

HELLO, AMERICA: CHRISTCHURCH'S 1970S PACIFIC MOMENT

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Poetic centres of gravity always seem to be shifting in response to global forces and the seemingly chance meetings of individuals at points in time. Seen from the perspective of a backyard in Christchurch, from the mid-1940s onwards, the progress of reputations from south to north is pretty well documented. James K. Baxter migrated along the coast from Dunedin to Christchurch in 1947 and by 1949, married to J. C. Sturm, he was in the capital, about to join forces with those who became known as The Wellington Group. Allen Curnow, after an abortive period in Auckland training for the ministry, returned south, before leaving local editing and journalism on *The Press* in 1950 for a teaching post at the English Department of the University of Auckland, where he taught and wrote until his retirement in the 1980s. By that time, Baxter was dead: Dionysius was silent, and Apollo had outlived him. The intellectual heft Curnow bore to the isthmus of Tamakimakaurau had been overtaken by a new generation, who would pioneer a poetics of postmodernism.

Well, perhaps this is a specifically South Island mythology, as we look to whatever happened to the Caxton generation, those influenced by Yeats, Auden and Thomas (Dylan, of course). All the big guns left this 'England of the South' eventually: Denis Glover, Caxton's founder and Dunedin-born, stayed on the bridge till the mid-fifties, eventually succumbing to the charms of Wellington. Some made brief returns, but from 1950 to 1970 you would be hard pressed to find many names, hailing from Christchurch and further south, that made the survival raft of national anthologies. Certainly, Baxter and Hone Tuwhare graced Dunedin as Burns' Fellows in the late sixties and early seventies, but they moved north again once their tenure was over (Tuwhare did return to live at Kaka Point in the 1990s and died in Dunedin). Charles Brasch, Charles Spear, John Caselberg, John Summers, Peter Hooper, and Ruth Dallas are some of the exceptions that prove this rule; but it would take something homegrown (the baby boom writers) and foreign (American imports) to change this storyline

from the 1970s onwards. Some of the major new voices - such as Loney, Wedde and Manhire - did live in the South Island (Manhire was born in Invercargill), or visit for longish periods, both in Christchurch and Dunedin, but all in time returned, or moved up north.ⁱ

Many of the foundations for this development were laid during World War Two, after the American entry into the conflict, post-Pearl Harbour. During the following three years, a change began to take place in New Zealand culture which has hardly ever stopped, only slowed: the Americanisation of a once Anglo-Saxon dominion. US troops were deployed here to train and prepare for the island invasions, and would return on leave, the effects of which are with us still. The Māori Party co-leader Tariana Turia is one of their descendants. This troop movement and the cultural change it accelerated signified much more than the obvious limits of a bankrupt Britain's global power. The tectonic plates of world pop culture were shifting: forces generated in Hollywood and Tin Pan Alley were playing out in the cinemas and on the radios of the English-speaking world, and its settler colonies: Canada, the African colonial states, Australia, and New Zealand. Clark Gable led in time to Frank Sinatra and Elvis Presley, the Disney Empire, and by the mid-1960s with television finally in Kiwi lounges, *Bonanza*, *Gunsmoke* and the *Dean Martin Show*.

Along with the so-called lowbrow stuff came something reputedly a little higher: more and more American fiction was appearing in bookshops, libraries and the dairies that carried a good range of paperbacks. Along with the westerns and crime novels, Norman Mailer, Robert Penn Warren, Mary McCarthy and Joseph Heller appeared on the shelves, as the newsagents took their quotas without demur from the large distributors such as Gordon and Gotch. This distribution was one way many of the brighter blue collar and middle class kids were exposed to an America beyond Dean Martin, Jerry Lewis and square-jawed cowboy mutes of John Ford movies. By the time these wide-eyed boomers reached university English departments in the late 1960s and early 1970s, they were groomed in an acceptance of American media supremacy and ubiquity (Norman Wisdom and *The Goons* notwithstanding). These late teens were of an entirely different order, formed by other influences than those that had shaped their lecturers and tutors - or most of them. Most, that is, except the Americans who taught on New Zealand campuses. This is where my particular experience of the Christchurch poetry scene from 1970 to 1974 emerges.

In 1971, returning to university after three years in the workforce, I enrolled in a new course called American Studies. A combination of history and literature, it was offered alongside the usual undergraduate English papers on Chaucer, Shakespeare, the Augustans, the Romantics and the Victorians. Back from two years' shearing in Australia with my fresh copy of Hone Tuwhare's *Come Rain Hail* on my shelf, I looked upon the likes of Pope and Browning as dusty old relics, museum literature. Arrogant as that was, right then and there all I wanted to hear were voices that spoke to me in the present. I had no deep-seated prejudice against American culture as a possible wellspring of good literature. Little did I know that the English Department, on the whole, did not share such views, and looked down their very provincial noses at the idea of such a frontier literature being worthy of undergraduate and postgraduate study.

The great irony here is that the study of frontier literature - as Patrick Evans perceived at the time, and has elaborated at much greater depth since - was exactly what we needed to be doing (Evans, 2007). He has spoken recently, in an extensive interview, of the strong resistance he encountered in 1970, attempting to begin a doctorate in New Zealand literature, which was denied him; he was only permitted with extreme reluctance by his superiors to attempt a dissertation in American literature instead (Evans, 2010). Fortunately for students such as myself - and aspirant writers to boot - there was a nucleus of working poets and fiction writers present on the town campus in 1971, teachers and students, who were open to American literature in general, and poetry in particular. Three names stand out, and two magazines: David Walker, Don Long, and Gary Langford; *Edge* and *Fragments*. To the off campus list, one should add David Young and David Waddington, the creators of the second of the two literary magazines, both of whom blazed their own unique trails in our publishing culture. The Thoreau scholar, Bob Stowell was a part of this too, although something of a lesser light compared to his American colleague, Walker. Young was a graduate journalism student cutting his teeth writing for the Christchurch *Star*, while it was still a functioning newspaper, and Waddington was an artist, a photographer, and designer.

The equation of 1970s Christchurch had a number of variables: a present base of American popular culture; an outpost of American literature teaching by practitioners in the university environment; the presence of young writers, editors, graphic artists and entrepreneurs; and an audience ready and willing to commit patricide against real and imaginary ancestral literary censors. All this of course with a good dose of idealism, arrogance, and the sheer energy

levels of a well-fed, well-housed postwar generation, entering en masse for the first time into the once elitist halls of academia.

Before turning to look in greater detail at the vehicles through which the revolution was propagated, the main players above need some introduction. Walker was born in Damariscotta Maine in 1942 and went on to leave his rural upbringing - on a dairy farm near Alna, run by the family since the Declaration of Independence - for an academic career. He graduated from Bowdoin, and read literature at Oxford where he was a Fulbright Scholar, exiting as a Bachelor of Letters. Arriving here in 1968, hired to teach American literature in the brand new American Studies Department, Walker was very different to the older literature teachers who ruled the roost in the study of Anglo-English writing.ⁱⁱ That appellation may seem an oxymoron, but to many of his older peers (or rather, imagined superiors), the real oxymoron was *American* literature, considered as a worthy object of study. Walker had wheels: intellectual grunt, a fine degree, and his rural, down-to-earth background. He was smart, sophisticated, and, as a practicing poet, well read in the fields of international writing. Steeped not only in the English and American traditions, up to date with latest from Lowell and Plath, he was equally at home discussing the works - little known locally at that time - of the Russian greats Mandelstam and Akhmatova, the South American giants Neruda and Vallejo, along with contemporary Russian poets such as Voznesensky and Evtushenko. He knew his Thomas and his Auden, but his reach was far wider than any of his local contemporaries and, of course, he drew students to himself without trying. Young writers here were ready for a teacher like him, and for that kind of subject matter. One of these was Gary Langford, a History and English major who was at that moment emerging as the most active and talented of the young university-based writers. Langford, a novelist, poet, dramatist and writing teacher now domiciled in Australia remembers Walker as his tutor in American poetry, one who switched him on to work of Robert Lowell, Sylvia Plath and others.

As a writer and a critic (who wrote articles on Lowell's influence on Baxter), Walker impressed Langford as a moving force behind the changes in our local literary culture. He has told me that 'much of that energy came from that period at university, and behind that. . . is David Walker. He was the only lecturer I'd met that I thought, he could outplay me in a tennis match of American poetry. I couldn't tell bullshit to him because he could tell it better, in other words he knew more about it than I did, so I had to make sure I'd read everything,

otherwise, how can I really talk about Gary Snyder? (Langford 2010). The next American to figure in Langford's firmament - who came knocking on both David Walker's and Patrick Evans' doors - was another student, the poet and editor, Don Long. Long was born in the US to American/New Zealand parents and grew up mostly in New Zealand. According to both Langford and Evans, Long was the mover and shaker behind what happened next, the literary entrepreneur who was instrumental in 1971 in establishing a unique literary magazine: *Edge*.

As a conduit to the awareness of established and emerging American writers, and a wide range of international figures, some already well-known, others not, *Edge* had few peers at that time. An exception to this was the Christchurch-based *Frontiers* (1968-69), edited by David Prescott in New Zealand and Michael Harlow in New York. Harlow's influence was instrumental in attracting some American contributors (he moved here in the first year of the magazine's operations). David Walker was one of these (Vol. 2 No. 1), but there was nothing like the range of established or emerging overseas names that would be found soon after in *Edge*, and sadly, *Frontiers* had a brief lifespan of only two years. Along with its less ambitious but graphically revolutionary fellow literary magazine, *Fragments* (David Young and David Waddington, 1972-1975), *Edge* in Christchurch - like *Freed* in Auckland at the same moment - was instrumental in changing the landscape of New Zealand poetry. While not a vehicle for theory and poetics in the style of Alan Brunton's anarchic Cultural Liberation Front with its upper-case manifestos in *Freed*, according to Murray Edmond, *Edge* was 'part of that burst of energy' which produced over a dozen new little magazines from 1969 onwards (Edmond, 29).

The editors consisted in the main of staff and students of the University of Canterbury: the American poets David C. Walker and Robert Stowell (staff), Langford, a student and literary editor of *Canta*, the student newspaper, and D. S. (Don) Long, an American student and poet. Long appears as the principal editor in the first edition: Assistant Editors were Langford (New Zealand Fiction), K.K. Ruthven (Criticism), Robert Stowell (Design), David Walker (Overseas), J.E. Weir (New Zealand Poetry) and the US poet William L. Fox as Contributing Editor.ⁱⁱⁱ Patrick Evans joined as a Contributing Editor in Issue Two, and by Issue Three, Langford had left the editorial team. Don Long left after Issue Four, to return for the final number (Issue Seven) in 1976. *Edge* Number Eight was to have been a UK-based number on modern poetry in translation, but it never appeared.

Langford remembers Long as having a unique ability to bring writers together, both personally and as an editor (he introduced Langford to Robert Creeley's work, for instance). In his knowledge of contemporary US and world poetry, and with a degree of chutzpah uncommon amongst his elders, Long would invite emerging international writers and established figures to contribute to what was avowedly New Zealand's first international literary magazine. In 1971, the young Richard Ford appears with an early story in the first issue, and by the time the second is published in August of the same year, Long has managed to get five poems from Jorge Luis Borges, first published in *The New Yorker Magazine* in 1969, alongside emerging local lights Sam Hunt and Bill Manhire, flanked by W. S. Merwin and escorted by Baxter himself. Over the next few issues, a similar parade of names that were either sitting on the pantheon, or would come to do so in the next two to three decades, were published in *Edge*, all for no payment. A sample roll-call reads: Richard Ford (Issue One); Charles Simic (Issue Two); Gary Snyder and Michael Horovitz (Issue Three); Margaret Atwood, Norman Simms, James Kirkup and Susan Fromberg Schaeffer (Issue Four); Brian Aldiss, Rene Char and Ursula K. Le Guin (SF Directions, combining Issues Five & Six). That's hustle. Langford recalls that either he or Long would write to them, the great and the small, and the poems and stories would arrive.

Langford summed it all up: 'the drive behind it was Don, myself, and those two lecturers (David Walker and Bob Stowell). The ones that did all the talking were Don and myself. They provided the foundation, but the ones who provided the clout, in terms of getting the students, and other writers in New Zealand interested were Don and myself. I had the background . . . to pull in a fair interest in fiction, Don's interest was in poetry [...] All you should be trying to encourage around the world is that everyone has a story to tell. It doesn't matter the form that you use. . . and this is what *Edge* really did, probably more than any other literary magazine, where it was actually an international magazine that didn't just *say it*, didn't just hint with a few, but took on all these and managed to get them without paying them a cent. Just by developing this magazine which was always pretty good to look at . . . but I think in order of credence for this, I would put Don and David ahead of myself and Bob' (Langford 2010).

Patrick Evans has a perspective on all this that confirms and extends Langford's observations. He was first on the staff of the English Department at Canterbury in 1970, as both a participant in and an observer of these changes and of the main players spoken of here.

Speaking of his own identification with American literature and its frontier tradition as echoing New Zealand's history, he has said 'that's the transition I was making. . . it's just a matter of intuiting that the experience we have in New Zealand is more easily understood through a North American lens than a British lens, and that's typical of my early baby-boomer generation, because in the late sixties as you well know, a number of poets who were roughly my age were making the same discovery, that US poets spoke to them in a way that British poets of the time didn't, and not only that, *the British poets of the time were inaudible and incoherent for our purposes*' (my emphasis).

A good example of North American shaping is Alan Loney, whose epiphanic encounter with Charles Olson's poem *Maximus* in Dunedin in 1971 is recalled in 'The Influence of American Poetry on Contemporary Poetic Practice in New Zealand', the text of a lecture to the 12th Australia and New Zealand American Studies Association Conference at the University of Auckland in 1986 (Loney, 92-98). Transformed in his reading and writing experiences through the theory and praxis of contemporary US poets, Loney went on to publish the magazine *Parallax: journal of postmodern literature and art* (1982-83), introducing among others the American L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E poet, Charles Bernstein, to a wider audience of New Zealand readers.

Evans continued: 'There are various reasons for that [US turn] - to me, there's a strong connection to the Vietnam War and our need for a counter culture in New Zealand. . . our great ongoing need, it was very strongly felt here, (that) we didn't have a counter culture of our own, so we borrowed the North American one, we borrowed the US one, which was very powerful and very audible. Without posing and self-consciousness, going in that direction and identifying with the Black Mountain poets, for example, was just normal, if you were a young academic and/or writer in those days, without even examining your position very much in those days, you thought of yourself as being close to US writers' (Evans 2010).

Evans feels that this particular door was 'was open much wider for poets than for fiction writers, because if you try to track [New Zealand] fiction that's written under the influence of North American writing, it is there, but it isn't sustained'. Poets for some reason were those who accessed and propagated the US strain of modernist - and soon postmodernist - literary movements, channelling them into the wider culture. Gary Snyder influenced Langford and many other New Zealand poets at the time: his Zen-inflected environmentalism lives on the

work of Brian Turner, also a devotee of Henry David Thoreau, to whose work he was introduced by Peter Hooper, who was himself inspired and supported in his longstanding engagement with the sage of Walden Pond by the presence and teaching of Bob Stowell in the American Studies programme at Canterbury. It would be fair to say that to some unquantifiable degree, a literary American Transcendentalism permeated the present Green consciousness of New Zealanders - not just of those who read this poetry - in this period.

Turner has recently highlighted his relationship to Hooper, to Green consciousness and the influence of certain American poets on his thinking.^{iv} The older writer 'introduced me to Thoreau's work, and [we] became close friends, [sharing] similar views on environmental issues . . . we read a lot of the same stuff, Schumacher, Carson, Snyder (Peter was keener on his work than I was, although I like and respect his work and writings overall), van der Post etc etc. Frost. Stevens'. Both he and Hooper felt that New Zealand writers were 'unaware of the environmental vandalism that was going on', and thought 'writing that expressed a love of nature was a bit passé, insufficiently 'experimental', or 'relevant'. We thought it ought to be central.' He knew of Walker and Stowell, but cannot recall meeting them, or remember the poems he published in *Edge*. Certainly, he took his environmental influences largely from American sources, and forged strong preferences for a number of US poets: W. S. Merwin 'had the most profound influence on me in the seventies . . . Ammons I liked and still do . . . more latterly, Hass'. While he says he consciously resisted 'the rowdy insistences of the Brunton/Freed group for a time', his story illustrates the globalisation of the provincial, of which *Edge* was a part - drawing the once remote into a centre of consciousness, whereby the self could locate and relocate, via a world-wide expansion of the post-war media. The influence of political revolution, theoretical upheavals, and shifts of consciousness amongst the country's literati have been extensively canvassed elsewhere (see Brunton, Edmond and Leggott).

Evans, again, traces the influence of American poets on those emerging at this time: 'the obvious ones are Wedde and Edmond and even Manhire, though his provenance seems more complicated than that . . . the ones that were collected in that 1970s anthology that Arthur Baysting did (*The Young New Zealand Poets*, 1973), all seemed to me to a greater or lesser degree to see particular North American poets as their mentors. They talked about that, they're quite open about that, it seems to me it's not too dissimilar to the fiction, but it is a stronger impulse, but there's a point at which each of those poets has to become himself or

herself. Not all of them make the grade, well, not all of them find it easy to do that - it's a kind of maturation thing, you can choose your strong ancestor or your strong ancestor chooses you, they were all different kinds of American poets, but the moment of individuation, that's the test for the lot of them'. Asked to pin down his own involvement with the young poets locally, he traces it to Long's appearance: 'Just a knock on the door . . . by Don Long, the driving force was [him], he was a small, youthful, good-looking American, I didn't know where he had come from, but there he was. I don't know if he had just arrived, if he had gone to school here, or what, and he was a real mover and shaker. If you want to talk about *Edge*, you're talking about him'.

Evans recalls Long as a gifted editor, and whatever his abilities as a poet, his importance at this historical moment was the ability Langford has spoken of, in 'just making things happen'. Long went on to a fruitful involvement with Witi Ihimaera and others in the groundbreaking series of anthologies of Māori writing, firstly with *Into The World of Light* (1982), and then the six volumes of *Te Ao Marama* (1992-1996). Long has been a literary midwife in New Zealand culture for over forty years, but remains little known or celebrated: 'Yes, and that was very much what I remember, that he kept it going [*Edge*] and there were various issues that were quite successful in that they were plausible in themselves, but there was no-one else who put any energy into it and when he moved his interests elsewhere - he might have left Christchurch - that's when the thing folded, so there were only a very limited number of editions.' Amongst other things, *Edge* - and Long - can lay claim to having first published the great Richard Ford.

Evans: 'Yes, that's one of its distinctions. I remember at the time thinking what a fabulous idea it was and how important it was because it was international and that meant New Zealand was a part of it, which is very much the way we see ourselves now, as a global environment, which does the opposite of diminishing us, it enhances us, whereas we are part of it and in that sense, it was a visionary thing. But you can't underestimate the indifference of the environment and the uneducated nature of people who were generally running the show at that stage. It wouldn't have been welcomed, it wouldn't have been funded and if the English Department had had any money, they would have used it to exclude it as a very negative thing.' But Long, a young American from outside that narrow academic culture, and unaffected by it, had arrived with his early US background and a foothold in New Zealand, by ancestry. With Langford's support, and that of Walker and Evans, they sought and

received funding from the New Zealand Students Association and *Edge* was born, the country's first international literary magazine.

The excitement and the creative energy could not be sustained: those overseas writers who would go on to greater things, once published in the likes of *Edge*, tended not to stick around. Evans remembers how 'they got some terrific stuff, I remember being impressed, there was one poet, I wish I could remember his name, marvellous poetry. But the difficulty we found was that you would get a talented new young writer who would give you something like that, it was a no-brainer, you'd read it once and put it in. You'd get somebody like that from the United States and that would help to get them going and you'd never hear from them again, because they were publishing in their own magazines. They could point to *Edge* and say this was a journal they were publishing in, but because they didn't stay with us, we didn't get a second Richard Ford story or a third one. We got off the ground, but not any further off the ground, that was the difficult thing'.

In the years 1971-1976, then, *Edge* was part of a guerrilla movement in New Zealand poetry, opening doors in the south that *Freed* and its peers were kicking in up north. Along with its lesser-known Christchurch stable mate, *Fragments* (1972-1975), it began to relate our poetry - and our poetic consciousness - to the wider world of contemporary international poetics. Both magazines also published local writers, including American academics living and writing here - *Fragments* with a range of graphic art, colour pages and photography unlike anything else seen at the time. In the case of *Edge*, it brought new work in from the outside that exposed young writers here to overseas writing we were unable to access easily. With some obvious exceptions - *Argot* publishing Kenneth Koch, as well as an entire issue in 1962 devoted to Māori and Polynesian writing - the majority of New Zealand literary magazines at that time were looking within, to publish work within the established mode of New Zealand literature. Their presence was vital for both the emergent and the established, providing outlets where they could find an audience; but before the advent of the Internet, it was still relatively easy for many New Zealand readers and editors to remain parochial and insular. To be published alongside Borges, and Merwin, Snyder and Simic, was to raise the stakes and change the rules of the game. Distance no longer looked our way: consciousness, not geography, was the brave new perimeter, determining our sense of place and our relationship to other poetics. *Edge* and *Fragments* are necessary reminders that not everything worth remembering on the cutting edges of our literary history has taken place across Cook Strait and north of the Bombay Hills.

Notes

ⁱ Bill Manhire (born Invercargill 1946), graduated Otago and London; since 1973 has lectured at Victoria University of Wellington. Ian Wedde (born Blenheim 1946), graduated Auckland MA 1968, Burns Fellow 1972; lived in Port Chalmers, moved to Wellington 1975. Alan Loney (born Lower Hutt 1940), lived in Dunedin in the early 1970s, moved to Christchurch in 1974, founding Hawk Press in 1975; edited *Parallax* 1982-83 (3 issues), lived in Auckland 1992-98 and founded Holloway Press, resident in Australia since 1998.

ⁱⁱ David Clifton Walker, 1942-2008. Walker returned to America at the end of teaching in 1971, writing and publishing poetry, and teaching in the University of Southern Maine at Portland until his retirement.

ⁱⁱⁱ William L. Fox was an Overseas Contributing Editor to *Edge* throughout its existence. A much-published poet, essayist and non-fiction writer, he has written extensively on human relations to the environment. He serves as the Director of the Center for Art+Environment at the Nevada Museum of Art in Reno, and has maintained New Zealand links through his interest in the Antarctic. In 2001-02 he spent two and a half months there with the National Science Foundation in the Antarctic Visiting Artists and Writers Programme.

^{iv} Brian Turner, email to author, 2010.

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