

**BEFORE EREBUS: FIVE FOOTNOTES TO KENDRICK SMITHYMAN'S
'AIRCRAASH IN ANTARCTICA'**

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AIRCRAASH IN ANTARCTICA

Nothing
(we could have told them
had we wished to know or had they thought to say
before they left us)
nothing of your technologies
or your ambitious
sense of duty,
your diligent rashness, your verve,

nothing
of your easy way
with our women assures success where skill is
otherwise valued
We have not lived long
in this southern ocean
in these wind-wracked
islands, yet long enough to learn

what you
thought that in your way
you recognise is quite rarely what you may have
fancied where the fact
more brutally stands:
It was no complex violence
first gave meaning
to lives in these selfsame islands.

There is
a rabid violence
in the earliest stories, those tales of the brown or white
sailors or settlers.
Violence gave its nuance
to our lives, to our fathers'
and theirs. It is cried
hazard of our native ocean

as of
those seas and islets
south from us, again south from them false pacific

mass of the icefall
where you proposed boldly
ambition's crass duties,
speaking probably (did
you so?) of calculated risk.

You are
not the first, surely
will not be the last. A measure of lives is wanted
to measure the dead.
Not confidence, less humility
nor severest calculation
fends off. You are
blooded today, you, your fellows

in the gray sea and impure ice vowed in the name
of those who are already, in fact, dead.

1. The commemorations and recriminations that marked the recent thirtieth anniversary of the Erebus crash showed that the disaster remains a painful subject for many New Zealanders. As James Brown observed, in 'The Poem That Took the Place of a Mountain', large numbers of New Zealanders 'can remember/exactly where they were' on the night the news emerged that an Air New Zealand DC10 had failed to return from a sightseeing trip over the white continent.¹ Brown's poem is only one of a number of treatments of Erebus by Kiwi writers. Though these literary responses to the disaster vary in form and perspective, they share a tone of bewildered grief. In poems like Bill Manhire's 'Erebus Voices' and in prose works like Chad Taylor's fine novel *Departure Lounge*, Erebus is presented as an essentially ineffable event, hostile to interpretation and generalisation.² A similar sense of bewilderment seems evident in other responses to the tragedy. The Royal Commission of Inquiry headed by Peter Mahon collected thousands of pages of documents, and did not fail to apportion blame for the Erebus crash, and yet a sense of mystery which cannot be dissolved through the recitation of facts or the repetition of expressions of sorrow clings to Erebus.³ We seem to struggle to connect the extraordinary, unheralded event that was the Erebus disaster to the ordinary lives its victims had led, and to the ordinary, and fairly orderly, pattern of New Zealand life in the last quarter of the twentieth century. How, we perhaps want to ask, could a culture like ours have produced an event as strange and terrible as Erebus?

¹ Brown's poem can be found in his first book, *Go Round Power Please*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 1995, pgs 83-85. The title of Brown's debut quotes some of the mysterious last words recorded on the black box of flight TE901.

² Bill Manhire's 'Erebus Voices' can be found in his collection *Lifted*, Victoria University Press, Wellington, 2005, pgs 40-42. Chad Taylor's novel was published by Jonathan Cape, London, in 2006.

³ Some of the documents the Inquiry considered are collected in *The Erebus Papers*, ed. Stuart Macfarlane, Avon Press, Auckland, 1991.

The sorrowful reticence with which New Zealand writers have responded to Erebus contrasts with an earlier cultural tradition of noisily celebrating, and in many cases glorifying, the dangers of Antarctic exploration and of flight. In New Zealand and in many other Western nations, both the sky and the white continent were once regarded as frontiers which needed to be 'opened' by risk-taking adventurers. When polar explorers and pioneer aviators survived their adventures, they were hailed as heroes; when they expired, they became martyrs. Martyrs often seemed to receive even more adulation than living heroes. Although Ernest Shackleton was celebrated when he brought a party of explorers back from a near-disastrous expedition to Antarctica in 1917, the death of Robert Falcon Scott and his comrades on the white continent in 1912 had caused a much greater outpouring of acclamation across the British Empire.⁴ The tragic fate of Amelia Earhart, whose flimsy plane disappeared over the Pacific in 1937, prompted a similar wave of adulation. The uncomplicated response to the deaths of people like Scott and Earhart contrasts with the sad bewilderment which is such a feature of our response to the Erebus disaster.

It is not difficult to guess the reason for the different ways the early and later victims of Antarctica have been perceived. A century ago, when Scott unloaded his Manchurian ponies on the shore of the Ross Sea and when the first attempt at flight over Antarctica ended in a crash, the sky and the white continent were zones which only the most resilient adventurers could enter.⁵ Aviators and polar explorers struggled to survive in environments that had not yet been subdued by human technology.

In the era that sociologists like to call 'late modernity', by contrast, the environments in which air travellers and most visitors to Antarctica spend their time are carefully controlled, and so comfortable as to be almost sterile. The Erebus victims didn't perish after trekking into a snowstorm or flying a small plane into a headwind; they flew to their deaths in a pressurised, air conditioned tube, sipping wine and nibbling biscuits. They died together, not individually, and they had no control over, and - in all likelihood - no knowledge of their imminent fate. The tub-thumping rhetoric lavished on the likes of Scott and Earhart is clearly ill-suited to the men and women who boarded flight TE901. Is it any wonder we struggle to find ways of understanding, and properly honouring, the lives taken by Erebus?

⁴ In her book *Antarctic Destinies: Scott, Shackleton, and the changing face of heroism* (Hambledon Continuum, London, 2007), Stephanie Barczeski discusses the different responses that Scott and Shackleton's exploits initially received.

⁵ An expedition led by the Australian explorer Sir Douglas Mawson suffered the first air crash in Antarctica in 1911, when the engine of their biplane froze. The unfortunate craft was later converted by Mawson to an 'air tractor' and used to tow sledges. See 'Historic Antarctica plane remains 'found' by expedition', BBC News, 02/01/2010, online at <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/asia-pacific/8437963.stm>, accessed 13/06/10.

2. The era of late modernity has also been the era of the United States. The key features of late modernity – mass consumerism, the growth of the service sector of the economy and of tourism, and a popular culture that cuts across class lines - emerged in America, and were exported from America to the rest of the West in the decades after World War Two, as Washington usurped Paris and London as the world's pre-eminent imperialist power.

1942 was the year in which the United States began to supersede Britain as the main political and cultural influence on New Zealand. After the British Empire had been unable to provide for the defence of New Zealand from a possible Japanese invasion, thousands of American troops began to arrive in the North Island in June 1942. The vast camps the Americans established in places like the Kapiti Coast and Franklin became springboards for the reconquest of the Pacific from Japan.

The arrival of the Americans reassured the many Kiwis who had been nervous about the prospect of a Japanese attack, but the newcomers soon became resented in some quarters for their apparent wealth, their lack of regard for the British customs and traditions that many Pakeha still held dear, and their popularity amongst local women. The American servicemen were often seen as the advance guard of a newly powerful but nevertheless crass and immature civilisation. In 1942 and 1943 the American 'invaders' were involved in a series of violent confrontations with Kiwi servicemen and civilians.⁶

Although the vast majority of American servicemen had left New Zealand by 1945, the influence of Washington over New Zealand only increased in the years after World War Two. The American policy of confrontation with communism was endorsed by the Labour government led by Peter Fraser, which sent Kiwi troops to fight in Korea and launched a campaign against the hard left's 'infiltration' of the trade unions. The National government that replaced Labour was widely seen to be acting on American advice when it used soldiers and emergency legislation to defeat the militant section of the trade union movement during the lengthy and bitter Waterfront Lockout of 1951. Dick Scott's famous account of the lockout in his book *151 Days* is notable for its use of the critiques of American foreign policy and American popular culture which had developed on New Zealand's hard left and amongst some of its intelligentsia in the years since 1942. Scott's book complains of a 'Yankee invasion', presents National Prime Minister Sid Holland as a stooge of America, and finds time to warn about the evil effects of American comics on Kiwi children.⁷

⁶ Nancy Taylor gives an account of the varied effects of the 'American invasion' in her massive study *The Home Front*, volume one, pages 625-631 and volume two, pages 1048-1058. Taylor discusses not only the well-known 'Battle of Manners St', the brawl between American and Kiwi servicemen in central Wellington on April the 3rd, 1943, but the killing of an American serviceman by a Maori civilian in Auckland on October the 15th, and a brawl-turned-shootout in Auckland's Shortland Street on the 10th of February 1943 that left two men seriously injured (Taylor, *ibid.*, pgs 645-647).

⁷ Dick Scott, *151 Days*, Reed, 2001 fiftieth anniversary facsimile edition, Auckland, pg 205.

Kendrick Smithyman had first-hand experience of the American ‘invasion’ of New Zealand. Called up to the army in the middle of 1941, he joined the air force the following year, and spent most of the war in a series of bases and camps up and down the North and South Islands, performing menial administrative duties. Smithyman served at Ardmore and Whenuapai air bases, on the southern and western fringes of Auckland, at a time when they were hosting large numbers of American pilots.⁸ In his wartime letters Smithyman often complains about the ennui of his life as a military pen-pusher, and sometimes expresses his envy of the glamorous American marines and pilots who were pouring into New Zealand. In a letter written from Auckland in May 1944, for instance, Smithyman complains about the ‘bloody fool (or wisely commercial?) attitude of the girls’ who perceive each American serviceman as ‘a strangely transmuted Adonis bearing gifts’.⁹

Smithyman was also able to observe the increasing influence of the US on New Zealand society in the post-war years, and the critiques of this influence which began to appear on the left. Smithyman’s familiarity with and interest in the politics of the far left – his father had been a member of the ‘Red’ Federation of Labour in the turbulent years before World War One, and remained a socialist until the end of his life, and Kendrick admitted conducting a ‘love affair with Marxism’ in the forties – and his friendships with intellectuals like Greville Texidor and RAK Mason, who were hostile to American foreign policy and popular culture, meant that he would have been well aware that the increasing influence of America over New Zealand in the post-war era was not universally appreciated.¹⁰

3. Flight was a subject that fascinated Smithyman throughout his career. He wrote poems about aviators, about birds, about aerodromes and modern airports and aircraft carriers, and even about space exploration. Over the course of his career, though, Smithyman treated the subject of flight in quite different ways. In his early work, especially, Smithyman often treats flight as a metaphor for freedom and rebellion. In some of his poems – the anthology piece ‘Waikato Railstop’, which complains about the way a conservative town will not give an aviator ‘license to go soaring’, for example, or ‘Lament, for a North Island Land Association’, which celebrates Leila Adair, the fin de siècle ‘queen of the air’ who defied death and social convention with a series of chaotic ascents over small North Island towns – explorers of the air stand as implicit rebukes to a rulebound earthbound

⁸ For a wonderful first-hand account of Smithyman’s strange war, see “Yours, my old and rare”: Kendrick Smithyman’s letters to Graham Perkins’, edited with notes by Peter Simpson, *Ka Mate Ka Ora*, issue 5, March 2008, online at http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/kmko/05/ka_mate05_letters.asp, accessed 13/06/10.

⁹ “Yours, my old and rare”: Kendrick Smithyman’s letters to Graham Perkins’, *ibid.*

¹⁰ For Smithyman’s mention of his youthful interest in Marxism, see his interview with Mac Jackson, which was originally published in *Landfall* 168, December 1988, and is now online at the New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre, http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/authors/smithyman/interview_landfall168.asp, accessed 13/06/10.

world. In Smithyman's melancholy 1947 lyric 'Icarus', the tragedy of the legendary aviator is regarded as a 'small matter' by stolid earth-dwellers.¹¹

If flight is a form of self-expression and escape in some of Smithyman's poems, it is in others a source of anxiety and a threat to identity. In 'Flying to Palmerston', one of Smithyman's best-known works, the poet downs pills 'to keep away/a certain condition', and fears losing his sense of self on the commercial flight he is about to catch:

Twelve forty-two. A bus is at the door.

No longer a person. You are now

*in flight. A flight.*¹²

In his excellent commentary on 'Flying to Palmerston', Ian Richards notes that Smithyman seems to perceive the rituals of commercial air flight as exercises in dehumanisation. Discussing Smithyman's 1981 poem 'Travelling', which focuses on the way calorie intake, sleep, and other bodily needs are managed on board a large commercial aircraft, Richards observes that 'the poet is disheartened...at being reduced by the miracles of technology to the 'plane' of a merely animal existence'.¹³ For Smithyman, the difference between Leila Adair's erratic ascents by primitive balloon and a 747 long haul flight is the difference between the heroic individual confrontation with a frontier and the mass use of a resource. In the era of late modernity, the romance of early flight is replaced by something both mundane and strangely sinister.

4. Smithyman appears to have written 'Aircrash in Antarctica' on the 20th of October 1956¹⁴, two days after an American transport plane called the P2V – or, more colloquially, the Neptune Lockheed – crashed at McMurdo Base, on the southern tip of Ross Island, off the coast of

¹¹ 'Waikato Railstop' can be found in Smithyman's *Selected Poems*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1988, pgs 55-56. 'Lament, for a Northern Land Association' can be read in *Dwarf with a Billiard Cue*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 1978, pgs 60-62. Along with many of the other works discussed here, both 'Waikato Railstop' and 'Lament, for a North Island Land Association' are available in Smithyman's online, searchable *Collected Poems* (Mudflats Webworks, 2002) at <http://www.smithymanonline.auckland.ac.nz/>, accessed 13/06/10. 'Icarus' can be found in the *Selected Poems*, *ibid.*, pg 29.

¹² 'Flying to Palmerston' can be found in the *Selected Poems*, *ibid.*, pgs 72-73.

¹³ Ian Richards, 'Kendrick Smithyman: Flying to Palmerston', at *No Frills NZ Literature* page, online at <http://nofrillsnzlit.angelfire.com/Smithyman.html>, accessed 13/06/10.

¹⁴ 'Aircrash in Antarctica' is found in file 145 of the Smithyman papers in the University of Auckland library's Manuscripts and Archives Collection. Smithyman dated the poem, which he chose never to publish, himself. For a good account of the Smithyman Papers and of the relationship between the published and unpublished work there, see Peter Simpson, 'The Smithyman Papers: a preliminary survey', first published in *brief* 26 (January 2003) and available online at the New Zealand Electronic Poetry Centre, <http://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/authors/smithyman/papers.asp>, accessed 13/06/10.

Antarctica.¹⁵ The crash, which claimed four lives and was blamed on a severe snowstorm, was only one in a series of tragedies that had marred Operation Deep Freeze, a campaign by the United States and New Zealand to establish viable research stations and air fields in Antarctica. Motivated by America's desire to extend its influence to the bottom of the world, and made possible by the relative proximity of the South Island to Antarctica, Operation Deep Freeze had been launched in 1955, when the construction of the McMurdo and Scott bases began. Despite half a dozen fatal accidents, both bases opened the following year, and began to receive regular supply flights from South Island airports. At the beginning of 1958 Operation Deep Freeze made headlines around the world, as a team of Kiwis led by Sir Edmund Hillary travelled from Scott base to the South Pole on specially-modified tractors. Hillary's feat was applauded by the New Zealand public, but it incensed the Americans at McMurdo, who had not authorised it.¹⁶

'Aircrash in Antarctica' is addressed to the Americans killed in the crash at McMurdo Base. Smithyman acknowledges the ambition and technological sophistication of Operation Deep Freeze, and notes the success that glamorous American servicemen enjoyed with New Zealand women. But in a place like Antarctica, where 'skill is/otherwise valued', glamour, ambition, and sophistication count for little. Operation Deep Freeze is, Smithyman thinks, bound to suffer the sort of 'rabid violence' that is preserved in the 'earliest stories' of 'brown or white/ sailors or settlers' who reached New Zealand centuries ago. Like the Polynesians and the British before them, the Americans will learn that the 'wind-wracked' region dominated by the southern ocean cannot be 'calculated' and controlled. The air strips and heated bunk rooms of McMurdo and Scott bases are not evidence of the subordination of Antarctica; instead, they represent the beginning of the latest chapter of a history that is given its 'nuance' by violence.

'Aircrash in Antarctica' might seem, on first or even second reading, like a simple warning against the folly of human vanity in the face of the indifference of nature and time, an antipodean echo of Shelley's 'Ozymandias'. But Smithyman's critique of American self-confidence is more complicated than the standard romantic critique of human hubris in the face of the inhuman. Smithyman does not regard the violent deaths of explorers and settlers as the avoidable consequence of arrogance, but as a necessary part of history. Just as the inevitability of death gives shape and meaning to human lives, so tragic confrontations with frontiers and with the rages of nature give shape and meaning to the history of our species. Neither self-assurance *nor* self-abasement can avert the inevitable:

¹⁵ Details of this event and related disasters can be found at the Operation Deep Freeze website, which is run by the New Zealand Antarctic Veterans' Association, and which is online at <http://antarctic.homestead.com/cas.html>, accessed 13/06/10.

¹⁶ Hillary gives an account of his adventure in his booklet *The New Zealand Antarctic Expedition*, RW Stiles, Nelson, 1959.

*Not confidence, less humility
nor severest calculation
fends off.*

For Smithyman the sin of the American mission in Antarctica, and of the American Empire in general, lies in a refusal to acknowledge limitations. Ignoring the pattern of human history, the self-confident new civilisation believes it can use technology and ‘severest calculation’ to subordinate and sterilise the territories it claims. The Americans are hubristic not because they have the ‘verve’ to make ‘icefall’ at the bottom of the Pacific, but because they believe they can do so without paying a price – without, to use Smithyman’s term, being ‘blooded’. By failing to recognise the limits of their control over their environment, the Americans only ensure that the tragedies they suffer will be more frequent and more severe.

‘Aircrash in Antarctica’ is written in the ‘syllabic’ form that Kendrick Smithyman gave to a number of his poems in the late 1950s. In an essay on the life and work of his old friend, CK Stead explained Smithyman’s choice of form:

One kind of experiment [Smithyman tried]...was to make a quite arbitrary syllabic count – a pattern of so many syllables for the first line, so many for the second, and so on, and then repeat it, as nearly as possible without variation, throughout however many stanzas the poem contained. This was so demanding, and took so much attention, it was hardly possible for the lines to slip unnoticed into the iambic ‘tune’. Smithyman’s experiments in these forms were typically extreme, and typically undeclarative. He set himself the most extravagant technical obstacles...¹⁷

The poem Smithyman wrote on October the 20th, 1956 consists of six stanzas of eight lines each, plus a two-line conclusion. Where some of Smithyman’s syllabic poems are, as Stead notes, very regularly patterned, ‘Aircrash in Antarctica’ seems a good deal looser. The first and last lines of every stanza are always two and eight syllables long respectively, but the others often vary. The third line of each stanza, for instance, may be either eleven, twelve, or fourteen syllables long.

Despite the relative moderation with which it is used, the syllabic form of ‘Aircrash in Antarctica’ often interferes with the rhythm and meaning of Smithyman’s sentences and phrases. Sudden line breaks dictated by the syllabic form sunder verbs from their objects, and adjectives from the nouns they qualify. That strange abstract noun ‘nothing’, which so fascinated King Lear, is repeatedly isolated at the beginning of stanzas, so that it acquires an incantatory effect. The syllabic rules which

¹⁷ CK Stead, ‘Kendrick Smithyman: Hiding the Lunch’, in *Kin of Place*, Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2002, pg 236.

govern the shape of the poem's lines struggle against the rhythms and meanings of Smithyman's sentences. The syllabic form is itself disrupted, as lines sag or surge unpredictably. The form of 'Aircrash in Antarctica' suggests a violent, only partially successful attempt to impose an artificial order on something complex and turbulent.

5. What is perhaps most remarkable about 'Aircrash in Antarctica' is the equanimity with which the poet discusses both the misfortunes of Operation Deep Freeze and the larger topic of American expansionism. Smithyman is unimpressed by the 'ambitious sense of duty' shown by the ascendant American empire, but his poem lacks the white-hot rhetoric and political partisanship of texts like *151 Days*, or RAK Mason's famous 'Sonnet to MacArthur's Eyes'. Smithyman observes the world's newest superpower not with admiration or anger, but with a distant, almost Olympian pity. Unlike Scott, Mason, and other left-wing anti-imperialists, Smithyman does not imagine that some rival force - the international working class, or the Soviet Union, or Red China - can constrain or even defeat American imperialism. Smithyman's cool tone and historical perspective mock not only the self-importance of America but the heat and urgency of the opponents of American imperialism.

We can only explain the peculiar perspective and tone of 'Aircrash in Antarctica' if we understand the worldview and literary modus operandi Smithyman had settled on by the time he wrote the poem. As a young man, Smithyman had been distressed and radicalised by the Great Depression and by the World War which grew out of the Depression. In a wartime letter to his friend Graham Perkins he complained that:

*We have seen virtually all things shattered. We are, those of us who think, sophists by birth and confirmed in the habit of doubt. What values can we take as permanent? Precious few out of our way of life...I see little remedy or hope in anything, though I turn more and more to Communist philosophy as a chance.*¹⁸

Although he abandoned any belief in 'Communist philosophy', the post-war Smithyman retained a sense of dismay at the state of the modern world. He also felt a sense of estrangement from his fellow New Zealanders, as he struggled to make a career for himself as a poet and an intellectual in a nation that seemed to have little time for ideas, and even less for the arts.¹⁹ The Stalinised hard left which presented itself as an alternative to post-war New Zealand society seemed, to Smithyman at least, just

¹⁸ "Yours, my old and rare": Kendrick Smithyman's letters to Graham Perkins', *ibid.*

¹⁹ For an account of some of the difficulties Smithyman faced making himself understood, even in sympathetic circles, see John Geraets' essay 'Kendrick Smithyman and Brasch's Landfall', *Landfall* 168, December 1988, pgs 443-457.

as intolerant as the Tories, with its demands that writers and artists 'serve' the working class and tow the 'party line'.²⁰

Smithyman's gloomy view of the modern world led him to pay attention to two radical critics of modernity, the American poet and essayist Allen Tate and the German philosopher Martin Heidegger. From Tate Smithyman took the concept of regionalism, which became crucial to his practice as a poet and to the view of New Zealand literature and society he put forward in his 1965 book *A Way of Saying*. In his 1945 essay 'The New Provincialism' Tate argued that in the modern era the West had lost touch with its history and its cultural traditions, and had therefore become 'provincial'.²¹ The 'provincial man' was arrogant, Tate said, because he believed that nobody had had his experiences before. In opposition to the shallow, ahistorical 'world provincialism' that had taken over the great cultural centres of the West, Tate argued that writers should base themselves in a region and seek to understand that region in terms, not of contemporary fashions, but of the rich cultural heritage of the West. Regionalist literature would be limited by space, but not by time. Allen Tate practiced what he preached, by residing in and writing about America's unfashionable south, whose agrarian way of life he contrasted favourably with the 'Yankee capitalism' of the modern, industrialised north.

Martin Heidegger was also a regionalist, in the sense that he chose to live almost his whole life in the Black Forest region of Germany, whose landscape and values he compared favourably with those of more populous and glamorous parts of Europe. Heidegger disliked the modern world partly because he felt that it insulated its inhabitants from confrontation with the essential nature of their lives. He believed that modern Western city-dwellers, with their comfortable homes and access to diversions like movies and television, were able to avoid thinking about the inevitability of their deaths. This avoidance of the essential fact about human existence led to an arrogance towards nature, and a

²⁰ Smithyman's feeling that Mason's political commitment circumscribed his creative writing is revealed in one of the many pieces of marginalia he left in a copy of JC Reid's book *Creative Writing in New Zealand* (Whitcombe and Tombs, Auckland, 1946) that has been placed in the Alexander Turnbull library (the volume can be accessed as part of the file 'Kendrick Smithyman MS-Group-0723'). In the margin of page thirty-three, beside a discussion by Reid of Mason's poetry, Smithyman suggests that the author of *The Beggar* was stopped from writing by his commitment to the Communist Party of New Zealand. The poet Richard Taylor, who was a student at the University of Auckland in the late 1960s, remembers Smithyman the tutor telling one of his classes that 'Mason stopped writing because he became a communist' (personal communication, 24/12/09).

²¹ Tate's famous essay is now available online at the VQR site, <http://www.vqronline.org/gallery/97/>, accessed 13/06/10.

forgetfulness of history, on the part not just of individuals but of entire cultures.²² Smithyman appears to have been one of Heidegger's first and most enthusiastic New Zealand readers.²³

The influence of the regionalist thinking of Tate and Heidegger can easily be discerned in 'Aircrash in Antarctica'. Smithyman's coolness toward American power and culture reflects his hostility to what Tate called 'world provincialism'. His recognition of the inevitability of tragedy to history reflects his understanding of Heidegger. His insistence on seeing the drama of the present through the prism of the past shows his determination to make history present in his poems, in defiance of the anti-historical bias of the modern age.

For the many New Zealanders touched in one way or another by the Erebus disaster, Smithyman's prediction that the Americans who crashed at McMurdo on October the 18th, 1958 'surely/will not be the last' rings sadly true. The absurdity of Air New Zealand's scenic flights to Antarctica, with their pretence that the wildest place in the world could be reduced safely to a spectacle to be consumed along with wine and biscuits in the pressurised tube of a long-haul passenger jet, can perhaps be considered a consequence of the sort of arrogance that Smithyman criticises so powerfully in 'Aircrash in Antarctica'.

'Aircrash in Antarctica' is included in A Private Bestiary, a selection of Kendrick Smithyman's previously-uncollected poems due to be published by Titus Books in October 2010.

²² Heidegger's classic discussion of death and its relationship to questions of (in)authenticity occurs in the famous 'division two' of *Being and Time* (trans John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson, London, SCM Press, 1962).

²³ Smithyman recommends Heidegger to his readers in one of the footnotes to his long poem 'Journey Towards Easter', which was published for the first time in *Landfall* 20, December 1951. For a discussion of some aspects of Heidegger's influence on Smithyman, see 'When the bookworm and the prophet met', *Reading the Maps*, online at <http://readingthemap.blogspot.com/2009/12/when-bookworm-met-prophet.html>, accessed 13/06/10.