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THE SOUTH ISLAND MYTH: A SHORT HISTORY

Introduction

> Why was it then that out of all the hundreds of towns and universities in the English-speaking lands scattered over the seven seas, only one should at that time [in the nineteen-thirties] act as a focus of creative literature *of more than local significance;* that it should be in Christchurch, New Zealand, that a group of young writers had appeared who were eager to assimilate the pioneer developments in style and technique that were being made in England and America since the beginning of the century . . . and to give their country a new conscience and spiritual perspective?

This is John Lehmann, as quoted by Allen Curnow in his famous introduction to the 1960 Penguin *Book of New Zealand Verse* (Curnow 1987, 134). Extravagant as Lehmann's rhetoric may sound, and though Curnow himself attaches a footnote which questions the force of the Christchurch connection, a closer inspection of mid-century nationalism suggests that such a claim is not entirely far-fetched. However, by 1959, when Louis Johnson does a head-count in that year's edition of his *New Zealand Poetry*

Yearbook, the North Island cities, Auckland and Wellington, are found to be home to 48 and 33 contributors respectively, while the South Island centres, Dunedin and Christchurch, can muster only 7 each (Johnson 1959, 10). What are we to make of these fluctuating fortunes in South Island writing? I am not going to offer a fully materialist account; nor can I answer Lehmann's query in quite those ambitious global terms in which he couches it. But out of the interval between these two moments — Lehmann describing the 30s and 40s, and Johnson's demographics of 1959 — there emerges a story which I think is indispensable to an adequate understanding of Pakeha cultural nationalism, the story of a harnessing of landscape and locality to the ideological dreamwork of naturalizing colonization. Treating Curnow's work as an exemplary version, this essay investigates the rise and fall of the South Island myth.

Debates of the 50s

Curnow's procedure with Lehmann's inquiry — running it up the flagpole, while demurring at the Christchurch emphasis ("it is a pardonable error . . . to lodge his 'group of writers' all in one city: various parts of New Zealand may claim them . . .") — shows a characteristic ambivalence about South Island regionalism (Curnow 1987, 134). Famously attentive to the claims of locality, Curnow is resistant to having his own work categorized in regional terms. In the arguments which, through the 50s and into the 60s, simmer round this notion of a "South Island myth," Curnow, plainly the most potent spokesman for the ideas associated with this myth, at the same time staunchly refuses to acknowledge either its mythic qualities or its regional provenance. And yet although he dislikes the label, his discourse appears irresistably drawn to it. "Have you in the back of your mind that expression 'South Island myth' . . . ?" he asks Mac Jackson in 1973, volunteering the term before the interviewer can mention it, and going on to wonder if it might have been "invented for" Keith Sinclair's *History of New Zealand* (Curnow 1987, 253). Oddly enough, though, Sinclair's book would not appear till 1959, while as early 1953 Curnow himself was citing the term and quarreling with it in a piece on M.H. Holcroft (Curnow 1987, 124).

Several things complicate and cloud the historical debate that took place around this notion. For a start there is simple geographical mobility; thus while he himself clearly is a Christchurch writer in that critical phase in the 30s and 40s, by 1959, had he chosen to contribute, Curnow would have swelled the ranks of Johnson's Aucklanders. Of greater weight, however, is the generational question. In 1953, in the Holcroft review, Curnow observes that a younger generation (he means that of Johnson and James K. Baxter) appears to be indifferent to the issues which preoccupied his own; it is with these younger writers, he suggests, that the talk has arisen of a South Island myth. It is a short step from here to brushing aside this

regionalist critique as mere generational animus: "As for the 'South Island' particularity, it just doesn't exist, except in youthful polemics" (Curnow 1987, 124n). The tone of these remarks is an intimation of trouble to come. The following decade would be overshadowed by what has since become known as the Curnow-Baxter feud[1] — a chapter marked by a degree of ill feeling which meant that the analytic force of the governing arguments could easily be obscured.

A case in point is the interrogation of South Island regionalism: the generational alibi cushioned its impact, and the challenge it presents to cultural nationalism was never squarely addressed. In my view, therefore, "South Island myth" is a term which still has work to do. Despite Curnow's own emphatic disclaimers, its banner unites in a common cause a decisive proportion of what is read today as the cultural nationalist canon. And where critics even now are still willing to invoke the nationalist writing of the mid-century in terms of a literary "decolonization" (Murray 1998), it seems fair to say that the sharper implications of this parochial centre of gravity could afford to be more plainly articulated.

Landscape and History

Curnow himself has always bridled at the description of his nationalist construct as a "myth" — "a curious term . . . for what is simply a way of looking at history," as he puts it in 1953 (Curnow 1987, 124).[2] Two decades later, little has changed:

> . . . you can't call a feeling a "myth", can you? Or an opinion? Unless you want to cast doubt on the historical existence of people you don't agree with? (Curnow 1987, 253)

To dust the term off again at this stage, then, is to buy a fight, not only with a highly distinguished poet, but with the writer who is plainly our most indispensable theorist of literature and nation. Happily, however, I am not persuaded that it challenges the writer's "historical existence," any more, indeed, than it threatens his eminence. Rather, it once again confirms — as if confirmation were needed — how extraordinarily *active* Curnow's intervention remains.

In discussing that intervention, the term "myth" is inescapable. In first place, the poet effectively tables it himself, when he speaks retrospectively of *Not in Narrow Seas* (1939) as his contribution to an "anti-myth about New Zealand" (Curnow 1987, 244).[3] In an earlier, again explicitly mythic proposition, he affirms in a sleeve note for *Island and Time* (1941) that "the need is for legend rather than for 'realism.'"[4] Curnow's generation sets out to combat a governing mythology with a more knowing and salutary alternative. Against the avaricious prospects of Victorian entrepreneurs and the blithe local colour of Georgian sentimentalists, the nationalists propose a grim counter-fiction, whose signature locality will be a sublimely

inhospitable South Island landscape. Far-flung and alien, windswept and ice-bound — its splendours only further underlining its inhuman scale — the scene is here established for a war of attrition between indifferent Nature and stoic settler consciousness.

William Pember Reeves, one of the few colonial poets in whom Curnow is able to find something worth rescuing, stands out as "prompted by a real need, a conflict of the exiled spirit" (Curnow 1987, 47). Curnow is never less than ambivalent about Reeves, but "A Colonist in his Garden" is a poem to which he returns on several occasions:

> We stand where none before have stood
> And braving tempest, drought and flood,
> Fight Nature for a home.[5]

Curnow, of course, is not fooled for a moment by this blatant imperial sleight-of-hand. But the fact that it does "little justice" to Maori (Curnow 1987, 32) will not prevent his own generation from reinventing the same trope. What Reeves, then, anticipates is the fundamental *displacement* of mid-century nationalist mythology, where the violence of colonial settlement will transpire, not between peoples, but rather between Man and a hostile landscape. Here the specificity of the South Island experience shows its full strategic worth. A smaller indigenous population, a costly period of warfare in the 1820s (both among and between iwi), and the overwhelming European deluge generated by the southern goldrush, were among a combination of historical factors behind a Pakeha ascendancy achieved in the South Island without military force (Belich 1996, 163, 254-57). This is the history on which nationalism seizes in order to establish its legitimating ground, superimposing this contingent local narrative onto a grimly romantic landscape, as if the landscape itself could account for it.

"We reach here the very principle of myth: it transforms history into nature." This, of course, is Roland Barthes (Barthes 1973, 140) — also writing in the mid-50s — and without doubt the nationalist anti-myth is mythological in precisely this sense. Confronted with the seemingly impossible dilemma of how to model a native idiom in a colonized territory, the nationalists fasten on the South Island landscape as a way to try to *naturalize* their own imperative occlusion of prior occupation. The island is configured as a frozen desert, historically uninhabited because sublimely uninhabitable. The task of the settler is simply to tame it. What Mary Louise Pratt calls the "anti-conquest" (Pratt 1992) — referring to the work of natural science in the imperial expansion of the Eighteenth Century — continues to resonate with these belated territorial ambitions of Pakeha nationalism. By displacing onto landscape the energies of conquest — a landscape which supposedly repelled prior settlement — the nationalist writers "secure their innocence" (Pratt 1992, 7) in the very gesture of imaginative seizure. An empty, inimical southern terrain which a staunch settler heroism is only now subduing naturalizes European occupation and mystifies its historical mechanics. Myth and locality are bound inextricably in the fashioning of the settler nation on the model of the South Island.

South Island Hegemony

As Curnow points out *appropos* of Lehmann's question, an appearance of Christchurch dominance in the 30s and 40s was in a sense exaggerated by the channelling of so much key work through the Caxton Press. There were writers based elsewhere, particularly in Auckland, who were largely indifferent to the geographical accent of South Island nationalism. But from about 1934, when Curnow left Auckland to return to the South Island, until — again reaching for a date of convenience — 1951, when he made the return journey, Christchurch and the South more generally could quite justly claim to be the powerhouse of the emerging nationalist culture.

A roll-call can tell at least part of the story. In the forefront, then, of this South Island vision is the poetry of Curnow, Brasch and Glover. McCahon and Angus, along with Lusk and Bensemann, painted the iconic visual works. From Invercargill the Christchurch-born Holcroft dispatched his crucial suite of essays. Bethell's poetry and Cresswell's prose had laid a foundation towards the end of the 20s, while Baxter, Campbell, Dallas and France ("Paul Henderson") would later carry the poetry into a second generation. There are more names that might well be added, of course, and more to be said at the infrastructure level where the polish of Glover's printing helped to underline the various editorial strengths of Curnow (the 1945 Caxton anthology) and Brasch (who would commute between Dunedin and Christchurch to bring out the quarterly *Landfall* from 1947).

But the larger significance of the South Island myth cannot be described simply by pasting names into an atlas. Its dominance emerges in the 30s and 40s out of a complex dynamics of cultural entitlement, whereby a necessary movement of settler self-empowerment must negotiate the glaring impossibilities of its own rhetoric. Under this ideological pressure, poetically unpeopled southern extremities are shaped into an imaginary heartland of Pakeha nationalism. As such, the myth entails, not just a landscape, but a particular affective disposition towards that landscape, a pained but resilient masculine stoicism which it offers as a template for a nationalist heroics. The nationalist writer, then, is apt to write like a "mainlander" even when he is not. Mason in his stoicism and his epic sense of exile, Mulgan with his suffering solo hero in a blasted landscape, even sometimes Fairburn — in spite of his well-known quip about "the dank pond of Ch[ristchur]ch culture" and its "diluted and slightly stagnant Anglicanism" (Trussell 216) — all in various ways participate in this vision.

Equally revealing of its hegemonic force is the early career of Alistair Campbell. Born in the Cook Islands, and now long established as our first, and most distinguished, contemporary Polynesian poet, nonetheless Campbell begins his career and establishes his initial fame with work which is clearly in the governing

South Island mode. While this, of course, is partly because he spent his teenage years in Otago, it also reflects the dominance of a particular poetic mind-set. When Campbell wrote the poems of *Mine Eyes Dazzle* (1950) he was living, as he still lives today, in the lower North Island. But the settings and conventions of the South Island myth provide him, not only with a "natural" default idiom, but with an audience readily able to appreciate it.

Curnow in Outline

In the rest of this essay, however, it is on Curnow that I wish to concentrate. Curnow's long poetic career invites breaking down into several distinct phases, their sequence more-or-less a matter of critical agreement. A decade or more of silence in the 1960s conveniently and broadly divides "early" from "late," while within the earlier of these two phases a further three-part division is largely sanctioned by the poet's own selections and commentary: three books, which we might call "pre-nationalist" (although *Enemies* [1937] I read here as transitional), date from before the War and are cut adrift in the 1982 *Selected Poems*; these give way to the nationalist phase proper (*Not in Narrow Seas*, 1939; *Island and Time*, 1941; *Sailing or Drowning*, 1943); then in the later 1940s a gnarlier, more determinedly modernist poetics takes over and the mantle of nationalist myth-maker is set aside.

I want to call attention here to three particular tropes, for which I will hazard, provisionally, three labels: depopulation, diminution, and identification. These seem to me to be the principal figures by means of which the writing of Pakeha nationalism addresses the prime ideological task of disavowing colonial conquest. To lay them out in this structuralist fashion implies (1) that these tropes are widely deployed, and (2) that they are distributed synchronically. In my reading, both propositions apply, but in Curnow's case the second of them has to be considerably qualified, and I want to suggest here that *Sailing or Drowning* operates quite differently from the two or three volumes which precede it. Accordingly, the virtue of focussing on Curnow is that — restless and steely thinker that he is — he works through the range of rhetorical alibis at pace. This forward momentum helps to dramatize for us the accelerated tempo of the movement as a whole, as if Pakeha nationalism were plunging ahead in an effort to out-run its own impossibility.

Depopulation: *Terra Nullius*

In a poem called "The Scene" from *Island and Time* this "scene" of nationalist consciousness calls up two unseparated — unpunctuated — qualifiers: "unpeopled diffident" (Curnow 1941, 22). This coupling is vital to Curnow's nationalist rhetoric. To imagine this scene as "unpeopled" is to appeal to the most fundamental of all the tropes of settler self-exculpation: the fantasy of an unclaimed land, a *terra nullius* that invites colonial settlement. Variations are everywhere in nationalist thought; in Mulgan: "New Zealand is very old . . . and quite untouched by men" (Mulgan 1947, 2); in Brasch: "There are no dead in this land / No personal sweetness in its earth" (Brasch 1939, 23). Of course, literally to claim that there was no one here stretches credibility a little too far. More customary, then are the various appeals to an absence of discourse, of maps, and indeed of myths. This gesture is typically couched as reproach, but the plaintiveness masks only thinly the more expedient corollary. If, as Brasch laments famously, "The plains are nameless" (Curnow 1960, 183), then it follows that "The stones are bare for us to write upon" (Brasch 1948, 14). When D'Arcy Cresswell imagines taking a stone mason into the Southern Alps to chisel his poems into a suitable rock-face (de Montalk 1983, 26), he is literalizing a common conceit: this "Silent Land" (Brasch) is unoccupied and unarticulated; settler poetry, therefore, as it brings it into speech, opens for the first time the prospect its imaginative habitation.

Curnow's own poems never miss a chance to stress the severity of their island locality, or to remind us how the bleakness of an Antarctic neighbourhood conspires against any habitation, let alone an articulate one: "Hands reach north for warmth, out of the south / Come storm and silence like a blow on the mouth" (Curnow 1941, 22). In this way the poetry continually implies that its claim is on a territory which no one else wants, a geographical grimace reaffirming this wishful depopulation. But the key term for Curnow is not so much *unpeopled* as *diffident*; it's the tentative, frequently risible quality of the existing settler culture that wipes clean the rock-face. The frozen wastes of "Polar Outlook" may not be uninhabited, but nor do they yet support intelligent life: "stimulus / Stops at a full gut; waves / Cast up such creatures when the southerlies pass" (Curnow 1941, 19).

Wystan Curnow has cautiously related Allen Curnow's cultural nationalism to Emersonian romanticism (Curnow 1973, 168). The connection seems apt, in as much as any nationalism, in its urge towards self-assertion, will assume a romantic impetus. Curnow indeed can sound very like Emerson when advancing locality as the ground of self-reliance. On the other hand, to turn to Curnow's particular strand of localism with the flavour of the American romantics in mind is again to be struck by its overwhelming negativity. The poem called "New Zealand City," from the earlier volume *Enemies*, reads as Curnow's first excursion into what will become his customary nationalist mode. And yet the landscape it offers, debased and apologetic, owes more to a dispirited British modernism than to an ebullient New World optimism:

> Small city your streets hold no particular legends,
> your brothels are inconspicuous as your churches,
> your potentates think in thousands not millions
> and the nations do not quote your newspapers.

> London has spawned. Here are banks in the egg,
> foetus Beaverbrooks, Edens and Baldwins,
> toy art and labour, the importance of children
> under an unstained sky. (Curnow 1937, 1)

The poet of the these stanzas is an Emersonian romantic hunched in a kind of Prufrockian drab. Intent, however guardedly, on the assertion of national self-hood, at this stage Curnow cannot yet afford to immerse himself fully in a modernist epistemology. But the seedy décor of Eliot and Auden already suits his paradoxical campaign.[6] Thus two different rhetorics of emptiness combine: on the one hand, a nationalist conceit of primogeniture ("no particular legends," "unstained sky"); on the other, an embattled sense of modernist self-election, committed to the work of culture in this city of "toy art." In Curnow's poems, the second is more insistent than the first (in Brasch's it may be the other way round), but the two are rhetorically synergistic, each mode of emptiness evoking the other. From either perspective, the island is a desert where, as Curnow later puts it in "Music for Words," the task of the writer as settler-hero is no less than "To remake man out of this chattering dust" (Curnow 1982, 100).

Diminution: Front Garden and Backyard

The Penguin introduction of 1960 reserves its choicest barbs for the poets of the Nineteenth Century. Curnow's survey of his Victorian forefathers bristles with finely crafted sarcasm: "The lucky accident of a good poem did not happen in that space of the colony's history" (Curnow 1987, 150); the books of Thomas Bracken "are the weightiest objects of rhyme in the nation's cupboard of worthless keepsakes" (Curnow 1987, 141); and so on. Not that this comes as any surprise, since his poetry rehearses these attitudes exhaustively in *Not in Narrow Seas* and *Island and Time*. Again here, cultural nationalism is formidably allied with a nascent modernism. For Curnow, the writing of the settler nation implies first a ruthless cleaning out, in which the over-stuffed furniture of Victorian poetic language (negatively motivating Pound and Eliot), and the petty grandiloquence of colonial politicians, are piled up together in the same revisionist trash-fire and summarily reduced to more fitting proportions.

But it's not just the rigour of modernist aesthetics which fortifies Curnow in this crusade, for this wholesale deprecation of the colonial legacy is dictated already by the historical liability of conquest. Curnow's response to this intractable inheritance is not to summon his forbears to justice, but, more cunningly, to belittle them. Victorian poets and politicians alike (conveniently, often the same people — Bracken, Bowen, Dommett, Tregear, Reeves) are mocked for the scale of their colonial aspirations: "ambitious men of action on a diminutive stage" (Curnow 1987, 146), their verse records "the management of small affairs in the language of great consequences" (Curnow 1987, 149). Similarly, in Curnow's poems, the colony shrivels to "the wrinkled edge of empire" (Curnow 1937, 2), a place where nothing has ever happened, its settlers "dwarfed to island size" (Curnow 1941, 37). The task consumes a large amount of energy, but the stakes are considerable, for a wholesale diminishment of the scale of the nation's history reduces to the point of inconsequence the impact of colonization:

> Green slashed with flags, pipeclay and boots in the bush,
> Christ in canoes and the musketed Maori boast;
> All a rubble-rattle at Time's glacial push:
> Vogel and Seddon howling empire from an empty coast . . .
> (Curnow 1941, 9)

These lines from "The Unhistoric Story" make the strategy explicit. Upper case (or mythical) Time, harnessed to the swift march of stanzaic form, rewrites our history of internal military conflict as simply one more petty evidence of colonial self-importance.

The fullest working-through of this procedure is *Not in Narrow Seas*, where in alternating verse and prose the poet narrates a summary history of the Canterbury settlement. Once more the South Island setting is vital, as history obligingly contracts, in duration, and in consequence. The "little artificial port" of Lyttleton is presented as "a natural point from which to begin a study of the birth, life and growth of a nation now nearly 100 years old" (Curnow 1939, unpaged). Life begins with European settlement, and by taking the Canterbury experience as model both prior occupation and subsequent conflict can be elided:

> Not leap of capture theirs,
> But as who safely dares,
> Seizing without sword
> Front garden and backyard. (Curnow 1939, unpaged)

The stanza's third line once again echoes Reeves, from a salute to national destiny which Curnow himself quotes in his introduction of 1960:

> Though least they and latest their nation
> Yet this they have won without sword —
> That Woman and Man shall have station,
> And Labour be lord. (Curnow 1987, 152-53)

His own revisionary impulse, however, is not to correct Reeves's self-serving interpretation of the colonial encounter — this his own version preserves intact — but simply to deflate Reeves's statist pretensions by confronting them with the inconsequence of their outcome in the suburban Utopia of the welfare state. Again,

that is, Curnow's satirical reproach to the pettiness of provincial culture conveniently effaces the history that brought it into being.

Only as an afterthought, in its Blake-inflected "Epilogue," does *Not in Narrow Seas* speak directly to the embarrassment of conquest. Once more, however, the recognition of prior settlement is the occasion, not for remorse or conciliation, but for national self-mockery:

> Bring me an axe and spade:
> For this is insolent country,
> James Cook's pig-farm
> Without rule or road.
>
> Bring me a winding-sheet:
> For the brown singing people
> Affront with death our triumph, an
> Unangry death without fight. (Curnow 1939, unpaged)

Here too the poem is in dialogue with an earlier triumphalism. As Alex Calder has pointed out, Thomas Bracken in *Musings in Maoriland* (1890) uses the gallantry of Maori resistance to glorify, and justify, the colonial land-grab; as Calder puts it, "these shabby proceedings are embellished by the chivalry and bravery of a vanquished race, a worthy foe. . . . [M]ilitary resistance of Maori . . . would excuse the large scale and indiscriminate confiscation of land" (Calder 1998, 169). If Curnow inverts this heroic image — Bracken's "wild untutored chivalry" reduced to "an / Unangry death without fight" — again it is not to deplore the event but to down-size an earlier language of nation. On subsequent reflection, he may have deemed the gesture too expedient; in any case, he re-wrote the second of these stanzas at a later date.[7] But in 1939 these lines are utterly in keeping with this vision of colonial history, not as atrocious, but simply as feeble.

Identification: War in the Pacific

Far more explicitly than the two books preceding it, *Sailing or Drowning* (1943) is a product of the Second World War. With Glover away in the North Atlantic, "laid . . . in the breech / Of this time's gun" (Curnow 1943, 17), the book marks a rare break in the collaboration of poet and master printer.[8] Glover still figures in the volume, however, as that reader whose absence helps to bring the conflict home. "In all that violent process / You follow the arc of islands," writes Curnow in "Spring, 1942" (Curnow 1943, 17), and as a new imperialism threatens the Pacific this unsettling yoking of "islands" to "violence" signals a shift in the way the poems manage colonial history. The war in the Islands now forcibly revives an awareness of earlier conflicts, no longer diminished or disavowed. As the sonnet "To M.H. Holcroft" puts it: "Now all the history that did not happen / Begins, and stings like an unfrozen wound . . ." (Curnow 1943, 15). A favourite point of reference in this volume is *Macbeth*: an epigraph for "Pantoum of War in the Pacific;"[9] the gilt/guilt pun in "Rite of Spring" (Curnow 1943, 19); and in "The Navigators," a running motif, with "no wave big / Enough to wash" the blood from the wringing hands of European settlement (Curnow 1943, 12).

This reawakening of the memory of conquest brings a new assimilation of violence into the nationalist myth. A passage from the 1945 introduction — again, that is, a product of the second half of the War — appears to be informed by Curnow's own recent work. He is talking about signs of "an unconscious kinship" (Curnow 1987, 65) among New Zealand poets:

> It may be in some such way we draw nearer to the imagination of the Polynesian peoples, islanders and inveterate voyagers; at least in the powers with which we seem to credit the sea. We are closer to them in this, and in what it may imply, than by the direct allusion to Maori myth and chants which some New Zealand writers favour. Their history is not available to us, except as we may enter it by some identity of vision. (Curnow 1987, 67)

Where the disavowal of history will no longer "wash," instead we see the tentative emergence of a poetics of identification. In a common environment, beset by a common peril — "Always to islanders danger / Is what comes over the sea" (Curnow 1943, 24) — successive waves of Pacific settlers begin to shed their historical differences: "Surf is a partial deafness islanders / All suffer from, committed to the land" (Curnow 1943, 11). Curnow will never venture as far down this path of identification as Brasch does in his war book, *Disputed Ground*: "The earth holds them / . . . . / . . . their unprotesting memory / . . . surrounding us with perspective / Offering soil for our rootless behaviour" (Brasch 1948, 11). Insistently, though, in *Sailing or Drowning*, this "all" and "always" invoke a shared, transhistorical experience.

Differences still show, however. The book concludes with the trio of sonnets collectively titled "Attitudes for a New Zealand Poet." The first reflects on how far the poet has come from the satirical postures of a poem like "New Zealand City":

> That part of you the world offended so
> Has atrophied, or else your strategy
> Has changed, or else you have so much to do
> The simplest way is seeming to agree.
>
> The falling cities, bones and brutal sky,
> And Eliot cactuses do not recur.
> Now, it is not an easy question why
> You were ashamed that things were as they were.

(Curnow 1943, 26)

But in the last and most famous, "The Skeleton of the Great Moa in the Canterbury Museum, Christchurch," this reconciliation with "things as they were" competes with that earlier language of censure and belittlement:

> The skeleton of the moa on iron crutches
> Figures in no wasteland; a private swamp
> Was where this tree grew feathers once, that hatches
> Its dusty clutch, and guards them from the damp.
>
> Interesting failure to adapt on islands,
> Taller but not more fallen than I, who come
> Bone to his bone, peculiarly New Zealand's.
> The eyes of children flicker round this tomb
>
> Under the skylights, wonder at the huge egg
> Found in a thousand pieces, pieced together
> But with less patience than the bones that dug
> In time deep shelter against ocean weather:
>
> Not I, some child, born in a marvellous year,
> Will learn the trick of standing upright here.
> (Curnow 1943, 28)

Even in its better-known later form where "Figures in no wasteland" becomes "Broods over no great waste,"[10] clearly this poem marks a return to that territory of "bones . . . / And Eliot cactuses." The rhetoric again is of historical diminishment: the "private swamp" on which the city is built is neither the "great waste[land]" of European culture nor the "better Britain" of Wakefield's planned settlement; and while the sonnet's final couplet restores a dim teleology, the progress at which it gestures is allowed for only negatively. Its hero, or rather its "anti" hero, is an eloquent figure of the nationalist "anti-myth". A delusional "elasticity of pride"[11] ("Vogel and Seddon howling empire," or the epic muse of Bracken and Dommett) is stood on its head — Antipodean — in the self-deprecation and deferral of this *Not* I. "Not I but another / Will make songs worth the bother," as Glover's Harry reiterates a few years later (Glover 1995, 40).

With its model of a reconciled, acclimatized subject constructed on the basis of an identification with this historical victim ("failure," "fallen," "Bone to his bone"), the poem represents a kind of belated "anti" climax to that pursuit of settler identity through abasement which governs the preceding two volumes. But it also gives us *Sailing or Drowning*'s last word on that effort to refashion the settler subject as a Polynesian "islander." What does it signify to recognise one's image in the reconstructed remnants of this hapless creature, hunted, perhaps to the point of extinction,[12] by those ("other") Polynesian settlers with whom the embattled subject has been seeking to identify?

The early years of the War were a prosperous time for moa excavation. The "huge egg / . . . pieced together" is more than likely the specimen from the Pyramid Valley site in North Canterbury, a rich, pre-human deposit excavated heavily between 1938 and 1941.[13] But 1939 and 1942 also saw Jim Eyles' widely publicized discoveries at the Wairau Bar. Here, more than moa bones drowned in a swamp, was an ancient Maori burial site, which gave up the most complete record to date of archaic Maori co-habitation with, and predation of the extinct bird.[14] In 1943, then, it had never been more clear that the moa's "Interesting failure to adapt" was a failure in the context of Polynesian encroachment. Likewise, between the lines of this poem, it is increasingly apparent that South Island myth is destined, as surely as the great flightless bird, for a reckoning with alternative claims to its allegedly "private" swamp.

No Future

> The air of their islands is mainly fresh from the sea, and the rainfall abundant from the mountains whereon it condenses, from which, in some places, a violent sirocco results. Their present condition depends on the state of peoples a great distance off, and their communications with these. As yet they have no future of their own; and when at last one confronts them, they shall awake to find where they lie, and what realm it was they so rudely and rashly disturbed.

This well-known passage is from D'Arcy Cresswell's *Present without Leave* (1939), but its wide familiarity is to large extent Curnow's doing, since he cites it (sometimes fully, sometimes just the final sentence) on no less than seven distinct occasions. Peter Simpson, who supplies a checklist of these citations in his editor's notes to *Look Back Harder*, uses Eliot's phrase "personal saturation value" to describe Curnow's obvious fascination with this fragment (Curnow 1987, 31n). Evidently it offers a thumbnail sketch of the key motifs of his anti-myth: the setting in a splendid but prohibitive landscape; global remoteness with its cultural and psychological consequences; deferral to a knowledge that can only come from the future; and a gaping discrepancy between imported expectations and the intractable locality on which colonial thought imposes them. Perhaps this already goes far enough to account for the fragment's obsessive value. But I wonder if a fuller explanation is not suggested by going back to *Present Without Leave* and reading the two succeeding paragraphs, where Cresswell expands on the nature of that realm which colonial settlement has so rashly disrupted. "The first there of whom there were any record were Maori," Cresswell explains, proceeding to detail the impact of missionaries, the inter-tribal musket wars and the European land wars. His account then concludes with a familiar motif: "But at length, after several wars and uprisings, we wrested the North Island

from them. The South Island, being colder, was barely inhabited." (Cresswell 1939, 6-7) As the fragment recurs like a nervous tic in page after page of Curnow's nationalist explorations, the succeeding discussion — which Curnow *never* quotes — travels in its shadow, like an uninvited guest with a message from that future which its repetition anticipates so exhaustively. If Curnow moves quickly, as I have tried to show he does, he is trying to keep one step ahead of the incoherence of his own fiction. His fascination with Cresswell's "future" exemplifies an ambivalent self-knowledge — always half in shadow, like Maori settlement in the moa text — which makes his version of the South Island myth such a difficult structure to see whole.

The impulse exhausts its potential in less than two decades. For argument's sake one can date its extinction: I will put it, half-seriously, at 1951. This is the date of Glover's *Sings Harry*, for many the finest achievement of the South Island nationalists, but more crucially than this — although I can't prove it here — a decisive culmination of its implicit narrative gradient. It is also the year of the Waterfront Strike, rich in significance in so many ways, but not least as a conflict in which urban left and rural right contest their share of the national imaginary. Further, 1951 brought, for the first time in fifteen years, a full-scale gathering of the country's writers. Effectively a summit of the new nationalist hegemony — and held, predictably enough, in Christchurch — the 1951 Writers' Conference was also the platform for Baxter's paper, "Recent Trends in New Zealand Poetry," in retrospect the first indication of the deep divisions of the coming decade (Simpson 1986, 373). Like all these events, then, the Christchurch conference amounts to a summation which is also the beginning of a disintegration.

But I have already mentioned the event which is perhaps the most telling of all. It is Curnow's own departure from Christchurch — confirming what, by the early 50s, was looking like a South Island cultural exodus. "Perhaps the S[outh] I[sland] is really mouldering away," wrote Brasch to Frank Sargeson in 1954.[15] In the six years before this, Curnow, Holcroft, Baxter, Glover, McCahon and Angus had all shifted North — Curnow and McCahon to Auckland, the other four to Wellington.[16] And this move would coincide, in virtually all cases, with a renegotiation of their relation to Maori culture and an implicit reappraisal of the elisions of South Island nationalism.[17] Confirming that gulf which I noted at the outset between Lehmann's demographics of the 30s and Louis Johnson's, this exodus speaks of a regional vision which had come to the end of its cultural legitimacy. The debates about the South Island myth were just beginning, but its fruitful and necessary moment had already been and gone.

Notes

1 Also referred to as the Auckland-Wellington feud. A discussion of the ebbs and flows in Curnow's relationship with Baxter can be found in Simpson 1986. For a wider-ranging discussion of the period's quarrels, see Simpson 1993.

2 In the course of these remarks Curnow also refers to his earlier comments in a 1951 review of *New Zealand Poetry Yearbook* (see Curnow 1987, 107-08).

3 A useful discussion of Curnow's use of myth (and "anti-myth") can be found in Weiland 1980.

4 Curnow has confirmed that he wrote this note himself (Simpson 1997, 54). For two further references to "myth" from 1942-43, see Simpson's introduction in Curnow 1987, xvi.

5 These particular lines are quoted twice (Curnow 1987, 32, 46); the poem is also discussed in the 1960 introduction (Curnow 1987, 150-54).

6 On the logic of this paradoxically "negative" nationalism, see Calder 1998, 170-71.

7 In the 1982 *Selected Poems*, the stanza reads:

And eke a shrowding sheet:
For the brown singing people
Lift nobody off from Te Reinga
So heavy, alone and late. (Curnow 1982, 25)

In Curnow 1974 the stanza is still in its original form.

8 Peter Simpson remarks that this is the only Curnow volume between 1935 and 1973 not to involve Glover as either printer or publisher (Simpson 1987, 56).

9 This poem is first collected in Curnow 1949, in a bracket of two poems collectively titled "Pacific Theatre 1943." But in Curnow 1982 it is incorporated in the selection from *Sailing or Drowning*.

10 The poem appears in its original form in Curnow 1949. The modified version first appears in Curnow 1962.

11 The phrase, originally Trollope's, appears in the 1960 introduction (Curnow 1987, 140).

12 On the probable causes of moa extinction, see n13(below).

13 The Canterbury Museum's first moa egg was recovered from Pyramid Valley in 1939, and reconstructed out of 200 fragments by Edgar Stead (Duff 1949, 29).

14 Although there were naturalists who, mostly in the Nineteenth Century, had argued for pre-human extinction, by the time of the Pyramid Valley and Wairau Bar digs human exploitation of moa had been conclusively established (Beattie 1953, 18-30). The principal impact of the Wairau Bar discoveries was on the debate about the identity of the bird's hunters, relative to modern Maori; in the wake of Eyles's discoveries, a continuity between "Moa-hunter Maori" culture (a term favoured by Roger Duff, though seldom used today) and modern Maori culture could now be confidently asserted (Duff 1951, 23-25). On the question of moa extinction, while even now "it is impossible to place [the] causes . . . in a clear order of priority" (Anderson 1989, 191), it is widely agreed that human exploitation and habitat destruction were at least significant factors. My thanks to Chris Jacomb for talking these issues through with me.

15 Brasch to Sargeson, 13/8/54, Alexander Turnbull Library MS Papers 0432-147.

16 Others to join the northward drift in this period — but not explicitly key players in the South Island myth — include Bill Pearson, Fred and Eve Page, and Douglas Lilburn.

17 The most obvious exception appears to be Glover; an assessment of Holcroft's trajectory might best be accomplished through an analysis of *Listener* policy under his editorship. Among southerners less intimately associated with the South Island myth (see previous note), Pearson stands out as a writer for whom the move North (to Auckland) would lead to an exemplary engagement with bicultural issues.

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