Upon a couch with gorgeous splendours drest
Day lay a-dying in the amber West,
Silent and sad, for since his race begun
He had known much of sorrow 'neath the sun;

Bereft of all his children, the fair Hours,
That bloomed and faded like the summer flowers,
Save one, the last, of all-surpassing charms
That lay a-dying with him, in his arms:

And sorrowful the royal couch beside
Sat pale-browed evening, the old monarchs bride,
Lovely in grief as tearfully she smiled
Upon her hoary spouse and sunny child.

Silence reigned all around, for Nature's choir
Had hushed their songs to view the god expire;
And she stood tip-toe, and with bated breath
Watched, through the casement the old monarch's death.

And soon it came; the lifelight left his eye,
And through the palace-windows came a sigh,
Deep-drawn and faint, from out the distant West
As of one weary sinking into rest;

The Hour was gone, and with it died the Day,
And o'er them Evening threw a pall of grey,
Then kissed the placid features of the dead,
And drew her dusky curtains round the bed;

Then lighting up a star she hung it high,
For a pale corpse-light, in the fading sky,
And as from out their lairs began to creep
The sombre shadows she went forth to weep;

And up and down the garden Earth she passed,
And as she walked her tears fell thick and fast;
And then returning with a solemn tread,
She robed herself in mourning for the dead,
And clothed in black, but crowned with jewels bright,
Went forth to watch until the morning light.5

A more elaborate way of not calling a sunset a sunset can hardly be imagined, but it seems to have suited some tastes - it was included in Alexander and Currie's *New Zealand Verse* forty years later.
It must not be assumed that all of 'Justin Aubrey's' poems were equally without content. He too was a 'magician', for the most part in the cause of Temperance, and I have no doubt that those of a similar persuasion found his effusions on the theme inspiring. 'Water, Lovely Water', for instance, begins:

Shall the bardic lyre he ever for the praise of Bacchus strung
And water, crystal water, God-given water be unsung?
Shall the garland be forever round the poisoned cup entwined
Shall Genius aye with roses deck the chains her wings that bind?
And shall the sparkling cup that's drawn from Nature's bubbling spring
Be scorned, and looked upon as but a mean and sorry thing?
Shall no poet to the fountain bring the tribute of his lays,
And to water, beauteous water, pay a loving meed of praise?6

The key to the argument of the rest of the poem seems to be that wine and spirits neither fall from Heaven nor offer acceptable reflection to the breast of the white swan.

Not all his magic was so unprofitably antisocial, although he chose his occasions with some care. In 'On the Laying of the Atlantic Telegraph' he made a determined effort to out-Tupper Tupper:

Shout victory! victory! England hath now
A glorious vict'ry obtained,
A vict'ry though bloodless of far greater worth
Than any her prowess has gained,

For 'spite of the boisterous Atlantic at last
The telegraph cable is laid,
The Old and the New World are knit into one
And e'en as one continent made.

etc.7

and he wrote a considerable quantity of religious verse that is duller even than most Victorian religious versifying.

Of much the same quality is the work of Chas. W. Purnell (1843-1926), whose Poems were published in 1868. In a grandiose opening poem he reveals the same talent for
personification that we have observed in Bracken:

Laving her feet amid the Austral sea
Whose surges fall with reverential sound
Within her regal hall, whose dome concave
Reclines its circle on the horizon round,
New Zealand sits.

and elsewhere in the volume he reveals a penchant for off-beat mammary imagery, so it is just possible that, as far back as the eighteen-sixties, somebody 'influenced' somebody else in the colony. However, to discover the length and breadth and depth of the influence of a bad poet on a worse one would be academic beyond the limits of even this thesis, and so we shall pass discreetly on to a consideration of the Lays and Rhymes, Descriptive, Legendary, Historical, Local and Lyrical of William Hogg, which were published in 1875. In the 'Introductory Verses' to the book, Hogg apologised for his predilection for traditional subjects:

I would strike my harp again -
Tune it to tales of other years -
To legends old, which still retain
The power to draw forth maiden's tears.

They may beguile a leisure hour,
Or even hence evoke a tear,
Or stir some ablest minstrel's power
To sing wild nature round us HERE.

But HERE no castle frowns upon
The channels of our mountain streams,
To tell a tale of days gone by,
Of superstition's 'wildering dreams

. . . . . . . .

If forest grim or mountain high,
Or rugged glen or houseless wild,
Or torrents roar, or wild bird's cry,
May stir the true "poetic child"

These hills and woods, in future times
Engrafted on the minstrel's strain,
Will grace his captivating rhymes,
Though long unsung they may remain.

The glories of our evening hours
When day has left a trail behind;
Are far beyond expression's powers,
But dear to the poetic mind.
They, too, shall gild some future song,
Some bard will tell, with abler hand,
What rich sublimities belong
To this our own adopted land. 9

Thus early, poets began to look for the child born in a
marvellous year.

The poems that follow are more legendary than historical,
more lyrical than local, and what description there is, is
of the subjectively vacant kind:

A wintry robe of spotless snow
Is flung o'er Anatoki's crest;
A flowing scarf of moving clouds
Is gathered round its ample breast.
And through the sweet manuka scrub,
The sighing winds appear to mourn
The sunny days of Summer fled,
And wailing weary their return.

etc.

Like Golden, he seems to have written verse chiefly as a
recreation, finding it, as he several times laments, scant
consolation for the lack of that 'vast necessity - a wife.' 11
At the end of a lengthy and dismal lay 'Glenardoch, or the
Victim of Passion', he justifies his poems in terms reminiscent
of the hut in the swamp:

Ask ye why I have dared renew
A song which minstrels sung in vain;
When mine ere long must perish too,
Like every other meaner strain?
I tuned my unassuming lyre
To cheer my hours upon the loom;
The Muse, though lowly, beats the fire
That gladdens labor's weary doom. 12

'Retrospective Random Rhymes' gives a moving account of
his life, although it is much cluttered up with reflex
moralising:

'Tis weary work to toil for years alone,
With grubbing-hoe, bill-hook, pick, axe or spade,
Where little else one's eyes can look upon
Save ferny hill, scrub, flat, or forest glade;
Here, wilderness, undisputed, holds its own,
For human skill has little progress made
In smoothing Nature's face to make it smile;
And here three winters through I've stooped to toil.

. . . . . . . . . .
three score and ten

Long years my shoulders now unstooping bear;
Though they are not so light as years were when
The hardest labour I could laughing share,—
For I am weaker now than I was then;
Yet when I think upon the wear and tear
That I have been subjected to so long,
I marvel much that I am still so strong.

My life has been throughout incessant toil,
A battle for existence day by day;
A sort of stand-still struggle all the while
To keep cold pinching poverty at bay;
Yet in my struggles I could often smile,
Despite my foeman mostly had his way —
For hope would fill my head with some ambition
To make me deem this world not quite perdition.

etc. 13

In his old age he looks back on the act of emigration with
more honesty than many of his contemporary poets:

It is a feat, that tries and strains the mind,
To build resolves, to bid a long farewell
To parents and to friends, who have been kind,
With whom we've lived, and dearly loved to dwell:
Especially to youths who ne'er have been
A days march from their native village green.

It is a leap — a bound into the night,
A journey o'er a drear and homeless plain.
Hope's flickering lamp may be exceeding bright,
But still it cannot quite insure from pain;
The bravest heart will be by sadness smote. 14

Hogg seems to have been something of a local laureate;
several of his poems were read to 'The Nelson Artizans' Mutual Improvement Association', with what improving effect is not recorded, and his book, rather a handsome one, was published by public subscription. Surprisingly, very few of his poems are magical in character, although he is a rather wavering supporter of Temperance:

Drink, only drink, of the streamlet that cometh,
Gushing and pure from the pure mountain's side;
Life-giving treasure to bless man it roameth,
Drink of it only, 'tis ever supplied.

............
Fly from the cup that the drunkard still draineth,
Want, woe, and madness, that fearful cup fill;
All that is baleful to man it containeth,
Drink only drink of the pure mountain rill. 15

a patriot (with some reservations):

I love New Zealand - for 'tis destined yet
To be the first, the greatest, and the best
Of lands on which an austral sun can set;
Although her movements now are not quite blest,
Yet she is destined, if great men would let
Her have some time upon her limbs to rest,
Nor hasten her upon her path, to be
The young Great Britain of the Southern Seal! 16

and unquestioning in his devotion to Great Britain:

Britain's march is ever forward,
Bearing bliss to all the world;
Eastward, westward, sou'ward, nor'ward,
is her glorious flag unfurled.
Britain's mission to enlighten
With the light of liberty,
Not the bonds of slaves to tighten -
For she rules none save the free.
Britain's march is ever forward, etc.

Has she truths, she kindly spreads them:
Has she science, arts, or laws,
Freely round the world she sheds them
Without price, or praise, or pause.
Obstacles, she does surmount them,
Treads them down by field and flood;
Losses, she disdains to count them
While her work is doing good.

etc. 17

The poem goes on to point out how Britain 'long and fondly ... has cherish'd/ Freedom for its sake alone;', and then with a mental somersault worthy of any presidential or prime ministerial after-dinner speech, arrives at the punch-line:

Shall a handful of the Maori
Stop her bravest pioneers,
In their peaceful path to glory?
Britain's deeds forbid our fears!
Savage foes must be subjected -
Must acknowledge righteous laws.

Hogg was not the first, certainly he has not been the last, to believe that 'freedom for its sake alone' also involves 'subjection' for freedom's sake, though one could wish that he had not exposed colonial principles quite so indecently.
The volume also includes a drama in one act, 'The Death of Woodiglen', in which the villain labours under the disadvantage of the name 'Hugh Staylibank', the hero is called 'Capelhall', and is given such lines as 'Ha! thou detested wretch! unhand the maid!', and the dramatic action in the main consists of four characters standing around shouting at one another until one of them falls dead. It is unreadable, but might well cause a sensation if acted.

Another poet of the period, Joseph Earle Ollivant, more visitor than resident, published in 1879 Hinemoa the Maori Maiden, which was subtitled 'The Legend of Hinemoa Sung By an Aged Maori', and offered a novel excuse for its not inconsiderable short-comings:

... the paucity of the Fauna, as compared with that of other lands - the class of indigenous quadrupeds for instance being blank - is a great loss to a writer where illustration is necessary. Add to this the difficulty of imagining what modes of thought Maoris would employ, more especially under the delicate circumstances of lovemaking. As to the illustrations, I have tried to use none or few that are palpably false, or that a Maori may not be acquainted with or have heard of, owing to his intercourse with Europeans; such as those drawn from the habits of bees or deer. 18

One quotation will suffice to indicate the quality of the poem:

Trees that shed the sere and faded
Leaf in winter plants the stranger,
But the ruthless strokes of hatchet
Rings along the tracks entangled
Of the forest hoar, primeval;
And the forest-father trembles
In his dark and green recesses,
And in anguish quakes at frequent
Crash of bough and groan of noble
Kauri, monarch of the pine trees, -
Soon to lofty mast or hollow
Womb of white winged vessel fashioned, -
And his sorrow bleeds from bearded
Bough and crustated trunk at piteous
Death of stately children smitten
Low, for ever bare and crownless. 19
There are other writers who, if this study made any pretence at completeness, would have to be given the courtesy of some academic consideration. I think it tactful to leave them where they are. There is something faintly surrealistic about the dogged determination of these early poets to write, although they had little skill, very little to say, and scant hope of achieving any fame or profit by their efforts. They sit, shadowy, in the Front Room of New Zealand Poetry, clutching the cobwebby lyres and lutes and harps they have dragged in from the cowshed, the newspaper office, the spinster cottage, or Parliament Buildings, waiting for the party to begin, half-convinced that they will never be asked to play. We will leave them there, and glance at an even more shadowy group skulking in the wood-pile - the Critics.
2. W.P. Reeves, ed. *Canterbury Rhymes*. 1866, p.21
4. ibid. p.186
5. ibid. pp.202-3
6. ibid. p.156
7. ibid. p.207
10. ibid. p.243
11. ibid. p.51
12. ibid. p.41
13. ibid. p.187
14. ibid. p.70
15. ibid. p.236
16. ibid. p.175
17. ibid. pp.312-3
19. ibid. p.3
X. THE WORSHIPPERS IN THE SANCTUARY

Criticism in New Zealand

1850-1880

Inimitable very mouldly and dull. Hardly able to work. 
... Disposed to go to New Zealand and start a magazine.

Charles Dickens, Letter to Foster.

I dedicate to you all - friends or foes (it matters not, for my heart is wide enough to embrace you all.) - this little book, in the hope that it may help to elevate your minds from the grovelling objects that too frequently engage your attention.

J.G.S. Grant.

Literary criticism in this country during the period under review seems to have been rather sparse, and not much more exciting than it is today. The first magazine recorded in Iris Park's invaluable New Zealand Periodicals of Literary Interest, is The New Zealand Magazine, which was published in 1850 and ran for two issues. Neither it nor its successor The New Zealand Quarterly which appeared seven years later contained much to interest the student of poetry. In 1862 the editor of Chapman's Monthly Magazine announced in the first issue:

We are a community of brethren, having common objects in view - to reclaim and occupy the waste places of this land, to develop its latent mineral wealth, to cultivate the arts and sciences, and the practice and extension of the amenities of civilised life.²

The last 'object' would seem to refer specifically to his trade as bookseller and stationer. He had few illusions about the difficulty of getting copy, but he had some hopes:

The raw material of literature is not so plentiful in New Zealand as in London... but there is doubtless a very great amount of literary talent among us, which requires only a little judicious training to make it perennial. The aim of the Editor will be to develop a taste for writing among the colonists.
The magazine itself shows that the colonists were prepared to write with some wit and more feeling about the problems of land-selection, and the difficulties of antipodean strawberry-growing, but were shy of anything more obviously arty. The main literary interest came from an imported serial, with a few translations of Horace for those of more elevated tastes. The magazine lasted for five issues and then, with a hasty summary of the rather dull serial, folded up.

The first review of a colonial poet appears in The Southern Monthly Magazine, a more successful venture that lasted from March 1863 to February 1866. It was a criticism of Bowen's Poems, and while being fairly soathing about the vapidity of most of the contents, the reviewer judiciously mingled censure with praise:

Mr Bowen's poems are of a mixed quality. They contain some passages which, if not of a very high style of poetry, yet show a neat and careful versification, and a gentlemanly and refined mode of expression. On the other hand there are some things the like of which we never wish to see again issue from the colonial press.

and he concluded:

We think that Mr Bowen is able to write really good and pleasing verse, although a high class of poetry may be beyond his reach.

The adjectives used indicate that the poems are being judged according to social criteria, evidences of 'polite accomplishment' - neat, careful, gentlemanly, refined, pleasing, and where they offend, they offend against good taste.

The magazine ran a series of articles on 'Modern Poets' that are of some interest, although there is little about them to indicate that they were aimed at a colonial audience. The first was on Mrs Hemans, and in the course of it the writer gave his definition of poetry as 'the most beautiful expression of the most beautiful thoughts' a definition vague enough to offer plenty of scope for the exercise of
correct 'taste'. He is at great pains to arrive at a balanced judgement. After praising the poetess:

The force of her genius is expended in the attempt to grasp an ideal beauty, and to transport every subject which she handles into that upper atmosphere of light and music in which her mind sustained itself with a wonderful constancy and freedom from effort. He is careful to qualify his enthusiasm:

poetry which does not fill the mind with some distinct and well-defined idea or image can never be recognised as a power in literature. . . . we grow tired of the very spiritual style sustained throughout.

In later issues he praises Southey for 'the uniform loftiness of his aims, the tender purity of his feelings, and the dramatic grandeur of his execution' and sees his one fault as being occasional lapses of 'good taste'. In an article on Keats, too, his idea of poetry as a form of social distinction is obvious:

He was the CLASSICAL POET of the modern world . . . his poetry has gained a great hold upon a certain class of minds in the community, and that class usually the most influential from its culture and talent.

Six months later, in an essay on Alexander Smith, he praises him for his 'clear-cut, cameo-like images, both new and startling, with not one word too much for conveying the full force of what was meant', although the example he gives hardly seems to support his judgement - 'an opulent soul/Dropt in my path like a great cup of gold/ All rich and rough with stories from the gods'. In his discussion of Shelley he reproduces Browning's distinction between the subjective and the objective poet, and praises the poet for his 'classicism': 'Shelley was an elegant scholar, and the Greek fire had kindled in his soul a flame everywhere visible in his writings.'

It is hardly surprising that so refined a sensibility should have been affronted at the productions of William
Golder and John Barr. In an article in Volume III, No. 21, entitled 'Helicon in New Zealand', he reviews four local poets: Golder's New Zealand Minstrelsy, Barr's Poems and Songs, Bowen's Poems, and Phasmata, or Visions and Ghost Stories in Verse by the Rev. John Duffus, M.A. The article begins with some optimism:

It would be a mistake to suppose that the genius of the country was lying dormant. On the contrary, the fresh influences and inspirations of the young country were all the while producing their effects, even as the 'old poetic mountains' of Greece produced their effects on the fathers of poetry.

and he even anticipates the later 'regionalists' by dividing the offerings into two camps:

We have now ... the productions of four New Zealand poets, of whom two owe their inspiration to the stern rigour of a southern atmosphere, and two to the balmier influences of the north.

On Golder he pours well-bred scorn:

It would be a delicate task to attempt to ascertain with exactness the prevailing character of Mr Golder's genius, but he possesses some peculiarities which seem capable of being pointed out with sufficient clearness. He evidently entertains the belief that poetical sublimity and grammatical accuracy are in inverse ratio to one another, and the more there is of the one the less there must be of the other.

Barr is seen as a competent versifier who gains some immunity from critical scrutiny by hiding behind a smokescreen of Scots vernacular, but whose talents are essentially commonplace. By contrast with the rough productions of his compatriots, Bowen's stock has risen. He has

The education, the elegance, the refinement, and classical taste which fully justify him, not only in cultivating the lyric muse for his own entertainment, but also in aspiring to publish a volume of correct, harmonious and pleasing verse.

The article ends on a somewhat patronising note:

We are glad to find that the New Zealand bush has an inspiration for its inhabitants, and we cordially welcome any proof that the labour of the axe and spade, or the monotony of a rural life, is relieved in some of the out-districts by the pursuit of literature.
and with a determination that, in the interests of maintaining quality, there will be no protection of local industries:

Our duty to literature itself will not allow us to permit false wares to pass without detection; and if our criticism seems in some respects harsh and unnecessarily minute, it is because we believe a correct taste in literature to be a thing not merely desirable, as a source of amusement and recreation, but of vital importance to the tone and character of the nation.

In the days of the Southern Monthly Magazine, critical dialogue was not as advanced as it was later to become, and there were no 'Letters to the Editor' following the review. Goldar, however, was understandably wary in his later volumes, and although he took no more pains with his grammar, indulged in the stock reply of the critically-outraged poet in the Preface to The Philosophy of Love:

I am no way averse to sound criticism; but let my critic prove himself master of the subject on which he exercises his censorial powers, and show he can give a better rendering to the ideas put forth, before he vomits out his invective and abuse; let him do this, and then we will bow in respect to rebuke: but a critic who can shew nothing but maliciousness; him we utterly scorn. 10

The literary editor of the Southern Monthly remained anonymous, but anonymity was not to continue in fashion long. The next critic to gain distinction in the infant colony, J.G.S. Grant, brought out a number of magazines in Dunedin, editing and writing them almost single-handed. The most important of these was the Saturday Review, which appeared in 1864 and ran irregularly for a hundred and nineteen issues until 1871. Between the years 1866-70, it was supplemented by The Delphic Oracle, edited and written by the same hand, until, the oracle not meeting with recognition in the way of a University appointment which he felt he deserved, he abandoned prophecy for
philosophy, and wrote instead *The Stoic*, twelve issues of which appeared in 1871-2.

His reviews of literature were occasional and often curious. In an essay on 'England's Antiphon' he slates Tennyson's theology:

Tennyson is the foremost of these 'reverend doubters'. His poetry is simply a spurious jingling of words and lines. His religious poetry is a sort of accommodation of the gospel tale - he flatly contradicts the spirit of the gospel in which he professes to believe.¹¹

About Dr Macdonald's *The Disciple* he is somewhat less than charitable:

These poems are contemptible futilities . . . empty trifles . . . The success that has marked Macdonald's literary career is substantial proof of the sterility of the British Muse in these materialistic times.¹²

Far from being optimistic about the prospects of literature in a new country, he anticipates only a gradual decline:

In Livy . . . you will find that transplanted plants, physical or moral, never equal in solid merits the parent stem shooting forth healthily and luxuriantly in its own indigenous soil under its own native sky. . . . even in Australia and New Zealand we observe with sorrow symptoms . . . that unmistakeably indicate that already the change for the worse has made itself visible.¹³

What the dreaded symptoms were he omits to mention; they can only be guessed at. Certainly he manages to locate perversity in the strangest places, as witness this thunder cracker on the death of Dickens:

Now that he is dead, let us hope the atmosphere of the Republic of Letters may brighten up and become free from the noxious and lethal malaria with which it has been surcharged since the death of Scott. Dickens pandered to the debased tastes of his age; made money but degraded literature. Not one of his vulgar effusions will survive this century. The next century will point the finger of scorn, on account of the evanescent popularity of its favourite writer of romance. Before the literature of a Dickens can be relished by a classical mind, the brain must first of all be clouded with the Stygian fumes of tobacco, and maddened with alcoholic influences. The Dickens style
is coarse, grotesque and filthy. The ideas are earthy, sensual and demoralizing... The man had no soul, no yearning after the true, the good and the beautiful in nature, art, philosophy and religion.

eetc. 14

If this is a model of trenchantly vituperative criticism, then his demand to the people of Dunedin that they appoint him Professor of Classics in the newly set-up University could also be a model for those who are anxious to give an impression of self-confidence in their application for similar positions; it comes in the concluding paragraphs of the Delphic Oracle:

We feel that we have an almost apostolic right to address you in this fashion towards the end of our labours. We have been injured, insulted, and robbed on your behalf; only one drop more is wanting to fill up the cup of your iniquity. Let your University shut the door of the Classical chair against us, and we will depart - assured that not one of them will prosper after such a flagrant and final insult. If they can find a better scholar, or a man of purer morals, or a loftier genius, we call upon them to reject us (Eminent writers at Home have characterised some of our compositions as "the emanations of genius of Titanic grandeur - not equalled since the days of Milton") But, if not, then let them shut the door against "the only scholar and man of genius in the Southern Hemisphere" according to some of the best authorities in Europe; and verily, it would be better for each of them that a millstone were hung around his neck, and that he were swung from Tauloa's head into the deep blue Pacific. To ourselves, it is a matter of indifference. We seek that position, believing that Providence has opened the door to us. Woe, then, to any man who shall dare to shut it in our face. If anyone, in fine, says that we have not written the truth in this remarkable volume, which contains more original thought than Bacon's Essays - let him be anathema.15

Strangely enough, considering his Almighty influence, he didn't get the job. If he had, then the tone of The New Zealand Magazine which was published by a committee made up largely of Otago University staff in 1866-7 might have been rather more lively.
This periodical was for the most part political and academic. Articles on 'The Definition of the Pronoun' and 'The Discipline of the Intellect' appeared side by side with dissertations on provincial government and characters in Shakespeare. The only notice it condescended to take of local literature was a review of Bracken's 'Flowers of the Free Lands' and by so doing it provides the first instance of wholeheartedly 'academic' criticism in this country. Considering the tone of this first effort, it is not surprising that the poetical heirs of Bracken have resented academic comment on their work ever since.

The opening gambit is familiar:

It is difficult to convince men that there is an 'art of poetry' and that no genius whatever, still less any of that common material we call talent, will enable a man to write true poetry unless he studies this art. 16

It is to be expected that those who live on, rather than by, literature should demand that it is something to be 'studied'; less predictable, however, is the delightful arrogance that follows:

Bracken has had the ill-luck to be applauded by the crowd. If ever he is to enter into the sanctuary where the true worshippers gather together, and to stand as a priest before them, the applause which has bewildered him must become rue in his mouth.

As usual the critic achieves his end more by devastating one-upmanship than by any precise comments, but he does think Bracken sufficiently salvagable to warrant some helpful advice:

Bracken will, indeed, probably learn more of the true art of poetry by the study of the classic poets of Greece and Rome, than by giving too exclusive attention to English poets.

Whether or not Bracken ever enrolled for Greek I at Otago is not recorded.

An anonymous reviewer in the Otago Daily Times was more favourably disposed towards Bracken's wild bush blossoms:
A poet of the people should be a man of gentle sympathies - one who loves and understands the children, who are nearer to Heaven than we are. That this is the case with Mr. Bracken is abundantly proved by some of his child poems. 'Little Violet', 'Bush Children', 'Our Little Darling', 'A Dream of Childhood', all tell us how

In pure childhood's thoughtless bliss
A taste of heaven and earth we get
More of the other life than this.

And 'A Mother's Grave' is perhaps, in thought and sentiment, the most truly poetical of all his lyrics.

As criticism, this is obviously far more 'in touch' with the poet's aims and ambitions, and must have brought a glow to his heart. With the perspective afforded us by an almost clinical study of the imagery of his verse, however, it is hard to avoid an ironical smile at the unknown critic's concluding paragraph:

The flowers are of a sweet and homely kind, fit to adorn the drawing-room or the chamber of our young daughters; not one of them has a poisoned chalice or contains the germs of the deadly fruits of passion; they are all wholesome and pleasant. 17

Introductions are, of course, hardly to be trusted as critical documents, but are often revealing in what they omit to say. The Rev. Rutherford Waddell, in his Introduction to Lays of the Land of Maori and Moa, takes a realistic look at the situation of Poetry, before moving on to a specific consideration of Bracken:

One is not . . . surprised to find that the younger nations - America and Australasia - have not as yet produced any poetry to which the title "own born" could be unhesitatingly applied. The conditions are not present. Before there can be a national literature, there must be a national character; and a national character, like an individual, is of slow growth and late maturity . . . But if one does not find it yet, one must needs look for it - hope for it - work for it, if one can. No people can be great or good, can live or last, without its singers. Truly, if they
are its final product, they are also its crown. Tons of iron and of copper, firkins of the best butter, and ship loads of frozen sheep: these are excellent. But after these, after the chemist, the geologist, the ethnologist, shall come the poet worthy of that name; the true son of God shall come singing his songs. One therefore, who wishes well and wealth to his nation will gladly welcome the first stray notes faintly heralding the approaching dawn.18

He is more vague, but just as obviously sincere, in his praise of Bracken's verse:

There is about nearly every one of the poems in this volume that impalpable something, which we can neither define nor describe, but which, like all true poetry, takes captive the soul.19

As illustration he cites, among others 'the very noble "Ode on the Opening of the Sydney Exhibition"' which we have already considered. With a touch of candour he admits that 'a very few of these poems have perhaps more of local than of general interest', but hastens to pour balm on the glancing wound:

Mr Bracken shows that he can touch some of the higher heights and the deeper depths of life as well. We have examples of this in 'Annihilation', 'Not Understood', and notably the profound sonnet, 'The Bird and the Idol' - a sonnet which is not unworthy the master hand of Mrs Browning or Rossetti. Lewis Morris has very truly said -

Most precious all; yet this is sure,
The song that longest shall endure
Is simple, sweet, and pure.

And these songs of Mr Bracken conform to this - they are simple in the original sense of that word. Many of them are sweet, and all are pure. They exhibit a high faith in God and Nature, and the "dear love of comradeship". Of course, one could easily pick out faults, but that may be left to those to whom hissing comes handier; and it may be good for these to remember that after all hissing is the only sound in Nature that produces no echo.20

It might be possible to dispute the validity of his criteria, but these being granted, there is no doubt that his judgement of Bracken's work is just. After all, the poems are,
indubitably, 'simple' and 'sweet', and superficially at least, 'pure', and it is conceivable that, if fashions in consolation were to change, as they are very likely to do, we might find the reading public once again endorsing Waddell's remarks.

Perhaps Bracken's grandest attempt to ensure that his claims on the shrine of the Southern Muse would be recognised by posterity was 'Musings in Maoriland', a monumental collection of his work published in 1890, dedicated to Lord Tennyson, garnished with a foreword on the 'Rise and Progress of New Zealand' by the Prime Minister, Sir Robert Stout, and with a Preface by Sir George Grey. Stout's foreword is largely concerned with the history of the colony, and he does not seem to have enquired much of the contents of the volume, since he talks of Bracken's 'poem' in the singular, but he concludes with a somewhat backhanded compliment:

Mr Bracken need not be ashamed of his efforts. When the history of our literature is written, his poem will not be forgotten, and in the future will not the labours of the writer be ranked as high as the work of the statesman or the warrior? 21

Grey's Preface is distinctly cagey in its refusal to come face to face with the question of Bracken's competence as a poet. He begins:

It is already recognised by many in New Zealand and elsewhere, that Mr Bracken possesses that deep sympathy with his fellow men and with nature, which, united with purity of taste, imagination, and power of expression, go so far to form the character of a true poet. 22

-a cautiously ambiguous sentence, which leaves it in doubt as to whether Bracken does in fact possess anything more than sympathy with man and nature:

Several of the pieces in this volume will undoubtedly be admitted to bear the impress of merit; and those treating of the sublime and beautiful scenery of New Zealand, are remarkable for their fidelity to nature.
This alone is a merit of a very high order, for every country should have its distinctive character faithfully expressed in a literature which is a reflex of the land in which it had its birth. 23

It is rather sad that Grey did not mention the titles of the 'several' out of the hundred-odd poems in the book; it would be interesting to know which of them Grey saw as 'remarkable for their fidelity to nature'. However, he had hit on a congenial theme, and elaborated on it in words that were to be echoed many times in later years, although they have little relevance to Bracken:

Such a national literature must, in each case, be greatly influenced by the nature of the country and the character of the native people with whom the early settlers came in contact. The more stubborn the conflict of races may have been, and the more trying the struggles undergone by the early settlers, the sterner and more earnest, even sometimes more melancholy, the character of the native literature is likely to become. In the case of New Zealand, the scenery in which so many early disasters and heart-breaking toils were undergone, was often weird-like and surpassingly grand, and at other times of unusual beauty and softness. The savage fierceness of the natives was also frequently tempered with a knightly generosity and fidelity and honourable bearing, which are not often surpassed. Thus all the elements appear to be here combined, which may originate and mature a literature equally suited to rouse a people to the heights of heroism, or to soothe them down to the tranquil and blessing-producing joys of domestic life. 24

So little, in fact, has any but the last line of this to do with Bracken, that it is difficult to read it as anything but an expression of dissatisfaction with the poems being prefaced. That this is so is evident from the next paragraph:

The sphere of Mr Bracken's labours may, perhaps, be thought by some, to be too circumscribed to possess any high degree of interest . . .

But the implied censure was intelligently qualified, in such a way as to bring out the real difficulties of a pioneer poet - difficulties which Bracken made little effort to surmount, but which must nevertheless be taken into account in any judgement that is passed on his work:
... but it should be remembered that the early poets of a new country give the first vivid descriptions of hitherto unrecorded varieties of scenery, of new trees and flowers, of the habits of new birds and animals, of the appearance, beliefs and legends of a newly discovered race of men. If, then, our early poets, with warm sympathies and truth of language, describe the sentiments and reveries that these fresh materials and their endless comparisons and combinations excite in the impassioned or meditative human mind, and especially the incidents which spring from the mingling of two such different races, they must create a present and lasting interest in many readers. 25

Once again, the praise is carefully ambiguous - it may not, and for the most part does not, apply to Bracken at all; it is more a prescription than a description, but so carefully composed that it is unlikely that the poet would have realised that the Knight of Kawau (who seems to have lent Bracken sixty pounds to help him publish the book 26) was covering himself against the jibes of posterity.

The only extended piece of critical theorising I have come across in this period is an article on 'The Nature of Art' by James Edward Fitzgerald in the Transactions of the New Zealand Institute of 1869. It is for the most part derivative, but is interesting in that it bypasses discussion of the colonial situation at points where it would seem directly relevant to his theory. He is, for instance, interested in the relationship of art to 'reality':

Within these limits [the natural laws governing the means of expression] subject only to the conditions thus imposed, the artist roams free and uncontrolled in a paradise of his own fancy, peopled by the creations of his own teeming brain. And so, in and around the material world, and out of elements of which he himself is a part, man weaves a new world, which hangs like a vision around the coarser elements of matter, and by the spells of his creative fancy, he calls into existence the world of Art. 27

and then qualifies this in terms which one would have expected to suggest some colonial parallel:

I may seem, by what I have said, to imply that the
idea of material beauty is wholly independent of the physical laws which rule the operations of nature. But upon this point we should speak with . . . caution. For we do not know that there may not be some necessary connection between the laws of nature and the manifestation of beauty. How can we say that the solemn beauty of the primeval forest is not an essential and necessary consequence of the laws by which the forest grew . . . The more perfectly fitted things are for the uses for which they were designed, the more beautiful do they frequently appear. . . . I say not this is a universal law; but I do say that its frequent appearance is sufficient to raise a doubt, whether the production of beauty may not . . . be inherently and necessarily connected with the mechanism of nature.

But apart from the mention of the 'primeval forest', the only time that he associates 'Art' with the colony, is to bewail its absence at the dinner-table:

Over the Art of dining in the Colony I draw a veil. It seems to me a subject to be spoken of only as amongst the sacred memories of the past.28

What interim conclusions can we come to about the evolution of 'New Zealand Poetry' by 1880? Only, I think, that it had hardly begun to evolve as a recognisably distinct thing. The difficulties of communication, the comparative scarcity of poets - only forty books of verse in all had been published here by this date - and the multifariousness of their English and Scottish models prevented any community of feeling that might distinguish a New Zealand 'school'.

However, what poets there were do seem to have held certain attitudes in common. The tension felt between Here and There, for instance, although for the most part productive only of a cloudy nostalgia, colours much of the verse even of transcendental poets like Bowen and Broome who had every prospect of returning to England, and is a recurring theme of those who had reconciled themselves to ending their lives in this country. More significantly, the colonial adventure brought poets and would-be poets face to face with two large problems that
could be evaded or ignored in England, that of the poet's relation to his audience, or his deliberate choice of an audience, and that of his relation to his environment, also, for many, a choice, although often a blind one. It is on these issues that the poets of the period divide. Those who, like Bowen, look to an English audience, tend to rely on infinity to bridge the twelve thousand mile gap; they value the vague and the introspective, are anxious to show that art is a thing of the mind, universal, and tend to rely on the superior mobility, in space and time, of dreams in preference to experience. Those, on the other hand, who resign themselves to catering for an antipodean audience are more free to deal with real concerns and places, but can establish their productions as 'poetry' only by paying more than usual attention to the needs and preconceptions of their limited audience. Thus Golder emphasises the material rewards of the settler's life, Barr sets himself up as a community entertainer, Bracken makes a considerable effort to 'poetise' Australasian events.

A parallel distinction, that did not endure much beyond this period, was that between the working-class poet and the gentleman-poet. As we have seen, this was almost the only critical distinction employed, and it operated in much the same way as later 'intellectual/non-intellectual' or 'academic/non-academic' - to obscure the real issues (or the fact that there weren't any) and to provide a pseudo-rationalisation for hastily conceived judgements and long smouldering animosities.

Criticism, as we have seen, was conservative, anxious to ensure that colonial verse was up to standards conceived elsewhere, and it was as effective as such normative criticism usually is. Golder declined to improve his grammar, Bracken made no attempt to please the gentlemen of the university, and instead of trying to produce correct,
pleasant and gentlemanly imitations of the classics lost himself in a surrealistic mammary labyrinth(?) without which New Zealand verse would be much the poorer.

'New Zealand Poetry', for critics and poets alike, was something to be aimed at, but it was conceived only dimly, in the same way as Utopia was conceived - England over again, only better; and the accident of a good poem - so much more difficult both to achieve and to perceive than a 'Poetry' since the sudden silencing of the Poetical brass band that heralds its arrival can so easily be mistaken for momentary deafness - had yet to happen here.
1. Iris Park, *New Zealand Periodicals of Literary Interest*. 1962
4. ibid. p.84
5. ibid. I.4
6. ibid. I.6
7. ibid. I.7
8. ibid. II.17
9. ibid. III.21
12. ibid. p.217
13. ibid. p.287
14. ibid. p.369
15. Grant, *Delphic Oracle*. 1866-70, 22
16. *New Zealand Magazine*. 1876-7, II.6
17. *Otago Daily Times*. April 10th., 1877
19. ibid. p.10
20. ibid. pp.10-11
22. ibid. p.21
23. ibid. p.21
24. ibid. p.22
25. ibid. p.22-3
   Auckland Public Library, Grey Collection.
27. *Transactions of the New Zealand Institute*. 1869, p.254
28. ibid. p.262
XI. SPARDRIFT AND SPOONDRIFT

Jessie Mackay (1864–1938)

It cooleth the brow, it cooleth the brain,
It maketh the faint one strong again;
It comes o'er the sense like a breeze from the sea,
All freshness, like infant purity.
O! water, bright water for me, for me!


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 Jessic Mackay, Land of the Morning.

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Jessie Mackay was the first of New Zealand's more competent versifiers to be born in this country. Paradoxically she is the one whose Muse is most obviously domiciled elsewhere. She was born on a Canterbury sheep station in 1864, but her interests soon forsok the narrowly pastoral, and she became a Celtic poetess, a prohibitionist, a vegetarian, and, in her biographer, 'a defender of the words of minorities, and of the unfortunate and under-privileged everywhere. . . . an advocate of Irish and Scottish Home Rule, of Liberalism, feminism, and internationalism.'

Her verse was in many ways out of tune with her other preoccupations as her nationalism with her internationalism, and her vegetarianism with the economy of her native land. Like Bowen before her, she found it very difficult to reconcile the conflicting claims of life and art — in fact often the only thing that the two seemed to have in common was that they were both centred overseas.

A poem in her first volume, published in 1889 when she was twenty-five reveals something of the elevation of her concept of poetry, and hints at the conflicts lurking behind it. It is on the death of Longfellow:
Was ever heart so full of love and praise?
Was ever voice as sweetly tuned as his?
He touched that wondrous harp the human heart
And with his lightest touch came harmony.
All lovely thoughts, true simple images,
And tender human sympathies were his;
Although his soul was ever straining up
Towards the noble, infinite, sublime.
His songs were like the moonlight, pure and calm,
That sheds a mellow glory over all.
The maid of Acadie shall never die,
Nor "Hiawatha", strong in truth and might.
Yes, they abide, a lovely record pure,
Of human love and sorrow, life and death.
But he who called them from the world of fancy
Has laid the pilgrim staff for ever down.²

The 'although' is significant, showing her awareness of the tension involved in her view of the poet, the two directions in which she sees him as facing—downwards, the direction of sympathy, the movement towards the real, and upwards, the direction of vision or prophecy, the strained movement towards a transcendental Nobility, Infinity, Sublimity.

In another poem in the same book, she announces her decision to reject the highest form of poetry, and to listen to the 'wail of the world' instead:

Parnassus Mount! Parnassus Mount!
Where, blest, the crowned shadows glide,
The wail of the world and her sin and strife
Die at the foot of thy mountain side.
But I — far down where sordid men
In the world's great market buy and sell,
My way is set, and my grave is dug —
Parnassus Mount, farewell, farewell!³

The belief that Poetry and Life are mutually exclusive categories seems to follow equally logically from the 'visionary' pretensions of the Romantics, and the theory that Art should be a comfort and solace for minds broken and disappointed by life, and Jessie Mackay's decision that she could not serve both seems to have been a sincere one, although she did not, like Bowen, abandon poetry for a life of action.
She returns to the theme in her next book, published two years later. 'Dreamer and Doer' is a poetic dialogue between an idealised man of action, Eric Gray, and an equally idealised poet, Guy Brand. Eric, although more at home shooting panthers than indulging in literary conversation, has a high opinion of the poet:

the loves and hates of Eric Gray
Are plain and vigorous, like himself;
They lack the calm, far-reaching, conquering power
That marks supreme the loves and hates of you,
Guy Brand, the poet and philosopher. ¹

And the poet, although he demurs a little at the flattery, modestly admits:

Yes; I have sent my spirit roaming up
Amid the holy stillness of the stars,
Till nigh the ear of sense was purified
To catch the psalm of great infinity
That rolls from ever on from world to world
Until it strikes against the Heaven-Gate.
And I am never lonely, never sad,
But dear dream-women come and comfort me;
And songs unworded are not hid from me.
For on a chord the spirit wings away
Down sweet dim esplanades by tideless seas,
With tender sparrows sporting on the sands;
And dreamy griefs she knows that are not pain.

However, he is not content with the ideal world that is his to command - 'dream-women', 'songs unworded', 'tideless seas'; the 'poet-vision' cries out for a bite of surf:

I burnt the student lamp,
But you have watched long nights by camping fires
Lest flame that scared the panther should attract
Black demon men, than panther fiercer far.
And you have fought long days, and have outpoured
On Freedom's shrine libations holiest, -
The alien blood that flowed not for its own,
But for the world-wide brotherhood of pain.
The dark old floods that cradled on their banks
The baby nations, you have tracked them up
To lakes primeval, with bright savage birds
Half tame with wonder drinking at their founts.
You have been dowered with love by noble souls, -
Such love as grows not in our common ways,
The languid flower of time and circumstance;
But like the Hindoo magic-flower that springs
To ripe perfection in a single night;
So this, by hovering death and daring forced
To splendid fullness, sweet abiding bloom.
Ah me! the rich red current of your veins!
The pulseless ichor running pale in mine.

Eric denies nothing, not even the magical love-affairs,
but says that, contrasted with the ethereal navigation of
the poet, his trips up primitive rivers seem dull:

> what I did I have done, nothing more.
I have not sunk from everlasting war
Of upper waves to everlasting peace
And oozy tangles of Nereus' halls,
Where dead men's bones as white as ivory
Shine fair in Amphitrite's coral bowers.
I have not seen where stately Juno's smile
Threw glints auroral on Olympian snows.
I have not been caught up in Freya's car
The storm cloud, edged with flying sheets of foam

One would have thought that at this point Guy, if he had any
sense of shame, would have interjected 'Nor have I!', but he
maintains a damning silence, and Eric concludes with a parable:

> A Count of Italy - you know the tale -
Gave up his title and his broad estates
To his young brother, and in cloister dim
Tossed on his holy vows. The younger said
'Ah, brother, you have given earth to me,
But heaven you have reserved unto yourself.'
If there's a moral point it, Poet Guy.

For the young Jessie Mackay it would seem that there was
nothing 'poetic' about the real world, and nothing 'real'
about the poetic world. The two are as distinct as earth
and Heaven. The problem is much the same as that faced
by Stephen in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man -
the odourless, nameless flowers that are the fruits of
Stephen's frenzy of devotion are the religious equivalent
of Guy Brand's 'songs unworlde' and 'dream-women'. The
crucial difference between the two lies in the fact that
whereas Stephen ultimately rejects the spiritual bouquet
in favour of the more accessible reality of stinking
cabbage, Jessie Mackay's poet figures to himself an
alternative 'reality' as vague and romantic as his poetic vision. The panthers, black demon men, noble souls that 'dower with love' the man of action are hollow echoes of romantic novels, just as the 'psalm of great infinity' which the ear has to be purified to hear, may prove, when listened to with a more critical attention, suspiciously like the local church choir.

Eighteen years later, in Land of the Morning, she was still circling around the same problem. Art is now seen as a retired campaigner's paradise. It is still a dreamy haven, but the entrance fee has been raised - one must qualify in Life first.

"Behold I come into thy garden, my beautiful brother of songs -
Fled from the arrows of noon to the slumberous haven of palms,-
To the bower of the snow-feathered dove as she coos in her languor and longs,-
To the honey-sweet droops of the purple that fringe the meridian calms.

Behold I come into thy garden, for an hour in the scent-laden dell,
To comfort the rock-blistered foot with the cool of the emerald mead,
To rest the sick eye, desert-weary, on vistas of pure immortelle,
To dream with the sumptuous lily of Nile where the rivulets lead."

"Thou art welcome as dew to me brother, thou toiler in outland ways!
For ungarlanded comest thou not to the bournes of the Garden of Art.
Whence cometh the gleam on thy brow, the argentine circle of sprays?
Thy wand of the mountain pine? - the red blossom over thy heart?"

"That silvery edelweiss garland I won on the ledge of the scaur,
High up where the sight is giddy, by the nest of the dread lammergeier.
The wand that I won in the forest by devious marches and far
Is the rod of the cause of the people I carry through flood and through fire."
And the blossom as scarlet as blood, the single, the starry, the strong,
Is the Alpine love that is nurtured in clefts of the toiler's life, -
The love that is sought not in languour nor chanted in zephyrous song,
But held in the heart of the storm when the soul has been wed to a wife."

Then one who had hearkened entranced to their words, the Parnassian twain,
Cried, "O to be hence with the voyager outland and upland, my heart!
Perish the poppy of slumber, the hush of the rose's reign!
Where man liveth, loveth, and dieth, there - there is my garden of art!" 6

This was her last poetic word on the subject. Over the next thirty years of her life her interests gradually shifted more and more in the direction of social work, although she continued to write verse. Her changed attitude is evident in two letters preserved among Johannes Andersen's papers in the Auckland Institute library. The first is dated August the twenty-first, 1907:

I like the poem you enclosed, with the liking that in my mind is the best of true poetry. Do not think I disparage your gift when I tell you that in my mind it lies there - in personal lyric feeling translated into graceful and melodious verse. Could one say better? It is pathos, tenderness, fire, and melody that count in poetry . . . 7

and the second, July the fifteenth, 1935:

behold I am perpetrating another little jeu d'esprit of the sort for next spring - by no means all the stuff in hand, only a fraction, but all that can see the light of day now. But you can only see it under a magnifying glass! and my heart is really in the Prohibition leaflets I'm dropping wherever they can find lodgement, in view of our deadly dangerous poll in November, with all the dice loaded against us - for we're in Armageddon already I think - and yet with a star in front of us. 8

It is not surprising then, that we find Jessie Mackay's verse pulled in two directions - towards the 'magical', the socially useful, and towards the 'poetical', the sublime vision. It is tempting to locate the cause of her failure to write poems that would endure in her inability to yoke
these two impulses together. This would be too slick, and altogether too patronising, but it does seem that 'Poetry', in the guise both of commitment and the 'psalm of infinity', came between her and the poems which, by virtue of her verbal facility at least, she should have been able to write.

The magic she attempted operated in many different directions. In her first book she has Kiplingesque verses on the death of Gordon:

Come quickly or we perish! Death is on every side;
Ever the strong men fall, and floweth the crimson tide.
The Mahdi strikes without with his dusky myriads strong;
And the cry goes up from the city, 'How long, O Lord, How long'

And still he stands unbent; he has held Khartoum a year;
And Gordon's name in the desert is a name of love and fear -
Fear to his countless foemen, love to the weak and frail.
But the hosts of darkness gather - shall the right or the wrong prevail?

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Most brave and true of Britons, the grandest man of the age,
Left to the African savage - the fanatic Mahdi's rage.
A nobler spirit wakes and chafes at cold delay
And the aid so long denied is sent on its tardy way.

But ever the circle narrows around the fated town;
And the hopes of its brave defenders are sinking lower down.

But their chief's unchanging heart is fixed on heaven above;
Firm as the earth's foundations his faith, that naught could move.

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Well with the hero now! he is gone to his home on high;
He is crowned in the glory of heaven above the starry sky.
But alas for the darkened page that tells of Gordon's fate,
Where gloom in an ominous shadow the terrible words "Too Late"

It has not quite the swing of Kipling - in fact at times, as in the penultimate stanza quoted, it has an almost McGonegallian lurch - but the intention is recognisably the same. Such verse needs the shadow of a nation looming behind it - something large enough and dense enough to give an appearance of solidity to the transparent simplicities
(a less doggedly impartial critic might prefer 'inanities') of which it is composed - 'love to the weak and the frail', 'Hosts of darkness', 'shall the right or the wrong prevail', 'the chief's unchanging heart' and, in a stanza that I haven't quoted, 'He offered his life for them on God's great altar-stone'. These are clichés, but they worked, or we may presume that they worked, because they were parasitic upon the great cliché of Empire that was the nineteenth century Englishman's way of finding an elevated psychic niche for himself in the divine scheme of things; since clichés are always more portable than living ideas, which need some sustaining contact with reality, it is not surprising that they flourished at the Antipodes. Events nearer home, however, had no such ghostly prop, and the arrest of Te Whiti at Parihaka in 1881 called forth only a feeble parody:

"Forward" the Colonel said:
Was there a man dismayed?
No, for the heroes knew
There was no danger
Their not to reckon why,
Their not to bleed or die,
Their but to trample by,
Each dauntless ranger
etc.

A more solemn effort was her poem on the burial of Sir John McKenzie, published in a little booklet From the Maori Sea. Alan Mulgan called it 'the finest occasional poem in our native literature.'

They played him home to the House of Stones,
All the way, all the way,
To his grave in the sound of the winter sea.
The sky was dour, the sky was grey.
They played him home with the chieftain's dirge
Till the wall was wed to the rolling surge!
They played him home with a sorrowful will
To his grave at the foot of the Holy Hill;
And the pipes went mourning all the way.

Strong hands that struck for right
All the day, all the day,
Folded now in the dark of earth -
The veiled dawn of the upper way!
Strong hands that struck with his
From days that were to the day that is
Carry him now from the house of woe
To ride the way the Chief must go;
And his peers went mourning all the way.

Son and brother at his right hand
All the way, all the way!
And 0 for them and 0 for her
Who stayed within, the dowie day!

Son and brother and near of kin
Go out with the chief that never comes in!
And of all who loved him far and near
'Twas the nearest most that held him dear;
And his kin went mourning all the way.

The clan went on with the pipes before
All the way, all the way;
A wider clan than ever he knew
Followed him home that dowie day.
And who were they of the wider clan?
The landless man and the No Man's man,
The man that lacked and the man unlearned,
The man that lived but as he earned;
And the clan went mourning all the way.

The heart of New Zealand went beside
All the way, all the way,
To the resting-place of her Highland chief;
Much she thought she could not say.
He found her a land of many domains,
Maiden forest and fallow plains;
He left her a land of many homes,
The pearl of the world where the sea-wind roams,
And New Zealand went mourning all the way.

The little 'mystical' touches - 'House of Stones', 'Holy Hill', 'the veiled dawn of the upper way' - and the obvious sincerity of the emotion cannot disguise the fact that it is not his land legislation that makes the panegyric possible, but the accidental felicity of his having been born a Scot and subsequently knighted. If he had been plain Bill Smith of Horororo (or Arawata) no amount of Liberalism would have made such a traditional expression of grief possible. The poet would have been obliged either to ignore the occasion entirely, or to discover a new formula which would adjust an old emotion to an unfamiliar situation.

In her next, and most ambitious volume, Land of the Morning, she seems to be making a conscious attempt to bring magic
closer to poetry, to bring what Browning had called an 'ultimate view'\textsuperscript{13} to bear on immediate social concerns. The message of 'Mother and Child: 1899', for instance, is simple, substantially that of Bowen's 'Battle of the Free' written forty years earlier — that England expects, and the colonies will do their duty, in any war that happens to be going — but it is complicated a little in the delivery:

High the golden Mother prayeth, "Child, if blood of mine bewray eth
In the wind-tossed hair of thee, or mist-enwreathen brow,
In the swelter of the moon-tide, in the homing of the moon-tide —
Child, if thou be a child, stand beside me now!
Gold as gold I do not seek for; horse and gun I do not speak for, —
Nay, nor men of thine to come, duty-driven cold:
Only in the clouds of thunder ere the lightning shear asunder,
Solace of the baby hands, baby prattle bold.
As a widowed mother mourning, to her hoyden daughter turning,
Finds her instant at her need, loyal-hearted, great,
Womaned in an hour of weeping, — so I look to thee for reaping.
Child, if thou be a child, 'tis the hour of fate!"
Golden child to golden mother, mouth to mouth, nor by another! —
Hands that speak before the tongue in the island way
Weave the will of our New Zealand, her, the lovelier later Sea-land,
Druid, Viking in her blent; thus she says her say:—
"Little hands but firm in doing, though the weft be red with rueing; —
Take them in the mirk of doom; hold them fast above.
The gift within them lying too costly is for buying;
Costly but it goes, yea, for love is love!
When the star of empire whitely shone in peace I babbledd lightly
Of thy slower fashion and my winged feet;
Now the clouds have over-ridden; dart the bats no longer hidden;
Bold am I in daughterhood; in my duty fleet.
Mother mine, accept my giving; thine they are in death or living;
Reddest blood and whitest hand - this they drew from thee -
Orient hearts and unforgetful, chafing at the blind and fretful
Gnats that sting for jealousy, shamers of the free!
Little hands, but hold them, Mother. Sun nor sea has crowned another
With the iron crown of queenhood since the world began
Like to thee for God's evangal in the wilderness where angels
Fled in hopeless horror from the Afric night of man.
Treachery, unfaith, forsaking, hate of ages covert breaking!
Burning jet of scarlet from the fountain heart of thee! -
Hush! the day of words is ended; straitly love and death are blended;
Mother mine, they gather home; take my gift and me!"14

The traditional counters that gave a recognised, if inflated, value to the poem on the death of Gordon - Love, Right, Honour, Manliness, Nobility, Faith, and so on have here been poetised in an almost Brackenish manner. Britain becomes 'the golden Mother', war 'clouds of thunder', the Boers are 'bats' and 'gnats', peace is the shining of the 'star of empire'. The clichés are not abandoned, but obscured, with the result that the social point is weakened, although the psalm of great infinity has by no means drowned out the war-trumpets.

By the time we come to the little booklet Vigil, published in 1935, this residual simplicity has been corroded almost to the point of incomprehensibility by her efforts to dignify her social interests by assimilating them to Poetry. I suspect that without the additional information supplied by a subtitle and an explanatory footnote even Sherlock Holmes would be at a loss to deduce how to put her injunctions in the title poem into practice:

Night, holy night!
Trees in the gloam-rift,
Stars in the home-lift,
And the wind, Heaven's rover,
Come silverfoot over
Wide reaches and rare,
Shod with silver and air!
The rivers sing low
From their cradle of snow
To the vast ebb and flow
For to hear, for to know.
O trees far a-quiver,
Low wind and low river,
Pray with us - pray,
That the death-drift be stayed
And the fiat obeyed,
"Let there be light!"

They are mute who have met
In mid-shock, battle set.
Hate is not here,
Nor reviling nor fear,
Nor clash for the goal.
O my land, do you hear
The pure Presences pray
For your life, for your soul?
Is it "Yea"; is it "Nay,"
For your life, for your soul?
You were chosen and dowered
By Him, the All-giver;
You were spangled and showered
From the dawn-fed river.
Floods carried along
Your defiance, your song,
To the shrines of the sea,
To the aisles of the free.
You rived at the chain
That the aeons had forged; -
Red ruin, red gain,
Where the ravens had gorged.

What ailed you, my land,
In your meadows of ease,
That you gave your white hand
To the dark and to these?
Are you lustrted, re-born?
Shall they lead you again
To the peaks of the morn
To rise and to reign?
Or lay on your face
The black veil of disgrace?
Hear airily hover
The wind, Heaven's rover:
Hear the ringed rune
Of the sea to the moon,
Then a hushing thereafter:
White Silence comes after; -
White Silence, bower maiden
Of Holiness, gathers
All hearts to our Father's
Shekinah restored.
Veil upon veil,
Luminous vanishes:
Trail upon trail
Shekinah-light banishes, —
Leaf after leaf
Of the Rose of Eternity
Sunned to unfolding,
Nor lightning as brief
As the odoured unfolding, —
Supernal,
Eternal,
The Rose of Eternity!

In the heart of the Rose
White Light that is living —
Priestliness pure,
Out-welling, outgiving! —
Though the Nameless unclose,
O my heart! yet endure;
For this was the Light
That starred Galilee
When the storm at its height
Fawned low at His knee;
This was the light
Sheathed Salem in gloom
In denial's dark night,
When she builded her tomb.

Silence and deeper!
Pure vials of prayer!
My land, my loved sleeper,
Your name, it is there!

The lap of the lake and the wind in the tree;
The moon, and the hush, and the hope of the seal

Night waneth to grey:
Is it goal, is it dole?
Is it "Yea," is it "Nay,"
For your life, for your soul? 15

The critical questions raised by 'Vigil' are many and
large, and are not entirely disposed of when we know that the
sub-title 'The Eve of April 10, 1919' refers to the first
Prohibition Poll in New Zealand. The 'red ruin' is Babich's,
the 'death-drift' is the five o'clock swill, and the first
Christmas Star is in some indefinable way the essence of
wowserism. 'Nor lightning as brief. As the odoured
unfolding' presumably indicates the short duration of the
poll, and 'The Nameless' is the possibility of defeat.
But who or what are the 'pure Presences' that are so prayerfully opposed to other spirits? and what is the significance of the 'White Silence', 'The Rose of Eternity', or the mysterious 'Shekinah Light'? If we compare this with the rousingly straightforward 'Water, Lovely Water' of Steward, for instance, it becomes obvious that Jessie Mackay's Poetry, and her determination not to call a noggin a noggin, while it adds a kind of spurious dignity and respectability (of an intellectual kind) to her enterprise, very much diminishes its social usefulness.

Like many early poets, she was very much aware of the lack of historical association in New Zealand, and tried to make up for it with magical 'place' poems whose aim seems to have been to provide instant poetic dignity for raw towns. 'Dunedin in the Gloaming', for example, is an obvious attempt to fill an emotional and associational vacuum:

Like a black enamoured king, whispered low the thunder To the lights of Roslyn, terraced far asunder; Hovered low the sister cloud in wild warm wonder.

"O my love, Dunedin town, the only, the abiding, Who can look undazzled up where the Norn is riding, - Watch the sword of Destiny from its scabbard gliding! Dark and rich and ringing true, word and look for ever!" Taking to her woman-heart all forlorn endeavour; Heaven's sea about her feet, not the bounded river! Sister of the mountain mist and never to be holden With the weary sophistries that dimmer eyes embolden! O the dark Dunedin town, shot with green and golden!"

Then a silver pioneer, netted in the drift, Leaning over Maori Hill, dreaming in the lift, Dropped her starry memories through the passioned drift: - "Once I do remember them, the glory and the garden, Ere the eldest stars had learned God's mystery of pardon, Ere the youngest, I myself, had seen the flaming warden. Once even after even I stole ever shy and early To mirror me within a glade of Eden cool and pearly, Where soft and cold and holy ran a torrent sought but rarely."
And fondly could I swear that this my glade had risen newly, -
Burst the burning desert tomb wherein she lieth truly,
To keep an Easter with the birds and me who loved her duly."

Wailing, laughing, loving, hoar, spake the lordly ocean; -
"You are sheen and steadfastness; I am sheen and motion,
Gulfing argosies for whim, navies for a notion.

Sleep you well, Dunedin town, though loud the lulling lyre is;
Lady of the stars terrene, where quick the human fire is, -
Lady of the Maori pines, the turrets and the eyries."

After prolonged exposure to this kind of verse one begins to doubt even the most elementary critical propositions - that, for instance, a poem must say *something*, however little, to sustain its intelligibility against the verbal chaos streaming from the imaginary monkeys pounding innumerable imaginary typewriters beloved of philosophers. One tends to think of the existence of a poem as being somehow balanced at the point where form and content intersect, but in the literary limbo we are investigating, there seems to be another mode by which a construction of words, innocent both of shape and meaning, can exist as a cultural *gesture* - obviously not prose, and therefore poetry by default, obviously moving away from reality, and therefore in some sense 'ideal' - the tipsy outpourings of 'delicate' artistic sensibilities that have succeeded in persuading themselves that the shakes which produce such sparkling and instantaneous patterns in their (imported) kaleidoscopes are the earthquakes of the soul.

In 'Dunedin in the Gleaming', Jessie Mackay virtually ignores the existence, in time as well as in space, of the town she is ostensibly writing about, except to mention that it is bounded by the sea instead of a river, and concentrates instead on trying to fit it into some kind of vision: not, however, *visual* vision, but emotional. Considered as images, some of her vague epithets are as ludicrous as Bracken's; what can one see in the fifth stanza, for instance, except a netted fish defecating
in a state of somnambulistic elevation? It might (I don't guarantee it) be interesting to compare this poem with one by Bracken on the same theme. Both poets are concerned simply to establish the importance of the town, not as a place, but as a focus for poetic emotion; the only essential difference is in the stage properties, which in both are jumbled confusedly together:

Go, trav'ler, unto others boast
Of Venice and of Rome;
Of saintly Mark's majestic pile,
    And Peter's lofty dome;
Of Naples and her trellised bower;
Of Rhineland far away:
These may be grand, but give to me
Dunedin from the Bay.

A lovely maiden seated in
A grotto by the shore;
With richest crown of purest green
    That virgin ever wore;
Her snowy breast bedecked with flowers
    And clustering ferns so gay,
Go, picture this, and then you have
Dunedin from the Bay.

A fairy, round whose brilliant throne
Great towering giants stand,
As if impatient to obey
    The dictates of her wand;
Their helmets hidden in the clouds,
    Their sandals in the spray
Go picture this, and then you have
Dunedin from the Bay.

A priestess of the olden time
    (ere purer rites had birth)
On Nature's altar offering up
    The homage of the earth;
Surrounded by grim Druids, robed
    In mantles green and grey
Go picture this, and then you have
Dunedin from the Bay.

0 never till this breast grows cold
Can I forget that hour,
As standing on the vessel's deck
    I watched the golden shower
Of yellow beams, that darted
From the sinking king of day,
And bathed in a mellow flood
Dunedin from the Bay. 

The kind of poem is familiar enough; the colonial deviation seems to lie in the shouting, the certainty that, since one's voice will not blend with the murmur of centuries in dignifying a place, the next best thing is to use a megaphone.

The limits of Jessie Mackay's more purely 'poetical' verse are well enough indicated in a line that contrasts oddly with the English Decadence that was the fashion (not here, of course) during her early years as a poet, and which seems to sum up fairly well a prevailing attitude to what is 'permissible' in art in New Zealand: 'All the way to madness and half the way to sin'.

In her poetical verses she veers constantly in the direction of 'madness' - insofar as a determination to use words as a substitute for reality, or as a defence against reality constitutes a form of aberration - although she doesn't deviate a fraction in the direction of anything less socially respectable. 'The Night Song of the Sea', for example, is just a wild flurry of unfocused emotion:

Turn ye, O turn ye, wild winds of the heaven!
Now is the night-watch: join ye with me;
Let the dark starry vault in the midnight be riven
By the shriek of the wind and the roar of the sea.

Now is the night-watch; all creatures of terror
Roam the lone forest or plunge in the deep;
The ghosts and the demons of wrong and of error
Wake, and the spirits of happiness sleep.

Veiled are the heavens in black robes of thunder;
Muffled on high are the moon and the star;
Awed is the earth in her darkness and wonder;
Mine is the hour, and the winds' from afar.

Gone with the day are the shimmering glances
That dance on my deeps with a treacherous smile;
Gone like the laughter, the sunlight and fancies,
Masking in mortals their grief or their guile.

Mine is the midnight, and from my abysses
Unfathomed, unsounded, arises a cry
Of ceaseless unrest; and my foam-fountain hisses
On black, jagged rocks, as it dashes on high.

O, sleeping Earth! awake from thy dreaming;
Hear it and tremble, my challenge of war.
Lo! my defiance on dark billows streaming
I hurl to the heavens, to moon, and to star.

Dark caves of the deep, where light never entered,
Let your monsters arise and destroy with their powers;
Howl louder, ye winds, with a hatred deep-centred —
Howl, for the dark muffled midnight is ours!

This is so obviously not a poem about the sea that only ignorance prevents me attempting a Freudian interpretation; instead I shall content myself with the suggestion that the peculiarly unreal quality of the poet’s vision, in this and other poems like it probably stems from the fact that she looks at the world rather as if it were an ink-blot in a psychologist’s test, the point of the exercise being that one is obliged to see anything but an ink-blot, if the test is to be ‘significant’.

There are very few real people in her poems, the protagonists are nearly always fantasy figures - Lorelei, angels, star-maidens, the Maid of the Mist, the Spirit of Past Days, the Naiad, the Voice of the River, the Nereid, the Spirit of the Streams, the Winter King, the cradle-maids of heaven, and so on. She tries to see them as fairy-tale creatures, keeping themselves at a distance, in a rosy mist, and she is happiest when writing about vague memories and vaguer hopes - 'the Golden Long Ago', 'the Land of Night-Have-Been' and the like. So certain is her conviction that 'poetry' and 'reality' are mutually exclusive except when both are yoked to some kind of social vision that often the only point at which a poem intersects the world of ordinary experience is the title - the rest is 'all the way' to verbal madness:

O strangest and fairest! O wonder, O light!
Why drawest thou me from the bosom of Night?
On the wings of the darkness is rest, but in thee
Is strife of the spirit - why drawest thou me?

Thy beauty and wonder hath lured me from far,
Till I seek not the glory of moon and of star;
Calm as the heavens and cold as the night
They are throned, and I loved them with tranquil delight
Till thy power was shot forth, and straight in my brain
Was a war of two natures, a rending in twain,
Swift as an arrow and sharp as a spear,
With a torrent of rapture, and trembling, and fear.

Is it that I do love thee? or is it a soul
That has entered my being and holds thee its goal?
What is the cord that has bound me to thee?
Is there strength that can break it in earth or in sea?

I know not, I know not, but this do I know,
That the eddying straw on the wild torrent-flow
Is drifting not swifter nor surer to sea
Than I through the darkness, am drifting to thee.

Dark mother, O Night! star-girt and serene,
Farewell! I shall never be what I have been;
New life and new joy in an uttermost light
I am seeking — ah! grant that I seek it aight.

O wonder! O mystery! is it for me
To search and to know thee, to pass into thee?
I approach; I am dazzled; I struggle for breath;
Is it light? is it joy? is it pain? — it is death!

This again smacks a bit of the rag and bone shop — the emotion
it contains is fairly convincing — but only the title 'Moth
and Candle' gives any point to the imaginary drama, and it
does so by reducing it to insignificance.

When she does glance at the real world, she is happier
to describe her emotion than to express it. 'Autumn Song',
for instance, begins:

Glory of golden even-tide!
Wealth of yellow sheaves!
O queenly Earth, for ever bide
Crowned with golden leaves.

Glorious calm of dying sun!
Surely peace is good —
O Earth, amid thy thoughts is one
Of sighing solitude! 21

— glory, golden, wealth, queenly, crowned, golden, glorious,
calm, peace, dying, good, sighing — one thinks of the March
Hare looking dolefully at his stopped watch, and muttering
'It was the best butter you know,' as he dips it in his cup
of tea. Ruskin diagnosed her complaint accurately enough in
Modern Painters:
So . . . we have the three ranks: the man who perceives rightly, because he does not feel, and to whom the primrose is very accurately the primrose because he does not love it. Then, secondly, the man who perceives wrongly, because he feels, and to whom the primrose is anything else than a primrose: a star, or a sun, or a fairy's shield, or a forsaken maiden. And then, lastly, there is the man who perceives rightly in spite of his feelings . . . 22

There is no doubt which category Miss Mackay belongs to; I can think of few poems of hers in which she gives any indication of perceiving 'rightly', and not many more in which she does not evince strong emotion of one kind or another - always described in the best clichés.

It may seem from the foregoing that she is simply a bad poet, that no one could possibly have taken Jessie Mackay's work seriously. In fact what we are looking at is an alien Poetry in action, and Poetry, like any other fashion, can never be judged 'good' or 'bad' since there is no platform of absolutes from which such a judgement can be delivered. We can, of course, pit Poetry against Poetry, but this is about as interesting and as profitable as arguing the pros and cons of Debussy versus Bob Dylan. In fact Jessie Mackay became something of a Grand Old Lady of New Zealand literature. On her seventieth birthday she was presented with a cheque and an illuminated letter of appreciation bearing over three hundred signatures, in which she was praised for having 'united an old tradition with a new loyalty, and blended without loss the heritage of one land with the ideals and aspirations of another.' 23 Quoting this a few years after her death, W.F. Alexander adds:

"I am sheen and motion" she made her sea exclaim, and the words might have described her poetry. Though the lyric note was her strongest gift and she was romantic to the heart's core, the thrice-tempered point with which she often drove home a poem, consolidating its argument in some terse imaginative phrase, could be as hard as a diamond. Lyricism with her meant no lack of "fundamental brainstuff" 24
I have already mentioned Alan Mulgan's praise of 'The Burial of Sir John McKenzie'; on the same poem her biographer writes:

When . . . she wrote of
The landless man and the No Man's man,
The man that lacked and the man unlearned,
The man that lived but as he earned.
she was recording precise, indelible memories of the swaggers whom she had helped with food and sympathy at Raincliff and Trentham.25

To a later and perhaps more critical generation it might seem that the lines in question are anything but evidence of 'precise, indelible memories'; what is important, however, is the willingness to take the will for the deed, the critic contented, not with a poem, but with a movement in the direction of a poem. Similarly, although the poet's vision now seems to us more misty than mystic, Miss McLeod is more than willing to take her at face value:

Despite her many friends and her huge correspondence the cultural and racial loneliness of her later years deepened her mysticism. Even her occasional poems of that period show the increasing aloofness and separateness of her vision. There are words in 'Merlin, My Sea', in her last volume, which suggest that the temptation to forget a troubled world in mystic meditation may have been very real to her:

How can Joy's prisoner
Will to be free?
Give me my soul again,
Merlin, my Sea!

She overcame it by continuous crusading; but it would be prejudice to condemn the mystic element in her poetry, for we need not only the interpreters of our common experience, but the seers who can lift us to the heights to share with them the wider vision. The mean soul attempting prophecy will achieve only petulance. It can be said of Jessie Mackay that the prophetic manner was natural to her. She was adequate for the heights.26
The poet herself said, in the introduction to a small anthology that she edited in 1907, that 'the aim has been throughout to dwell on the quiet but everlasting verities on which English poetry anchors.' Such a selection can only have been made to provide a Newmanesque 'solace', and a vague idealism must always be much more comforting to those fortunate enough to possess it than any actual vision, especially when dignified with the title of 'mysticism'. Even the more tough-minded school of the Australian Bulletin recognised her talents, although they expressed their admiration with a typically double-edged compliment:

They are healthy girls in Maoriland, and their verse is usually a healthy and regular secretion. On Sunday evening after church is a favourite composition time ... We can draft from the mob of Maoriland girls three whose verses are not composed precisely in this manner, Mary Colborne-Weel ... Dora Wilcox ... Jessie Mackay.28

As late as 1940 O.N. Gillespie, writing in Review said of her: 'That wonderful genius ... here was poetry with a pulse in it, the strange incommunicable gift of insight, and an uncanny gift for the right word' — and there is no reason to suppose that he was being insincere. Further evidence of the esteem in which she was held as a writer is unnecessary (a lot more of it is collected in the final chapter of A Voice on the Wind); enough has been given to show that she had her readers, and her readers had a high respect for her poetry. Allen Curnow, in his Introduction to the Penguin Book of New Zealand Verse, says of her:

Her case is an extreme one, and it is not surprising that her New Zealand reputation is dying hard, since so many other names, among her colonial predecessors and contemporaries must stand or fall with hers. Having little sense of an audience, these writers delivered themselves irresponsibly and inconstantly. In the 'stone-deaf islands' they spoke like the deaf, out of pitch and out of touch with the common converse of the place.29a
But it seems to me that the real question, to adapt another phrase of Mr Curnow's, is who or what were they to be responsible to? After all, Miss Mackay is one of the most 'committed' poets one is likely to encounter, and had a very exalted idea of the social responsibility of the poet; if her exaltation is essentially second-hand who can blame her? If New Zealand has a 'tradition' of poetry, it is not a tradition of originality, but of imitation, not 'intellectual' but unintellectual, and Jessie Mackay is right in the middle of it, sharing the social concerns of Golder, the pretensions of Bowen and Broome, the sentimentality of Bracken, and looking forward to the vague benevolence of Marris, the slushiness of Fairburn and the patchwork clichés of Louis Johnson. It is a tradition of effort rather than of achievement, and the effort is not aimed at producing poems, but at establishing a poet - at showing, in other words, that one's magic does work often enough to qualify one as witch-doctor to the tribe. Curnow, on the other hand, is on the fringe, the place of all who write poems instead of poetry. There will never be a 'School of Curnow', just as there will never be a 'School of Yeats', because 'schools' indicate a centre, and the centre is always dull. On the other hand, in another guise Curnow is central; by adopting the persona of 'Whim-Wham', and keeping his social comments in a separate compartment from his 'poetry', he avoids the stupidities of such things as Jessie Mackay's 'Vigil', or Fairburn's 'Dominion', although some of his early poems

* No poet, of course, would ever choose an outside position at the barrier. Mr Curnow's subtle criticism in the Introductions to his two anthologies seems to me to add up to a determined attempt by an essentially conservative critic to relocate his own radically peripheral poems at the centre of things - to create a retrospective 'school'. It is not surprising that later poets, with little to conserve but their own conservatism, have resented his efforts.
show that when he tried to combine the two the results could be as dull as anything Fairburn ever wrote. It is not surprising, then, that from his vantage point on the periphery, Curnow should look with some scorn towards Jessie Mackay in the centre - the same glance takes in the middle-class audience on which colonial 'fame' depends - but it is the scorn of the fighter pilot for the solemnly conscientious Home Guardsman. It is not that the earlier poet was not 'responsible', but that her responsibilities were too limited, too much determined by the narrow demands of the audience she tried too hard to please.

In all fairness to her, it should be admitted that she showed an enduring dissatisfaction with the limitations of both her poetry and her life. When asked what poem of all she had published she thought most likely to endure, she named 'The Nixie's Prayer' - yet another lament for the 'rich realities' she never knew:

There's never a saint on the floor of heaven,
Never a saint to pray to!
Nor seraph white at the Nixie's need
To mourn the livelong day to!
For the word that made the good red blood
And the golden clay of woman
Went by the dew-born Nixie folk
That wear but the shape of human.

My father was an elfin king
Where the last world-water stilleth;
My mother was a rosy wraith
That shared the dule of Lilith.
I was born in a pearly bower
Between the sea and Eden;
And given the wide forwandered foam
To nurse my elfin need in.

So it's well-a-way to the waning moon!
For the wild witch drop that's in her
Cries down the dewy lift to me
That never was saint or sinner.
Give me a heart, my Lady Moon,
Be it but a cup for sorrow!
Give me a heart tonight, tonight,
Though it should break tomorrow!
Give me the wounded breast of Eve,
To chrisom child a heaven!
Give me the weeping eye of Eve,
Forgiving and forgiven!
Give me the hope of mourning Eve
From Eden gate and onward,
The robe of living light to be,
And the throne they build her sunward!

There's never a soul in the waning moon,
Never a soul to hearken!
She is the Nixie of the sky
Where the founts of heaven darken.
I am the Nixie of the pool;
And the star-leaved book we read in
Has never a hope for the Nixie folk
Between the sea and Eden!

The tragedy of her art lies in this consciousness of herself
as a Nixie, living and partly living, emotion floating
unfocused and unfocusable. For her, 'reality' was always
somewhere else, and she tried to bridge the gap between
herself and it with words that became increasingly wild
and desperate. She failed, but her failure to communicate
became a kind of success - it seemed to reveal the existence
of something incommunicable, and her inability to see things
secured her fame as a 'visionary'. She deserved her fame,
as she deserved her Civil List pension, because she revealed
the secrets of the universe as being essentially cloudy
platitudes suffused with emotion, and thus, if only in a
small way, enabled her readers to forget them. The cosmic
truths peddled by second-rate poets today are culled from
popular textbooks of psychology, and Jessie MacKay has
outlived her usefulness. It is impossible to regret the
fact that she is no longer read and admired, but it is
equally impossible to deny her a place in the New Zealand
Tradition of Poetry - that tradition is, after all, not a
growth, but the slow antipodean decay of English Victorian
poetry, and her work greatly assisted the process of
decomposition.
3. *ibid.* pp.96-7
5. *ibid.* p.32
   Auckland Institute Library.
10. *ibid.* p.30
11. *A Voice on the Wind,* p.108
12. Jessie Mackay, *From the Maori Sea.* n.d., p.23
13. below, p.7
14. *Land of the Morning,* pp.56-8
15. Jessie Mackay, *Vigil.* 1935, pp.5-8
16. *From the Maori Sea,* p.14
18. *Land of the Morning,* p.69
20. *ibid.* pp.78-9
21. *From the Maori Sea,* p.8
25. *A Voice on the Wind,* p.122
26. *ibid.* pp.113-4
29. *A Voice on the Wind,* p.108
30. *Land of the Morning,* pp.30-1
XII. THE COLD GREY HILLS

David McKee Wright (1869-1928)

Oh, chaps, it's a wonderful land! - wild mountain-chains
ringed by the sea;
It surely was meant from the first for the home of the
true and the free.
It's the true and the free that I've sung, though I
didn't go high on the wing,
You wouldn't have listened at all if I'd set fifty
sky-larks to sing.

D. M. Wright, 'So Long'

Fancy, what art thou, witching shade of dreams?
At dawn it seems to me thou art a bird
Calling from out the trees the rising day;
And when the noonday o'er the broad earth streams,
Thou art a glory seen and felt and heard,
A breath of many flowers along life's way;

D. M. Wright, 'Fancy'

It is something of a relief to turn from Jessie Mackay to
the work of her contemporary, David McKee Wright. Another
frankly magical poet, Wright compounded his spells from
ingredients much dearer to the heart of the average New
Zealander than temperance and vegetarianism. He is almost
the only New Zealand exponent of the ballad poetry that achieved
such wide popularity in Australia, and in quality, if not in
quantity, he is almost a match for 'Banjo' Paterson and Henry
Lawson. Like them a man of considerable education - he
attended Otago University and studied for the Presbyterian
ministry - the audience that he envisaged for his verse was,
like theirs, primarily working class, and embodied the values
of the nomadic diggers, shearers and swaggers that formed for
a time a rural proletariat in this country. He uses a limited
form of their idiom deftly and unself-consciously, and
although it sounds to us now rather derivatively Australian,
it should be remembered that this floating labour force was
virtually Australasian.
Not surprisingly, in view of his audience, Wright is usually deliberately anti-Poetical and unintellectual. In an autobiographical note reprinted in the second edition of *Station Ballads* he is at pains to establish his credentials as a poet of the people:

My great distinction, and that which specially qualifies me to write of simple themes, is that I was born under thatch—brown Irish thatch with sally rods for binding and deep green moss on the weatherside. . . . I loved every tree about my old home, every turn of the green roads, every cadence of the people's voices. They were all my friends—the farmers, the cotters, the very old men who talked of the Battle of Ballynahinch as a familiar memory of childhood, the beggarman sitting eating stir-about or broth in the big Ballynaskeagh kitchen, the people under the orange banners and those who wore green sashes.1

and he is careful not to alienate the sympathy of his audience by any reference to his training as a clergyman. The ideals that he holds up for emulation are those that still linger in the indigenous substratum that pines beneath our American popular culture—mateship, do-it-yourself, rural life as opposed to town decadence, pride in physical accomplishment and so on. If there was any condescension in his relationship with his audience, it probably worked in reverse. The book by which he is best remembered, *Station Ballads and Other Verses* (1897) was published through the generosity of 'Crockery Bob'—Robert McSkimming—a hawker of pots and pans, and seems to have bypassed normal trade channels entirely, if his later editor's account is accurate:

McSkimming . . . suggested to McKee Wright that he should publish his poems in book form, but the poet confessed that he was too poor to pay the publishing expenses. So McSkimming gave a publisher a promissory note for three months and a letter to his banker in Naseby on the understanding that the edition would be at Putaraua on or before the annual race-meeting day. All went well and, on November 6th, 1897, half the edition was sold at once, the rest being completely disposed of within the month. So, thanks to Robert McSkimming, did *Station Ballads* find its way into the world.2
The poems themselves are socially oriented, moralistic, and usually embody a Christianity reduced to its essentials. In 'The Swagger', for instance, he describes the plight of those put out of work by the depression, and blames the Liberal legislation for depriving them of the 'normal' sources of charity:

The winter ain't been bad as yet, though frost was pretty keen,
But there's one thing that I'll tell you, mate, the country's getting mean!
The price of wool is lookin' up, the harvest ain't been bad,
But for them that's on the wallaby there's little to be had.
The country's lookin' not so bad, the prospect's pretty fair,
But for coves that's out of collar, mate, there's hunger in the air.

I mind the time when men was pinched and things was pretty blue
For the mortgage-burdened station and the struggling cockatoo,
But if work was hard of getting and a fellow had to tramp
He was pretty sure of tucker and a decent place to camp.
But it's when God's hand is open most with plenty and to spare
That the swagger feels it roughish when there's hunger in the air.

It isn't fallin' wages that makes a fellow sick,
We had our turn of fairish times, there ain't no cause to kick;
And drink, that cursed the most of us, helped pay the country's way,
But there's thousands trampin' on the roads that do no work today.
And when the skies are grey above us it seems middlin' hard to bear
The feelin' that the swagger has of hunger in the air.
A rabbiter or digger cove will stand a chap a feed -
The poor man helps the poorest best in any time of need -
But cockatoos with decent homes and firesides warm and bright
Will send a starving fellow-man to sleep outside at night.
With stations mostly busted up that once was pretty fair
Its little wonder there's a feel of hunger in the air.
and then goes on to point the moral in a deliberately understated analogy:

I used to read the Bible once, and thought it pretty clear
That Christ was on the wallaby that time that He was here;
And when He looked around about some likely mates to choose
He didn't pick on squatter swells or well-off cockatoos;
And I used to sometimes fancy with their trampin' here
and there,
The Lord and His disciples felt the hunger in the air.

He is slightly embarrassed by the faint preachiness that survives the slang, and the deflationary 'I used to read the Bible once' is obviously an attempt to get his audience on his side. This fear of alienating the sympathies of his readers colours much of his work, with the result that, although he is, if anything, even more moralistic than Jessie Mackay, the understatement by means of which he makes his points renders them much more palatable than her cloudy pretensions. So, in 'The Rabbiter', he concludes his defence of the rabbiter's occupation against the charge that it is 'a dirty savage life' with another deliberate understatement:

There's clean-lived chaps among the men who wield the rabbit knife;
It isn't sun and mountain air that lead to sin and crime,
There's blackness in the city night, but not in morning rime;
And if you take them as a class the rabbiters will show
There's better feeling on the hills than in the town below.¹ (Underlining mine)

He shows a similar restraint in his verse anecdotes such as 'The Man Who Saved the Match', 'Over the Ranges' and 'The Bloke that Ran Across a Snag', never letting his moral dominate the story, but making his point unobtrusively. Since it is impossible to gain any idea of either the strengths or the weaknesses of Wright's verse without considering at least one of his narratives, I will reproduce the last-mentioned poem in full. It smacks a little of Tom Brown's Schooldays, - English Public School stories attempt a magic very similar to Wright's, although aimed, of course at a very different class - but it has at least
the virtues of simplicity and clarity, qualities conspicuously lacking in New Zealand verse since the time of Barr:

They were big rough sheep on Maimai, fit to make a shearer's heart
Settle down about his boot-tops on the morning of the start.
Brice - the boss - was hard to shear for, we that knew him told the chaps,
Though the ringer muttered 'Likely' and Dick Mason sneered 'Perhaps!'
Then Dick winked at Billy Myers, chucked his thumb towards the boss,
And the other joker sniggered, and then winked again across;
So that some of us that knew them reckoned there were storms in store,
And that something might get broken long before that shed was shore.

Mr Brice ain't much to look at - narrow-chested, small and spare,
Eyes that don't seem much like fighting, freckled face and sandy hair.
Dick said: 'He's had coves to deal with that was frightened of a look,
Reckon with a bit of bouncing we can work him like a book.'
Dick was something of a fighter - he had sparred with Billy King,
And at Orakau last winter knocked Sam Smith about the ring.
All the sports had got his measure, reckoned him a coming man;
'Blokes,' said he, 'I'll give him shearing! It was then the fun began.

Dick could shear if he was willing, pink 'em if he wanted to.
But he wouldn't shear at Maimai, started in to rough them through.
Brice looked at him - 'Shear them better,' that was all he had to say;
Dick was eager for the racket, and he started it this way;

'What's the blooming use of talking? ain't that sheep as good as most?
Trimmings! What's the good of trimmings? Mighty lot of wool you've lost!
Second cuts? Well, that ain't my fault, you've his wrinkled hide to thank;
Who the H -- I can shear them better?' - and the rest was blanky blank.

'That will do,' said Brice, quite quiet; 'close your shears and leave the shed.'
Dick stopped swearing, took to sneering - 'You don't mean it now!' he said.
I came here to get a tally, not to knuckle down to you; If you want more satisfaction you can take it from my hide. 'Very well,' the other answered, soft as silk, 'then come outside.' 'What? A decent clout would kill you; I can't fight a weed like you.' 
'I'm afraid,' Brice said, 'you'll have to, no amount of talk will do.'

So they went, and all the shed-hands crowded to the open door, Half-shorn sheep were finished faster than was ever known before. All the yardmen heard the racket, and came running in a string, While we blokes rushed in around them, held their coats, and formed a ring. When the men were stripped and ready, someone said: 'The thing's a shame; If he stands one round with Mason I'll give in he's true and game.' And it didn't look too pleasant, though I knew the boss's strength,
Dick had science, weight, and muscle, pluck, endurance, reach and length.

Then says big McFee, the shepherd: 'Dick, you'd better tackle me.' Dick was savage - 'Keep your coat on till I've done this bloke,' says he. 'Yes, you'd better wait,' the boss says; 'give us fair play, boys, awhile!' Then he put his freckled hands up, with an easy kind of smile.

So they started in, or Dick did, Brice had work to dodge his blows; But he dodged them - how he done it not a bloke as seen it knows! And the other joker maddened when he couldn't touch his man,
While we coves all laughed and shouted, and the barracking began.

So they sparred for full ten minutes, it was good enough to watch, Till Dick got a strong left-hander home that nearly fixed the match. Brice went down, but in a moment he was on his feet again, With his cheek all red and swollen and his lips drawn in with pain. And us chaps about the ringside cheered him on for all we knew,
Though we thought we had the measure of the best that he could do.
But he rallied, and we wondered at the gameness that he showed;
Dick was getting far too savage for the clever things he knew.

He was hitting all at random as the other dodged about,
When his mate sings out sarcastic, 'Go in, Dick, and knock him out!'
But he didn't, for such shouting as was never heard arose
When Brice dashed, as quick as lightning, right and left on Mason's nose.
Mason reeled, then tried to rush him; Brice ducked, dodged, and got away,
Feinted quickly at his body, brought his right hand into play.
Though the weight was small behind it, yet I'd take my dying oath
You'd have thought a red-hot boulder landed on the big 'un's mouth!

Now the game had got exciting, such a show ain't every day;
Both the men were breathing loudly, and the little one could stay.
Things were getting rough for Mason; we were taken so with Brice
I believe that if he'd asked us we'd have shore for half the price.
But the other bloke was faggling with the running to and fro
And the blows he hit at nothing, and his feet were getting slow,
Till the boss just caught him napping, landed in upon his neck,
And the scrapping match was over - Dick was sleeping on his back!

With a bucketful of water soon we got him on his feet,
And he looked a trifle sheepish, said: 'I own I'm fairly beat.'
'You can fight, sir, it's a lesson not to blow what I can do
When an amateurish light-weight takes me out and puts me through.'
Then Brice laughed, and said: 'Come, Mason, you can shear as you can fight;
Take the pen again and welcome, knuckle down and do them right.
You can shear them if you're willing; see, I read you like a book,
But in future judge of people anyhow but by their look.'
Then we blokes all took our places, Mason wouldn't have a spell,
Said his head would soon be better, but the sheep he shore looked well;
And if any other joker seems inclined for bluff or brag
Dick will tell the cove the story how he run across a snag.

The moral of the poem is not, of course, that one should not
underestimate weedy men, but political, an attempt to define
an ideal boss-worker relationship, and is quietly underlined
by the 'sir' in the penultimate stanza. The verses are
crude at times, but they have a certain rude strength and
raciness which makes up for the obviousness of the story.

Although he laments the passing of the big stations, and
is openly antagonistic both to the new class of 'cockatoos'
or small farmers, as well as to socialism, not all his tales
are politically oriented. 'The Mile' has a similarly
submerged and equally public-school-storyish moral, but
the values it implies are more elementary than social
relationships. Ostensibly it is a straight-forward
account of a mile race at a country sports day, told
in the first person by the contestant who eventually
wins; he hasn't run for a year or done any training,
but, and this is the point of the poem, he is 'hard
from the hills' and runs with a 'long steady swing'.
The poem is not a particularly good one, but it stands
out by virtue of Wright's refusal to condescend to his
audience and belabour his points. Few moralists before
or since would have resisted the temptation to point out
that in the 'race of life' it is the 'long steady swing'
that wins. Wright is obliged to resort to this kind of
subliminal advertising simply because, as a poet, he
could enter into no compact with his audience; a trans-
action of that kind involves a 'Poetry' offered and
accepted, but where there are no specifically literary
preconceptions, as it is unlikely that there would have
been at the Patearoa races, a writer is likely to find
his magic accepted only to the extent to which it is not
Poetry. What he offers his readers is, manifestly, not
the real, but the ideal, but this is of the essence of magic, and at times he exploits the gap between the two to some effect, as in 'Shearing', in which the shadow of the archangel looms over his rural Eden in the last line:

'All aboard! All aboard! is the cry. 
They're a ripping lot of shearers in the shed;
Big Mick, the Speewah ringer, must make skin and trimmings fly
This season if he means to keep ahead;
For Barcoo Ben will run him and half a dozen more
Of the lank Australian crush upon the board,
And it ain't no use to tell us of the tallies that he shore,
There'll be records broke this year, you take my word.

'Wool away! Wool away!' is the cry,
And the merry game of busting is begun!
They're going sheep and sheep, for Big Mick will do or die,
And the fleecy boys are kept upon the run.
It ain't no kind of joking, it's a game of killing men—
Up the neck and down the shoulder like a flash,
And the scruffing and the rattle on the battens of the pen
As to gain a catch the ringer makes a dash.

'Sling 'em out! Sling 'em out!' is the word,
You can hear the grinding pinions of the press,
Snipping shears and flying brooms upon the board,
And the sheep are growing wonderfully less.
The shepherds' dogs are barking in the yard,
And the penner-up is cursing at the back,
And the boss is looking savage at a long Australian card
With a look that means its odds he gets the sack.

'Clear the board! Clear the board!' is the shout,
And Barcoo Ben is caught upon the tail!
Big Mick is smiling grimly as he takes the cobbler out,
With a lead of two at breakfast he can sail.
The shearers laugh like schoolboys as they hurry from the shed,
There's a clinking of the pannikins and knives,
There's the 'barrack' at the table and the clever things are said,
And yet all those blokes are shearing for their lives.

A surfeit of Domett and Jessie Mackay is likely to lead one to overvalue restraint in poetry, but it does seem to me that Wright's refusal to reinforce the last line even to the extent of an exclamation mark is quite remarkable when we consider contemporary poetic practice.

He does not always exercise such control, and some of his
more ambitious poems are marred by sentiment. 'While the Billy Boils', a frankly nostalgic poem, is moving enough as it wanders through an old swagger's memories, but deliquesces disastrously into sentiment in the last line:

The speargrass crackles under the billy and overhead
is the winter sun;
There's snow on the hills, there's frost in the gully,
that minds me of things that I've seen and done,
Of blokes that I knew, and mates that I've worked with,
and the sprees we had in the days gone by;
And a mist comes up from my heart to my eyelids, I feel
fair sick and I wonder why.

There is coves and coves! Some I liked partic'lar,
and some I would sooner I never knew,
But a bloke can't choose the chaps that he's thrown with
in the harvest paddock or here on the road.
There was chaps from the other side that I shore with
that I'd like to have taken along for mates,
But we said 'So long!' and we laughed and parted for good
and all at the station gates.

I mind the time when the snow was drifting and Billy and
me was out for the night,
We lay in the lee of a rock, and waited, hungry and cold,
for the morning light.
Then he went one way and I the other - we'd been like
brothers for half a year;
He said: 'I'll see you again in town, mate, and we'll
blow the froth off a pint of beer.'

He went to a job on the plain he knowed of and I went
poisoning out at the back,
And I missed him somehow - for all my looking I never
could knock across his track.
The same with Harry, the bloke I worked with the time I
was over upon the Coast,
He went for a fly-round over to Sydney, to stay for a
fortnight - a month at most!

He never came back, and he never wrote me - I wonder how
blokes like him forget;
We had been where no one had been before us, we had
starved for days in the cold and wet;
We had sunk a hundred holes that was duffers, till at
last we came on a fairish patch,
And we worked in rags in the dead of winter while the
ice bars hung from the frozen thatch.

.................
The speargrass crackles under the billy and overhead is the winter sun,
There's snow on the hills, there's frost in the gully, and oh, the things that I've seen and done,
The blokes that I knewed and the mates I've worked with and the sprees we had in the days gone by;
But I somehow fancy we'll all be pen-mates on the day when they call the Roll of the Sky.  

Because of the poem's dramatic form one could almost justify the concluding banality by saying that it is appropriate in the mouth of the old man who utters it, although he gives no other evidence of mental debility. Most of Wright's poems have this form, which enables the poet to eliminate himself from the poem almost entirely, but once or twice the mask slips, and we are given an ironically apologetic glimpse of the poet lurking behind his poem, as in 'Speak As You Find Him':

... the air that he breathes is a pure one, if it blows a bit hard in his face;
Let them smile in their sheltering gully - in the storm and the struggle's his place.
Too much metaphor? Well, I'd best drop it, but I always get riled when I hear
A little heart speak of a big one with something that sounds like a sneer.  

The gap between poet and audience is revealed only to be glossed over: the 'too much metaphor' shows his awareness of an audience for which 'poetry' is suspect. He has to apologise for being a poet. The same deliberate rejection of the poetical is evidenced in the flora with which his poems are sparingly adorned. He is as ruthless with unessentials in the backdrops he provides for his rural dramas as McCahon was later to be in his settings of the Annunciation and the Crucifixion. Fern, flax, scrub, toi-toi, speargrass, gorse, pine, cabbage-trees appear occasionally, but the tussock, most ubiquitous and unassuming of plants is omnipresent in his work - the perfect image of the tough, plain thing that can endure 'God's winds' since it is content to remain close to the ground. Unlike Domett, he carefully avoids any mention of
the more exotic local flowers - kowhais, pohutukawas, ratas and the like, and when he does include flowers in his ballads it is usually to reject them as inadequate correlates for the emotion he wants to convey. In his 'Dedication' to *Wisps of Tussock* (1900) he writes:

Sweethart, sweethart, this wreath of song for you:  
Wisps of mountain tussock and ferns washed in dew -  
Neither rich camellia nor sweet garden rose,  
But plain things that blossom best where God's wind blows.  

And in 'Our Cities Face the Sea' garden flowers are seen as existing only in a limbo of nostalgia:

He thought of a far-off village, and a steeple grey with years,  
The cottages white in the sunshine, and a parting day of tears;  
He saw the gardens blooming with lavender round the beds,  
And the doors that were bowered in roses that nodded over their heads;  
He heard the thrushes singing, and the sparrows chirping at morn;  
He saw the joy of the hay-time, and the poppies that starred the corn;  
But up on the bush-covered hill-side the years were laughing by;  
We take our homeland with us, however we change our sky.

and he turns his back on them, they belong to the past, and there is no point in *lamentations* that New Zealand is not Britain:

He had learned the charm of the mountains, the breath of the tussocks he knew;  
He had lived in the land of sunshine, under skies of cloudless blue;  
And the charm of the old had faded, as the charm of the new had grown,  
Till he hailed the windy islands with their flax and fern as his own.

The landscape values of the new land are still very vaguely and traditionally conceived. His memories are of 'cottages white in the sunshine', and yet New Zealand is 'The land of sunshine'. 'Skies of cloudless blue' and 'windy islands' are obviously inadequate - but this is, I think, a turning point in poetic attitude. The 'desert' which so baffled
Golder, and the exotic paradise of Domett's day-dream are beginning to husk off the colonial world, to reveal a greyer, bleaker landscape, but one which at the same time is capable of being defined in terms of what it is and not just in terms of what it is not, and which is thus capable of being used as a correlative for emotions more positive than those of exile and deprivation.

It might seem that Wright is that rarity, a natural unpoet; someone who realised from the start that to arrive at Poetry one must walk, like Alice in Looking-Glass Land, in the opposite direction, but he is by no means single-minded in his avoidance of more pretentious literary forms. His first book was called Station Ballads and Other Verses, and the 'verses', mercifully few in number, show that he could if he wanted grind out a cliche with the worst of the antipodean Victorian Parnassians. Towards the end of the book he says farewell to his ballad readers in a poem that makes his moral purpose in writing abundantly clear:

We're down to the last ballad chaps - at least, it's the last for a while!
I dont know if I've roused you at all or twisted your mouths to a smile;
My songs have been most of them true, and the smell of the tussocks is there -
You'll admit that I've talked pretty straight if I ain't on for splitting a hair.

There's fellows that's humping the swag today on the long dusty track -
I've put in a word for them here that might lighten the load on their back;
There's the chaps in the rabbiting camps - I've hailed them as brothers and men;
So they are, and the grip of their hands I can feel in the turn of the pen.

There's the diggers - the best of the lot - the men of the hard honest hand;
They've got their certificate here as the jokers who opened the land;
And the good sort of shearsers as well that keep clear of the low spieler crowd,
They're a push - and deny it who will - that would make any young nation proud.
There's the cockeys you think that I've wronged — as a
class they ain't all they should be;
That's straight — but I ain't down on them if they ain't
got a derry on me!
And the best of the farmers I've met I look on as kings
among men —
Its the pig-shooting dummy I've 'set', and I'm willing
to say it again.
Oh, chaps, its a wonderful land! — wild mountain-chains
ringed by the sea;
It surely was meant from the first for the home of the
true and the free.
Its the true and the free that I've sung, though I didn't
go high on the wing,
You wouldn't have listened at all if I'd set fifty sky-
larks to sing. 10
and then, with his working-class dismissed, goes on to try and
make it with the bird-fanciers:

Fancy, what art thou, witching shade of dreams?
At dawn it seems to me thou art a bird
Calling from out the trees the rising day;
And when the noonday o'er the broad earth streams,
Thou art a glory seen and felt and heard,
A breath of flowers along life's way;
When the soft evening sets in red and gold,
A cloudland wonder of bright islands rolled
In lakes of light and spreading seas of blue,
And dreams of sunset cities far away;
Then when night comes thou art a wandering star,
Peopled with changing visions ever new,
And singing voices coming from afar,
Making my dreamland brighter than the day. 11

I have no doubt that his shearing cobbers would have found this
embarrassingly 'wet' and would have been glad to stay boozing
outside on the verandah while Wright put on his black tie to
entertain in the drawing-room. One further example will
suffice to show how his talent disintegrates once he succumbs
to the 'witching shade of dreams':

Aorangi — 'Dawn of Heaven' — about thy feet
Man breaks the solitude of Nature's might,
And as the golden years go rolling by
Strange works of man must every landscape own.
But thou unaltered still shall stand,
Fresh from the great Creator-Sculptor's hand,
A mighty emblem of Eternity,
With every icy precipice and chasm
To mark the passing of a world of Time.
And still the dawn about thy brow shall cast
A diadem of silver gaudy mist
O'er topped with icy gems and rosy sheen
Of Nature's softest satin. Still at eve
The golden-broidered curtain of the night
Shall open out to the warm breezes' touch
The crimson pillows of thy downy couch
All edged with fiery gold.

Friend of the stars!
At midnight in the mirror of the lake
Amid their silent counsels shalt thou stand,
And mark the weaving robe of mortal fate
Working the silken lines of days and years
Upon the never-resting loom of Time.
And thou shalt see it all, all that must be
Or ever can be in thine island home;
And the rich heirs of time that centuries
And ages yet unborn shall hither bring
Will still look up to thee in wondering awe,
Eternal changeless wonder of the world!

This is real Jekyll and Hyde stuff; not only does he
swap his 'ain'ts' and 'mates' for 'thees' and 'shalts',
and his swag and billy for diadems and gold-broidered
curtains, but he also abandons the simple flora and
fauna of his ballads in favour of the most hackneyed
props of English nature poetry: larks, robins, brooklets,
roses, meads, daisies, sunflowers, and the like, and the
native plants that he mentions, from being the most
unobtrusive, have become the gaudiest—'rata blossoms' that
'brighten all the glade', and 'the gold of the kowhai' and
the 'honey-belled flax' that had been flowerless before.

Still, even Alice had to waste some time in walking forward,
before she learnt that the way to get places was backwards.

In 1910 Wright left to try to make a living as a free-lance
writer in Sydney, and his subsequent literary career is more
a matter of Australian than New Zealand history. His career
as a minister of religion had ended five years before when
at the Annual Meeting of the Congregational Union of New
Zealand he recommended State Control of the liquor trade
instead of prohibition, and he became very unpopular with
his parishioners. His highest aspirations as a poet were unrealised - he wrote too little to succeed as a balladist - and he turned his attention more to prose, but he made his mark on New Zealand verse, although few attempts were made to imitate his ballad style. In a way he represents the end of an era. As he wrote the large stations were being broken up, and the large gangs of seasonal workers broke up too, some to become 'cockatoos' in their own right, others to linger on as 'swaggers'. Even before this the gold had run out, and the armies of diggers who, with the shearers, had formed a rural proletariat, had drifted away, leaving behind only a memory that still lies buried in the New Zealand way of life, and the bush graves on the cold grey hills that Wright commemorated in 'The Nameless Graves':

They talk about Glengarry's grave, the last of all his race -
Perhaps he'll sleep as soundly here as any other place;
But many are the nameless graves, with none to raise a stone,
Of hero chieftains of our race who made the land our own:
They sleep upon the cold grey hills, and in the clear blue deeps,
And o'er their head the seabird cries, the springtime shower weeps
Glengarry's fame is but his sires' - the heroes of a clan -
And more to me the tussock mound that marks the nameless man.

McKee Wright's verse may not be read today with much pleasure, but at least he can be read without irritation, and if his magic - the magic of a right-wing clergyman - is of little use today, that is the nature of such magic; it is irrevocably tied to its time and place. But he did at least make a genuine effort to write poems that were more than Poetry, and for that he deserves to be remembered with respect. He was not much given to theorising about literature, but his remarks on Henry Lawson, revealing as they do something of the positive approach he had to the problems of the colonial poet, may fittingly conclude this chapter:
Henry Lawson is the first articulate voice of the real Australia. Other singers in plenty the southern continent knows and has known — men and women following bravely in the broad pathway where Byron strode and Wordsworth loitered; but one alone has found the heart of the new land, its rugged strength, its impatience of old restraints, its hopes and fears and despairs, its irreverence and grim humour, and the tenderness and courage that underlie them all. Lawson is never exquisite as are our greater lyrist. The axe-marks show in his works everywhere. But he is sincere and strong and true; and the living beauty of that sincerity and strength and truth grips us more than any delicate craftsmanship. His laughter is as genuine as that of the wind and sea; he weeps as Australians of the bush weep, with dry eyes and a hard curving mouth. He knows men and women - his men and women. In the world's loveliest places he has grasped hard hands alive with heroic meaning; in crowded cities where the shames of older nations have overflowed into the new, he has felt the throb of emotions too fine for civilisation's sordid setting... and he sets it all to a rugged music of his own that goes straight to the heart.

2. *ibid.* p.34, Note.

3. David McKee Wright, *Station Ballads and Other Verses*. 1897, pp. 23-5

4. *ibid.* p.15

5. *ibid.* pp.33-45


7. *ibid.* pp.55-8

8. *Station Ballads*. 1945, p.50


10. *Station Ballads*. 1897, pp.106-8

11. *ibid.* p.119

12. *ibid.* pp.125-6


XIII. FOAM-FLECKED UPON SAPPHIRE

William Pember Reeves (1857-1932)

out o'er the luminous, heaving expanse,
Sailed fancy on verdurous quest
Of that dream of the weary, — dim isles of romance,
Surf-guarded, palm-girt and — at rest.

Pember Reeves, 'Hokianga'

That deaf people can hear best in a great noise, is a
fact alleged by some moderns, in favour of the ancient
story of curing deafness with a trumpet. Dr. Willis
tells us . . . of a lady who could hear only while
a drum was beating, insomuch that her husband, the
account says, hired a drummer as her servant, in
order to enjoy the pleasure of her conversation.

D'Israeli, Curiosities of Literature.

At the other end of the political scale from Wright,
although much more conservative as a poet, is William
Pember Reeves. He is the first 'respectable' New Zealand
poet, in the sense that his name can be dropped in literary
company without those present holding their noses as if one
had committed a nuisance. Some, such as Laurence Baigent,
would go further:

... it is really nonsense for Mr Chapman to speak,
as he does, [in the Introduction to the Oxford
anthology] of 'the first articulate generation of
poets, the men of the 'thirties'. The poetry of
Pember Reeves is sufficient to refute this statement.
It is the fully articulate utterance of a man gifted
with considerable power of poetic expression using
the techniques of his period with skill and dis-
 crimination. He is the best of our early poets, and
for him remoteness and strangeness seem to have been
an inspiration rather than a handicap.

With this kind of critical underpinning for Reeves, we can
go on to consider the kind and quality of his verse without
the apologies that seem necessary when dealing with poets
that are both unreadable and unread.

Something of his idea of poetry can be gleaned from a
letter he wrote to another poet, Miss G. Colborne-Veal, in
his old age:
As for the poetry you know what a solace and 
delight verse is, how it throws 'the light that 
ever was on sea or land' over the beaten and 
dusty thoroughfares of life. Perhaps a public 
man is rash to let his name be linked with verse 
in a country where provincial taste and middle-
class feeling are as strong as they are here. 
Perhaps he ought to treat it as

A thing to retain and say nothing about 
Lest if used it should draw degradation through 
doubt.

However I have run the risk. On the whole I have 
nothing to complain of though an M.H.R. did tell 
me in debate that I was 'worse than Nero' for writing 
the 'Toi-Toi in Church' while there were Unemployed 
in the country. ²

This is essentially the profession of belief of an amateur 
poet, providing 'solace and delight' for himself rather than 
for others. In fact, of course, he could not keep his 
private amusements separate from his public activities, and 
many of his poems are distinctly magical in content. 'Anzac', 
for instance, reflects a popular belief that with this bloody 
and distant sacrifice the antipodes bought themselves into 
History, and coats the bitter pill of a tragic fiasco with 
the sugar of poetical cliches:

Belike they knew not of Thermopylae
Where Sparta's spearmen died 'twixt hill and sea,
Yet, when they fought anigh the Aegean tide,
What Spartans stood more staunch, more sternly died?
So, since their death was glory unsurpassed,
'Anzac' shall live while English speech shall last,
And the rough camp-word, nickname of a day,
By 'Spartan' shining in our tongue shall stay. ³

In phrases like 'their death was glory unsurpassed' magical 
poet and politician come so close together as to be virtually 
indistinguishable.

Like many another, he tried his art on the most 'heroic' 
event of the age, the death of Gordon:
White face among dark faces,
    White soul black hearts amid;
Afar within waste places,
    A light that was not hid;
Of hero-stuff unruly
    In unheroic age,
Cursed, worshipped, weighed untruly,
    Not for today to gauge.
A land he toiled in saving,
    Its loss in death to be;
He died, the free enslaving
    Who lived the slave to free.
By death unseen, uncertain,
    He conquered certain fame;
And fills behind fate’s curtain
    A grave without a name.  

The confident antithesis of the second line is something to be marvelled at, but Reeves was the author, not only of the famous Liberal 'Industrial Conciliation and Arbitration Act', but also of the ' Asiatic and Other Immigration Restriction Bill' which wasn't liberal at all. As Sinclair dryly puts it, 'His vision of New Zealand's future was of an exclusive and healthy people - and the term 'healthy' included the idea of 'racially pure'.

He embodied his vision of New Zealand chiefly in three poems, the first of which, 'New Zealand', is noteworthy mainly for the sonorous vagueness of the first stanza, which says nothing except that this country is an island:

God girt her about with the surges
    And winds of the masterless deep,
Whose tumult uprouses and urges
    Quick billows to sparkle and leap.
He filled from the life of their motion
    Her nostrils with breath of the sea,
And gave her afar in the ocean
    A citadel free.

Her never the fever-mist shrouding,
    Nor drought of the desert may blight,
Nor pall of damp smoke overclouding
    Vast cities of clamour and night.
But the voice of abundance of waters,
    In valleys that bright rivers lave,
Greets her children, the sons and the daughters
    Of sunshine and wave.
Lo! here where each league has its fountains
In isles of deep fern and tall pine,
And breezes snow-cooled on the mountains,
Or keen from the limitless brine,
See men to the battlefield pressing
To conquer one foe — the stern soil,
Their kingship in labour expressing,
Their lordship in toil.

Though young they are heirs of the ages,
Though few they are freemen and peers,
Plain workers — yet sure of the wages
Slow Destiny pays with the years.
Though least they and latest their nation,
Yet this have they won without sword,
That Woman with Man shall have station,
And Labour be lord.

The winds of the sea and high heaven
Speed pure to her kissed by the foam.
The steeds of her ocean undriven,
Unbitten and riderless roam,
And clear from her lamp newly lighted
Shall stream o'er the billows upcurled
A light as of wrongs at length righted,
Of Hope to the world.6

It is not surprising that Reeves, as a politician, should
attempt to define New Zealand in terms of Liberal (and, the
historians assure us, largely accidental) legislation, but
it is surprising that, as a poet, he could think of no
physical characteristics other than the fact that it is
surrounded by sea. As an attempt to come to grips with
New Zealand as a place, this is not very much better than
anything in Bracken; the description is so general that
it could refer to almost any island in the world. One word
only stands out as having a distinctively Colonial quaver —
a native-born inhabitant of any other island (or even for
that matter a Maori) would be unlikely to refer to his
homeland as being 'afar'.

Another poem, 'The Colonists', dedicated to Henry Newbolt,
derives its strength from the pretence, still not entirely
unfashionable, that the colonisation of New Zealand was not a
compound of accident and economic opportunism, but a grandly
conceived and heroic enterprise:
Poet, whose verse in lines that glow
Shall tell lads yet to come
Of Hawke's dread swoop upon the foe,
Or rattle of Drake's drum;
Bard of that bright sea-glory's roll,
Where battle-splendours play,
What can this bring to touch thy soul,
This land of mere To-day?

Our conquest of the wilderness,
Our march to plant or spoil,
Is labour's trudge in working-dress,
Rough, slow, prosaic toil.
Little of grandeur, fire or tears
Here thrills through heart to pen
From deeds of scarce a hundred years,
Plain work of common men.

Scarce have we turned the brief cramped page
Whereon our tale began:
A single hour of Europe's age
Stretches beyond our span;
So swiftly-built our structure stands
Its rise a dream appears,
Yet slow they toiled with building hands,
Our sires, the pioneers.

Their faith looked forth o'er oceans three,
Four thousand leagues of foam,
Seeking their cities yet to be,
Their wild sea-prisoned home.
Blithely they planned the large design
And flung the gage to Fate
In hazard of a venture fine,
The founding of a State,

Sundered, a hemisphere away,
Distant, an empire's length,
Resistless, friendly myriads lay,
Great England's shattering strength.
But here, strange hills and silent shore,
Shut in the lonely few,
And o'er dark ridge and torrent's roar
The very stars were new.

... ... ... ... ...

Strong few, whose solitary thought
Had vision for the way!
Brave common many, who yet wrought
Until the night grew day!
Passing, they saw their race abide,
And now we know them great,
Whose hands took plain and mountain side
And built thereon a State.
More convincing, because it smacks less of the public platform, is 'A Colonist in his Garden'. The structural tension (not a phrase that I like, but I can think of no other) in this poem lies in the Colonist's consciousness of home and his consciousness of Home, and the movement of the poem is towards a resolution of the tension not by a decision in favour of New Zealand, but by a recognition that for this colonist at least, the antithesis is only imaginary, that there is no real difference between Here and There, only distance. At the beginning of the poem the Colonist is in his garden reading a letter from a friend in England who is trying to persuade him to return:

"Dim grows your face, and in my ears,
Filled with the tramp of hurrying years,
Your voice dies, far apart.
Our shortening day draws in alack!
Old Friend, ere darkness falls, turn back
To England, life and art.

Write not that you content can be,
Pent by that drear and shipless sea
Round lonely islands rolled,
Isles nigh as empty as their deep,
Where men but talk of gold and sheep
And think of sheep and gold.

A land without a past; a race
Set in the rut of commonplace;
Where Demos overfed
Allows no gulf, respects no height;
And grace and colour, music, light,
From sturdy scorn are fled.

I'll draw you home. Lo! As I write
A flash - a swallow's arrow-flight!
O'erhead the skylark's wings
Quiver with joy at winter's rout:
A gust of April from without
Scents of the garden brings.

The quickening turf is starred with gold;
The orchard wall, rust-red and old,
Glows in the sunlight long.
The very yew-tree warms today,
As the sundial, mossed and grey,
Marks with a shadow strong.

Tired of the bold aggressive New,
Say, will your eyes not joy to view,
In a sedate clime,
How mellowing tones at leisure steal,
And age has virtue scars to heal,
And beauty weds grey Time?" 8

So far this is only a rather more competent reworking
of the 'April Here and April There' theme. England is
equated with 'life and art', and is a place, by implication,
of 'grace and colour, music, light'. New Zealand is 'lonely'
and 'empty'. In terms of what is, the Friend obviously has
everything on his side. The Colonist, however, counters by
arguing that life and art are as much a matter of potentiality
as actuality, that effort is more important than achievement,
and that New Zealand offers unlimited scope for effort:

Good wizard! Thus he weaves his spell.
Yet, charm he twenty times as well,
Nor shall he never spur,
To seek again the old, green land,
That seems from far to stretch a hand
To sons who dream of her.

For is my England there? Ah, no.
Gone is my England, long age,
Leaving me tender joys,
Sweet unforgotten fragrance, names
Of wrinkled men and grey-haired dames,
To me still girls and boys.

With these in youth let memory stray
In pleasance green, where stern today
Works Fancy no mischance.
Dear pleasance - let no light invade
Revealing ravage Time has made
Amid thy dim romance!

Here am I rooted. Firm and fast
We men take root who face the blast,
When to the desert come,
We stand where none before have stood
And braving tempest, drought and flood,
Fight Nature for a home.

Now, when the fight is o'er, what man
What wrestler, who in manhood's span
Hath won so stern a fall,
Who, matched against the desert's power,
Hath made the wilderness to flower,
Can turn, forsaking all?

Here, logically, the poem should end. England is rejected
as the land of 'dim romance', and the colony is seen to be a
field for heroic actions, and not just empty and lonely and materialistic. Reeves, however, goes on to show that the whole argument has been based on false assumptions. The wilderness has been made to flower, and the blossom is another England:

Yet that my heart to England cleaves
This garden tells with blooms and leaves
In old familiar thron;
And smells, sweet English every one,
And English turf to tread upon,
And English blackbird's song.

"No art?" Who serves an art more great
Than we, rough architects of State
With the old Earth at strife?
"No colour?" On the silent waste
In pigments not to be effaced,
We paint the hues of life.

New Zealand is seen not as the antithesis of England, as the Friend had suggested, but rather as a kind of God-given colouring book, to be filled in with English watercolours. It is blank - lonely, empty, drear, a desert, a wilderness, silent, bare, mute, weary, waiting to be tinted with the 'hues of life'. The process has already begun, and Times will eventually accomplish what the Colonist so earnestly desires - his physical translation from New Zealand to England. He will not go to England, England will come to him, and the tension between Here and There will vanish. He can even pretend that it doesn't exist now:

Mine is the vista where the blue
And white-capped mountains close the view.
Each tapering cypress there
At planting in these hands was borne,
Small, shivering seedlings and forlorn,
When all the plain was bare!

Skies, without music, mute through time,
Now hear the skylark's rippling climb
Challenge their loftier dome.
And hark! A song of gardens floats,
Rills, gushes clear - the self-same notes
Your thrushes flute at Home.
See, I have poured o'er plain and hill
Gold open-handed, wealth that will
Win children's children's smiles,
- Autumnal glories, glowing leaves,
And aureate flowers, and warmth of sheaves,
Mid weary pastoral miles.

Yonder my poplars, burning gold,
Flare in tall rows of torches bold,
Spire beyond kindling spire.
Then raining gold round silver stem
Soft birches gleam. Outflaming them
My oaks take ruddier fire.

And with my flowers about her spread
(Else brighter than her shining head),
The lady of my close,
My daughter, walks in girlhood fair.
Friend, could I rear in England's air
A sweeter English rose?

The significance of the title, 'A Colonist in His Garden'
now becomes clear. The garden, for the Colonist, is England,
and the only real difference between the two Homes is that
while it is English Spring in one, it is English Autumn in
the other. It is not, therefore, particularly surprising
that Reeves left his antipodean garden for 'the old, green
land'. His expression of faith in New Zealand was really
only an assertion of his belief in the transplantability
of English culture, and his vision of the new land is
almost entirely negative; his poetic purpose would not
allow him to recognise the tuis and wood-pigeons that
invaded a garden consecrated to thrushes and blackbirds,
and the torches of his poplars burned so brightly that the
golden glare prevented him from seeing the tussock and flax
that they shaded.

In fairness to Reeves, it must be added that he was not
as completely blind to the beauties of New Zealand as, for
the purposes of this debate, he pretends to be. In a
preface that he contributed to Lirls and Lyrics of New
Zealand by Marie Randle, he shows a willingness to go
at least half the way towards an appreciation of the
intrinsic beauty of the local landscape:
The New Zealand settler is not all prose, nor is he deaf and blind to the fair aspects of Nature around him. The yellow, tussock-covered slopes of his swelling hills, the sombre green depths of his forest-clad valleys and gullies, the breezy beaches of his ever-restless sea, the far-off outlines of his snowy alps are as dear to him for their beauty as for their home associations.

A similar half-heartedness is evident in 'The Passing of the Forest', the regal imagery of the first three stanzas of which is curiously at odds with the subtitle 'A Lament for the Children of Tane':

All glory cannot vanish from the hills.
Their strength remains, their stature of command
O'er shadowy valleys that cool twilight fills
For wanderers weary in a faded land;
Refreshed when rain-clouds swell a thousand rills,
Ancient of days in green old age they stand,
Though lost the beauty that became Man's prey
When from their flanks he stripped the woods away.

But thin their vesture now - the trembling grass
Shivering and yielding as the breeze goes by,
Catching quick gleams and scudding shades that pass
As running seas reflect a windy sky.

A kingly garb their forest raiment was
From crown to feet that clothed them royally,
Shielding the secrets of their streams from day
Ere the deep sheltering woods were hewn away.

Well may these brooding, mutilated kings,
Stripped of the robes that ages weaved, discrowned,
Draw down the clouds with soft-enfolding wings
And white, aerial fleece to wrap them round,
To hide the scars that every season brings,
The fire's black smirch, the landslip's gaping wound,
Well may they shroud their heads in mantle grey
Since from their brows the leaves were plucked away!

In the same way when he describes the bush flowers, he wavers between Home images and vagueness:

Gone are the flowers. The kowhai like ripe corn,
The frail convolvulus, a day-dream white,
And dim-hued passion-flowers for shadows born,
Wan orchids strange as ghosts of tropic night;
The blood-red rata strangling trees forlorn
Or with exultant scarlet fiery bright
Painting the sombre gorges, and that fay
The starry clematis are all away!
And yet when he forgets, or cannot find, conventionally vague adjectives and images like 'day-dream', 'dim-hued' 'strange as ghosts' 'blood-red' 'forlorn' 'fiery-bright' and 'starry', he does succeed in conveying something of the atmosphere of the bush:

Gone are the forest tracks where oft we rode
Under the silvery fern-fronds, climbing slow
Through long green tunnels, while hot moon-tide glowed
And glittered on the tree-tops far below.
There in the stillness of the mountain road
We just could hear the valley river flow
With dreamy murmur through the slumbering day
Lulling the dark-browed woods now passed away.

Fanned by the dry, faint air that lightly blew
We watched the shining gulfs in noonday sleep
Quivering between tall cliffs that taller grew
Above the unseen torrent calling deep,
Till like a sword cleaving the foliage through
The waterfall flashed foaming down the steep,
White, living water, cooling with its spray
Fresh plumes of curling fern now scorched away.

The lines are still rather cluttered with irrelevant or superfluous adjectives such as 'dreamy', 'dark-browed', but they are tougher because of his turning away from simile (the first recourse of the Tourist's sensibility) towards metaphor (which seems to require a more sustained act of consciousness); one cannot imagine the description applying to an English scene. Reeves, however, is unwilling or unable to locate the centre of his poem here. He seems to think that, in order to be 'poetic' he must assimilate his musings to older, more stereotyped patterns of association. So, having begun with an extended and somewhat confused metaphor of the hills as uncrowned or disrobed kings, he ends by regretting that man has baulked God's efforts to emulate the architecture of the Greeks:
The axe bites deep. The rushing fire streams bright;
Swift, beautiful and fierce it speeds for Man,
Nature's rough-handed foeman, keen to smite
And mar the loveliness of ages. Scan
The blackened forest ruined in a night,
The sylvan Parthenon that God will plan
But builds not twice. Ah, bitter price to pay
For Man's dominion - beauty swept away!

If Reeves sometimes seems to be speaking, unaided, with
a truly New Zealand voice, he is usually happier when hooked
up to a Poetical amplifier, whispering clichés that reverberate
like thunder down the corridors of English Verse. Sometimes
the echoes are so loud that they drown out the poem entirely.
In the poem to which the Honourable Member (with more
discrimination than Honourable Members are usually given
credit for) objected - 'The Toe-Toe in Church' - that
unfortunate vegetable is considered in turn as a 'captive
from the wilderness', a 'listless valley queen', a chained
'golden prisoner', a 'fay forlorn', a 'dainty gypsy', a
'dancer light' that has been 'haled in bonds' and 'crucified' -
all in the space of the first twelve lines. Subsequently it
becomes a 'laughing beauty', a 'lady love', an 'ensign of the
hidden streams', a 'prisoned nun', 'virgin-tribute', a 'golden-
plumed Amazon', (defended rather mysteriously by 'valiant lords'
and 'pikemen') a 'water nymph', a 'pagan maid' a 'fading
princess', and 'Bright Andromeda'. Although this kind
of metaphoric crepitation may have been in some psychotherapeutic
way a 'solace and delight' for a busy politician, one finds
it hard to second his concluding self-congratulation:

So, a breath of freshness free,
Speeds the fancy stirred by thee.

When he tries to write about particular places, he
resorts far too often to the amplifier. Unlike Bracken
and Jessie Mackay he does see something of what he is
describing; he doesn't have druids and norns dancing on
his eyeballs, but he is still much more interested in Poetry
than in place. 'Hokianga', for instance, is a poem in which
the place celebrated is seen as a point of departure for
the imagination, not as somewhere to arrive at:

Day drouses; green waters are stilled at high noon,
Enchanted to silence and rest.

Night stirs, and white wavelets flash back to the moon
To die on Omapere's breast.

Dark, ancient, and sacred, the trees on her beach
Rise, domes blossom-sprinkled with blood,
Whence halcyons, jewels flame-gleaming from each,
Skim, swift as light's arrows, the flood.

There safe in the folds of her valleys are seen
Shy palm-trees of frost unafraid;
Cool ferns lifting wings over caverns of green
Veil light intermingled with shade.

There strange tidal inlets, salt wandering creeks,
'Mid mangroves in labyrinths glide;
Now rivers full flowing, now shrunk to slow streaks
Athirst for the lingering tide.

Then long ocean beaches, where serpents of spray
Sped up as we rode the wet strand,
And coiled round the hoofs of our horses in play,
And hissed at each print in the sand.

But the scene from the pass was the fairest. Amazed
We paused, for the winds lay asleep,
And halting drew bridle in silence, and gazed
On the infinite plain of the deep.

There screened in a twilight of whispering fern
We saw, through the fronds looking forth,
No wailing sea of the South, cold and stern,
But the brilliance and glow of the North.

Foam-flecked upon sapphire and purple they lay,
Peace, splendid, and colour— all fair,
Far fading to lilac and delicate grey,
Under shining abysses of air.

And out o'er the luminous, heaving expanse,
Sailed fancy on venturous quest
Of that dream of the weary, — dim isles of romance,
Surf-guarded, palm-girt and — at rest.12

'Enchanted to silence and rest', 'dark, ancient, and sacred',
'shy', 'strange', 'the infinite plain of the deep', — almost
every stanza reveals the poverty of his imaginative response
to the scene — and his conviction that it demands some response.
The poem is like a school exercise, written to an outline
provided by the teacher; so much so that one feels that a perfectly appropriate conclusion would have been 'tired but happy we returned home'.

We have seen that when McKee Wright so far forgot himself as to make a frontal attack on Poetry he crumbled into banality. Reeves never forgot for long enough that he was a poet, and as a result never achieved more than fragments that 'live' - most of the time his work is on a level with Wright's 'Other Verses'. 'Egmont', for instance, is as imprecise in detail and banal in conception as Wright's 'Aorangi':

Elsewhere the mountains have their peers, or stand
Ringed and beset with hedge and press of hills;
But, peerless and superb, great Egmont wills
To dwell apart beside the western strand.
The sweeping outlines of his towering cone
Curve from the shore itself, and steadfast, grave,
Above the shifting, ever-changing wave,
The solitary Titan watches, lone,
Moveless, majestic. There, at fall of night,
Wrapped in his sombre forest drapery,
The giant, gazing down with fixed sight,
Eyes the half-vanished sun, slow, loth to flee,
Quenching its vast and crimson-gleaming light,
Drowned in the foam-drift of the Tasman sea.13

It is so unutterably boring to be told (twice) that waves move and a mountain doesn't that one wonders at the power of a convention that enables such concoctions as this to be accepted as Poetry - more than just accepted, in fact, but almost seen as paradigms; for years it seems to have been one of the local literary rules that a poet had hardly earned his title if he had not had a bash at Mt. Cook or Egmont, or both.

Reeves very seldom unplugged himself. Even in the fairly restrained 'A Colonist in His Garden' the conversation is still conducted by means of loudspeakers. His poetry was meant to be heard, not overheard, even if its primary function
was to be a solace and delight. But once in a while there is a power failure, a silence that only a human voice can fill, and he rises to the occasion in a way that shows that under different circumstances he could have written poems as well as poetry. Among his papers in the Turnbull Library is a revision, apparently made in his old age, of a poem he had written as a young man. Most of the revision retains the sugary emotion of the first version, but the final stanza, with its simple strength, is rather moving. It is like an epitaph on the optimistic casuistry of 'A Colonist in His Garden':

_A Dream_

Hard on the passing of a winter night
Ere frozen morning came the poor to fret,
A dream came, falsely sweet, of such delight
It haunts me yet.

Beside a ruin's sea-confronting wall,
'Mid gnarled and ancient olive trees, apart
She sat, the love whose step with lightest fall,
Could thrill my heart.

A sea breeze wandered from the western sky
A red-barred sky where late the sun was gold,
And, slowly sinking on the shore to die,
The sea-wave rolled.

Roused by the tread she rose at my approach
And stood to greet me, silent, rigid, pale,
Nor could my burst of pleading and reproach
To more avail.

Nor to my boyish heat, half-choked, unwise,
Made she reply, but with averted head,
Bent on the sea below unyielding eyes
And nothing said.

Yet when I paused to turn in mute despair,
Her heart, by Love's dear grace was touched at last:
Sweet was the shame that looked with piteous air
And sobs came fast.

Then the white rose, soft-flushed, with tears impearled
Was to a red rose kissed; and love-beguiled,
Deep eyes, the kindest eyes in all the world,
Grew brave and smiled.
I wake to hear the bitter wind, and know
That round her island grave the seas are cold,
While in a wintry land, his lamp burnt low,
The man sits, old. 14
1. Lawrence Baigent, Review of An Anthology of New Zealand Verse in Landfall Vol.10, no.3, p.251


3. W.P. Reeves, The Passing of the Forest and Other Verse. 1925, p.62

4. W.P. Reeves, New Zealand and Other Poems. 1898, p.74

5. K. Sinclair, William Pember Reeves. 1965, p.226

6. Reeves, New Zealand. pp.1-3

7. Reeves, The Passing of the Forest. pp.42-4

8. ibid. pp.13-4

9. Reeves, Preface to Lilts and Lyrics of New Zealand by Marie Randle, 1893.

10. The Passing of the Forest. p.9

11. ibid. pp.67-9

12. ibid. pp.59-60

13. New Zealand. p.27

14. Reeves, Manuscript Papers 129, Turnbull Library.
XIV SLOUCHING DOWN THE CENTURIES

(Arthur H. Adams 1872-1936)

Literature is, in essence, heresy.

Jean-Paul Sartre.

He played the trivial drama through -
A little wearily, 'tis true! -
With blind fate prompting in the wings,
He strove to follow each vague cue.

He from the stage could not divine
Whether an audience malign
Or friendly judged him from the dark:
He never knew: they gave no sign.

The futile farce, the bitter mirth
Of this poor pageant of the earth
He saw too clearly - yet he played
His part as if it were of worth.

A.H. Adams, 'Requiescat'

Decay seems in some sense to be essential to Romanticism,
and the whole of New Zealand's literary history has happened
inside the Romantic movement. But in a land so conscious
of itself as brand-new that it doesn't like to contemplate
the inevitability of its own corruption, decay takes a number
of strange forms, not all of them profitable for literature.
The Romanticism of Jessie Mackay, for instance, is the frigid
autophagy of a slice of watermelon three weeks in the back of
a refrigerator - a cloud of green mould floating on a pool
of liquid into the composition of which one doesn't feel
like enquiring too closely. That of Reeves is a sustained
try to embalm the twenty-pound New Zealand cabbage for
the edification of posterity. But with Arthur H. Adams we
got for the first time a whiff of the true creative stink.
For one thing, he abandons the 'solace and delight' theory,
which has always been a great preservative of ideas and worn-out emotions which should by rights be allowed to rot. For
another, he doesn't even pretend to hold the untenable proposition that the function of poetry is to 'entertain' people. As a result, he is a failure - probably the first failed poet in New Zealand's history. In reading him we are conscious of poems that might have been in a way that we never are with Goldre, or Broome, or Bowen or Reeves, who could not fail because they never allowed themselves the luxury of an attempt.

Adam's first book of poems, *Maoriland and other Verses*, which was published in 1899 is distinguished only by its rather self-consciously youthful exuberance, and a tendency to shout that umbilical dependence on Britain was undignified and to whisper that sexual passions might exist as possible subjects for verse. Both attitudes had the virtue of novelty, in this country at least, and probably owe more than a little to the *Bulletin* school of writers, whose influence, in Australia if not in New Zealand, had caused vitality and national sentiment to replace moral earnestness as a criterion of publishability. Of the thirty-three poems in *Maoriland* that had previously seen the light of day, twenty-eight had been published by the *Bulletin*, so that it is more than likely that he had an Australian audience in mind.

The book is divided into five sections. The first, 'Maoriland' is the customary attempt to ensnare the soul of New Zealand in description, and is remarkable chiefly for the remarkable infelicity of the rhymes. In the title poem, for instance, 'ranges' rhymes with 'change is', 'forest' with 'more rest', 'merge in' with 'virgin'. Another poem, 'The Dwellings of Our Dead', although still technically inept, and marred by platitudes, approaches something of the feeling of Wright's 'Nameless Graves'.
They lie unwatched, in waste and vacant places,
In sombre bush or wind-swept tussock spaces,
Where seldom human tread
And never human trace is -
The dwellings of our dead!

No insolence of stone is o'er them builded;
By mockery of monuments unshielded,
Far on the unfenced plain
Forgotten graves have yielded
Earth to free earth again.

Above their crypts no air with incense reeling,
No chant of choir or sob of organ pealing;
But ever over them
The evening breezes kneeling
Whisper a requiem.

For some the margeless plain where no one passes,
Save when at morning far in misty masses
The drifting flock appears.
Lo, here the greener grasses
Glint like a stain of tears!

For some the quiet bush, shade-strewn and saddened,
Where'er the herald tui, morning-gladdened,
Lone on his chosen tree,
With his new rapture maddened,
Shouts incoherently.

For some the gully where, in whispers tender,
The flax-blades mourn and murmur, and the slender
White ranks of toi go,
With drooping plumes of splendour,
In pageantry of woe.

For some the common trench where, not all nameless,
They fighting fell who thought to take the tameless,
And won their barren crown;
Where one grave holds them nameless -
Brave white and braver brown.

But in their sleep, like troubled children turning,
A dream of mother-country in them burning,
They whisper their despair,
And one vague, voiceless yearning
Burdens the pausing air . . .
"Unchanging here the drab year onward presses;
No Spring comes trysting here with new-loosed tresses,
And never may the years
Win Autumn's sweet caresses —
Her leaves that fall like tears.

And we would lie 'neath old-remembered beeches,
Where we could hear the voice of him who preaches
And the deep organ's call,
While close about us reaches
The cool, grey lichened wall."

But they are ours, and jealously we hold them;
Within our children's ranks we have enrolled them,
And till all Time shall cease
Our brooding bush shall fold them
In her broad-bosomed peace.

They came as lovers came, all else forsaking,
The bonds of home and kindred proudly breaking;
They lie in splendour lone —
The nation of their making
Their everlasting throne!

The monument Adams is trying to build is just as false, to
History and to the pioneers, as any 'insolence of stone',
but although diffuse and repetitive, and too cluttered up
with trite images like 'pageantry of woe' 'leaves that fall
like tears' and 'broad-bosomed peace', the poem does succeed
in conveying a more durable emotion than, for instance,
Reeves' 'The Colonists' if only because it enshrines a fact
rather than a fiction.

'Written in Australia' is an attempt to sort Australasia
into its emotional components, and is interesting as, I think,
the first poem of exile from New Zealand, as distinct from
the endemic exile in this country:

The wide sun stares without a cloud:
Whipped by his glances truculent
The earth lies quivering and cowed!
My heart is hot with discontent —
I hate this haggard continent.

But over the loping leagues of sea
A lone land calls to her children free;
My own land holding her arms to me
Over the loping leagues of sea.
The old grey city is dumb with heat;
   No breeze comes leaping, naked, rude,
Adown the narrow, high-walled street;
   Upon the night thick perfumes brood:
   The evening comes lassitude.

But o'er the edges of my town,
   Swept in a tide that ne'er abates,
The riotous breezes tumble down;
   My heart looks home, looks home, where waits
   The Windy City of the Straits!

The land lies desolate and stripped;
   Across its waste had thinly strayed
A tattered host of eucalypt,
   From whose gaunt uniform is made
   A ragged penury of shade.

But o'er my isles the forests drew
   A mantle thick - save where a peak
Shows his grim teeth a-snarl - and through
   The filtered coolness creek and creek,
   Tangled in ferns, in whispers speak.

And there the placid great lakes are,
   And brimming rivers proudly force
Their ice-cold tides. Here, like a scar,
   Dry-lipped, a withered watercourse
   Crawls from a long-forgotten source.

My glance, home-gazing, scarce discerns
   This listless girl, in whose dark hair
A starry-red hibiscus burns;
   Her pallid cheeks are like a pair
   Of nuns - they are so fragile-fair;

And like a sin her warm lips flame
   In her wan face; swift passions brim
In her brown eyes, and ebb with shame;
   Her form is sinuous and slim -
   That lyric line of breast and limb!

But one there waits whose brown face glows,
   Whose cheeks with Winter's kisses smart -
The flushing petals of a rose!
   Of earth and sun she is a part;
   Her brow is Greek and Greek her heart.

At love she laughs a faint disdain;
   Her heart no weakly one to charm;
Robust and fragrant as the rain,
   The dark bush soothed her with his balm,
   The mountains gave her of their calm.
Her fresh young figure, lithe and tall.  
Her twilight eyes, her brow benign,  
She is the peerless queen of all -  
The maid, the country, that I shine  
In this far-banished heart of mine!

But over the loping leagues of green  
A lone land waits with a hope serene -  
My own land calls like a prisoner queen -  
But oh! the long loping leagues between!

It is perhaps significant that whereas Australia stands for sinuous passion, the smaller country is seen as being much more rigidly healthy, although it is fortunate that the Grecian lass of the antepenultimate stanza 'laughs a faint disdain' at love, since the rapid transmogrification of New Zealand from mother in the second stanza through pal to sweethearts has left morality teetering above an abyss of unmentionable depravity.

In 'Brave Days to Be' Adams envisages a glorious future for New Zealand and musingly dotage for Britain, in a welter of personification that can only be called Brackenish:

I looked far in the future; down the dim  
Echoless avenue of silent years,  
And through the cold grey haze of Time I saw  
The fair fulfilment of my spacious dream.

My Maoriland! she sat a new-crowned queen,  
Hilarious and radiant with youth,  
Superbly throned above a world of peace  
By the mere power of loveliness. . . .

He includes a somewhat barbed compliment to the 'rudely husked' government of the day - presumably he had 'King Dick' Seddon in mind:

This was the time  
When all were children of a mother State,  
And for the common weal did common work;  
And all had freedom, for no man was free  
In thought or deed to do his neighbour sooth.  
This was the culminating moon, the crown  
Of Time, to which our leaders, rudely husked,  
But kermelled with a rich humanity -  
Struggling, confused, with steps irresolute,
Now crashing forward in a moment's space
Through barriers that a thousand grey-haired years
With hands laborious had built; and now
False paths retracing with a tardy step;
Anon awaiting with a weared hope
More light, more light, to see the forward path;
Brimming with pride and huge selfishness,
Yet with a patriot purpose burning deep
And one great yearning hope unquenchable -
Had won their way! 3

His attitude towards Britain was distinctly unfilial, and
would no doubt have shocked Reeves, or indeed any previous
poet, although he had Macaulay looking over his shoulder:

And while my lusty land
Felt in her veins the triumphant sap, and heard
The wonder of the Spring shout in her heart,
Across the waters peering, chin in hand,
A grey old crone mumbled the name that once
Was Britain! Spent with mighty pasts her soil,
And sodden with a hundred histories;
Her old frame enervated with the pangs
Of bearing progenies of giant men
Who shackled the careering centuries
To one small island's name! The end had come.
Upon her fallow fields huddled her brood
Of teeming pigmies, craven beneath their pride;
Too weak to wield the sword their fathers forged,
Too rich to risk the shock of war. Like leaves
In autumn winds, about their uncertain feet
Their shrivelled greatness swept.

The most one can say of this ill-written jabberwocky is that
it does show some awareness of the fact that questions tend
to have two sides - a marked improvement on the magical poems
that preceded it. Britain, although she has no future, has
a past; 'our leaders', although 'Brimming with pride and huge
with selfishness' are nonetheless 'kernelled with a rich
humanity' and even the 'new-crowned queen,/ hilarious and
radiant' has rather Learish, if not altogether private, parts:

And in the haggard country of the North
Between the uncouth hills of manuka
The white steam drifted like the dying breath
Of some huge dragon overthrown. The earth
Writhed with a scrofula of quivering sores;
Her thick warm blood, exuding sluggishly,
In pools of ugly reluctant bubbles cozed.
At a provincial level, Adam's magic seems to have been socially acceptable, since one of a set of four sonnets celebrating New Zealand cities entitled 'The Four Queens' was chosen by the Wellington City Council to adorn one of their tramcars. They too are distinctly Brackenish in their jumble of personification and description, although his dream-girl would probably have been too much like an unblactescent Girl Guide leader for Bracken's taste.

Wellington

Here, where the surges of a world of sea
Break on our bastioned walls with league-long sweep,
Four fair young queens their lonely splendour keep,
Each in a city throned. The first is she
Whose face is arrogant with empery;
Her throne from out the wounded hill-side steep
Is rudely fashioned, and beneath her creep
The narrow streets; and stretching broad and free,
Like a green-waving meadow, lies the bay,
With blossom-sails and flower-wavelets decked.
Elate she stands; her brown and windblown hair
Haloes a face with virgin freshness fair,
As she receives, exuberant, erect,
The stubborn homage that her sisters pay.

For purposes of comparison I include the sonnet on Dunedin.
It is a slight, but only very slight, improvement on Bracken and Jessie Mackay.

Dunedin

And one is fair and winsome, and her face
Is strung with winter's kisses, and is yet
With winter's tears of parting sorrow wet;
And all her figure speaks of bonny grace.
High on the circling hills her seat has place,
Within a bower of the green bush set;
And 'neath her feet the city slopes - a net
Of broad-built streets and green-girt garden space.
Above her high the suburbs climb to crown
Her city's battlements; and in her thrall
Lie sleeping fiords, and forests call her queen.
About her waist she winds a belt of green,
And on her gleaming city looking down,
She hears the siren South for ever call.
The love poems that make up about a quarter of the book are distinguished chiefly by their modernity. 'Satana', for instance, is remarkably similar to Rupert Brooke's 'Success', which was not published until eleven years later:

But though her red lips mock me of their wine,
And that low laugh of hers fills me with fire,
As, spent with loving, in her scorn I lie;
Yet some day she will come to me and twine
Her slender arms about me; and desire
Will plead in those eyes that were all disdain,
And break her bosom with a sob of pain,
And her hot lips will lavish all their store
Of hungry kisses on me — then shall I
Remember all her queenly coldness, or
With kisses make her breathing beauty mine? 6

and 'Antagonists' must have made the 'solace and comfort' school shudder. For them the relationship between the sexes was one of the most 'poetical' of all God's gifts, and therefore the one that had to be most rapidly interred like sharks under an apple-orchard, against an improbable harvest-time, and they must have found even mental/soul copulation with the sea between somewhat disturbing:

What though the neutral sea sever us twain?
In the still night your soul in mine I take;
Your eyes, hilarious with passion, wake,
And love's delirium is mine again;
When all your body's warmth swirled in my brain —
Your face uplifted like a pallid lake
Wherein my eager lips their thirst could slake,
With deep-sighed, languorous kisses, keener than pain.

Then suddenly through passion's rosy mists
A shudder trickled, like a stream of blood:
In a grim pause we felt and understood
The everlasting war that was our fate —
The pitiless struggle and primeval hate
Of old implacable antagonists? 7

Also rather like Rupert Brooke are the deliberate and rather childishly obvious attempts to shock his audience, as in 'In Hyde Park':
The world sighs wearily, with pain
   Drawing tired breath;
The stars are like a silver rain;
   And down beneath
On Night's smooth garment running o'er
   In sullen flood,
The city, like a festering sore,
   Oozes warm blood.

The best poems in the book are 'The Australian' and
'Myself - My Song'. In the former Adams, trying to
characterise the new breed of colonial man, rears a
clumsy monument of conventional prophecies and occasionally
apt description, only to topple it in a splendid last line:

Once more this Autumn-earth is ripe,
   Parturient of another type.
While with the past old nations merge
   His foot is on the Future's verge;
They watch him, as they huddle pent,
   Striding a spacious continent,
Above the level desert's marge
   Looming in his aloofness large.
No flower with fragile sweetness graced -
   A lank weed wrestling with the waste.
Pallid of face and gaunt of limb,
   The sweetness withered out of him.
Sombre, indomitable, wan,
   The juices dried, the glad youth gone.
A little weary from his birth;
   His laugh the spectre of a mirth.
Bitter beneath a bitter sky,
   To Nature he has no reply.
Wanton, perhaps, and cruel. Yes,
   Is not his sun more merciless?
Joy has such niggard dole to give,
   He laughs, a child, just glad to live.
So drab and neutral is his day
   He gleams a splendour in the grey,
And from his life's monotony
   He lifts a subtle melody.
When earth so poor a banquet makes
   His pleasures at a gulp he takes.
The feast is his to the last crumb;  
Drink while he can . . . the draught will come.

His heart a sudden tropic flower,  
He loathes and loves within an hour.

Yet you who by the pools abide,  
Judge not the man who swerves aside.

He seeth beyond your hazy fears;  
He reads the desert of the years.

Rearing his cities in the sand,  
He builds where even God has banned.

With green a continent he crowns,  
And stars a wilderness with towns.

His gyves of steel the great plain wears,  
With paths the distances he snares.

A child who takes the wilderness for toy,  
To build a nation, or destroy.

His childish features frozen stern,  
A nation's task he has to learn,

From feeble tribes to federate  
One splendid peace-encompassed State.

But if there be no goal to reach?  
The way lies open, dawns beseech!

Enough that he lay down his load  
A little further on the road.

So, toward undreamt-of destinies  
He slouches down the centuries. 9

The images are still in the Golder - Bracken - Reeves  
tradition - 'crowning a continent' for example, and  
'starring a wilderness' - but these essentially non-  
visual poetic counters are no longer necessary to the  
structure of the poem; they are simply signs of a lack  
of confidence, fig-leaves clutched at by a poet who  
already knows there is more enterprise in walking naked.  
In 'Myself - My Song' Adams gives us his poetic testament.  
The closest parallel to it that I can think of is R.A.K.  
Mason's 'Song of Allegiance', although the earlier poet  
is much more diffuse, and has not yet come to the realisation  
that there were 'none to hear' his song that was to embitter  
his later work. Nonetheless, the stance of the two poets  
is much the same:
Here, aloof, I take my stand—
Alien, iconoclast—
Poet of a newer land,
Confident, aggressive, lonely,
Product of the present only,
Thinking nothing of the past.

If some word of mine abide,
Yet no immortality
Looks my soul for; satisfied,
Though my voice be evanescent,
If it sing the pregnant present
And the birth that is to be.

All the beauty that has been,
All of wisdom's overplus,
Has been given me to glean;
In Earth's story clear one page is—
This - the widest of the ages—
Virile, vast, tumultuous.

I shall croon no love-song old,
Dream no memory of wrong,
Build no mighty epic bold;
From my forge I send them flying—
Fragments glowing once and dying—
Scattered sparks of molten song.

If I bring no gospel bright,
Still my little stream of song
Quavers thinly through the night,
Burdened with a broken yearning,
Still persistent, though discerning
Life has shadows, sorrow wrong.

So my life shall be my verse.
Here's my record, stand or fall!
Failure may be mine, or worse,
In the twilight land of living—
With no doubt and no misgiving,
Here's my life-blood, breath and all! 10

There was little in Macriland and Other Verses to justify
his confidence, although like most volumes of indifferent verse
it was well received; a Melbourne reviewer, for instance, went
so far as to say of the poems that they were 'quite equal in
rhythm melody and feeling, to many of Swinburne's, and in point
of sentiment ... absolutely better.' 11 Nonetheless 'Myself—
My Song' is the manifesto of a professional poet, one for whom
writing is neither a polite accomplishment, nor a relaxation,
nor an opportunity for preaching, but a way of life. Had he continued to produce vaguely sensual love poems and iconoclastic nationalist verses, however, he would have only slightly more claim on our attention than his contemporaries Jessie Mackay and Pember Reeves. His next book, though, reveals a surprising new direction. Entitled the Nazarene: A Study of a Man, it is a serious study of Christ as a human being, in a blank verse that had been largely purged of the diffuseness and repetition that had marred the longer poems in his first book; in fact the language is, if anything, too sparse – Richard Strauss would certainly have found the second section, 'John the Baptist', rather too austere for his purposes:

Salome, daughter of Herodias, danced
Before the leering king. The trumpets told
His fame; the palace blazed with revelry.
And, caged within his cell, the prophet John,
Fierce-eyed and gaunt, inveighed and snarled against
The ribald Court.

Before the leering king
Danced slim Salome like a flame - the spawn
Of sleek, lascivious Herodias - she
Who on the Prophet's stern impassive face
Had poured her passionate kisses, till in scorn
He whipped her writhing with his words, and now
She hated him because she once had loved.

'Judas' bears comparison with Mason's 'Judas Iscariot':

Out from the upper room where Jesus sat
And supped the last time with his brotherhood
Judas and Hate went staggering through the night.

Yet Judas loved the Master jealously,
With that fierce love a woman bears a man
And must betray him for. And Judas felt
The tiger stir within him when he saw
The Master's gaze first question John's rapt face
And daily there reluctant ere it drooped
To pass and note the others. Judas saw
Their close, quick confidence of glance and glance,
And knew the lingering touch of Jesus' hand
Forgotten in John's fingers. . . . 13
It is impossible to do justice to the poem in quotation, but, possibly because of his avoidance of more 'normal' religious ideas, Adams has managed to write almost the only religious poem produced here - and there have been hundreds - that is still readable today.

In 1913, at the age of forty, Adams abandoned poetry for the 'dustier, though broader and more direct, highway of prose' and published his *Collected Poems*. Again the book is divided into sections - 'Maori Legends', 'Verses of the Dominion and the Commonwealth', 'Lyrics', 'Sonnets', 'Star Sonnets' and 'Interrogations'.

In the Maori part of the book he is less concerned to turn the legends than he is to exploit the culture gap between Maori and pakeha for his own purposes. Just as in films it has until recently been permissible to show naked 'natives' whereas white bodies have to be strategically covered, so it has always been easier for 'civilised' people to deal with the more elemental instincts in art by attributing them to those in whom they are considered 'natural'. Thus, where Adams might have been considered beyond the pale even by the bohemians of the *Bulletin* if he had confessed that he was 'enamoured of fair Miss Smith's little breasts', he can in all propriety commence the first poem in the book:

Enamoured of dark Ina's little breasts,  
Pale Marama, the Moon-God, dreaming leant  
Low from his grey canoe, whose eager sail  
Bore him too swiftly past her island home. 15

* In 1906 he published a volume *London Streets* which he called 'an attempt to give a vision of London' but I have been unable to locate a copy. No poems from it are included in his *Collected Verses*. 
It may be true, as Mr Curnow says, that the legends in this collection are 'some of the latest, and most exemplary failures to assimilate Maori matters into pakeha verse', but it is also true that they are the first attempts at sensuous verse to be written here, and sensuality rather than 'assimilation' was I am sure, Adam's intention. In 'Puhihuia', for instance, he treats the story very cavalierly, altering it to suit his purpose, and investing it with a sensuousness entirely lacking in Grey's original version. Here is Grey's account of Puhihuia's dance:

Then, just as they were all beating time together, Puhihuia perceived the proper moment had come, and forth she sprang before the assembled dancers; first she bends her head towards the people on the one side, and then towards those on the other, as she performed her part beautifully; her full orbed eyes seemed clear and brilliant as the full moon rising in the horizon, and whilst all the strangers looked at the young girl, they were all quite overpowered with her beauty; and Te Ponga, their young chief, felt his heart grow wild with emotion, when he saw so much loveliness before him. In the meanwhile the people of the village went on dancing until all the evolutions of the dance were duly completed, when they paused.

Adams alters the relative status of the lovers, to emphasize the power of love in defying social conventions, and rather crudely injects sex appeal into the dance:

Like blundering moths about the evening fire
The young chiefs followed her with blinded eyes
As in the dance, lithe as a flickering flame,
Slim Puhihuia swayed, and saw them not.

And, by the legend of her beauty stilled,
To that fierce land of tribal feuds there came
A dreaming pause: the old hates smouldered down;
Forgotten in the glamour of her face,
Unglutted went the hoarded vengeances
For ancient slights; and murders slowly planned
Through long resentful generations died.
The patient weapon, fashioned through long years
For one red blow, fell, unbesmeared - a gift
At Puhihua's feet; and silently
Peace lay like evening on the adoring land.
So, wasted by the wonder of one face,
The whole land drowsing lay; and chief on chief
Up to Mount Eden questing for the hand
Of Puhihua came, and one by one
Were moths to her slim torch, and blinded went
With maimed and dragging wing out of the night.

......

And every stubborn heart was humbly hers;
While she knew nothing but the dreaming joy,
The grave delight of dancing, ever dancing . . .
And Ponga, lowly in his place, looked up
And saw the cruelty of dreams come true.
For veiled within the wonder of one girl -
Smooth rippling curves, nude limbs of swaying brown,
And soul deep-drowned beneath the unstirred pool
Of musings, unawakened maidenhood -
That faint remembered beauty not of earth,
That dim, indelible, forgotten face,
Vaguely recaptured, mistily enshrined,
Smote him like sunrise. 18

'Mistily enshrined' the vision may be, and reminiscent
at times of adolescent fantasy, but at least he avoids
the absurd excesses of a poem like Broome's 'Cleopatra',
in which the poet is loth to call a spade even an implement
for digging.

Most of the non-Maori love poetry in the book is
conventionally Georgian * and shows little advance on the
verses of Maoriland, from which much of it is reprinted.
Most of the 'Verses of the Dominion and the Commonwealth'
too, derive from the earlier volume; the revisions are
occasionally amusing: the only change in 'The Australian',

* This in itself should be recognised as an achievement in a
colony where fashions in literature tend to lag very much
behind the rest of the world. Twenty years later A.R.D.
Fairburn, whose first volume is very like Adams diluted,
was to write rather pitifully home from England 'Lester
says Brooke is spat upon at Cambridge now. T.S. Eliot
is the God of the place. He says he hasn't heard Brooke
mentioned once since he's been there. Curious, isn't it?' 19
for instance, is that in the couplet 'From feeble tribes
to federate/ One splendid peace-encompassed State.'
the second line becomes 'One white and peace-encompassed
State.' In the 'Sonnets' he sometimes manages to rid
himself of the diffuseness that vitiates most of the longer
works, as in 'The Pacific', another moribund poem galvanised
into life by the last line:

They ring her round like gods who watch a game
Of mimic boats upon a sheltered pond.
The round arena each has coldly conned,
And from his city gazes, keen to claim
The mastery of oceans and the fame
That waits in the immediate Beyond.
Will it be ancient yellow, brown or blond
To write upon its waves his deathless name?

All for this Armageddon breathless wait:
Dumb Russia stretches one vast frozen paw,
And he who lately nipped it stands elate;
Sydney and San Francisco crave their share;
Samoa threatens - but within his lair
The dreaming saurian lifts a listless claw.

The lines are still marred by clichés like 'deathless name'
and 'immediate Beyond', and there is no hint of irony in
his use of them here, but sometimes, as in 'Night in England'
he manages to exploit them ironically with considerable effect:

Silence like a night-mist from the ground
Floods all the sodden fields. London lies there -
A hundred miles beyond that hillside bare -
Its fever ended in a peace profound,
Still as this stagnant village that is drowned
In immemorial quiet. High in air
The street-lamps of a greater city flare!
But of its tireless traffic not a sound!

And yet a measured music marks the time:
Charging a culvert on its distant flight,
An unknown train comes roaring up the night;
And over all dead England, from dark towers
Village to village calling, chime to chime,
The empty churches tell the empty hours.

'English' clichés - 'peace profound' and 'immemorial quiet'
are entertained for a moment, and then tossed away, their
vacuity mocked by the repeated 'empty' in the last line.
It is in the section 'Interrogations', however, that Adams is seen at his best. Like Dickens, when he is trying to describe the 'normal' or the 'good' he is a sucker for every platitude that pops into his head, but when he tries to grapple with an abnormal condition he is forced back on his own creative vitality. Like Mason later, he was unable to come to rest in any comforting belief, and thus had little incentive to peddle comfort to others. They are both very conscious of their alienation as poets, and they confront it in similar ways — Mason's 'Stoic Marching Song' is paralleled by Adams's 'The Truce':

Uncouth is the armor I bear;  
Caged in a body inert is a heart that is eager to dare.  
Yet I smote with a sullen endeavour,  
And if sometimes I felt my blade quiver,  
I was glad, for I knew there were foes that even my sword could reach.  

In fact the similarities are so many and obvious that it is hard to avoid the rather academically unprofitable conclusion that Adams probably 'influenced' Mason. The latter's 'After Death' for instance, is very like Adams's 'After':

After Death

And there will be just as rich fruits to cull  
and jewels to see  
nor shall the moon nor the sun be any more dull  
and there will be flowers as fine to pull  
and the rain will be as beautiful  
but not for me

And there shall be no splendour gone from the vine  
nor from the tree  
and still in the heavens shall glow Jah's radiant sign  
and the dancing sun on horses' sleek hides shall seem no less fine  
still shall the car sweep along with as lovely a line  
but not for me

And men shall cut no less curious things upon brass  
still sweep the sea  
nor no little lustrous shadow upon the sand's mass  
cast by the lilting ripple above shall cease to pass  
and radiance still shall enhalo shadows on moonlit grass  
but not for me. 23
After

After the hapless struggle and the fret of life,
After desire and hope and yearning, grief and strife,
Earth gives her sleep.

There will be no more dreaming and no more despair;
I shall not even wonder, and there will be there
No need to weep.

And Time his quiet way above me still will take,
And on me all the moving days will ripple and break
Like gentle waves.
The glory of the summer will above me glow,
And all the traffic of the years sweep on, as though
There were no graves.

The green will surge above me in a tide of Spring,
The blossoms open to the wet skies wondering,
    Silent and slow;
The winds will wander free above me endlessly,
And the familiar rain will drip and drip on me -
    And I not know!  24

'The Ballad of Judgement Day' is another poem that leaves
one conscious that a failure has occurred, but that it has
been the result of too much effort rather than too little:

    The Criminal came to the Throne of God
    At the close of the Judgement Day,
    And with a truculent step he trod:
    He had come to say his say -
    And he held his head - it was sideways set,
    And the bruise of the noose was on it yet -
    Upright, in an awkward way.

    The serried hosts his curt glance swept.
    Before his eyes theirs fell;
    And jauntily up to the Throne he stepped:
    'Twas a scene he knew so well!
    To the judge he nodded - he had no awe,
    For he was familiar with courts of law,
    And had often been sent to Hell!

    The judge began to drone the law;
    But he, with a wry grimace,
    Uplifted a hand that looked like a claw,
    And thrust up his narrow face.
    And over the startled face of One
    A horrible shudder seemed to run -
    A shudder that trailed through Space.
The hosts of Paradise, swept with fears,  
Their spheric music stayed  
A moment – or a thousand years –  
While, fleering, unaflraid,  
Before the Plotter stood his Plan –  
The Master-Workman and his man –  
This grim Tool he had made.

"Because their laws I went and broke,  
They hanged me high," said he.  
"They got quits with me for my little joke;  
But I’m jiggered if I can see  
If ’twas Jester or Devil that dared to make  
These laws, and then – his laws to break –  
Deliberately made me?"

The Felon straightened his sideways head;  
(The Judge quailed from his frown!)  
"Take off that motley robe," he said;  
"Take off that mose-like crown!  
By your works you shall be judged, you know;  
And I am a beautiful work to show!  
From your pantomime Throne – step down!"

And at his scorn the serried hosts  
That sat round, ring on ring,  
All dwindled, paling, into ghosts;  
While He, their discrowned King,  
Stepped cringing from his futile Throne,  
And stood, in all wide space alone,  
A shivering, naked thing.

And over the ruins of Paradise,  
And over the endless dead  
The Convict with the little eyes  
Slouched with his leg-iron tread.  
And on the cracked old Throne he sat,  
With the halo like a tilted hat  
Upon his sideways head.

"You might have made a thing of pride,"  
He sneered, "For you were shod  
With majesty and puissance wide.  
You didn’t – though you were God!  
And all your high, tremendous powers,  
And all your length of endless hours  
Made me – this pretty cled!"

"All that you dreamed of, builded, hoped  
Through all eternity,  
All that you fumbled for and groped,  
Summed in this face you see.  
So high on the wall of your banquet hall  
I set my mark in my gaol-bird scrawl –  
This ‘MENE TEKEL’ – Me!"
"So by this narrowed, slanted brow,
This sullen, bestial jaw -
It was murderer's work! - I doom you now!
This make-shift botch, this flaw
You willfully out of Nothing brought;
So at your throat - 'tis a trick you taught! -
My hand that is a claw!"

Then he summoned before his Judgement Seat
The Powers that had done
This thing, and spawned their incomplete
And maimed and twisted son.
And, sitting stiff on that Throne of Dread,
With his crooked eyes and his crooked head,
He doomed them, one by one.

First, Evolution, with its wiles,
Its endless, pitiless strife,
And Love that maimed with subtle smiles,
And Hatred, with his knife,
And Kings and Conquerors and Trade,
And all the Gods that Man had made;
And, lastly, he doomed Life.

And so at last he was left alone,
This King of claw and fang,
A sideways thing on a tottering Throne:
There were no more to hang!
And, from that desolated place
At the end of Time, far out through Space
His bitter laughter rang.

The crumbling walls of Space were rent,
The stars rained in a rout;
And, shattering through each atom went
A cataclysmic Doubt.
And, like a sickening candle light,
Into its old, primeval Night
The Universe guttered out.

With Adams roughage appears on the local literary scene.
His predecessors had been content for the most part to
digest and painlessly eliminate imported prunes — plums
of Life and Love and Faith and Feeling with the juice
withered out of them. Adams, like Mason, gives the
impression that for him making poems was like shitting
razor-blades.

The problems with which he wrestled have little
relevance to us now, but he is important historically as the first New Zealand poet to write and think like a professional, and to face up to the fact that a poem has to be worked for, that it is not just something with which to amuse an idle hour or an idle audience. The world as he saw it was a grim place, and his poems are equally grim, but through all his doubts he kept his belief in the efficacy of 'song', not as an anodyne, but as a spit in the eye of the universe. 'The Tavern' is perhaps his most successful attempt to see his world whole, and it is a fitting conclusion to his career as a poet.

Outside is a world wind-stripped and wide,
A starless horror of storm;
But we poor devils may sit inside
In our tavern vile
For a little while,
With the liquor to keep us warm.

For one with the wine of Joy is drunk,
Another is fuddled with Prayer,
And one in the Torpor of Faith is sunk,
And one drinks deep
His draught of sleep,
And one lies drugged with Care.

Our tavern window - a star in Space -
Looks out on the lonely hill;
But huddled here we have found a place
Where with humankind
We have drunk and dined -
But where each must pay his bill.

With Life the room is warm and bright;
Yet when each must pay his score
A summons comes from the starless night -
A tap at the pane -
Or is it the rain? -
And a fumbling Hand at the door!

And he who receives that summons dread,
Must arise at its command;
And when his curt "Good-night" is said,
Must go alone
On a road unknown
In the clutch of that fumbling Hand!
He pays his bill; and we others know
We shall hear his laugh no more.
And mute eyes ask a question slow -
So thus it ends?
Or finds he friends
Through that sullenly closing door?

So one to the lonely void goes out
With his laughter ringing clear;
One swaggers off with a reckless shout;
One goes with a verse,
And one with a curse:
Not one with a shudder of fear.

And one, long finished with fears and hopes,
Flings out with a stubborn lip;
His friendly hand for that grey Hand gropes:
What use to whine . . .
And we wait for a sign;
And listen, and wonder, and sip.

For each must go when his time has come
Not alone through that drenching night.
With his soul and that one Companion dumb
He takes the track;
But he comes not back,
Drowned deep from the tavern light.

There are other taverns, this one believes,
In that un-horizoned dearth;
But one cares not, nor hopes nor grieves:
The coin will spin . . .
Is there more to win?
And - what is its winning worth?

The room grows empty and desolate;
The dead fire sinks to a glow;
And, sipping slowly, I dream and wait . . .
Till whimpers the rain
At the window-pane,
And I guess it is time to go.

Is this lone inn on the rain-swept hill
The last where I shall sit?
Or shall I find more taverns still?
When I have traced
The star-blind waste,
Shall I see a window lit?

What matters to me if the tipsters lie?
What difference if they should?
For - though the price was fairly high -
I have drunk my fill
And paid the bill -
And the liquor was fairly good.
The grey Companion waits for me.
He is busy tonight. Be strong!
Those long lean fingers at the key! ... 
So into the night
With a head upright,
And on ashen lips a song. 26
1. **Arthur H. Adams, Maoriland and Other Verses.** 1899, pp.5-7
2. *ibid.* pp.19-21
3. *ibid.* p.23
4. *ibid.* p.72
5. *ibid.* pp.72-3
6. *ibid.* p.57
7. *ibid.* p.82
8. *ibid.* p.102
9. *ibid.* pp.103-5
10. *ibid.* 89-90
12. *ibid.* p.25
13. *ibid.* p.33
15. **Adams, The Collected Verses.** 1913, p.15
16. **Curnow, Penguin Anthology.** p.311
17. **Grey, Polynesian Mythology.** p.304
18. **Adams, Collected Verses.** pp.27-30
19. **Fairburn, Letter to Guy Mountain, Jan.1st., 1931. Turnbull Library manuscript collection.**
20. **Adams, Collected Verses.** p.111
21. *ibid.* p.116
22. *ibid.* p.160
24. **Adams, Collected Verses.** p.171
25. *ibid.* pp.186-90
XV. WILD PEACHES

Blanche Edith Baughan (1870-1958)

Tired of solemn toil, of restless search
After the truth of things that still seem false:
Tired of all our subtle schemes to catch
The living thought, to rend and ravage it,
Till at its heart of hearts our ruthless thirst
For motives and hid meanings and dark signs
Of something great, profound, and serious
Be glutted: tir'd of these, and tir'd to death
Of mine own feverish mind and seething doubts,
I snatch'd a quiet week by the blue sea,
And set to words a picture of my brain
Mere colour, hoping to find rest thereby.

Blanche Baughan, 'Nereia'.

Blanche Baughan did not settle in New Zealand until 1900, when she was thirty. She arrived equipped with a B.A. in Classics from the University of London - her certificates, now in the Turnbull Library, show that she was first in the First Class of 1892 - and almost immediately took a job as housekeeper on a farm. In her baggage were a few copies of a slim volume, Verses by B.E. Baughan, that had been published by Constable two years before.

Over this, her first book, we need not linger long; the reviewer for Academy summed it up pretty well: 'Verses is a clean and healthy book . . .' ¹ The poems are for the most part impeccably worshipful, of Nature and of God, and, although they may decay are, as the Academy noted, unlikely to corrupt. At their best they are simple and unpretentious records of simple things:

Cottage Days

I

As small winds at a window
With just as little art,
These gusts of song come calling
At the casement of your heart.
Open a tiny chink in it,
  And let them in, I pray!
They will but throw a country kiss
  To you - and run away.

II

The Study

My room has bare white walls
  So every sunbeam bright
Runs naked round my room
  In unoffended light.

My room has bare white walls
  - So, if a daffodil
Is yellow, in my room
  She shows quite yellow still.

To give each thought full scope
  And every fact its due,
Perhaps the mind of man
  Should go uncolour'd too?

III

The Concert

This gusty morning comes with gifts
  Of music to my room:
She bids the Wind to ring in the roof,
  And in the chimney boom;

She marshals thick at my window-pane
  The reedy Raindrop choir;
And calls for wood, to whistle the songs
  Of last year to the fire;

And (like a Starling, venturing notes
  That to the Thrush belong),
Me too in this singing world she sets
  Crooning my little song.

At their worst they descend to melodious raving, rather like
Jessie Mackay's "Night Sea":

Light and Night

Light! Light! Light!
Mother of the wide-e'y'd flowers,
  Mother of glad lips and bright
Dancing feet of the noontide hours,
  Dancing with delight!
Oh, the joy, the rapture strong,
  Thrilling thro' the entranced air,
When thy glory rides along
Heaven's high rampart bare!
Mother of ecstasy, Mother of might,
Come, sweet Light!

Light, fierce Light!
O intolerable gaze,
O unstay'd insatiate blight,
Battening thy relentless blaze
On the roots of sight!
Mercy! Mercy! Mind and heart
Writhe beneath the unswerving fire!
Mercy, mercy, Light! Depart,
Thou first-begot of Ire!
O for dullness, darkness, Night!
Hence, dread Light! etc. 3

Her second book, Reuben and Other Poems was published by Constable in 1903. The title poem is long, and rather solemnly Wordsworthian - it would have made quite a good short story - but the most interesting pieces in the book are those with a colonial theme, 'Young Hotspur' and 'The Old Place'. In them she showed that fresh vision, intelligence and a lively sympathy can more than compensate for the lack of that 'early and long' experience of one's subject that Ruskin had claimed was a prerequisite for true art. As a letter shows, she started in New Zealand in a neo-pioneering fashion:

One day at Brighton High School we had a geography lesson all about New Zealand. It was a land, we were told, of sunshine and flowers and beautiful mountains, with no poverty, no snakes, no wild beasts, no strikes (true in those days), and as I could see for myself from the map, lots of lovely sea. I was twelve years old then, and I'd go to New Zealand when I grow up, thought I; and I did, but not until 1900 was I free to do so.

I knew nobody in New Zealand but even before leaving Wellington wharf I felt at home and kind friends of friends up country took me in hand and taught me housework and cooking and to know the up-country life. It was a proud moment when I saw a family of children eating, without critical remarks, porridge I had cooked.
but even so it is remarkable how quickly she came to appreciate the possibilities of local idiom, and the kinks in colonial mentality. 'Young Hotspur', for instance, is a sympathetic portrayal of the often fatal attraction of bloodsports for the adolescent colonial, anxious for 'a bit of a roam' at the country's expense:

Farewell to you, gully and paddock and peak,
And you, lonely old whare aside of the creek!
Lonely and silent, you'll see me no more,
For I've finished with farming: I'm off to the war.

I have scored my last tally, I've done my last dip,
And, thank God, there's no curching aboard of a ship.
No more of the yards and the race and the pen,
For I'm going — I'm going to live among men!

Who next on my stretcher his blanket will spread,
And curse this old oven for burning his bread?
Poor beggar! he'll stare at that map till he's sick of it,
Here — while, hurrah! I shall be in the thick of it.

Cushie, old woman, you'll feel a fresh hand,
And the dogs'll get working they won't understand.
Ay, Roy and Rover, you'll miss me a bit;
Well, I don't care who misses, so long as I hit!

Last night I was hearing my mother looked sad,
And a face at the station's not overly glad.
But when fighting and fun have got hold of a man,
Why, — the women must manage the best way they can.

What's kisses and comfort? The worth of a pin
When there's wrongs to be righted, and honours to win:
When the country is up, and they're calling from Home,
And you've long'd all your life for a bit of a roam!

And suppose, one fine evening, the old Cross up there
Down at me dead in some kopje should stare —
All right! I'll have met with some reason for breath;
Life I'll have tasted before I feed Death.

Here's the moon, Russet! Not much of a lamp,
And a dozen odd miles to pick back into camp.
Up! Good-bye, whare and paddock and all!
It's "Hurrah for New Zealand, and down with Oom Paul!"

And 'The Old Place' reveals a capacity for nostalgia surprising in one who had been in the country for only three years, and is closer to New Zealand idiom than any verse since McKee Wright's, although phrases such as 'bright with purity' sound a little inappropriate in the mouth of an old bushman:
So the last day's come at last, the close of my
fifteen year —
The end of the hope, an' the struggles, an' messes
I've put in here.
All of the shearing's over, the final mustering done, —
Eleven hundred an' fifty for the incoming man, near on.
Over five thousand I drove 'em, mob by mob, down the
coast;
Eleven-fifty in fifteen year . . . it isn't much of a
boast.

Oh, it's a bad old place! Blown out o' your bed half
the nights,
And in summer the grass burnt shiny an' bare as your
hand, on the heights:
The creek dried up by November, and in May a thundering
roar
That carries down toll o' your stock to salt 'em whole
on the shore.
Clear'd I have, and I've clear'd and clear'd, yet every-
where, slap in your face,
Briar, tauhinu, an' ruin! — God! it's a brute of a place.
. . . An' the house got burnt which I built myself, with
all that worry and pride;
Where the Missus was always homesick, and where she took
fever, and died.

Yes, well! I'm leaving the place. Apples look red on
that bough.
I set the slips with my own hand. Well — they're the
other man's now.
The breezy bluff: an' the clover that smells so over the
land,
Drowning the reek o' the rubbish, that plucks the profit
out o' your hand:
That bit o' Bush paddock I fell'd myself, an' watched,
each year, come clean
(Don't it look fresh in the tawny? A scrap of Old-Country
green):
This air, all healthy with sun an' salt, an' bright with
purity:
An' the glossy karakas there, twinkling to the big blue
twinkling sea:
Ay, the broad blue sea beyond, an' the gem-clear cove
below,
Where the boat I'll never handle again, sits rocking
to and fro:
There's the last look to it all! an' now for the last
upon
This room, where Hetty was born, an' my Mary died, an'
John . . .
Well! I'm leaving the poor old place, and it cuts as keen as a knife;
The place that's broken my heart - the place where I've lived my life. 

Although her local idiom is still very 'literary', and consists largely of a rather mechanical elision, the unselfconscious way in which she uses phrases like 'God! it's a brute of a place' and 'salt 'em whole on the shore' is evidence of a more than mechanical sensitivity to the language she heard 'up country'. It would seem that she did bring to New Zealand the 'uncoloured' mind she had written of in 'Cottage Days'; certainly she is refreshingly free from any extraneous demands - sentimental, social or literary - which might have marred her work.

Her most substantial book of verse, *Shingle-Short and Other Verses*, was published here by Whitcombe and Tombs, probably in 1908, and is almost entirely 'New Zealand'. The title poem is long - thirty-two pages - and is in the form of a nocturnal soliloquy in rhyming couplets uttered by what must be the most loquacious half-wit in literature. He begins muttering to himself in the early evening, and does not finally fall silent until milking-time next morning. The 'action' is the making of a toy boat from a piece of firewood, the long-delayed moral is that God has a place even for those who are a 'shingle-short'. It says much for the vigour with which Miss Baughan invests his speech that this improbable and laborious enterprise almost comes off; she retains our sympathy, although not our interest, by giving 'Barney' a liveliness of speech which, though it tends to be dramatically rather unconvincing, does at least keep the poem moving along. Here he is taking a clock to pieces to make a motor for his boat:

Clock! you're bound for a bit of change.
I shall miss you, an' you'll feel strange -
Wonder, now, little Tick-tick-tick,
If ocean-motion 'll turn you sick?
Sorry - can't help it! ... 'N, if I'm late,
Missis 'll thankfully set me straight.
Seems to bustle her up to find
Time runnin' on, with me behind -
Straightens her back-bone, whips her blood,
Tautens her belt, like, does her good.
Waste o' worry! What's time to we,
When there's all of Eternity?
Out o' your coat! - So - Off you come,
Ratchet, scapement, an' pendulum -
   etc. 7

Another fairly weighty piece of versifying is 'Maui's Fish',
which is a combination of two undertakings that have always
been dear to the heart of the colonial poet - a rendering of
a Maori myth, and an exhortation, on a grand scale, to New
Zealand. So rapidly, in fact, did she adapt to local
literary habits, that Alan Mulgan said (approvingly?) of
this poem that it sounded 'like an outburst by a dissatisfied
New Zealand-born Radical.' 8

In a letter to J.C. Anderson a year before Shingle-Short
was published, she had written about the difficulty of
rendering Maori matter into verse:

Like you, I should like to see the Maori traditions
   treated in verse, but the difficulty to me seems the
   form - Our rhymed smooth metres don't seem to me to fit
   the half grotesque, wild and above all free genius of
   the Maori. Its like putting a Maori into European
clothes - he's not himself; Whereas in a Birmingham
(or wherever in England they make them) blanket, he'd
be all right. Have you ever tried them in something a
la Hiawatha, only very much more irregular, with long
lines? It seems to me that that would be a hopeful
direction? With a real but irregular rhythm you
understand. 9

She may have prescribed dilute Longfellow for Anderson, but she
tipped on Whitman herself, as 'Maui's Fish' shows. The
resemblance is most marked when, having described Maui's
feat of fishing up the North Island, she goes on to exhort
it, or rather, the country as a whole, in somewhat mixed
metaphor:
Still alive is that Fish!
Here, on the edge of the world, on the rim of the morning,
She stands, Tangaroa's dear daughter, a vigorous virgin,
Fresh from the foam.
Still the daylight is young in her eyelids, and on her
full forehead;
Her brown limbs gleam from the bath,
Dew is yet in her wind-tossing hair.
The wild winds are her walls, and she stands here,
untamed as sea-water,
Brave with the heart of the Ocean, sweet with the heart
of the Sun.

Ay!
A sea-wind for freshness, a sea-wave for brightness,
A sea-sunrise for beauty, a strong sea for strength,
Here she stands, Maui's Fish, here she shines, a new
Land from the Ocean,
Alive 'mid the ever-live Sea.

Alive! Yea, Te Ika -
Of the Bone of the Past, of the Blood of the Present,
Here, at the end of the earth, in the first of the Future,
Thou standest, courageous and youthful, a country to come!
Lo, thou art not defiled with the dust of the Dead, nor
beclouded with thick clouds of Custom:
But, springs and quick sources of life all about thee,
within thee,
Splendid with freshness, radiant with vigour, conspicuous
with hope,
Like a beacon thou beckonest back o'er the waters,
away o'er the world:
The while, looking ahead with clear eyes,
Like Maui, thou laugh'st, full of life;

And do not regard overmuch
Those tedious old Brothers, that still must be pribbling
and prabbling about thee
(Paddlers inshore: when a Maui has fish'd, then they
claim the canoe!).

Laugh at them, Land!
They are old; are they therefore so wise?
Thou art young, Te Ika: be young!
Thou art new; be thou new!
With keen sight, with fresh forces, appraise those old
grounds of their vaunting,
Dip in deep dew of thy seas what swims yet of their catch,
and renew it, -
The rest, fish very long caught,
Toss it to them!
And address thee to catches to come.
Rich hauls to bold fishers, new sights to new sight, a
new world to new eyes,
To discoverers, discoveries! Yea,
Offspring of Maui! recall the experience of Maui
A dead fish he did not receive it? No, no!
He endured, he adventured, he went forth, he experimented,
He found and he fetch'd it, alive!

Yea, alive! a Fish to give thanks for.
Ah, ah, Tangaroa, well done!
Thou livest, Te Ika a Maui!
Enough! My last word:
Live! Dare! Be alive! 10

No matter how often the exhortations in the last line are repeated - and they have been the stock-in-trade of local literary tohungas right up to the present, although of recent years the correspondence columns of the Listener have taken over from poetry as the favoured medium of incantation - they never seem to have any effect. New Zealand was a virgin in Golders time, she remained so during Brackens reign, although her sister Australia lost her virtue rather disastrously, and even by 1908 she had stubbornly refused to change her condition. So tedious does the recurrent image become that the magic begins to wear rather thin.

'Early Days' is a much simpler, and much less hysterical poem. Like 'Shingle-Short' it is dramatic in form, but since Granny, who tells the story, not only has all her wits, but an audience as well, the result is more successful. It is an unpretentious poem, never aspiring to be more than a 'story', but the picture of pioneering life that it conjures up is very vivid - remarkably so when one considers that all the details so convincingly given must have been acquired at second or third hand. Real pioneers, like Golder and Barr, turning to poetry as they did for entertainment and relaxation, obviously turned away from the prosaic details of their daily labours. Sixty-odd years had to elapse, and the account had to be handed down through one or two generations and passed on to an interested Classics
graduate from England, before the 'slush-lamp' made its odiferous entrance into our verse:

Want to hear a story? Want to come on Granny's knee?
None the better for that party and the pastry, I can see!
Tired of all your dollies, and the picture-books? Well, well
I dont think we'd have tired . . . . Now, you listen and
I'll tell.

... Once, there was a blue Bay - years and years ago;
Cram'd with red and black pine, thick as they could grow;
Half-a-dozen settlers, with as many children each;
Not a track to anywhere, and Bush to the beach.
We'd no mail, or schoolhouse; there was neither church nor store;
People lived in pine-wood whares, with pine-sawdust on the floor.
Strangers never came our way, playthings mostly grew,
An' Town might have been at Home, for all us young ones knew.
Always dressed in dungarees: never had new boots!
Lived on pig and pigeon, Kaka, fish, and roots.
But, chew, an' get the full good out of everything you've got,
And I guess you're just as well-off with a little as a lot.

Ay, sunshine: sunshine: freedom, an' content:
Bless those bare old Bay days - light enough they went!
- But what I was going to tell you, was, when Father's boat came down
After taking up the timber from the sawpit into Town.
Mother and Aunt was timid when the men-folk were away;
Used to call us young ones in at dimming of the day.
We'd fetch in water and wood, and we'd make the whare fast,
Snuggle under the blankets, an' wish the night was past.
But sometimes, sometimes! in the middle of the night,
Round the Northern Head 'ud steal a little lonely light.
"coo-sei!" 'd come the cry . . . . Waken all! and hark!...
Oh, its Father! Father coming in the deadness of the Dark!

Then, one 'ud shift the back-log, for the hot red beneath,
One 'ud pilo the kindling on, and blow with all her breath,
An', wide on the dreadful Dark, an creepy, curdly Cold,
One 'ud run and fling the door, an' nobody 'ud scold!
"Coo-se ... Coo-se!" ... closer 'd come the sound ... Peer an' peer ... at last we'd hear her being run aground!

Footsteps up the shingle! Shout! ... and answering shout!
Out we'd run an' pull 'em in, an' shut the Darkness out!

Father, Uncle Eb, an' big brother Dave -
Oh, so wet an' salty! Oh, so big and brave!
Good it was to hug them, an' warm their wintry cheeks -
Sometimes they'd been up in Town, weather-bound for weeks.

Then I'd be at the bellows, an' I'd blow, blow, blow,
Till the brown walls were ruddy, an' the whare all a-glow.
Merrily danced the fire-flasher, bright the flashes danced,
Upon merry heart-lit faces, an' bright eyes that danced.

Then Father'd weigh the baby, and declare we all were grown;
Or he'd want the dimples counted, an' the last new freckles shown.
While close we'd cling about him, an' flossick in his coat -
"Lollies for the kiddies", always came in Father's boat.

Next, he'd toss the parcel Mother always caught:
Something tasty out o' Town, down for supper brought.
Hiss! Splat! Splutter! ... Tending it in turn,
You can guess us children never let that cooking burn!

Meanwhile, the grown-ups 'ud be carrying in the swags;
There'd be diving into bundles, an' dipping into bags ...
Matches: molasses: cotton, and salt an' such -
Puzzled me how Town got on, when the Bay had took so much?

An' all the while, they'd tell us tales - what the timber brought,
Town-news, war-news, an' what vessels lay in port;
An', Oh! the people, an' places, an' sights an' all,
they'd name -
How big! How wonderful an' strange! - how full the world became!

An' sometimes, Oh! a letter. - Then, 'twas "Get the slush-lamp, quick!"
('Twas a hollowed raw potato, stuff'd with stocking round a stick,
An' stuck, swamp'd with porpoise-oil, in a pannikin -
Smelt, Uncle used to say, worse than home-made sin);
An' then we'd hush an' settle down quiet round the hearth,
For to hear o' green Kent country, an' the old side of
the Earth.
Uncle listen'd interested, Father with a frown;
Mother used to listen with her head bow'd down.

It was always full o' stories; folks were wedded, buried,
born;
There were animals, an' railways, an' "the cherries", or
"the corn".
All our plays 'ud be for days what the news had been;
An' twas nice that people loved you that you hadn't ever
seen.

Well, an' after that came Supper - for us young ones, too;
at least,
Mother'd let us have a taste, just to feel the feast.
An' wasn't she a picture! pouring, good an' hot,
Tea (not manuka-brew, but Tea!) from the pot.

Then, amid the cozy, warm tobacco-smoke,
Through the deep, protecting tones of the men-folk,
Good it was to listen, with your head on Father's knee,
To the falling, lifting, falling, of the Sea!

Or, gazing through the window that look'd upon the tide,
To dare all that big, black, bogey Dark outside . . .
Outside, the pouncing Dark, and cold, cold foam,
- Inside, all of us - and Father! safe back home.

Then, when all was over, all the good-nights said,
Fire covered up again, and every one in bed -
Why, bless me child, 'twasn't over! 'Tisn't yet - the
dear delight
Of those sudden riches rain'd down in the middle of the
night.

'A Bush Section', reprinted in Allen Curnow's Penguin
anthology, is probably the best known of her works. It is also
a landmark in New Zealand poetry, as I think the first poem to
be written here that means more than it says - the first poem,
that is, which is actually larger than the poet's pretensions in
writing it. It is in five sections: the first deals with the
land, and the keynote is death and desolation. This is New
Zealand with the pioneering impulse exhausted, summed up in
'a little raw farm on the edge of a desolate hillside', caught
between two worlds, one dead, the other waiting to be born:
Logs, at the door, by the fence; logs, broadcast
over the paddock;
Sprawling in motionless thousands away down the
green of the gully,
Logs, grey-black. And the opposite rampart of
ridges
Bristles against the sky, all the tawny, tumultuous
landscape
Is stuck, and pricked, and spiked with the standing
black and grey splinters,
Strewn, all over its hollows and hills, with the long,
prone, grey-black logs.

For along the paddock, and down the gully,
Over the multitudinous ridges,
Through valley and spur,
Fire has been!
Ay, the fire went through and the Bush has
departed,
The green Bush departed, green Clearing is not
yet come.
'Tis a silent, skeleton world;
Dead, and not yet re-born,
Made, unmade, and scarcely as yet in the
making;
Ruin'd, forlorn, and blank.

At the little raw farm on the edge of the desolate
hillside,
Perch'd on the brink, overlooking the desolate valley,
Tonight, now the milking is finish'd, and all the calves
fed,
The kindling all split, and the dishes all wash'd after
supper:
Thorold von Reden, the last of a long line of nobles,
Little "Thor Rayden," the twice-orphaned son of a
drunkard,
Dependent on strangers, the taciturn, grave ten-year-
old,
Stands and looks from the garden of cabbage and larkspur,
looks over
The one little stump-spotted rye-patch, so gratefully
green,
Out, on this desert of logs, on this dead disconsolate
ocean
Of billows arrested, of currents stay'd, that never
awake and flow.
Day after day,
The hills stand out on the sky,
The splinters stand on the hills,
In the paddock the logs lie prone.
The prone logs never arise,  
The erect ones never grow green,  
Leaves never rustle, the birds went away with the Bush, -  
There is no change, nothing stirs!  
And to-night there is no change;  
All is mute, monotonous, stark;  
In the whole wide sweep round the low little hut of the settler  
No life to be seen; nothing stirs.  

Into this stark landscape intrudes the River (Miss Baughan uses capitals in the same way as a beginner pounds the loud pedal - the effect is not unpleasantly 'primitive') which could stand for Life or Time, or some other resistless force. It is tempting after so long a sojourn in simplicity to say that it does stand for something - symbols are few and far between on the lower slopes of Parnassus, at least in New Zealand - but this is not a poem that can be forced:  

Yet, see! past the cow-bails,  
        Down, deep in the gully,  
What glimmers? What silver  
        Streaks the grey dusk?  
'Tis the River, the River! Ah, gladly Thor thinks of the River,  
His playmate, his comrade,  
Down there all day,  
All the long day, betwixt lumber and cumber,  
Sparkling and singing;  
Lively glancing, adventurously speeding,  
Busy and bright as a needle in knitting  
Running in, running out, running over and under  
The logs that bridge it, the logs that block it,  
The logs that helplessly trail in its waters,  
The jamm'd up jetsam, the rooted snags.  
Twigs of konini, bronze leaf-boats of wineberry  
Launch'd in the River, they also will run with it,  
They cannot stop themselves, twisting and twirling  
They too will keep running, away and away.  
Yes; for on runs the River, it presses, it passes  
On - by the fence, by the bails, by the landslip, away down the gully,  
On, ever onward and on!  
The hills remain, the logs and the gully remain,  
Changeless as ever, and still;  
But the River changes, the River passes.  
Nothing else stirring about it,
It stirs, it is quick, 'tis alive!
"What is the River, the running River?
Where does it come from?
Where does it go?"

Next the Train carves a passage of fire in the distance, and then the moving Stars appear, all seeming to show that the essence of things is motion, that the still desolation of the raw little farm is not its ultimate condition. Then comes the climax - a paean in praise of Life and consciousness, that at the same time contrives to be an exhortation to the colony as a whole and a prayer for a young boy:

Ah, little Questioner!
Son of the Burnt Bush;
Straightly pent 'twixt its logs and ridges,
To its narrow round of monotonous labours
Strictly tether'd and tied:
And here to-night, in the holiday twilight,
Conning, counting, and clasping as treasures,
Whatever about your unchanging existence
Moves and changes and lives:
One delight have you missed, and that one of more import than any:
More quick than the River, more fraught than the Mail-Train,
More certain to move than the stars in their courses,
The most radiant wonder, the rarest excitement of all.

What is it? Oh, what can it be?
- It is you, little Thor! 'Tis yourself!
Little, feeble, ignorant, destitute:
Wondering, questioning, conscious, alive!

A mind that moves 'mid the motionless matter:
'Mid the logs, a developing Soul:
From the battle-field bones of a ruin'd epoch,
Life, the Unruined, freshly upspringing,
Life, Re-creator of life!

Yea, newly-come Soul!
Here on Earth, from what region unguess'd at?
Here, to this rough and raw prospect, these backblocks of Being, assign'd -
Lean, cumber'd with ruin, lonely, bristling with hardship,
A birthright that fires have been through -
What change, O Changer! Creator, of Spirit?
In this, thy burden'd allotment, wilt thou command and create?
Finite, yet infinite,
Tool, yet Employer,
Of Forces Almighty,
Beyond thee, within, -

What Fires of the Spirit, what Storms, wilt thou summon?
What Dews shall avail thee, what Sunbeams? What seed
wilt thou sow?
Ease unto weaklings: to thews and to sinews, Achievement!
What pasture, Settler and Soverign, shall be grazed from
the soil-sweetening ashes?
What home be warm in the wild?
Nay, outflowing Heart! thou highway forward and back:
Thought-trains of the Mind! commencing with far-away
worlds:
What up-country traffic and freight shall travel forth
into the world?
What help will ye summon and send?
Spirit, deep in the Dark! with the light of what over-
head worlds
Wilt thou in the Dark make friends?
O pioneer Soul! against Ruin here hardly pitted,
What life wilt thou make of existence?
Life! what more Life wilt thou make?

Ah, little Thor!
Here in the night, face to face
With the Burnt Bush within and without thee,
Standing, small and alone:
Bright Promise on Poverty's threshold!
What art thou? Where hast thou come from?
How far, how far! wilt thou go? 14

There is something satisfying in the obliquity of this
exhortation; little Thor Rayden, 'last of a long line of
nobles' and 'twice-orphaned son of a drunkard/ Dependent on
strangers', trapped in a desolate landscape, is an image of
the country with much more life latent in it than Reeves's
imperial vision of 'the large design' and 'citadel free',
which could not 'live' since it dropped stillborn from the
womb of History. The poem is a celebration, or invocation,
of the life and vital tension implicit in an apparently static
situation. The river, the train, the stars, and finally the
child are all evidence of the garden lurking behind the
wilderness, which seems to be both a real farm, the colony
as a whole, and the spiritual state of the persona, unseen,
but heard, who makes the invocation.
The other poems in the book are a mixed lot. 'Gathering Peaches' is another piece that deals with the tension between the monotony of 'up-country' life and the Life of the big, bad world outside, told this time from the point of view of a girl whose lover has gone off to seek his fortune. It begins quietly:  

Father is out to his tea, and I've stolen an hour at last  
To come and gather the whare peaches, that fall in the  
wind so fast  
- the wild little whare peaches, that pucker your mouth  
so sore.  
By the whare that won't be the whare to me any more!  

But when she tries to describe the lover she is reduced to clichés from the romantic novels of the period:  

O you faces of famous men, his hands hung here on the  
wall,  
Only a shepherd was he? Ay, but mate to you all!  
Go! yes, rise to your own height, Philip - high as  
ever you can -  
But if you never get on one inch, I shall have loved  
a Man!  

Straight; spirited; clean; look'd up at women, and down  
on lies;  
Cool, at a hurry: stuck to things: and took command with  
his eyes . . . .  

- he probably went away and made a fortune in whisky and/or  
after-shave lotion advertisements.  

'A Conquering Coward', although hitched to rather too  
obvious a moral, shows her remarkable technical skill; the  
verse gallops along like the soldier she is describing, with  
capitals scattering in all directions:  

... Rangi! She whimper'd, she touched me, God bless her!  
Oh, comfort and ease  
Of her breath, of her warmth, of her wonted old flanks  
in the grip of my knees!  
A chance! for companions, for Reason, for Life! . . .  
Out we shot thro' the Black,  
Away from the tempest, away from the Terror -  
Back! Back!  

The Lightning shot after, the Thunder came ploughing  
and plunging behind . .  
The Unearthly was on us! 'twould catch us, 'twould have  
us! On, on, lass, to find
Men, and the Little-Things - euchre, tobacco, 
the same, commonplace, 
Everyday details - On! - How I did rowel her, 
how we did race.

Till, the speed, and the hope, and the help of the 
animal nerving me, Thought
Tighten'd the rein upon Panic, and Manhood with 
Creaturohood fought. -
We were breasting a rise - half-a-mile from the 
lines I remember'd it dropp'd -
When I check'd her; and there, in the darkness, we 
slacken'd . . . . and stopp'd . . . .

etc. 16

The most baffling poem in the book is 'The Paddock'.
Like 'Bush Section', it is about the life-forces at work 
on an out-back farm, although the vision is complicated 
by an awareness of what is being lost - culture and society. 
It is nearly seventy pages long and more like a verse 
novelette than anything else. The scene is 'A Paddock on 
Andrews Farm', the time 'A November Morning', and at this 
particular farm on this November morning everything that 
could reasonably, or unreasonably be expected to sing, is 
singing, not just the human beings, Andrew, Elizabeth, his 
wife, Janet, her young sister, and Hine, an old Maori woman, 
but also the Clover, the Sunbeams and Strawberries, the 
Creek, the Wind, the Seeds, and the Ti-tree. The non-
human warblers, not being gifted with overmuch grey matter, 
tend to be rather wet in their choice of lyrics - the 
White Clover, for instance, sings:

Up from my sheets of green-and-gold, 
And soft brown bed, 
Straight in the Sun alert I hold 
My happy head; 
And see, beneath the stainless Blue, 
Merry with Morning, quick with Dew, 
The whole World springing up from sleep, 
Eager, and new!

The Lark, already hid in height, 
Rapturous sings; 
The Bee, already, hangs on bright 
Sun-warmed wings.
Veil-less the Mountains meet the day,
Little and light the Breezes play,
The early work of Morn is sped
Well on its way.

I, too, must fill with all my might,
    Faithful, my place,
And flush with freshest green-and-white
    This Paddock-space.
Lofty the russet Fern may grow,
The tufty Tussock shining go
Mile upon mile outside the fence,
    But inside - No!

etc. 17

The Sunbeams and Strawberries are rather self-important:

"Hey, Brothers!"    "Ho, Brother!"

"Where are you?"

"In the heart of this Pine,
    Helping it secretly smell and shine." -
"Changing its coat for this drop of dew
    From fire and crimson to pearl and blue." -
"Here's a host of us, down in the creek,
    Riding ripples at hide-and-seek,
    Pencilling living I's and O's
    On a pebble the water overflows,
    Or weaving the links of a golden net
    Round jewels of jasper, opal and jet."
"We are tressing the T with ribbons of light." -
"Painting Capeweed yellow, and Clover white."
"Brightening a cloud." - "Brightening mud." -
"Kissing a blossom out of a bud."
"Summoning seeds." - "Sweetening blood." -
"I am warming this root." - "And the breezes, I."
"I am telling a joke to the jubilant sky."
"And I am at work in this poplar tree,
    Helping a stunted shoot go free." -
"Busy ye all are?"

"Hey, Brothers!"    "Ho, Brother!" etc. 18

The Creek chatters to itself for a hundred lines or so, in
similar vein, and the Wind as was perhaps to be expected, is
more verbose than any of them, and puffs and blows for seven
pages. Even the seeds carol cheerfully as they are being
planted, their last words as the soil is raked over them being:
Quick! Let's begin to grow.
Quick, quick, Let's go
Glad and with joy below.
Down! Down into the Dark!
Our Right is so! 19

Blanche Baughan was, after all, a serious artist, and one
cannot without impudence dismiss stuff like this as the
infantile gibberish it appears at first sight; still, it is
possible to whisper 'Amen' to a resolution she expressed in
a letter to Andersen dated May 1908:

I really must try to boil myself down. 20

In and around this welter of animistic versifying, however,
there is a human drama. Its theme is one we have encountered
in a number of her poems — the problem of locating Life or the
'world of Men' in a colonial country. Andrew, the farmer,
and his wife Elizabeth, represent the older generation of
pioneers. Their lives have been one long struggle to
carve a farm out of the bush and make it pay. After many
trials and disappointments they have succeeded, and are content
with the 'restful security' they have won. Janet, Elizabeth's
younger sister, who lives with them, feels that she needs more
than a subsistence emotional and intellectual economy to
sustain, and fights against the constrictions of farm life.
The problem is not resolved — there is no war for her to
escape to, as the young man in 'Young Hotspur' escaped — but
it is quite movingly stated, in a series of soliloquies and
conversations. Elizabeth tells at some length the history of
the farm and her marriage, which it made possible, and concludes:

Sometimes, in the quiet night,
I lie still and think it over,
Feel and finger o'er my joys,
As my Jeanie does her toys.
Till, as, drowsied with delight,
Down the darling sinks to sleep,
Carelessly in careful arms
Cradled safely, nestling deep:
So I, slipping out of thought,
Sure of nothing else, still feel
Fondled safe in happiness,
Buoy'd up in the great Caress
Of some lasting, world-wide Weal;
Mighty; more than all things, Real!
Shallow, once, quite dry in drought,
Lay my little rock-bound well;
Pain his fuse and powder brought,
Patently, and long he wrought . . .
Then, when rains of rapture fell,
Lo, the miracle!
Not alone in larger measure
Smiling shone the heaven-sent treasure,
But, within the hollowing
Of the torn and broken earth,
See, Oh see! a living spring
Blasted into birth!
Daily, daily, more and more
Drawing from its unseen store:
Gushing, rushing, welling free,
Welling, swelling, filling up
Even this, my deepened cup.
Filling up? Ay! brimming over . . . .
Oh! it is too much for me.
To the All-holding Reservoirs,
To the never-sounded Sea,
Of Your Joy, O Heart Divine!
Take the overflow of mine. 

Her satisfaction is as much sexual as material, and her sister's frustrations seem to have a similar basis. She describes in a soliloquy the tedium of her day as housekeeper, and then broods over her troubles, and the inadequacy of the comfort offered by Andrew and Liz from their experience:

Life's - Oh, well,
Something big, anyway!
"It's hard." All right!
Let it be hard! I want it hard! I want
Something to grab, and grip and grapple with,
Something - Oh, tough! Here it's like fighting feathers.

- Think . . . Home! old cities - London, and the Rhine -
Places where things have happen'd, famous folk -
Music (Ah me!), palaces, ships and soldiers -
Swallows, and cowslips - vineyards - jewels - plays -
New animals and flowers - new clothes - new customs -
And people! lots and lots and lots of people!
- More, even, than that - my own part! Deeds to do,
Adventures, and experiences, and - Oh!
Who's to know what? That's half the beauty of it . .
Yes! there they are, not tales, not dreams, but real,
Waiting for me! and here I'm caught and caged,
And can't get out! Oh, on a day like this,
When everything just teems with life - the grass
So glad, the sky so gay, the light and air
So large and bright and racy, and young things
Frisking with joy, tingling with joy: I tingle,
I stretch and strain, I flutter - but I'm tied!
O, somebody, help! It makes me tug and tear
To snap my rope, escape, break loose, go ... go! ...

...

Let, or not let, I will get out! I will!

How, though? I can't imagine. All day long
Most days, I puzzle; and at night I'll lie
Sleepless for hours, thinking of things, and planning.
Then, I'll forget a little - not for long,
And hardly ever now. Even when I do,
It goes on; it's a living thing, it grows
Even while it sleeps. And then there'll come the time
When it'll wake! and seethe so, urging, urging -
That, 'spite the pain, I'm very nearly happy -
It feels so strong, so irresistible,
I feel it can't be stopp'd very much longer
'Twill make its way . . . 22

She ends with the happy notion of swapping places for a while
with a cousin in town, but this is more a way of shelving the
problem than solving it, and has a conversation with Elizabeth,
who sees the whole business as part of the natural order of
things, the continuous cycle of birth, life and death. The
Ti-tree ends the poem with a virtuoso solo, in the course of
which Hine, an old Maori woman who has been planting seeds,
and represents the natural, spontaneous life of pre-European
times, dies.

'The Paddock' seems to have been conceived as a kind of
pastoral concerto, with natural and human forces blending
together, and the rebellious Janet taking the solo part. It
is moving in parts, but the whole structure is so ramshackle,
and the Clover and Strawberries so intrusive that (to mix
further an irretrievable confusion of metaphor) it never gets
off the ground.
By 1913 she had, to all intents, abandoned literature, and had embraced the cause of Penal Reform. A later book of verse Poems from the Port Hills is interesting only as evidence of a drastic decline in either her interest or her facility as a poet, although a book of prose sketches Brown Bread from a Colonial Oven shows that she could use the greater freedom of prose to record incident and atmosphere with a sensitivity that merits comparison with Katherine Mansfield.

Blanche Baughan had perhaps more potential than any New Zealand poet who preceded her. If Arthur Adams was our first grand failure, she was our first partial success, and if she had only managed to restrain her tendency to prolixity and 'boil herself down' and persevered in her craft, she might well have deserved some of the reputation that her less gifted contemporaries acquired so easily.
2. Blanche Baughan, *Verses*. 1898, pp. 72-4
3. *ibid.* 91-2
6. *ibid.* 87-9
9. Letter, Blanche Baughan to J.C. Andersen, May 12, 1907. Bound into Auckland Institute's copy of her *Verses*
11. *ibid.* pp. 71-6
12. *ibid.* pp. 75-80
13. *ibid.* p. 81
14. *ibid.* pp. 87-8
15. *ibid.* p. 91
17. *ibid.* pp. 137-8
18. *ibid.* pp. 150-1
19. *ibid.* p. 184
20. Letter, Blanche Baughan to J.C. Andersen, May 6, 1908. Auckland Institute manuscript collection.
21. *Shingle-Short*. pp. 149-150
22. *ibid.* pp. 167-171
XVI. THE VIRGIN CALYX OF VOLUTED FLOWERS

Hubert Church

If we hear not
The subtle music of the universe
That was before us, and will murmur round
The grave of our last generation wrapped
In ribbed ice, an exhalation falls
From the invisible balm; a spider thread
Of ecstacy floats where our feet have touched
The border-land of Nature's harmony.
We know not what we gather, but we reap
Charm undecipherable; and a woof
Pours with a flame of glamour through us, pressed
To her inordinate bosom unperceived.

'New Zealand.'

Poets here have always been distinguished, if not by talent, at least by the earnestness with which they trudged up the foothills of Parnassus, but compared with the unwavering solemnity of Hubert Church most of his predecessors seem frivolous to the point of infantility. Born in Tasmania in 1857, Church was educated in England until an accident at cricket which left him seriously deaf cut short his studies at Oxford. He then came to New Zealand, where he studied law for several years, before settling down to a job in the Treasury.

Something of the gravity of his approach to his art can be gleaned from an essay 'The Poet in Australia' that is to be found among his papers in the Turnbull Library:

The poet finds his immortality in the passing show of life - spiritual, external. To him - as for all of us - but to a larger compass, there is revealed the inner sanctuary built by the soul from the common clay of our life. In the poorest heart of the world rise solemn springs from profound deeps - for you, for me: cocooned in the daily round of labour and sleep there is [a] nimbus flown with glory. Here is the poet's dominion; he interprets the dumb dreams. He has the keener pain, that he feels more poignantly than others the grieves of humanity; and he has the countervailing glory to capture the secret of the parable, and bestow it on all . . . .
Thanks to the unseen for this sacristy of the mind.
Within it we are no longer alien creatures of the mire;
pursuing wealth, slaves of our desire, traffickers in
the mean. Who would not wish to be dowered with a spirit
above the world? To be able in fortunate hours to forget
the babble, the heartache, and find a peace in faint
divinities afar.

In his verse, however, the 'dumb dreams' cut loose like Trappists
at Christmas, and the 'solemn springs' gush so copiously that
the reader is left gasping for air. His first book, The West Wind,
which was published in 1902, was one of the 'Bulletin Booklets',
and consists largely of poems reprinted from that journal. Most
of them are decorously crystallised aches, with lush words
embroidering emotional vacuums, but one or two are noteworthy for
the occasional 'gorgeous phrase/ Exorbitant of poetry pinnacled/
Upon ethereal heights'¹ which it seems to have been the summit
of his ambition to produce. 'Bowen Falls', for instance,
deserves to be better known, if only for the remarkable spiritual
synaesthesia of the last line:

O waterfall that fallest to the sea,
Falling for ever to white virginals
Of olden melody! thy voice I hear
In molten moments of the summer stars
When the great sun is dead in majesty.

From the white fields of home like thee I came
Impetuous to the cliffs, and I have poured
Treasure of love on altars cold, as thou
Hast showered thy rainbow on the icy rocks,
That have not felt thy kiss, — and I would die.

Athwart the hollows of the moon-fed air
Come eider tremors of thy dying plunge,
Successive as child-tired eyelids droop
Upon a wavy bosom, rocked with love
Poured from the heaven for ever like thy song.

The moon is kissing thy keen diadem,
Sick for her barrenness, and all her face
Creeps to thy white arc down the precipice,
As I have nestled, yearning with wild eyes,
Into the umber chancels of a soul. ²
Two poems from this volume were reprinted as recently as 1956, in Chapman and Bennet's Oxford anthology - 'Retrospection' and 'Favonius' - although they would seem to have been chosen mainly because they are the least verbally excessive pieces in the book. The former, for instance, is little more than competent versifying.

If there were any of the sons of men
Could win from Fate to hold their youth again,
Would any travel more
The paths they trod before?

Would any vex those hyacinthine days
For love of woman, or the many's praise;
The vain delights that trend
To the abhorred end -

Age, that discovers there is nothing worth? ... 
God, when He flung this unessential earth,
Spun it with a bias given
To sunder it from Heaven! 3

'A Swallow in Maoriland' is a fair specimen of the soft jubes that predominate in this assortment: it takes one of the stock colonial 'poetical' emotions, adds sugar, and simmers; the final product is sticky and sweet:

Dear Swallow from a fonder sky!
Why do you leave your happy mate
Within the golden lands that lie
Beyond the evening's shadowy gate?
Ah, tender wings! you bear a load
That only Memory may see, -
The fragrance of my Youth's abode,
The ecstasy of life to me!

It may be that their beat has waved
A path by Childhood's starry creek,
Where jealous ferns droop interleaved
To hear the whispering waters speak;
And thou, perchance, hast flown aloof
Astartle the garden sweet and wild,
And rested on the sheltering roof
Where tender Love and I have smiled!
Already thou on ceaseless wings
Art bidden to thy loved return;
To all thy flight my vision clings,
From far-off home like thee I yearn;
And through the warm, unfolding tears
I see the sacred fount again
That poured the Joy of Childhood's years —
That still, supremest heart of Pain!

If, after reading this, and others like it, we find ourselves wondering why Church should have a P.E.N. literary prize awarded annually in his memory, it is as well to remember that fashions have changed - and will change again. In a note appended to 'The West Wind', the literary editor of the Bulletin puts the case for Church persuasively enough:

The charm of Hubert Church's verse is a charm of slow, unfolding sweetness, of suave and mellow grace. The refinement of his mind attenuates the force of his expression. - the force of his emotion, it may be. His poems move quietly and naturally to their close, expanding harmoniously as flowers that bud and bloom in peace to gently fade and fall, scented petal after petal. Without being great poetry, they bring to the Quiet Life many lines, many images which are greatly poetic, in that their influence comes with music and abides like the odours of old balsams, fragrant and healing.

The only thing a modern critic might be tempted to query in this appraisal is the 'naturalness' with which the poems are said to move to their close, but no doubt even this could be explained, in terms of emotional fatigue.

In 1904 Whitcombe and Tombs published a much larger volume, Poems, the most bulky item in which was a thirty-page poem on 'New Zealand', which begins:

This is the pale enchanted. Here the sea,
Shouldered by winds toward the leaning South,
Breaks on ultigate shores, whose citadels,
Besieged by 'low Time and Solitude'
Stare where the Summer slits theullen snows,
Whereover the breeze impels the foam,
Playing Pandean-pipes upon the beach,
Or smooths white lakes of cloud from peak to peak
For rolling thunder to sail over, roaring
To cataracts and avalanches hurled,
Nature's harmonies wonderfully flung
Through harping forests; here is imagery
Feigned by sad, dreaming poets when of old
Infinite vision failed. Here the abodes
Charted by melancholy troubadours
In wastes of song of all-pervading tears,
Wooing the sail of Hope to fall unfurled
Under the blessed isles. O shade austere,
Wan Discontent, sister sad of Triumph,
Through thee we feel that all attainment fails,
For ever hovering on the cloudy verge
Of happiness, far-sunken in her deep
And lucent blue. She is never gathered;
Folded in the white tents of youth and pressed
By trembling lips; and she is never led
By meditation to the brooding heart.

Church's trouble is that he is drunk on words, and his habit
of mixing his drinks does not help matters. Only conservative
anger reduces him to comprehensibility on the subject of his
native land:

We have chosen
Chaos of squat intelligence that apes
Tyranny clothed in specious garb, and seeks
A fetid oracle, beslavering it
Equality of votes - harlot and nun.
One man, one vote, one destiny of dross,
One imbecility of ignorance
Darkening counsel; losing the path of truth,
Befogged in that Daedalian swamp profound,
Democracy, ruffled by jangling winds
To noisome turbulence; where Envy is king,
And violence his vizier. Idle words,
A pure democracy! As well to speak
Of prostitution pure! Have we not heard
Far off in tears the melancholy sound,
The tumbrils of the murdered?

The tone and quality of the verse are reminiscent of the first
part of Fairburn's Dominion.

It would seem that, all things considered, Church did not
entirely approve of the Liberal government that employed him,
and his panegyrics on William Rolleston and Harry Atkinson
reveal a political enthusiasm out of all proportion to the
achievements (at least as recorded by later historians) of
these worthies. Of the former he writes:

Close his fair volume of true word and deed
For the still hour when sorrow is alone
With the beloved; when the heart has grown
Less poignant for his parting we shall need
His bland, sweet wisdom, sacrosanctest creed
Of truth omnipotent above all throne,
Or people, till the larger life be known
Wherefor he scattered oft the earliest seed.
Oh! Godlike charity for the oppressed,
Clear spirit looking to the border goal
With eyes not politic, but shining far
With the upspringing rectitude of soul,
Be here with us, still striving, from thy rest,
Forget not in the glory of a star!

and he praises Atkinson in terms which must have made Jessie McKay shudder:

Earth that holds him, he withheld
From the vulgar herd the tide
That within his spirit welled;
Here he sleepeoth sanctified,
Like a kauri monarch felled.

From the triumph of the North,
Where the battle shook the boughs,
By the shade of Egmont's wrath,
Thunder-menace of his brows,
He with Constancy came forth!

Brow with all the ruggedness
Roman lapidary carved
Never let the shrine confess
That its marble urn was halved
With remotest tenderness.

He was steadfast, he was true,
Like the breeze that finds the cliff
Whatever the darkness do,
Like the ripple to the skiff
Was his heart to them that knew!

Labour that had never gleaned
Tithe of its delicious rest
Broke the heart that duty weaned
From the quiet of the blest—
Till, worn out, on death he leaned.
Hear! oh land, to whom he gave
All the absolute design
Of his strenuous thought, the grave
Keeps him, he can make no sign,
Not a memory can crave!

But you will not let him fall
From the grateful heart that keeps
With the dead a festival,
Where remembrance never weeps,
Though love shadoweth it all!

We shall gather from his shade
High endeavour, word austere
Of the truth that he has made
Pole for tribune chart, and here
We shall tremble, unafraid! 9

This is 'magical', but it is a magic verging on jabberwocky -
what the first and third and last stanzas mean is anybody's
guess. It seems rather a pity that the ritual entombment of
indifferent politicians in worse verse has fallen out of fashion
in New Zealand. Even more 'way out' is Church's sonnet on
Keats:

Thou has touched virgin music till the keys
Fell at thine adoration; 'tis a sound
Ineffable as winds that wreathe the mound
In holy places of dead poet's ease;
Soft as the light latticing dusky seas
When the moon's splendour by the night is crowned,
Releasing deliquescent memories.

Does Tiber murmur? No, it is the moan
Of melody that never may be heard;
She that would press her lips upon thy mouth
Lies sleeping, and no worship may attone
For thee, enchanter, slumbering where a bird
Loosens the passioned anguish of the South. 10

In 1912 a larger collection again, also called Poems was
published in Melbourne, and seems to have been intended as a
definitive collection of his work. Most of the poems in it are
reprinted from earlier volumes, some of them extensively revised.
The major additions are 'To the Light' and 'A Fugue', which together make up half the book's two hundred-odd pages. The first-named poem seems (it is impossible to be certain) to be about the decline in standards since the days of the pioneers, and the lack of opportunity for heroic enterprise - themes that had been touched on in Jessie Mackay's 'The Lost Tribe':

Now the world is all too narrow;  
Veil of wonder all withdrawn;  
Did we shoot Apollo's arrow,  
'Twould but graze our neighbour's lawn. 11

Church, who could never bring himself to use one word where a dozen would do, is much more ponderous:

What dissonance of age has curdled thought  
That loved the ideal? Oh, how fall'n the eye  
That held with level courage into theirs,  
The heart that never looked for other goal  
Than the clear peak above the draggled plain.  
Degenerate is the mind that cannot leap to them.  
Oh, holy pioneers, forget  
Our indolence of virtue, luxury,  
As you remembered not the slothful ease,  
The counterpart of struggle for the height  
For ever and for ever your renown. 12

However, he soon leaves this more limited topic, and branches out into a panoramic snarl, the sincerity of which is unquestionable, although at times his precise points are a little hard to catch:

who would not despise  
The specious bounty of the gold and glare  
So hard achieved, so indeterminate,  
For the delivering clarity of Truth  
From lips that broke their silence at our door?  
What eyes that would not worship and dissolve  
In tears before the robe of one who knew  
That never wound but had medicinal balm  
In the clear ether; bidding us to see,  
Blind moles with darkness girdled evermore.  
And never since the morn that Christ arose  
To purge the temple has a grosser clay  
Shut heart of man from heaven than our mischance
Of all dubiety: the film of mud
Material of the senses. We prefer
The impact of reality, unhear
All spiritual sound. The orb of gold,
The diadem of pearl, the king, the queen;
And even their embroidery of knaves,
Courtiers and courtesans, are truer held
Than prayer that doth entreat us, than all heaven
Upon the wings of music falling through
The mystic flight of arches where old tombs
Hold dust that made a covenant with God.
But, mark, I would not recreate the spell
Thrown on the spirit peregrine by monk,
Aurg or medicine-man; the dolt of text,
Shibboleth, mummerie of faculence.
Thanks be to God, the heart can not be bound
For ever by such sticky cozenage. 13

My dictionary, although, like Church, Oxonian, unlike him,
Concise, offers no clue to the meaning of 'mummery of faculence', which is in a way a pity, since the phrase has a certain ring to it, and sounds as if it could bear reviving as a term of genteel abuse.

Church, like Baughan, needed to be boiled. Someone has rather impudently suggested somewhere of a more modern writer that if you were to distil off the top one per cent of his verse he would be revealed as a major poet - the same might well be said of Church, although it is doubtful if he would achieve the majority predicated of Johnson. How much simmering the seventy pages of 'A Fugue' would need I cannot guess; in fact I cannot even locate the theme of the composition. It seems to embody a personal grief, the monotony of his office work, fragments of the Wellington scene, some more ant clericalism, and quite a lot of colonial history. Most of it is in the typical Church style - comparatively straightforward ideas elaborately camouflaged and convoluted with a deviousness that can best be described as 'A Way of Not Saying' - but with an occasional lapse into clarity. The lines of Wakefield, for instance, have an almost Curnovian ring to them:
Sundered by the inevitable sea
From these dim islands; there he weaved a web
To catch the dewy dawn again, to make
The distant the delightful . . .

Dying in this retreat, I think he felt
The home-thrust given by sour ingratitude;
The fruit so bitter gathered by the mob
From choicest seed . . . 14

Then he slides back into his cloudy versifying for pages,
until other lines emerge that linger in the memory:

I'd lief
Not look below, lest somewhere in the sand,
Like a grey log the Katipo will haunt
A sailor breaks the parapet of the wave
Flicking his cheek; and in his body bears
The crucifixion of a thousand years
The tired foam has endured like blinking child
Whose sight God hath forgotten at its birth.
The wind may whistle me the harmonies
Of islets where the palm is sentinel
For ever by the derelicts of Time,
The wandering billows booming evermore.15

One can sympathise with Church, as well as with those who
bought his books; he was a better poet than he allowed himself
to be, and there is something pathetic in his letter to
Andersen preserved in the Auckland Institute:

It is a pleasure to know at least one reader who enjoys
studying my verse. The book was by no means sought
after by the public, nor did I ever suppose it would be
popular. 16

Poets in this country have seldom dared to write poems with
the intention that they should be 'studied', and they have
seldom been read when they did.

Church was, as I have said, intoxicated with words - he
could afford to be, since the hangover devolved onto his
readers. He was also encumbered with an ecstasy that he held
up as a shield between himself and the impact of reality, and
it is this, I think, that prevented him realising his potential as a poet. His eye rolled in such a fine and continual frenzy that he seldom if ever allowed himself to see anything.

1. Hubert Church, Poems. n.d. (1904), p.2
2. Hubert Church, The West Wind. 1902, p.20
3. ibid. p.13
4. ibid. p.10
5. "A Personal Note" by A.G.S., The West Wind. p.48
6. Church, Poems. 1904, pp.1-2
7. ibid. pp.14-15
8. ibid. p.110
9. ibid. pp.39-40
10. ibid. p.102
12. Church, Poems. 1912, p.110
13. ibid. pp.111-2
14. ibid. pp.172-3
15. ibid. p.182
XVII. A REASONED ABSTENTION

(Mary Ursula Bethell 1874-1945)

Much speech leads inevitably to silence.
Better to hold fast to the void.

Lao Tzu, Tao Te Ching.

Comely the smile of all well-natured subjects,
Goodly the smell of wholesome up-turned soil.
Lovely above all is this silence —
But the silence is vibrant with words!

They murmur in the distance like bees,
They whisper in the rustle of the trees,
Then springs one, instant to be heard,
Sings on my shoulder like a bird.

Ursula Bethell, 'Names'.

"Eloquence is heard, Poetry is overheard" wrote John Stuart Mill, and he might almost have had Ursula Bethell in mind. Where poets like Adams and Church shouted or declaimed, she whispered; as a result her voice is still being heard, and theirs have long since lapsed into silence. Her first book, From a Garden in the Antipodes (1929), consists of poems that had been enclosed in letters to a friend in England with little thought of publication and was published under a pseudonym, 'Evelyn Hayes'. The fact that she was writing primarily for an audience of one determined not only the tone of the pieces, but also, to a considerable extent, their content. While no doubt many poets would like to be 'friends' with their audience, a real non-literary relationship with a reader can be a considerable limitation - a whole lot of potentially exciting literary gestures and stances are destroyed by the relationship. One cannot brow-beat, or sneer, or talk down, or preach; above all, one cannot rant. It is obvious, then,
that if they had had to write for a friend instead of the
Public, people like Broome and Bowen and Domett would never
have written at all - friendship will triumph over poetry any
day of the week. At the same time, of course, a limited
audience has its advantages; the poet can take so much more
for granted - sympathy, intelligence, knowledge. What poet
before Bethell, for instance, would have had enough confidence
in his audience to entitle a poem about the whiteness of dawn
'Caunour'? Or to hinge the last line of a poem on the
ambiguity of a word like 'fond', as she does in 'Pause':

When I am very earnestly digging
I lift my head sometimes, and look at the mountains,
And muse upon them, muscles relaxing.

I think how freely the wild grasses flower there,
How grandly the storm-shaped trees are massed in their
gorges
And the rain-worn rocks strewn in magnificent heaps.

Pioneer plants on those uplands find their own footing;
No vigorous growth, there, is an evil weed:
All weathers are salutary.

It is only a little while since this hillside
Lay untrammelled likewise,
Unceasingly swept by transmarine winds.

In a very little while, it may be,
When our impulsive limbs and our superior skulls
Have to the soil restored several ounces of fertilizer

The Mother of all will take charge again,
And soon wipe away with her elements
Our small fond human enclosures.²

Poems are always richer and more complex than the poetry that
spawns them, in the same way as experience is always richer
than the 'meaning' with which we invest it, and it may be that
it is only when writers can afford to take the meaning of the
world as much for granted as friends and lovers do (having their
eyes fixed on smaller things) that they can hope to achieve a
more subtle communication.

There shall be no insistence upon symbolism; let each eye take the tokens, heart interpret, individual tongue make fit respond. 3

The world that she shares with her reader is very small - a cottage with a garden on a hill, a view of mountains, a cat called Michael, one or two rather special trees. Its boundaries are pushed back by occasional picnic excursions into the country, or visits to the 'trivial' city, and it is invaded at times by alien creatures - rabbits, storm-driven sea-gulls, visitors who admire the vegetables and ignore the flowers. It is a very clearly lit, almost luminous world, but the clarity and the light come from the darkness that surrounds it, of which she is always conscious. Her days pass 'Like jewels dropping into a dark well' and although she tries to net them in words as they fall, she never forgets the 'primal mist' into which all unique experience must dissolve. So, in 'Response' the 'particulars' of the body of the poem are put into final perspective in the last line, quietly, without sentimentality, and with a perfect dying fall:

When you wrote your letter it was April,
And you were glad that it was spring weather,
And that the sun shone out in turn with showers of rain.

I write in waning May and it is autumn,
And I am glad that my chrysanthemums
Are tied up fast to strong posts,
So that the south winds cannot beat them down.
I am glad that they are tawny coloured,
And fiery in the low west evening light.
And I am glad that one bush warbler
Still sings in the honey-scented wattle . . .

But oh, we have such remembering hearts,
And we say 'How green it was in such and such an April,'
And 'Such and such an autumn was very golden,'
and 'Everything is for a very short time.' 4
Similarly in 'Erica' the picture of quiet gardening labours, which is at the same time an image that seems to contain her whole life's enterprise, is quietly undermined by the last word of the poem, which effortlessly sets it into an ultimate context:

Sit down with me awhile beside the heath-corner.

Here have I laboured hour on hour in winter,
Digging thick clay, breaking up clods, and draining,
Carrying away cold mud, bringing up sandy loam,
Bringing these rocks and setting them all in their places,
To be shelter from winds, shade from too burning sun.

See, now, how sweetly all these plants are springing
Green, ever green, and flowering turn by turn,
Delicate heaths, and their fragrant Australian kinsmen,
Shedding, as once unknown in New Holland, strange scents
on the air,
And purple and white daboecia - the Irish heather -
Said in the nurseryman's list to be so well suited
For small gardens, for rock gardens, and for graveyards. 5

She published three volumes during her lifetime. After From a Garden in the Antipodes came Time and Place (1936) and Day and Night (1939), and the poems in each of them revolve around the same primal themes - light and darkness, life and death. She seldom indulges in description for its own sake; she sees every concrete particular as valuable, because of the infinite gap by which its existence separates it from nothingness. 'By Burke's Pass', for instance, is a minor triumph of perspective, accomplishing with rhetoric what a Chinese painter might achieve with ink on silk.

Nature, earth's angel, man's antagonist,
The stern antagonist from whom he wrests his bread,
Long heretofore with vast magnificence
Did carve this scene, prepare the arena, spread
Bronze tussocked terraces before precipitous
Great purple alps, loose glacier-shed
Fierce-laughing streams in circuitous riverbed.
Lo, man to the assault! In part victorious,
His petty trophies sets he up to amend
The natural scene. The corn-stacks aureate,
Wearing their weights like amulets, the autumn blend
Of orange-spattered poplars, with the various
Gilt willows are his signet. Now, vainglorious,
He calls the expanse a home and awful Nature, friend.

The austere angel smiles on man's predicament,
Forgoes awhile advantage, and abates his blows;
Soft mien assumes of kindly ministrant;
As on this ending day in genial radiance glows
The whole amphitheatre, stark antimony
Of wild and won annulled; and new-companioned foes,
Beneath the hostile heights homestead and farm repose.

Homestead? Nay, halting-place, accommodation
Achieved . . . Did not that sombre regimented band
Of firs, those gravestones, publish man's condition?
For night, parental night, shall soon with gentle hand
Suspend her folding arras, resume domination;
Nature, to rest dismissed by a most high command,
Shortly roll up this planetary decoration,
Men having passed darkly onwards to an unknown land.

Just as a camera set with the smallest aperture will register
the greatest depth of field, so Ursula Bethell, in her
concentration on minute particulars always seems to get Time
and Infinity in focus too, in a way never achieved by those
like Jessie Mackay, who made a frontal attack on such
imponderables. In 'Nor'-West Evening, Winter' the picture
contains little more than a cow, a tree, and a persona who is
heard, but not seen, yet it involves a whole way of looking at
the world:

Beneath the purple canopy of cloud-mass
And indistinguishable density of earth-form
A space, at evening, of pale yellow, sunlit;
Inscribed most delicately upon it
The black reticulation of a naked hawthorn.

I was aware, then, of a thicker darkness
Blotting the shadow of my bitten picture -
The breathing presence of a stocky heifer
Browsing beside me in a richer twilight.
Accord I knew with the confederate creature
Fellow-agisted on small star for sustenance;
In common, we, upon earth's mercies pensionary;
But my convenient food in that hour was a construction
Of cloud-mass darkly overhanging light-rift,
And the black latticed twigs of a bare hawthorn
Printed most exquisitely upon it.7

She is preoccupied, not with an imaginary 'human condition',
but with a very real thing - her condition, and as a result
her poems have an almost universal reference; it is almost
impossible to say anything about them without insulting them.
Because they are good poems, they will not submit to being
'explained' - they are themselves their own explanation. Nor
will they readily yield themselves up to 'analysis'. Even the
statement 'These are good poems' seems pitifully thin and
meaningless when set beside them. Perhaps the most that can
be said of them is that they are, whereas the verses of most
of her forerunners are not. A poem like 'Night Rain' would, I
am sure, have been quite incomprehensible to Bracken - not that
he wasn't intelligent, or that the poem is not intelligible,
but because it is not 'Poetry':

In the dark of the night, rain;
Unlocking of water-floods;
Washing away, obliterating
All night-whisperings;
Nought but the sound of falling waters
Returning whence they came.

By the noise of the rain set apart
In a lightless cloister,
What am I, in the night,
Listening to my suppliant heart
In the play of thy forces, Genetrix,
What am I but a particle tossed
Upon vast arterial waterways,
Borne down in the dark?
In the ark of thought I abide,
Lattice-wrought of experience,
Faith-pitched for bitumen,
And apocalypse to guide,
Riding on the tide of consciousness,
On waves of pleasure, pain;
Responsive microcosm, alive
And free upon the great main,
Out of this musical enclosure,
This ringing cage of rain.

And in 'Kaikoura. Winter, 1941' she confronts the precarious poise of her 'intimate Eden' in lines that challenge comparison with any by Yeats or Curnow:

The mountains and the ocean meet
beyond these pastures; in perpetuity
the planet's bastions endure, resist and cede
to the obsequious sea's assault and undermine
hurling its breakers. I hear the distant roar
of that encounter, now, from this seclusion . . . .

I have watched a seagull
swoop and wheel and dive and dash himself
into the uproar, into the vaulting spray,
rejoicing. The rage is his delight, the storm's his home,
therein he takes his pastime . . . .

But I no sea-bird! On this gradual mound,
Upon its firm and interwoven turf
I rest and gaze, in the shelter of a bank
Of gorse in bloom and breathing scented air,
At thickest yellow thrust across the blue
Of mountain snows and up to the hot sun;
On a far hillock's crest the aspiring arms
Of a dark pine against the placid sky;
Or at the bare, the rose-brown willows bunched
Where a curved dimple, rain-filled, in the grass
finds the deep-carved conduit by the road.

No flock is gathered in this field's enclosure
To stir the silence; but in further meadows
The browsing sheep and the set, ruminant cattle
Impart to the still scene a soothing rhythm;
And now bird-shuttle-cock, black fantail flutters
About a low bush, and, perched sideways,
Courts my attention to his circus fancies,
Nearer, each sally, varies his approaches,
Invites response to his confiding prattle . . .
Small, fragile bird, today shall send us happy,
Here in this intimate Eden, this close anchorage . . . .
Yet still I hear the thunder of the waves' blind battering . . .
I fear the hunger of the undertow, the sucked stones' hiss . . .
False peace! all's peril. Here's no hold, no harbour . . . .

Oh! to ride, seagull, surely
over the abyss of whirling waters,
to plunge into the tumult
unseeing, safe, in the dark crypt of the breakers
(loosed, my soul, from earth-lust)
secured through insecurity.  

Birds, hills, gardens are real to her, but the urgency of the attention with which she looks at them stems from her consciousness of a more primitive reality - the hunger of the undertow, the primal mist, the darkness, compared with which all the trappings of this world are mere 'planetary decoration'. Words, too, are a real part of her world, in a way that they are for few other poets. Most writers get their effects *through* words, they use them transparently, to reveal the world, and so, much of the time, does Ursula Bethell. Some of her most quietly effective poems, such as 'Decoration', are purely transparent in this sense:

This jar of roses and carnations on the window-sill,
Crimson upon sky-grey and snow-wrapt mountain-pallor,
(Sharp storm's asseveration of cold winter's on-coming,)
How strange their look, how lovely, rich and foreign,
The living symbol of a season put away.

A letter-sheaf, bound up by time-frayed filament,
I found; laid by; youth's flowering.
The exotic words blazed up blood-red against death's shadow,
Red upon grey. Red upon grey.

Words here are the medium through which the poem as 'living symbol' comes to be, but they are not the reality on which the poem depends - they lack density, if that is the right word. Only 'asseveration' verges on opacity; as we read the poem we stop to consider the word, its novelty, its effectiveness, before fitting it into the pattern of visual images.
But in poems like 'Time' words are used as distinct, opaque objects, gathered like driftwood, and wrapped in silence, grouped in clusters till they form a pattern:

'Established' is a good word, much used in garden books, 'The plant, when established'...
Oh, become established quickly, quickly, garden!
For I am fugitive, I am very fugitive ---
Those that come after me will gather these roses,
And watch, as I do now, the white wistaria
Burst, in the sunshine, from its pale green sheath.

Planned. Planted. Established. Then neglected,
Till at last the loiterer by the gate will wonder
At the old, old cottage, the old wooden cottage,
And say 'One might build here, the view is glorious;
This must have been a pretty garden once.'

The words 'established', 'fugitive', 'planned', 'planted', plucked out of the air or gleaned from a gardening book don't just point towards a reality, for Miss Bethell they are real; she holds them up to have a look at them, as if they were curious antique talismans, with the result that, as we read the poem we feel that we are encountering them for the first time. 'Catalogue' is another poem about words, and their ambiguous relationship to reality — and to 'literature':

'Now is the time for planting shrubs.'
Shall I plant shrubs? 'Shrubs' is an ugly word!
When one says 'shrubs', I think of suburbs,
Damp villas, desert isles, detective stories.

('Bank' is an ugly word — and yet one said
'I know a bank where the wild thyme grows.')

Come, let me read this catalogue of shrubs,
And choose out those with lovely-sounding names.

Adenandra uniflora, Aloysia Citriodora,
Iochroma Tubulosa, Podalyria Grandiflora,
Melaleuca, Santolina, Lasiandra,
Cantua, Cassia, Felicia, Luculia,
Daphne...

Shrubs. I am planting shrubs.
On a similar theme is 'Ruth H.T.', and again the garden catalogue provides the text:

'Ruth' is my very fine new rose-tree.
'Compact in growth' is she, and 'fairly vigorous';
Her leaves so 'dark and shiny, will not mildew.'
'Erect' she carries 'large round blooms of copper-carmine'.
'Continuous' these blooms, and 'sweetly scented'.

Around her base spring many-coloured tulips;
Beside her leans an orange crimson-spotted lily;
Beneath her smiles a small bright apricot-hued viola.

- So to my faith, and for your fancy. But the facts are:
  Two bare thorny twigs with a pink label;
  Stuck in the earth around them several white pegs! 13

The whimsical irony of 'Sinensis' is due almost entirely to the pseudo-pomposity of one word, which is used with resounding effect:

A Friend said: 'You must be dull sometimes
Away up there on that hill'.

But the Horticulturalist is deprived of the experience of dullness;
When he is not labouring in physical toil,
Or attempting to alleviate ever-recurring hunger and thirst,
He is working out a succession of vegetables,
Or engaged in agreeable speculations
Relating to the prospects of four or five years hence,
Or, after an unfortunate disappointment,
Seeking the consolations of Philosophy.
He has never accomplished when the sun goes down
More than a small portion of what he had intended to do.

The poet Marvell said, in one of his compositions:
  'But at my back I always hear
    Time's winged chariot hurrying near'.
Such is, likewise, the experience of the Horticulturalist. 14

The same awareness of the incantatory power of words makes possible the gleeful triumph of the last line of 'Verdure':
Do you remember, Ruth, in the years of our immaturity,  
How you loved to be surrounded by green ornamentations?  
You would applaud in my garden now the green environment  
That tenderly encompasses its bright blooming denizens.

But for the gem-green setting of this florid jewellery,  
Green of jade, emerald, aquamarine, chrysoberyl,  
But for the intermediate lawns and plotted plain green  
spaces,  
The soft greensward springing night and day continuously,  
Leafage of lemon, myrtle, rosemary, and mimosa,  
Cypress-green shades of the high macrocarpa hedges,  
And the tall boundary trees' bronze and viridian boughs—  

But for all these I should have, not a pleasaunce, not a  
garden,  
But a heterogeneous botanical display.  

Ursula Bethell was not mastered by words, as Hubert Church had  
been, and as Blanche Baughan had almost been. She treated them  
as part of her intimate paradise, searching for them, not buying  
them wholesale, picking them up like pebbles on a beach,  
polishing them and arranging them in rows, so confident of their  
solidity that she will even, as in 'Sinensis' put them in the  
scales against a lump of Eng. Lit. of proven gravity, and  
chuckle as the balance wavers.  

Sometimes, perhaps inevitably, she picks up a few duds. In  
'Showers of Leaves', for instance:

April is passing; the tired trees are casting their harness  
down, here in the valley where the east wind is bated  
and fans but faintly the rays of the waning sun.

A soft susurration of small leaves in dessication, a  
rustling . . . 16

—the last line is, as they say, 'too much'. Again, in '23rd  
July, 1930' the lines:

While jetty yet the expanse of low alluvial plain  
Studded with red-gold flambeaux,

A griseous lambency vibrates the aerial sphere  
Where silvery star-ghosts hover. 17
are excessive — one has to pay so much attention to the words that they block the image they are supposed to reveal.

Ursula Bethell is a serious poet, often bitterly serious, even in her lightest pieces, but she is never solemn, she can always detach herself from her preoccupations; and her consciousness of the shadow of death looming over life, and of chaos lurking behind her apparently ordered and comfortable life enables her to penetrate effortlessly, or so it seems, to the core of absurdity in all her undertakings. As a result she is the first of our poets to attain a true ironic poise — the stance of the court jester who has the ear of the king, and mocks him, and is wise without caring whether he shares his wisdom or not. Even when dealing with themes dear to the heart of the colonial poet she will not take anything less than an ultimate view:

Howbeit, wanderer, having slaked your drought
In forest silence, eyes in greenness steeped,
To mossy stature with the knotted creepers stooped
Cede separateness, and disarm observant thought;
Take root with trees in centuries of decay,
And with their leaves imbreathe the woody fume,
From leafy drowse let individual dream
Drop with those woodnotes in a falling joy,
(Like jewels dropping into a dark well
Dug long ago amid the ligneous dust,)
And all particular dissolve to primal mist,18
Whereof the Thinker fashions what he will.

She seldom writes about people, and when they do intrude into her sanctuary she finds a distinct lack of rapport with the average Kiwi, whimsically recorded in 'Perspective':

I find vegetables fatiguing
And would rather buy them in a shop.
But to the right-minded person the soul of his holding
Is the parallel-rowed, neat, early vegetable plot.

'I hope you like the colour-pattern of this garden, —
White flowering creepers by the white painted cottage,
By the middle path red roses, purple underlings,
By the east path yellow, and pale and dark violet,
Here gentlest pink all interspersed with lilac,
And here I design blues, sapphire blues -
Rich and rejoicing, is it not, to the spectator?'

'Yes, very nice, very nice indeed . . .
How well your beans and cabbages are coming on.'

Ursula Bethell is so much greater as a poet than any of the other poets that have been somewhat irritably reviewed in this study that it is tempting to linger over her work. Only my conviction that her poems defy analysis and are cheapened by even the most innocuous 'explanation' prevents me from reproducing more of them. I will, however, conclude with a consideration of two poems, two of her best. The first, 'Dirge', is what I have called a 'transparent' poem. In it she uses her garden, which has been all things to her, as a window on to another world, in another vision of the time when the 'small fond human enclosure' will have been wiped away, and the luminous 'intimate Eden' which has gleamed so defiantly and joyfully against the darkness which surrounded it will flicker out:

Easter. And leaves falling.
Easter. And first autumn rains.
Easter. And dusk stealing
Our bright working daylight;
And cold night coming down
In which we may not work.

Easter. And morning bells
Chime in the late dark.
Soon those fluttering birds
Will seek a more genial clime.
Time has come to light fires
For lack of enlivening sun.

Summer's arrow is spent,
Stores her last tribute.
So, now, we plant our bulbs
With assured vision,
And, now, we sow our seeds
Sagely for sure quickening.
So, purging our borders
We burn all rubbish up,
That all weak and waste growth,
That all unprofitable weeds,
All canker and corrosion,
May be consumed utterly.

These universal bonfires
Have a savour of sacrifice.
See how their clean smoke,
Ruddy and white whorls,
Rises to the still heavens
In plump spirals.

You take me - yes, I know it -
Fresh from your vernal Lent.
These ashes I will now spread
For nutriment about the roses,
Dust unto fertile dust,
And say no word more. 20

'The Long Harbour' is both transparent and opaque, a mosaic
of lovingly gathered solid words - 'cobbled', 'curvature',
'graven', 'sea-bevelled', 'sequestered', 'ossuary' are just a
few of them - which linger in the mind even after one has seen
through them to the haunting evocation of a place which is at
the same time a summing-up of and a benediction on the whole
colonial adventure. The comparison is perhaps impertinent, but
this stands in relation to Bracken's 'Dunedin from the Bay' -
indeed to all the 'place' poems that preceded it - as Sibelius
does to Alfred Hill:

There are three valleys where the warm sun lingers,
gathered to a green hill girt-about anchorage,
and gently, gently, at the cobbled margin
of fire-formed, time-smoothed, ocean-moulded curvature,
a spent tide fingers the graven boulders,
the black, sea-bevelled stones.

The fugitive hours, in those sun-loved valleys,
implacable hours, their golden-wheeled chariots'
inaudible passage check, and slacken
their restless teams' perpetual galloping;
and browsing, peaceable sheep and cattle
gaze as they pause by the way.
Grass springs sweet where once thick forest
gripped vales by fire and axe freed to pasturage;
but flame and blade have spared the folding gullies,
and there, still, the shade-fitting, honey-sipping lutanists
copy the dropping of tree-cool waters
dripping from stone to stone.

White hawthorn hedge from old, remembered England,
and orchard white, and whiter bridal clematis
the bush-bequeathed, conspire to strew the valleys
in tender spring, and blackbird, happy colonist,
and blacker, sweeter-fluted tui echo
either the other's song.

From far, palm-feathery, ocean-spattered islands
there rowed hither dark and daring voyagers;
and Norseman, Gaul, the Briton and the German
sailed hither singing; all these hardy venturers
they desired a home, and have taken their rest there,
and their songs are lost on the wind.

I have walked here with my love in the early spring-time,
and under the summer-dark walnut-avenues,
and played with the children, and waited with the aged
by the quayside, and listened alone where manukas
sighing, windswept, and sea-answering pine-groves
garrison the burial-ground.

It should be very easy to lie down and sleep there
in the sequestered hillside ossuary,
underneath a billowy, sun-caressed grass-knell,
beside those dauntless, tempest-braving ancestresses
who pillowed there so gladly, gnarled hands folded,
their tired, afore-translated bones.

It would not be a hard thing to wake up one morning
to the sound of bird-song in scarce-stirring willow-trees,
waves lapping, oars plashing, chains running slowly,
and faint voices calling across the harbour;
to embark at dawn, following the old forefathers,
to put forth at daybreak for some lovelier,
still undiscovered shore. 21

It is easy to say that Ursula Bethell was a good poet; it is not
so easy to say what 'good' means in that sentence. That she is
a better poet than any other we have so far considered would seem
self-evident, but, like many self-evident propositions, its truth is difficult to demonstrate; we can say something about how she differed from them, but that is all. With the sound of the blind battering waves in her ears it never occurred to her to offer her beleaguered 'intimate Eden' as a sanctuary for bruised and timid spirits. She knew it was illusory and fleeting; as a result it is still real and permanent today, more real, perhaps, than any other garden in literature.
Note. All references in the text are to this edition, 
which collects the three volumes published during the 
poet's lifetime, together with other poems that had not 
been published in book form.

2. ibid. p.16
3. ibid. p.83
4. ibid. p.15
5. ibid. p.28
6. ibid. p.52
7. ibid. p.72
8. ibid. p.77
9. ibid. pp.94-5
10. ibid. p.70
11. ibid. p.21
12. ibid. p.17
13. ibid. p.17
14. ibid. p.21
15. ibid. p.34
16. ibid. p.51
17. ibid. p.82
18. ibid. p.49
19. ibid. p.33
20. ibid. p.39
21. ibid. pp.45-6
XVIII. SILVER PHANTOMS AND WEEDY PILES

The creekstones ring like little gongs
Tapped softly by the fishes' fins,
And trees lilt airs of greenwood songs -
The purl of pixie mandolins
Far off begins.

O. N. Gillespie, 'Transmutation.'

The writing of poetry seems to have been even more popular as a genteel pastime between 1880 and 1930 than in the previous period. W. F. Alexander and A. E. Currie in 1906 collected some of the best pieces of fifty-five poets, all but six of whom had flourished in the last twenty years of the century. Eighteen were added for the second edition that appeared twenty years later, and in 1930 Quentin Pope anthologised fifty-six poets, thirty-four of whom had not appeared in the earlier anthology. The period thus yields up over a hundred poets deemed worthy of inclusion in representative anthologies, and many more failed to achieve even this limited immortality. Some idea of relative production can be gained from the fact that in a prize-poem competition open to the English-speaking world, New Zealand, as Alexander and Currie record, contributed seventy-four out of the thousand-odd entries. Not surprisingly, the intrinsic interest of most of this verse is slight. Allen Curnow has called it 'trivial if sincere', which sums it up adequately enough. One must not assume, however, that their triviality was necessarily a refusal to face up to real problems. William Stenhouse, M.D., whose Poems, Songs and Sonnets was published in Glasgow in 1886, provides as fine an example of 'commitment' in literature as one could wish:

... the author has not scrupled to employ his muse on subjects that at one time would have been thought wholly without the range of poetical treatment, but which are
most intimately bound up with the welfare and progress of the race. Therefore, he has inculcated temperance; advocated the repression of barmaids, an occupation wholly incompatible with the charming delicacy of the sex, and so beset with temptations that thousands of young women fall victims to the calling; denounced the continuance of the iniquitous game laws; pleaded for a limitation of the sovereignty of the landowner over the sons of the soil; sought to turn his compatriots away from the grovelling worship of Mammon to the nobler pursuits of moral and intellectual culture; counselled the suppression of Monaco as a gambling hell, affecting the happiness of all Europe, as well as the discountenancing of betting in every shape and form; and has shown how much wiser it would be to estimate people by their worth rather than by their position. So that the author may claim to have assailed the most conspicuous vices of the age.  

It is unfortunate that the first, and perhaps most important poem in the book, 'The Pathetic History of Lucy Brown, Barmaid', which is subtitled 'A Modern Ballad. Dedicated to the Association for the Suppression of Barmaids' is too long to be reproduced here in full. Richard Packer once wrote in a review:

Poetry must say something important if it is to have meaning in human life. One does not want an epic or an illumination - just a human comment with concern in it.

and 'Lucy Brown' certainly fits the prescription.

A forerunner of those who believe that poetry must be 'local and special' was Frank Cowan, a member of the Geographical Society of Lisbon, the American Anthropological Society of Washington, the Historical Society of Pennsylvania, and other learned societies, whose long poem The Terraces of Rotomahana is perhaps the least effervescent poem ever written on a geological theme in this country. It is prefaced by a learned paper on 'Geyser Eruptions and Terrace Formations' by Josiah Martin, F.G.S., and was published in Auckland in 1885. Once again, I am tempted to quote at length (the fusion of art and
science is rare in New Zealand) but I will confine myself to one or two brief extracts. Here is his description of a pool at the White Terraces:

A wondrous well of water and as well
A well of wondrous water, holding in
Solution many earthy substances:
A lithic lymph: an inorganic ichor:
A min'ral magma, milk, or menstruum:
A cosmic chyle: a confluent
Conglomerate - Nay, nay, a water-womb,
Whence whatsoever issues from it in the form
of rock - a lithic progeny
Yclept among the wise silicious sinter,
Including geyserite and hydrophane . . . .

A page or so later he goes on to describe something else - it is not immediately clear what, but he brings to bear on it a great range of similitude:

And here, a wondrous series, shelf on shelf,
Of conjugations of concretion, or,
Of demilunes of deposition, like
A fossil forest full of basking boas
In endless coils and curvings, limb on limb;
Or a dead sea of ammonites - Nay, like
An ancient Greek gymnasium in gypseum;
Or cycloid cornice of cathedral foils,
Tre-, quatre-, cinque-, and mille-compounding - Nay
A chiliad of blessed basin bracts
On temple walls - Nay, swallow-nests of sea-foam
Accrete to overhanging chalky cliffs;
Or a compounding of opossum-pouch
In ring and wrinkle round and round, in lay'r
And lapping up and down - in marble,
A Marsupiatal Ephesus-Diana!
The limpid, opalescent levels of
These chalices of chert-precipitation,
A phantasy of isothermal lines.

Like Bethell, he uses words opaquely.

Mary Colborne-Weel, a friend of Jessie Mackay, seems to have been quite highly regarded as a poet. Her most ambitious book, *The Fairest of the Angels*, is for the most part rather too
pallidly devotional for modern taste - 'The Angel', for example, begins:

God sendeth His angel, Sleep.
When the night falleth calm and deep
  The beautiful angel comes.
A glorious unseen guest,
With the fame of a deeper rest,
And the beauty of far-off things
In the hush of his angel wings.

Her poetic is summed up in a poem on the relative merits of nationalism and internationalism in poetry, 'The Colonial Poet's Lament':

Too modern your land far away
For the birthplace of fancy, you say?
On colonial, inglorious ground
No theme for romance can be found?
O, dullards! where under the sky,
Does a kingdom too desolate lie
For poetry's delicate breath?
There is Life, there is Love, there is Death!
Unlock, with your magical keys
The meanings that sanctify these,
And the Old World and the New shall proclaim
Your right to the coveted fame,
Or say thou shouldst fail of thy meed,
Yet comes the reward in the deed.
The quest of the Sangreal makes clean
All hearts that pursue, though unseen
Save by few, the elected, it shine.
The choice of the highest be thine,
To strive, that, if given to thee
Thine eyes may be worthy to see.

She is very obviously one of the 'solace and comfort' school, and the rest of her verse is true to type. For her 'Life', 'Love' and 'Death' are ideas, not events as they were for Ursula Bethell, and since they are ideas they are independent of place and time, 'international' and therefore dull. 'Blessed are the Pure in Heart' is one of her attempts to unlock with her 'magical keys' the meanings that 'sanctify' death:
In a quiet upper chamber
She lies at rest:
Sweet-scented violets
Upon her breast.

She lies as if calmly sleeping,
In maiden grace,
And a strange sweet smile illuminates
Her peaceful face.

A look of wondrous knowledge;
Of anguish past;
A gleam of sudden glory
From Heaven cast.

For the sweet child soul has ended
Her earthly race,
And passed, to behold for ever
Her Father's face.

-a creation that any Mr. Joyboy would be proud of!

We are so accustomed these days to the amateur status of even our major poets, that it comes as a surprise to discover that New Zealand has had at least two versifiers who lived, for a time at least, almost entirely by writing. The first of these, Dugald Ferguson, travelled all over the Dominion with books of verse, selling them not only in the towns, but also to settlers in the back-blocks. He was a prolific versifier who never wrote a good poem, although no doubt the back-blocks derived some humour and much moral nourishment from his wares. Ernest L. Eyre, another wandering bard, is likewise more interesting as a case history than as a poet. An article in the 'New Zealand Observer' of October 22nd, 1921, describes his mode of existence:

Devonport can boast possession of the only poet in New Zealand who makes his living entirely out of verse. The author in question, Ernest Eyre, writes light verse in the evenings, and sells it in little volumes in the daytime. He is a wandering poet, who tramps the country roads with his books, selling them to farmers and the folk of the villages.
Not all his verse was 'light' however; he too, in his own way, was a committed writer, as the Preface to one of his booklets makes abundantly clear:

My main object in publishing this volume is to make known my views on the subject of the Anglo-Japanese Alliance.  

The poems that follow certainly do reveal his 'views'; he praises those who are:

Holding back the hordes of Asia! How a white man's blood should warm
To do the work you do today.  

and justifies wars against the Chinese because:

A Chinaman will plod along - live on his garden-plot
But as for race progression, science, art, he knows them not.
So I think his lands, if needed, to a white race should belong.  

Another highly regarded poet was 'Roslyn', Miss M. A. Sinclair, of whom one reviewer wrote that:

We feel sure that none who study it will question [her] right to a high place in the rank of poets of the twentieth century.  

Her contribution to the swelling chorus of national self-praise is a fair sample of her work. The reader may judge for himself the height of her place among the poets of this century:

New Zealand

Future

Dear isle! surrounded by unfathomable depths of blue,
Kept verdant by a thousand sparkling streams;
So may the social bonds be girded by the true,
So irrigated by love's purest gleams,
And what a glorious future shall be thine,
Long as the Starry Cross shines on thy sea-girt strand,
Till on the page of Time thy history grand,
Inscribed in golden characters shall shine!
Rich in thine own resources, rich in friends,
Peace in thy valleys, plenty on thy shore,
Thy children seeking light and knowledge evermore;
Like dew the heavenly benison descends.
Jewelled thy crown, and sceptre fair and free,
Queen of the South Pacific, hail to thee!15

As well known, and almost as tedious a poet, was John Liddel Kelly, a journalist who came to New Zealand in 1881. A few years later, having heard that Sir George Grey was 'compiling a work on New Zealand poets', he ventured the hope that:

possibly my five years of residence and literary labours in Auckland may constitute some sort of claim to admittance into your Valhalla of the tuneful brotherhood.16

and appended a short biography, which may be of interest, showing as it does the humble beginnings of a representative emigrant bard, and his first tottering steps towards the melodious Valhalla:

... born in Lanarkshire Scotland 19th. Feb. 1850; apprenticed at age of 11 years to printing in [illegible] Advertiser" office; drafted onto reporting staff; in 1871 placed in management of "Rutherglen Reformer" newspaper in suburb of Glasgow. Wrote poetry from age of eight years & had piece inserted in local journal when fifteen years of age ... Compositions chiefly lyrical & sentimental, with tendency to philosophical speculation been published in many Scottish and English journals ... Health broke down ... and in 1881 emigrated with wife and six children to New Zealand - getting employment on "Auckland Evening Star" ... Always fond of literary competitions. When a boy got prize from Beestons Boys Magazine in London for best essay on "Comets", open to the United Kingdom ...17

In 1902 he published a large volume entitled Heather and Fern consisting of poems compounded equally of pomposity and trite sentiment. It is distinctive for containing the only poem that I know of written to the Auckland Fire Brigade (an institution that unfortunately seems to have escaped the notice of Francis Cloke) which concludes:
Then, ye at night who hear the bells,
Whose jangled music harshly swells,
If safety unto you is given,
O breathe a fervent prayer to Heaven
That He will, by His outstretched arm,
Preserve His creatures safe from harm;
And bless Him for that noble aid —
The gallant AUCKLAND FIRE BRIGADE. 18

Heather and Fern was followed up with a small booklet, the aim of which was apparently to prevent any miscarriage of poetic fortune, by anticipating once and for all the judgment of posterity. Half of it consisted of Press extracts, all favourable, culled from some dozens of reviews of Kelly's work. The rest was made up of an elaborate essay by one John Christie called About Poetry and Poets: With Special Reference to "Heather and Fern", subtitled 'J. Liddell Kelly's place in Literature and his views on Unconquerable Women'. His place, needless to say, is seen as being fairly high.

Another poet whose output was considerable, and who came in time to be regarded as one of the grand old men of New Zealand letters, was Johannes Andersen, whose first book of verse, Songs Unsung, delighted an unsuspecting world in 1903. In his introduction Professor J. Macmillan Brown singled out one poem for special praise:

... the 'Cradle Song' is, to my mind, the finest of the lyrics; it is so pathetic, and so nobly expressive of the noblest of all passions - maternal love, and it has the very rhythm of the rocking cradle in its music. 19

With this recommendation, the poem can stand as a more than representative sample of Andersen's early work - an achievement upon which, it must be admitted, he failed to improve. 'Noble' it may be (far be it from me to contradict so eminent an authority) but the nobility seems to have been achieved at the expense of sense:
Song of the night, song of the day,
Where are the forms that we fondled alway?

Song of the eve, song of the morn,
Soon they forsake us as others are born;
Mothers sit watching with faces of love,
God watches them from His Heaven above;
Life is a task, set with a vow,
Babies that slept in us where are ye now?

Up from our arm, up from our breast,
Where are ye wandered in East or in West?
Mothers may love, mothers may croon,
Ye become stripling and maiden too soon;
Stripling and maiden, - and lo the refrain
Crooned by the mother is murmured again:
Life is a war, life is a race, -
Over the cradle a heavenly face.

"Son of my heart, where wilt thou go?
Empty mine arms when thou leavest me so; -
Where wilt thou speed, daughter of mine?
Look in my face as I looked into thine; -
Earth is a wilderness open and wide;
Shun ye its evil, and God be your Guide:
Children of mine, go on your way -
Think ye of mother when aging and gray?"

"Goest so soon, idol of love?
Goest so soon to the Father above?
Thou in mine arms cradled shalt be; -
Goest so soon from thy cradle and me?
Earth is too wide for thy weak little feet?
Life is too weary? - and Heaven so sweet?
Idol of love; soul of my heart;
Heaven is thine who of Heaven wast part."

Life and its toil, death and its sleep,
Children must wander and mothers will weep;
Life is so wide, death is so cold,
Other embraces than mother's enfold; -
Children are mothers and mothers are gone,
Crades are rocking for evermore on;
Children are born, never remain, -
Life is a rocking of pleasure and pain.
It is saddening to think that the taste even of Professors of English remains subject to the vagaries of changing fashion. In charity we must assume that Brown was simply being polite to a former student.

It was not, however, until three years later that Andersen broke into the poetic big-time. The occasion was the International Exhibition held at Christchurch in 1906/7, a feature of which was to be an Ode sung at the opening ceremony. A competition was announced, and MacMillan Brown judged the sixty-nine entries. Andersen came first, and Hubert Church second. Alfred Hill was asked to write the music. The result was a full-scale 'happening' of which Dali would have been proud. The Ode was in seven parts, all for different combinations of solo and chorus, and the final section was scored for Brass Band, Soprano Solo and Quartet, full Chorus, orchestra, organ, band (presumably of some other metal) and peal of bells; the words were as follows:

Joyously! Joyously! sing triumphant song of toil victorious;
World-renowned! - A Colony begun shall grow to Nation glorious!

Praise to God!
Praise to God for aid in younger days, and pray for aid in peaceful days to be,
Praise to God who gives the heritage, Who makes His people joyous, just and free! 21

One or two carping critics noted that the Ode as a whole was both ungrammatical and repetitive, but in general the sentiments seem to have been well received; it is difficult to imagine what the music must have sounded like, although the "influences" noted by an approving newspaper reviewer are some guide:

No one who has critically examined the score will deny that our composer is a musical craftsman of real force and power. He is perhaps our only writer for the orchestra whose lips have been touched with the live
coal from off the altar. He is earnest and sincere, and his fertility and resource never fail him . . . . It has been suggested that some of the music in this ode is not quite original, and there can be no doubt that the work contains suggestions of Gounod's 'Faust', the 'Mikado', the Tannhauser Overture and Coleridge Taylor's 'Hiawatha' these however, are merely accidental similarities . . .

Many other poets flourished in the opening years of this century. Arnold Wall was producing dull patriotic verse, Alan Mulgan was writing even duller imperialistic verse, Mrs Anne Glenny Wilson was finding fairies and gnomes indefatigably, in the most unlikely places - along with dozens of other female versifiers. It would be polite, but wrong, to say that I have no space in which to represent and comment on them. The truth of the matter is (and the reader who has staggered this far in our murky literary limbo will surely understand) I lack not paper but patience, and I have a strong suspicion that if I were to attempt to type out even one more lump of indifferent verse I would end up disembowelling the almost entirely innocent cat which is cynically watching me as I write this. Which brings me to the point of this chapter. This was the world in which R.A.K. Mason began to write, and Katherine Mansfield, and Robin Hyde, and later A.R.D. Fairburn, Denis Glover, Allen Curnow. They too felt that the time was ripe for murder. The first two tried to avoid it by exiling themselves, the latter three relieved their feelings by letting off squibs. One cannot say that their disgust was the beginning of 'Poetry' in this country, but it was at least a healthy step away from it, and some of them kept on going.
4a. Frank Cowan, *The Terraces of Rotomahana*. 1885, p.22
5. ibid. pp.28-9
7. ibid. pp.92-3
8. ibid. p.158
10. ibid. Introduction.
12. ibid., p.19
13. ibid. p.23
17. ibid.
20. ibid. pp.11-12
22. Andersen Scrapbook, Auckland Institute Manuscript Collection A54, Newspaper clipping, no date or name.
As the great end of human society is to become wiser and better, this ought, therefore, to be the principal view of every man in every station of life. But, as experience has taught us that such studies as inform the head and mend the heart, when long continued, are apt to exhaust the faculties of the mind, it has been thought proper to relieve and unbend the mind, by some employment or another, that may be agreeable enough to keep its powers in exercise, but, at the same time, not so serious as to exhaust them.

Robert Burns, 'Regulations of the Tarbolton Club'.

There was comparatively little literary criticism published here between 1880 and 1930 - most of those whose talents would seem to have been peculiarly suited to it appear to have frittered away their time writing third-rate poetry instead. What there was tended to be theoretical rather than practical, panoramic rather than particular, and highly nationalistic in tone. There were, of course, the usual exercises in literary piety - Ebenezer Storry Hay, for instance, read a paper on July 22nd, 1881, before the Otago University Debating Society on 'Some Characteristics of Wordsworth's Poetry', in the course of which he made two principle points:

No poet has so well depicted the hollowness of mere worldliness. Amid the sordid and debasing influences of colonial life - especially in cities - it is simply priceless to be able, by a mere act of volition, to transport ourselves into the region of poetry.

Wordsworth claimed to be a teacher as well as a poet, and would, I am sure, have condemned a doctrine advocated with such reiteration of emphasis by the recent artistic school of poetry of which Rossetti and Swinburne are the leading lights. That doctrine teaches that 'the content of a poem is of no moment', the only thing of value being 'the manner', or the
medium by which it is conveyed. Now, if we apply this test to Wordsworth its absurdity, I think, becomes apparent. Take his 'Lines on Tintern Abbey'... surely what is priceless in it is the profound and tender lesson, that in Nature is the anchor of our purest thoughts, the guide, the guardian of our heart, and soul of all our moral being.

There was a gap of ten years or so until another literary periodical arrived to help counteract some of the 'sordid and debasing influences' from which Wordsworth offered such a convenient refuge, but in 1838 appeared The Monthly Review edited by J. R. Blair. In the first volume there was an article on 'Henrick Ibsen's Social Dramas' by Oscar Alpers, in which he enthusiastically praised his compatriot, and managed to slip in a dig at the local scene as well:

It is in the repression of individuality by an antagonistic social environment that Ibsen finds the gravest malady of our civilisation.

The magazine even had little 'Notes and Queries', e.g.

Has anyone remarked that Dickens in 'Dombey and Son' appears on three occasions to have forgotten that he had described Captain Cuttle as having only one hand?

It also contained reviews of Colonial verse, chiefly written by David Will M. Burn. He had a very exalted idea of poetry indeed, as this extract from a review of a Canadian poet, Archibald Lampman, shows:

The greatest function for the bard, I take it is to sing, however brokenly, of what he sees when gazing awestruck into the deep chasmic secret of the Universe — gazing with those keen, stilly-glowing eyes of his that must see more than ours. There is another and a lower function, yet a worthy one, he may perform: he may become the common voice to all the human beings who, having eye and ear, and measure of intelligence, are thrilled intensely in the presence of life's mystery, entranced by the external beauty of the Universe, yet find no utterance: the poet may express their dumb emotion, and earn himself their everlasting gratitude.
A fluorescent parody of Browning, but the rest of the
review makes it quite obvious that he is in solemn earnest
about the stilly-glowing eyes. The Monthly Review had a brief
life, it expired in 1890, as did Zealandia, which had commenced
publication the year before, under the editorship of William
Freeman. His Introduction is eloquent of his ambitions:

Colonies though it may be, New Zealand is a nation —
not yet beyond its embryonic form, but still a nation;
and to the realisation of this truth is due the fact
that ZEALANDIA has been established as a distinctively
national literary magazine . . . . No thoroughly popular,
and therefore no thoroughly successful, effort has been
made to systematically bring forward the very large
amount of literary talent which is known to exist here. 5

This was not, however, to be a proto-Landfall — Mr. Freeman
wanted a 'quality' magazine, but:

By good quality, however, we do not mean what is wrongly
known as the severely 'classical'. We prefer to sprinkle
our road to the higher life with flowers of fancy rather
than strew it with rugged philosophical boulders . . . .
To be permanent, it must be popular. Therefore the most
strenuous efforts have been made to accommodate ourselves
to the prevailing taste. To this end a serial tale has
been selected which by its inherent force and thrilling
interest will appeal to the public at large rather than
the hypercritical few, while at the same time its
tendency will be ever upwards.

On the other hand, the 'ever upwards' tendency was not to be
achieved by attempting, like the vulgar Australians, to sever
all links with the past:

I regard the thraldom of English literary princes as
one of the surest and most binding ties between the
Mother Country and her Colonies. However successful we
may be in establishing a national literature in New
Zealand, no lover of the true and the beautiful would
wish to shake off the pleasant bondage of the British
masterminds of the literature of their younger days.

The Rev. Rutherford Waddell plugged much the same line in an
eSSay in the same number entitled 'Some Social Responsibilities
of a Young Community':
First, to the Past. It has put into our hands a great heritage - a heritage of race, riches, thought, law, liberty, literature, language, religion . . . . Nations, as persons, belong to the past. They are its children. They are organically connected; their roots are in it. They draw their best sustenance from it. There is a floating atmosphere of traditions, memories, sentiments, customs, modes of thought and feeling and action, whose air we breathe, which is in our blood and our brain, and from which we cannot suddenly separate ourselves without severing arteries essential to a harmonious life. No nation has ever attempted to do it without disaster.6

Critical reception of the new venture was apparently not entirely favourable, and drew a peevish squawk from the editor in the second number:

How any editor with a spark of patriotism could lend himself to so gross a piece of journalistic immorality as to wilfully seek to injure a disinterested national enterprise such as Zealandia is, it is difficult to conceive.7

By the time the fourth issue appeared he was almost laying eggs:

Why is colonisation despised? Why is colonial literature, the formative power of true Colonialism, called an abortion? Why is our embryonic art despised?8

and in the March number of 1890 he complains again, about a situation by no means unique in this or any other country:

It seems to me as if but few New Zealand writers entertain the feelings of good fellowship, the sense of fraternity which they should have for one another. Like sulky children each holds aloof, eyeing with green jealousy the slightest advance another member of the unrecognised brotherhood makes in popular favour.9

It would seem that Zealandia was a victim of literary in-fighting - certainly it appeared no more.

Fortunately, or perhaps unfortunately, poets did not have to depend on the 'little magazines' for publication. Most newspapers were happy enough to fill up a column or two with
verse - without paying for it. Between 1894 and 1903 J. C. Andersen published fifty-odd poems, in papers like the Christchurch 'Press', the 'Canterbury Times' and the 'Otago Witness', as well as in more literary magazines such as the 'New Zealand Magazine' and the 'Bulletin'. This latter, although it did have the advantage of paying for the contributions it accepted, was regarded with some distaste by the more staid New Zealand literati. Blanche Baughan exclaimed in a letter to Andersen:

I loathe the Bulletin! Mr. Whitcomb pleased me very much by calling it a low rag & thinking that he wouldn't send a copy of Shingle for review but he evidently weakened on that half-resolve. By its encouragement of cheap, low, cynicism and pessimism, I think the B. exercises a directly bad influence on Australian literature.

Nonetheless, as Mr. Whitcomb seems to have realised, the Bulletin was for a long time the literary magazine in Australasia.

In 1893 came 'The Triad', a lively and iconoclastic monthly largely devoted to music. Although its place of publication shifted from Dunedin to Wellington, and then to Sydney, it was to maintain almost continuous publication until 1937. Its taste in bad poetry at a time when so much was being published that was merely dull, was impeccably ironic. It was in its pages that G. Tomlinson, the poet of Ponsonby, first achieved national fame with his poem on Gladstone, which begins:

Thy birth it was in the month of December
A day that English people and history will ever remember
Just a few days after the Christmas day
That the English-speaking people and nation
Always keeps in commemoration,
When "Christ" himself first saw the light of day.

It must have been a day when snow lay on the ground,
And as you looked out of the window you could hardly hear a sound,
Probably the news spread quickly all around,
That a man-child had been born some distance from
'Plymouth Sound'.
He was not exactly born in a stable or cradled in
a manger,
But for several years was nursed and kept out of
danger.\textsuperscript{12}

It also discovered in Taranaki a genuine New Zealand McGonagall
writing verses on the occasions of the Queen's sixty-second
birthday, but his work doesn't achieve quite the same standard
as his namesake's. Nonetheless, in the not too distant future
when scholars have exhausted 'good' poetry as a text for
discourse, and turn instead to consider the great seething
verbal pudding on which it floats like froth, 'The Triad' will
be recognised as a pioneer in the field. The 'good' verse
that the magazine printed is not nearly so distinguished, and
consists mainly of sugary confections by one Alice A. Kenny.
The leading lights of 'The Triad' were the editor, C.N. Baeyertz,
and Frank Morton, who distinguished himself by engaging in
argument with Ezra Pound, until the latter squelched him with:

It is perhaps too much to expect that a man of one
generation, living in one corner of the world should
know or even be able to see clearly just what men of
another generation are rebelling against in the
opposite corner.\textsuperscript{13}

Which summed up the position of the New Zealand literati (at
least in 1915) well, if somewhat rudely. However, Pound was
to make amends handsomely later, when, in an essay in 'The
Little Review' of February 1918 he wrote:

It is something in the nature of a national disgrace
that a New Zealand paper, The Triad, should be more
alert to, and have better regular criticism of,
contemporary French publications than any American
periodical has yet had.\textsuperscript{14}

As well as reviewing French literature, the magazine also
kept a quizzical eye on things at home, noting, for instance
such facts as the public burning by the Salvation Army at Dunedin of novels by subversive writers like Mark Twain, Charles Reade, Rudyard Kipling and R. L. Stevenson. There were also occasional reviews of local verse, in which no punches were pulled - of Hubert Church’s *Poems*, for instance, the reviewer wrote:

> We have to confess that we have never been lovers of the cheaply inscrutable kind of poetry . . . . With some undoubted poetic gift, he has allied a deplorable inaccuracy of verbal construction, often resulting in a sort of English flawed and shapeless.¹⁵

Alan Mulgan in *Great Days in New Zealand Writing*¹⁶ recounts some amusing anecdotes about Baeyertz’s trenchant music criticism.

The most famous critic - or at least, the most sought-after for Introductions - of the day was the Rev. Rutherford Waddell, of whom it was said that his literary reputation spread over the whole Dominion.¹⁷ He liked his poetry cheerful, as he said in his introduction to Wright’s *Station Ballads* in 1897:

> What I like best is the health and sanity of his song. In the poetry of some of his colonial contemporaries "There sounds I know not what ground tone Of human agony." But there is nothing of this in Mr. Wright’s work. It is free from that pessimism and morbid introspection that spoils so much modern poetry.¹⁸

Two years later, writing in the Australian 'Review of Reviews', he touches on a subject from which poets here have always drawn inspiration - the fact that islands are surrounded by water:

> New Zealand . . . may count among its richest assets that it is a 'blue cinctured isle' and that round it roll incessantly The moving waters at their priest-like task Of pure ablution.
Its position in this respect is quite unique among Australasian colonies. The country reaches through almost ten degrees of latitude, and its breadth is so narrow that even in its remotest parts one is never far away from the 'murmurs and scents of the infinite sea'. And so, more than any other colony of the Southern Hemisphere, the Maori will have ever close to him and his children the wondrous voice of those mighty waters whose steel bright arm has moved through the centuries like a sweeping scimitar guarding his old Northern home, and whose weird, mysterious music sobs and soars through all the life and literature of the great race whence he sprang.19

In the same year, in an address to the St. Andrew's Literary Institute, he offered a new slant on the possibility of a national literature. The 'Otago Daily Times' reports him as saying that:

... the future of literature in this colony depended finally on the character of those who were to be its colonists; and in the character the highest elements were the moral and the spiritual. Given that, then, the prospects and possibilities of literature in this land were of the most brilliant kind. What was needed was the moralisation of the material and secular concerns of life, and if we were only true to our destiny no country of the world - certainly none in the Southern Hemisphere - offered more brilliant literary prospects and possibilities than this colony, in which a beneficent Providence had cast our lot.20

In an essay 'Possibilities and Prospects of New Zealand Literature' he explains why it is that the New Zealander must inevitably be more moral than anyone else:

The mind will be quickened and the nature made more eager, more inventive and more nervous by the soft and changeful climate and this will manifest itself in the literature of the future. Another result of our climate will be, especially in the South Island, the preservation of home. Home is a word of the temperate zones. You do not find it in tropical countries. You find houses to sleep in, but not that institution which stirs the heart of the Briton when he hears the old music of "Home, Sweet Home". Where
there are no such homes, character loses its strength and flexibility ... There is no doubt that the atmosphere of a land has a powerful influence in colouring the thoughts of its inhabitants. Take, for instance, Australian poetry. There is hardly a native song in which the note of sadness and world-weariness is not struck again and again. There is no doubt that one of the most potent causes of this is the atmosphere. Ever so many writers have noticed this ... Now in New Zealand our climate will not produce literature of that character. 21

Perhaps the best chance Lit. Crit. has of becoming an exact science is to amalgamate with meteorology.

Not everyone, however, was so optimistic about the inevitability of a national literature. The Rev. W. Rouse, writing in Atene, the journal of the Wesleyan Literary and Debating Club of Wellington, pointed out some of the difficulties confronting the antipodean artist:

It is very evident that our country affords very few associations that can inspire the literary genius of our rising aspirants to fame, or promote an all-round culture of our would-be literati, as compared with the older countries of the world. We have no history running back into past ages, or historical objects and monuments of a public character to fire a national and

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* The previous high point of critical exactitude was, of course, achieved by the phrenology in vogue during the early years of the nineteenth century, which managed to deduce the obvious with as much labour and cunning as any New Critic. Its finest hour came when the skull of Burns, specially exhumed for the purpose, revealed when measured that the poet had been benevolent, independent, and uncommonly Philoprogenitive. 22 A somewhat similar approach was adopted by early scientists in New Zealand, who proved that it was right that the Maories should die out after the arrival of the pakeha because their skulls could contain fewer millet seeds than an Englishman’s. 23
patriotic spirit. There are here no ancient cities, hoary with age, and bearing unmistakeable testimony to the great national crises through which they have passed; no old embattled castles with grass-grown court-yards, through which have passed the prancing steeds of the ancient warriors and the grand old knights of fame; no once fortified towns bearing everywhere the evidence of fierce sieges and conflicts, with their decayed remains of former grandeur; no haunted baronial halls with tradition of murders and other deeds of old-time cruelty and shame, when might was considered to be right, and pride and power crushed all the heart out of the people. We also miss the surroundings of most old English and European communities of a different character - the ancient parish church lifting its tall and picturesque spire to heaven, while at its feet lie the mounds and monuments of the crowded dead of former generations; the beautiful rural scenes, so often depicted by poets and painters; the varying landscape of grove and meadow, amidst which gleam the bright waters of lake or streamlet; the quiet, retired walks and shady nooks, tempting the meditations of the thoughtful; or, coming to more lively scenes, the bustling cities and market towns, the crowded sea-ports and watering-places, the manufacturing centres with their machinery, smoke and din, in all the moving, animated masses of humanity. 24

It is difficult not to think that Rouse is overstating his case a little when he bewails the fact that colonial artists lack access to 'beautiful rural scenes' and 'varying landscapes', and when he can find no lakes or streamlets, or even a 'shady nook' to tempt his thoughtful meditations. Even Wellington isn't all that bad. However, he does not despair. Midnight oil can make up for New Zealand's natural disadvantages in the way of church spires and mouldering generations:

Contrasted with this [the idyllic scenes described above] our colonial life seems dull and limited in its variety, and, therefore, to some extent wanting in the necessary surroundings to a full equipment for literary work; and yet, notwithstanding, by dint of hard reading and practice, with the splendid libraries available in every centre of population, these deficiencies may be overcome, and, as in many notable instances, our colonial youth
may hold their own in the cultured circles of the world.

The New Zealand Illustrated Magazine, which commenced publication in 1899 under the editorship of Thomas Cottle, was solidly on the side of the Rev. Waddell. Its appearance coincided with, and seems to have been linked with, the formation of the 'New Zealand Natives Association' and the 'New Zealand Literary and Historical Association'. In his introduction to the first issue H. Talbot-Tubbs added his voice to the debate:

The conditions of environment are peculiarly favourable in New Zealand. Pre-eminent natural beauty is there to train unconsciously eye and mind to a perception of the beautiful. Her insular position must assist in the development of a national type — in character first and then in that artistic creativeness which is the outcome of a strongly-impressed character . . . . Signs of the coming of literary power in New Zealand are not wanting; but literary power is not necessarily a literature. Let there be a period of 'storm and stress' and a national literature is certain; . . . 25

If he lived to see it, he must have rejoiced in the depression of the early thirties, although he may have wondered that it produced so much bad verse.

The next issue contained an article by J. Hight, M.A., which seems like a counterblast to the Rev. Rouse:

When our carping say too, that we must rely for ages to come . . . upon the traditions and the heritage of the old land, thereby implying that there is no local foundation upon which to build up a colonial literature, their assertions are based on ignorance of what the essence of literature is. Surely it is the presentation of life, life either past or present, or ideal. Wherever there is a human heart, a human soul, there must be subject enough to build up a whole world of time-defying literature. 26

When we think of A.R.D. Fairburn's devotion to the cause of compost, and the wealth of so-called 'dirty' stories which are
almost our only true folk-art, his next remark seems particularly pregnant:

[New Zealand's] national spirit, of course, will have something distinctive; it will be redolent of the soil.

and he warbles to a conclusion calculated to rouse the local cow-cockies — those at least who took the New Zealand Illustrated — to a frenzy of literary composition:

Men and women of our bush and paddocked countrysides, you whose ears are ever charmed by nature's sweetest music . . . when the first chosen one of the gods is revealed to us, be he poet or prosewriter, dreamy idealist or scathing satirist, he will surely stand forth one of you who are the priests of nature — though haply you know it not — preserving the one same point from which to view all things, and ever-pulsating with those primal feelings that, changing with varying times and scenes, are still the same in essence.

The next issue had a review of Adam's Maoriland which must have grieved the young iconoclast a little, with its emphasis on the nutritional value of his verses:

Many of the shorter poems deal with the elemental feelings, and show that the author possesses that essential of the poet — a broad and palpitating human sympathy. Maternal love, the beauty and simplicity of a child's innocence, the passionate longing for a love that shall ennable, are the subjects of some of the best lyrics in the book . . . . There are in this volume poems of genuine worth, thoughts to be read and re-read, the digestion of which will be accompanied by a most pleasureable and profitable increase and strengthening of our mental and spiritual health. 27

Another article on 'The Possibilities of New Zealand Literature' followed, in which the usual arguments were put forward:

By such a climate as ours, the finer feelings are stimulated and cultured, the emotional spirit is vivified and intensified; etc. 28
But by now people were beginning to wonder why, with all these atmospheric advantages, there were still no signs of a great national literature. This writer, Hilda Keane, located the cause of the failure in the audience; the only thing wanting to bring the prolonged gestation to a 'glorious birth' is encouragement, which so far had, she said, been lacking. The idea seems to have caught on, and two months later we find E. B. Vaughan complaining in 'The Conditions of Art in New Zealand' with some bitterness:

The chief drawback . . . to the appreciation of art in New Zealand lies in the character of its leading citizens. These petty souled bourgeoisie of more or less affluence, smugly complacent, or loudly pompous according to their nature, are hardly the kind of individuals to possess that sympathetic feeling which leans towards the finer instincts of life . . . . the shopkeeping spirit and Art do not assimilate.²⁹

By 1903 the magazine had largely abandoned its theoretical nationalism - or was at least keeping quiet about it. It published two reviews, the first of 'A Fair of New Zealand Poetesses' - 'Roslyn' and Mrs. Glenny Wilson. The article consists mainly of lengthy quotation, but the reviewer is not sparing of his praise. Of the former's verses he says:

The secret of their spell lies in their charming naivety, their sweet simplicity, their limpid clearness, above all in their sympathetic interpretation of the varied moods of nature reflected in the scenery around her . . . . We feel that none who study it will question 'Roslyn's' right to a high place in the rank of poets of the Twentieth Century.³⁰

And Mrs. Wilson's style is:

Always clear and simple, her metre always true, her rhythm almost perfect. But to us the sweetest charm of her poems is in their originality. She has copied no models. Her ideas are always fresh, and her mode of expression peculiarly her own.³¹
There seems to have been surprisingly little literary criticism at this time, considering the volume of poetry that was published, and most poets must have had to content themselves with newspaper notices as evidence of fame. Some, however, were lucky. Almost the last contribution that the Illustrated made to the national literature which it so ardently hoped for was a review of *Afterglow*, a book of poems by D. M. Ross, who wrote occasionally for the magazine. It must have brought joy to his heart:

Often the mind is bewildered by the opulence of the imagery. Golden sunsets, opal skies, the glitter of innumerable stars, the beating of waves, the rustling of the winds, and the presence, seen and unobserved, of angels, often make the effect phantasmagorical. But the phantasma are no mere stage property. They are a symbolism by which the writer apparently endeavours to visualise what is wholly unsusceptible of materialization . . . . The *Afterglow* represents the strivings of an earnest soul to break the spell of an utilitarian world . . . . [it] appeals to all that is most truly masculine in man and most sweetly feminine in woman . . . . The spiritual insight . . . is profound. It reaches the deepest springs in our nature.  

There were a number of anthologies published about this time, notably *New Zealand Rhymes Old and New* edited by Jessie Mackay, and *The Jubilee Book of Canterbury Rhymes* edited by Oscar Alpers, which had a very Waddellian, if that is the right word, introduction, but the most important of them did not appear until 1906. It was edited by two youths not long out of school, W. F. Alexander and A. E. Currie. The poems are what one would expect from a collection that contained more poets than there had been years since the first book of verse had been published in this country, but the long introduction is well written, and although it breaks no new ground, is a fairly adequate summary of the main critical problems encountered up until that time. There is not space to quote from it as extensively as its
importance deserves. A few extracts will, however, give some idea of its general drift:

It is the conviction that some of [the volumes published each year] contain verse which at least comes well up to the level of modern minor poetry that has led to the making of the present collection. It may be admitted at the outset that there is nothing very great to be disclosed herein: the poetical element that a new land contains must always at first be small and of little power. In the generation of pioneers that is passing away literary effort was inevitably a rare thing: men's energies were set too sternly to battle with the material facts of life to leave them time for cultivating its graces. The second generation has still before it the task of establishing the nation whose foundations were set by our fathers, and we too have comparatively little time for things not practical - the columns must be set up before we turn to moulding the entablature.  

This lack of pretension is a pleasant change from the ardent nationalism of the Illustrated, although the basic premises are still national. Nor did they attempt to gloss over the fact that, the efforts of the Triad notwithstanding, New Zealand was still very much behind the times: 

No attempt has been made at chronological arrangement; not because there is not as much difference between some verse of 1850 and some of 1900 in New Zealand as in France, say, but because in connection with a place which is a whirlpool of active life, and yet at the same time a backwater of literary influences, dates would only mislead. Younger writers, for example, have imagined the emigrant spirit as truly as the men of the early days.  

They are cautious about the possible existence of a national school of poetry:

It is hard to say whether there are as yet any signs of a distinctive school of New Zealand poetry. Circumstances in the State are against the development of any consciously united effort. As has been said, there is very little local reading for the local
writing, and each writer is a law unto himself in the choice of models, and responds to influences flowing anywhere out of the whole corpus of Anglo-Saxon literature. Again, there are no literary coteries in New Zealand, and the geographical configuration of the country will always prevent much centralisation in any division of national effort.35

Their summing up is also modest enough:

At the most, one may venture to remark — provided a poet can be considered as in any wise a normal specimen — that the New Zealanders make love with as much fervour as lovers elsewhere, are as much saddened by a luckless wooing, and rejoiced at a smile from their ladies; that when they write religious verse, it is of various degrees of orthodoxy, sometimes forgets its aim of instilling right doctrine and gains thereby a fine line or two; that they can occasionally turn a blank verse line, and do not quite escape the charm of old Greek legends; that some among them have a mind of fancy that will be bound down to no particular time or place, or perversely imagines all that is unknown to be magnificent; in a word, that they can write with more or less felicity what we agree to call, mingling praise with blame, "minor poetry".36

In the twenty years following the demise of the Illustrated Magazine there were very few periodicals that paid any serious attention to poetry, and it was not until 1921 that a magazine calling itself variously New Zealand Life, New Zealand Life and Forest Magazine, and Forest Magazine appeared on the scene and published occasional articles on New Zealand verse. The first of these was by Alan Mulgan on Jessie Mackay, in which he acknowledged her position as reigning queen of local poetry:

Strength, sympathy, tenderness and imagination form in her an alliance that has enthroned her amongst her brethren. In poetic fire and imagination she is first of New Zealand poets, but New Zealand, preoccupied with pioneering and trade statistics, and perhaps dulled by prosperity, has little time for poetry, so her entire output has not been great . . . . Jessie Mackay has the true Celtic fire and imagination, touched by the freedom and spaciousness of the country in which she lives. It
is not in technical excellence that her charm lies, so much as in insight and the 'deep poetic heart',

Four years later there was an article by James Cowan on Domett, largely concerned with theorising about New Zealand poetry in a rather derivative manner, but digging right down to critical bedrock in its summing up of Ranolf and Amohia:

For all of literary tastes this great poem has a charm due to the intimate association of the author with Robert Browning.

In 1930 there was an article by 'Rawhiti' entitled 'Be Yourself', the Neglected National Note in New Zealand Art and Literature', which rehashed the usual arguments in favour of nationalism. On the page opposite the editor had with conscious or unconscious irony placed a large advertisement which read:

BUY NEW ZEALAND-MADE GOODS - A policy that will promote National Prosperity and provide Employment for Everybody.

We have, however, in following the sporadic efforts at reviewing and theorising in local journals, passed over what is certainly the heftiest lump of criticism to be unloaded on a New Zealand poet up until that time. In 1916 Louis E. Victory, Fellow of the Royal Society, published in Wellington a booklet entitled Thomas Bracken: An Appreciation. Like the professional he was, he set about his task in a methodical and business-like manner:

In every considerable poet there are certain qualities, or characteristics, which I always look for in deciding the value to be attached to his work. In regard to his spiritual equipment I probe for:

1. Moral Philosophy.
2. Sincerity.
4. Imagination.
5. Depth of Vision.
6. Fundamental Brain Work (Rossetti's essential)

On the technical side I seek for:

1. Verbal Power and
2. Metrical Craftsmanship.
The bulk of the essay consists of a point by point demonstration that Bracken possesses all these qualities, and is therefore entitled to be considered a 'considerable poet'. By comparison with such writers as Swift, Bracken shines in the 'Moral Philosophy' department:

"The theory of 'Art for Art's Sake' is immoral, because it permits the unbridled treatment of any subject, however depraved, and that which does not elevate, degrades. Men like Dean Swift who write verses saturated with the canker of immorality, are not poets, but pestilences."^{41}

He goes on to quote Bracken's 'The Soul's Treasury' approvingly as evidence of a right moral sensibility, and to praise him for his uncomplicated goodness:

"Amid the multiplicity of vain strivings, the modern fret and unrest, the craving for fresh excitement and sensations, it is a tonic to find a poet who can sing with humble content."^{42}

He is at pains to dispel the idea that he is advocating any pallid ivory-tower kind of art:

"I knew a poet years ago who was so carried away by feeling that he wept over the composition of his verses. The result was that his poems were always powerful."^{43}

and seems confident that Bracken, too, cried into his ink-pot. It is, however, Bracken's pokings into the bosom of Nature that elicit his most fulsome praise:

"It is one of the prerogatives of the poet to look into the secret springs of human action, and to bring therefrom, and from the moods and manifestations of Nature, meanings and messages hidden from the view of ordinary minds and eyes. Bracken possessed this deep vision in no common degree. And nowhere does he put his finger more definitely on the human heart and its foibles than in that masterly poem - the best known of all his verses - "Not Understood"."^{44}

With even the overseas experts solidly behind the 'solace and comfort' school, it is little wonder that few people, in print
at least, thought of challenging the dominant local poetic, although many must have known that it was long out of date.

Criticism in this period was singularly useless, but, one suspects, no more useless than it is now. For the most part it consisted of empty theorising, or extravagant adulation, in which poets' offences against reason and taste were simply compounded. Since even the best poets, like Bethell, worked for the most part in readily accessible areas of experience, there was no scope for literary scholarship, and since there was no poet around to take advantage of a gap in the defences, there was no incentive for a critic to plant any bombs under the battlements that defended colonial sensibilities from the onslaughts of reality. Small wonder that writers paid little or no attention to the works of literary pundits, and the public declined to support them.
1. E. S. Hay, Some Characteristics of Wordsworth's Poetry. 1881
3. ibid.
6. ibid. p.17
7. ibid. Vol. I, No. 2
8. ibid. Vol. I, No. 4
9. ibid. Vol. II, No. 2
11. ibid.
14. Reprinted in Make It New, Faber, 1934
16. Alan Mulgan, Great Days in New Zealand Writing. 1962
17. The New Zealand Magazine. May 2nd, 1932
18. Introduction to Station Ballads. 1897

26. ibid. Vol. I, No. 1

27. ibid. Dec. 1899

28. ibid. Feb. 1900

29. ibid. Oct. 1900

30. ibid. Aug. 1903

31. ibid. Aug. 1903

32. ibid. Aug. 1904

33. Alexander and Currie, New Zealand Verse. 1906, p.xiv

34. ibid. p.xviii

35. ibid. p.xx

36. ibid. pp.xxx-xxxii

37. New Zealand Life and Forest Magazine. 15th Sept. 1924

38. ibid. 10th April, 1928

39. ibid. 1st March, 1930


41. ibid. p.11

42. ibid. p.13

43. ibid. p.16

44. ibid. p.19
XX. **CONCLUDING INCONCLUSIVE POSTSCRIPT**

Generalisation . . . the act of a vulgar, incapable, and unthinking mind.

Ruskin, Preface to 2nd Ed. of *Modern Painters*

Now is the time, I suppose, that these subcutaneous excavations into our literary heritage should yield some result, the boil that has been swelling so long should burst - in fact, (to change the metaphor before it becomes too grisly) any reader who has toiled this far through the bad verse and worse criticism that constitute *New Zealand Poetry Before Mason Came Along* and *Began It has a right to expect a generalisation or two which will enable him to shroud the whole subject in a few neat phrases and bury it comfortably in some weedy corner of the mind, never to be exhumed. Such phrases do exist. They have floated into my mind often as I toiled through one or other of the four-hundred odd volumes written here before 1930. And they have come with a spontaneity and luminous clarity that guaranteed that they were more than mere intellectual fabrications. But friends have assured me that until academic conventions catch up with more permissive literary ones they just "won't do". So my postscript will have to make up in formality what it lacks in pungency.

Looking back over the preceding chapters I can see a number of assumptions - about poetry, and about what it means to be a New Zealander - that seem to justify the poems and criticism quoted, and that should, in the normal course of a study such as this, have translated themselves into 'conclusions'. They were designed to probe and explain what I took to be a colossal failure - so much effort, so many volumes, resulting in only a handful of poems that are still read, or considered readable today. But as I considered the possible explanations -
preoccupation with 'poetry', the traumatic effect of emigration, difficulty of assimilating a new landscape, isolated survival of Victorian 'solace and comfort' ideals, lack of professionalism, lack of commitment, and so on, the more it seemed to me that these were veiled descriptions rather than explanations — and that the solemnity with which I advanced them was an inversion of the faded comedy into which time had transformed the earnest endeavours of the colonial poets and critics I was reading.

There was no problem. At least, there was no problem that history or geography threw any light on. They hadn't failed, they had succeeded, in everything except capturing the interest and affection of posterity — and the fact that they are no longer read is as irrelevant as the fact that a whole lot of Wordsworth, or Tennyson, or Swinburne is no longer read.

Very few people, except perhaps schoolteachers, attempt to explain why a 'good' poem is good — the attempt involves such an intricacy of arrogance, towards the poet, the poem, the reader, the language. But to explain away the badness of bad poems is both arrogant and trivial, and I can't imagine why I once thought it necessary to try. It is, I think, useful to take a close look at the morass of versifying which a poet has to struggle out of if he is to achieve anything, and the New Zealand literary scene before 1930 provides a nicely self-contained one. It provides a background against which the achievement of poets like Mason and Bethell and Curnow seems very impressive, and I think it shows that the concepts of 'development' or 'tradition' have very little meaning in the literary life of a small colony. It shows, too, that even in an age of mushrooming research it is still possible, in remote corners of the world, to study the poetic output of an entire nation over a period of eighty years without coming to any conclusion whatsoever, except that it exists.
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<tr>
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<td>Mackay, Jessie</td>
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<td>Baughan, B. E.</td>
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