

The Most Happy Fellow: 1969 interview with Hone Tuwhare

Bill Manhire

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Introduction

This interview took place in 1969 when Hone Tuwhare spent nearly five months at the University of Otago as a special Centennial Burns Fellow. He joined the official Burns Fellow for that year, Warren Dibble; and of course began to do significant work with Ralph Hotere, the 1969 Frances Hodgkins Fellow. At the time I was a graduate student in English, editing a small medieval Icelandic prose narrative for my MLitt dissertation. The interview appeared in the student newspaper, *Critic*. The headline wasn't mine.

Looking at the interview now, a few months after Hone's death, I'm struck by just how early in his writing life he had in place what would become some of his standard interview answers. Hone was 47 at the time, and he had published only one book, *No Ordinary Sun*. But what a book.

Typical, too, is the generosity and encouragement he shows to other writers. Likewise, the way he downplays his own achievement – especially if you remind yourself that he was then writing the poems in *Come Rain Hail*, one of the most remarkable small books of poetry ever published in New Zealand. It appeared from the University of Otago's Bibliography Room in 1970, and contained some of Hone's greatest conversation poems – work like "Rain", "Hotere", "Child Coming Home in the Rain from the Store". I recall that it was also dedicated "TO J.", and back then I could have named at least five women whose hearts must have fluttered when they saw those quiet little letters – one of them the nun who is the subject of "Song to a Swinging Contemplative".

Some of Hone's self-deprecation sounds to me mildly fraudulent – for instance, his remarks about grammar. People who truly don't know about grammar tend not to use terms like "noun" and "verb" and "adjective". I can personally vouch for the fact that Hone enjoyed student company more than that of academics, but those grammatically-anxious noises are

probably on a par with a story reported from the Centennial dinner where, seated next to the formidable Professor Margaret Dalziel, he professed not to know which pieces of cutlery to use. “What do you do with this fork thing?” he is said to have said. The other thing I recall about his role in the University’s Centennial was his contribution to a celebrity debate. Hone was on the team affirming the motion “That New Zealand is a nation of sheep.” “Jeepers,” he said, “what will I do?” – and then there he was on the radio news the next morning leading the audience in a loud chorus of “We’re poor little lambs that have lost our way: Baa! Baa! Baa!” His team won.

The interview now seems oddly formal – brief, stiff questions, followed by uninterrupted answers. That was the mode of the time, I guess. In the Department of English staff still addressed students as Mr X or Miss Y. But the actual experience was of course much more relaxed and rambling. The way in which Hone’s answers tend to slip sideways, then sideways, then sideways (“What was the question?”) will be familiar to anyone who knew him. And you can occasionally glimpse the easy if untranscribed sociability in a phrase like “Have a smoke”. When I interviewed Hone for *Landfall*, almost 20 years later, it was the same story. We talked in his little cottage in Dundas Street. We had both knocked off smoking by then, but it was a Saturday, and I had brought a couple of bottles of red wine, just to help things along. After a couple of hours of very good talk, there was a smell of burning from the kitchen. “Cripes!” cried Hone, and raced to open the oven door. After the smoke had cleared, two well charred shoulders of lamb were sitting forlornly on the oven tray. He had cooked one for each of us.

The M Happy Fellow

As part of the University’s Centenary celebrations a special Burns Fellowship was awarded to the Maori poet, Hone Tuwhare

Why and when did you start writing?

I began when I was about 19 – I was serving an apprenticeship in the Railway Workshop, in the boiler-making trade. I was exposed to various streams of thought, you know, which ranged from Atheism, through various religious beliefs, to Communism – and a lot of people drew attention to the very excellent library there, the Railway Workshop Library – this is in Otahuhu, Auckland. I would say that in that complex there would be about 1,500 people working, a fairly large concern by New Zealand standards. As I say I was exposed to a lot of intelligent people who talked about books and drew attention to writers such as Hemingway,

for example, Thomas Wolfe – mainly American writers – Steinbeck; and Russian writers too; Sholokhov – I couldn't tackle Tolstoy's *War and Peace*. I had a skim through it, but it was only about ten years ago that I had a slower plod through Tolstoy. And I suppose, I think it was a natural sort of voraciousness, you know, hunger, for reading anything – westerns even, detective stories – which probably provided some impetus for making me turn to the pen. Why did I turn to poetry, for example, instead of short story writing? I was very good at composition – essays I suppose you'd call them – at school; I never went beyond Form II as far as my formal education's concerned, apart from three years' night school during the apprenticeship – none of this played much part in my writing, the writing I was to do later at the age of 36. So I had this initial sort of go at writing when I was 19; and my attention was drawn to the works of R.A.K. Mason, whom I'd already known for two years, but who hadn't told me that he wrote poetry. To my great surprise, I discovered, you know, his good mind. So then I started to crawl round him – well he didn't mind this – and I remember once he told me, "Look," he said, "Don't worry about the formal rhyme schemes and iambic rhythms and things like that, it gets a bit monotonous. You just write how you feel." I'll always remember that from him...and then, of course, I couldn't relate this advice to the kind of stuff he was doing. It was very hard to read him, I found at that early stage. But I kept plugging away at him, I found it rewarding, things would come through from his work. When I finally did write, I think he was the one single influence in my work. There may be others, Lorca for example – as I say, I didn't start seriously writing until I was 36.

How does a poem begin?

Oh, goodness gracious me, I don't know how it starts. Have a smoke. I don't think any good poem comes mechanically. You know, you can't just sit down at a typewriter and expect a poem to leap out of the keys. But I think part of a poem's already formed, in your head, before you put it down on paper. I think often a poem can be sprung by a line. This is a very personal thing; for example, a line has come out of an image I got from reading a western book, "the brawling stream" – I think some bad man was crossing the Rio Grande – so I used this line in the poem called "Not by Wind Ravaged". Another example is a bloke, an artist mate of mine...we'd come out of the boozier one night, this was winter time and it was late, dark, and lights were on; we'd come by this tree, and he looked up, you know, and he saw it, silhouetted against the light, and he said, "Look at that tree, it's got muscles on it, you can see tendons". So, then I thought, "goodness gracious me, tree, muscles, good on you mate", and that sprang another poem called "Song", a very short one. Both of which are in my book, *No Ordinary Sun*. I can't explain how the others came, probably something like that happened, I don't really know.

Do you find writing easy?

No, I don't. For one thing, probably it's more of a struggle for me than, say, for people like C.K. Stead or James K. Baxter, who've had some sort of better formal training than I have. My problem, I think, of expression may be technical...I'm rather conscious of my limitations. Well, grammar, you know. I never had very much, I couldn't tell a verb from a bloody noun. I couldn't tell you what an adjective is. It's kind of instinctive – and because of fairly wide-ranging reading, from the detective things I read to the Bible, Tolstoy, Dostoevsky, Chekhov, Lorca. I told you I was exposed to different people, including Communists; well, I tended to read quite a lot of Leftist writers, like Pablo Neruda, Louis Aragon of France, Mayakovsky of Russia – Walt Whitman, of course, was our favourite of the Left. T.S. Eliot I didn't come to until after I'd published my book. I'd been warned against Ezra Pound because the Communists reckoned he was a Fascist, somebody you had to keep away from; but, you know, I was to turn to these two writers, much later, and appreciate them on their own account. What was the question?

Do you find writing easy?

No I don't, I don't find writing easy.

Is revision important to you?

Because I don't find writing easy, this is natural, yes. I have to do this over and over again. I even have to go to people who've got, say School C. or U.E. to check my grammar.

But there's more than just grammatical revision involved.

I'm very conscious of this kind of weakness. I'm in mortal fear that someone will say, "Well, hell, look, this man is illiterate". Perhaps I am, you know, but I think to any creative writer it's the kind of reading, the amount of reading, that he's got under his belt that is important. And – again a personal thing – going through the process of taking from any good writing what you want from it, and retaining it. Later on, if it's your own true voice that needs to come out, well it'll come out all right. But you have to have a good background of reading, I think, it's damn important – quite apart from the living thing of being exposed to people with ideas.

Now of course you're in a position where you can influence others. Does it worry you when, say, young writers come to you, asking for advice or criticism?

I think, yes, it worries me; but of course, it's a matter of preening, you know, to think, "Oh God, I'm Someone, somebody's coming to me". Again, it is a worry, this other side of you, of the artist, that is afraid of being pontifical about art, about poetry. And here I think there's a danger: I wouldn't care, for example, to write a book about poetry, because you may set up rules that you can't stick to later on. I think I'd avoid that. I don't want to trap myself, with rules of my own making which I may have to break later.

e.e. cummings makes a (not wholly serious) distinction between poets and what he calls "most people". Are you ever aware of this?

It implies an artificial sort of separation, I think...

I think cummings is suggesting that a poet always protects a part of himself.

You think that's what he means?

I hope so.

Well, I'd agree with that interpretation. There's something that an artist wants to keep for himself, that part of him which he won't allow anyone to violate, interfere with... And if that is what cummings means, well I'd agree with it. But on the other hand, I don't think poets are any better, or any worse, than anyone else that they mix with socially, or work with. I don't condemn, either, an artist who has a total commitment. He may be the worst family man, the greatest boozier and so on, neglects to take part, say, in the social life of people, of the group that he belongs to. I don't blame him – if he's got a total commitment, well, good on him, good on him; this is very good.

Do you find that you need to talk to other poets and creative artists, even if it isn't about poetry? Do you think you could write poetry in a vacuum?

I don't mind the casual contact with other writers. It's even better if it's over a glass of beer, or fishing, or doing ordinary sort of things – going for walks, for hikes, going to the beach for a swim and so on. That's getting to know the artist as he normally, is, as a bloke; not when he's firing and tempering his work. There are many facets of a man that one should try and get close to; but not consciously, of course. I mean, if it arises in a natural way, getting to know a person, his family, and so on, that's good, that's fine. This is normal. It's good to find out about other people too – who don't write poetry, or paint, or sculpt. This is quite a natural thing.

But do you need to be aware that there are other people round about you who are also writing poetry?

I think so – being exposed to fine writing and to writers who are living contemporaries, like Mason for example. I said that when I was fumbling around with pencil and paper, trying to get some thoughts down, at the age of 19, I sought Mason out, having known him for two years. I pinned him down, you know, on poetry. Because I was beginning to fumble with it. But people can put you off. I was put off about getting on to Ezra Pound and T.S. Eliot, for example; and to my great delight, you know, I find them, well, delightful, good, good for me. But that's much later. It's not always necessary, of course, to seek people. Get something down, and if you're still going hard at it, I think you'll look around all right.

Poetry isn't exactly a marketable commodity in New Zealand, yet *No Ordinary Sun* has run to a fourth edition.

Yes. This may or may not be a good sign. It's not always an indication of how good a work is. It may be just a popular sort of thing. It may be that people buy it out of curiosity: "This happens to be a poet who is at the same time a Maori". You know, this may explain perhaps the phenomenal success *No Ordinary Sun* has had. I can only think of one other poet, that's Alistair Campbell – he also is part Polynesian. I'm not sure. There may be some flavour about it that appeals to New Zealanders, I can't really tell. You don't write, you know, because you're a New Zealander, or because you're a Maori with a particular viewpoint that you want to set down poetically.

You're preparing a new book for publication. Do you think your poetry will be taking any new directions?

Well, you know, before I came down here I had stuff already prepared, but I'm rather dissatisfied with it. Maybe it's because of the Dunedin scene, the literary scene down here – my goodness gracious me – I've never had the opportunity, of course, to be right in among this, in a context that makes me halt a bit as far as my own work is concerned. I don't know whether it will influence me or not, but there's a lot of...I can think of some poets – younger poets – down here – yourself, for instance – whom I like to look at again and again...This doesn't exclude established writers like Charles Brasch – his latest book, I think – it seems to me that this man has suddenly found a new lease of life. I hope to find the same kind of thing.