

### **A Life & Opinions: Trevor Reeves, 1940-2013**

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When Trevor Reeves died in August 2013, I commented rather forlornly that he would now be advising God on the repackaging and marketing of the Bible. And yet these funereal jests often serve to specify the character of a departed man. Trevor was an initiator and activist. An afterlife devoid of opportunistic change would not suit him. He was also humorous and irreverent in ways that were somehow still respectful of others' views. The latter quality was at the core of his success as a publisher and as a game changer in the stultified atmosphere of the New Zealand literary scene that preceded him.

Annotators of the 1970s have often cast Trevor as a rebel who wished to pull down the establishment. In my fiery twenties I might have wanted this to be the case, too. But Trevor upbraided me both vocally and in letters: his project was to expand the territory, to include and parallel the many voices that make up a national literature. In this he was a genuine pioneer. It can be argued that most of the poets who published their initial collections with Caveman Press would have eventually placed their work elsewhere (as many, of course, subsequently did), but it was with Trevor they found themselves first. He was there, an enabler and encourager.

I first made contact with Trevor in 1971, responding to a public request for manuscript submissions. The result was my first, and Caveman Press's third, book, *Jesus Hobo*: 36 pages with reproduced illustrations by Stanley Palmer. These details underscore Trevor's early commitment as a publisher to combining poetry and visual art in each volume, culminating later with Hone Tuwhare's attractive collections *Sap-Wood and Milk* and *Something Nothing*, illustrated respectively by Ralph Hotere and Robin White. It was a special skill of Trevor's to put the right people together.

A glance at the list of Caveman Press publications during the 1970s includes first books by Alan Loney, Murray Edmond, Jan Kemp and Rachel McAlpine, an indication of the diversity of poetry sources and directions Trevor undertook. He wasn't interested in clans or tribes, but in the quality of the work itself, usually because it challenged and extended his

own awareness. If the poetry may be seen as avant-garde, it is because it was new to the writers themselves and to the cultural landscape from which it emerged.

As a poet, Trevor was persistently experimental, moving away like the rest of us then from the allegiances of our colonial ancestors. He listened to the hubbub of voices from Europe, America, Auckland (!) that had become the currency of the era. His visual and design enthusiasms led him into a serious focus on concrete poetry – with Alan Wells, he was one of our few successful practitioners of the genre. Trevor’s prose, on the other hand, largely took the form of narrative or anecdote. He loved a yarn and loved sharing them in company. The last time I heard his voice, on the phone sometime in the late 1990s, the growly drawl and most of the vocabulary remained unchanged.

With the significant exceptions of Baxter, Tuwhare and Ruth Dallas, the 1960s were years of stalled academicism in New Zealand poetry, a bit like the 1990s. Curnow had yet to resurface and the undercurrent represented by Mitchell, Young, Wedde and others revealed itself only late in the decade or in the early 1970s. Trevor’s two books published under the Caveman imprint both reflect and resist this malaise. The frustrations of poems like ‘Blurr’ and ‘Poem’ in *Stones* (1972) give way to an urbane, demotic chattiness in the ‘Pub Poems’ in *Apple Salt* (1976). The opening poem of the sequence could almost be a Caveman/Reeves manifesto:

you don’t knock  
the system  
on the head –  
you get under the nail  
and scrape

If at times the playfulness of this volume is too knowing, it is also the testimony of a writer operating in the ambience of the time, settling a few scores and starting a few of his own. Trevor could also be wittily self-aware about his social environment, as demonstrated by the fourth of the ‘Pub Poems’:

the sweet  
married Convention nurses  
from the North Island  
weren’t interested  
in our proposition  
of a party, and  
mood records  
after the pub,

even though flirting  
with straight talk  
all evening

they packed their handbags,  
swung off,  
down the stairs,  
and I overheard one

‘Dunedin, oh my –  
What a wealth of talent.’

The chronology is completely off, but I’d love it if one of those nurses had been Janet Charman!

Among the very best of Caveman Press books was the anthology of New Zealand women poets, *Private Gardens* (1977), edited by Riemke Ensing. Others have followed, but this beautiful collection clarified a distinctive strand in New Zealand poetry and mapped its location. The book is still remarkable for the consistent quality of the work it contains and (now) for some glimpses of earlier versions of well-known voices – a rappier Anne French, for example, or Jan Kemp’s passionate singing.

Late in 1973, a delegation consisting of Trevor’s brother arrived at our flat in Newmarket to persuade me to take over as editor of *Cave*, the print magazine Trevor had founded. This sort of volunteering was hard to resist but with a young family, and my first secondary teaching position looming in Whakatane, I felt unable to take on anything else. *Cave* passed into the hands of a man called Norman, in the Waikato, who seemed inordinately fond of Romanian literature, and later morphed into *New Quarterly Cave*, then *Pacific Moana Quarterly*. My regret over *Cave* as a road not taken was cured by exposure to the definitive perils of literary editorship, with *Printout* in the early 1990s and *Poetry Aotearoa* in the 2000s.

The second half of Trevor’s career benefited from changes he had helped bring about and firmly established him as a periodical editor. Square One Press, his second imprint, continued the poetry and polemic mix of Caveman from 1984 to 2010, but was more occasional in structure, with some elements of print-on-demand production. The real triumph of those years was *Southern Ocean Review*, New Zealand’s first literary e-zine, issued quarterly between October 1996 and October 2008. All 49 issues featured poetry and fiction, Trevor’s short reviews and occasional articles by others, and illustrations by Judith Wolfe.

*SOR*'s staying power is best evidenced by the number of very good poems it contains, usually several per issue, alongside prose and verse experiments which typify Trevor's generosity.

With the online archive starting to break up, hard copies of *SOR* may become a vital record wherever they are preserved in libraries. Likewise the Square One Press books, which include Trevor's own *Breaker breaker & other stories* (2001), as well as two further collections of his poetry. *A Poetry Book to Cuddle Up in Bed With* (2003) is a treasure not only for its contents but also, I suspect, for its rarity. The garrulous, later non-sequitur sentence poems in *Hand in Hand* (2007) record Trevor's expanding ambition as a writer. He was always independent and surprising.

Thinking now about the turmoil of ideas and impulses that hijacked rather than directed cultural and counter-cultural debate towards the end of last century, it is possible to regard Trevor as a creature and a creator of his times. His legacy in the always lively, sometimes piratical atmosphere of small press publishing has been continued and built upon by later exponents. It has become the natural habitat of my own work and I will always be grateful to Trevor for the early immersion he gave me.

Trevor also enjoyed poetry readings, especially away from Dunedin. I performed with him and others on various occasions in the 1970s, and in various locations: Christchurch, Auckland and, interestingly, Whangarei. He knew people everywhere and was always willing to engage with those he had just come to know. Sometimes, when his material had worn thin from repetition, he improvised. Another lesson worth learning.

This account of my old comrade would be misleading if it did not refer to some of the more extreme aspects of his personality. Trevor's enthusiasms were not invariably well-placed or well managed, which I usually found endearing, though I understand why others were exasperated at times. His planned 1981 Springbok Tour protest calendar exhibited photographs likely to expose their subjects to criminal prosecution. There was also Trevor's ill-fated stint as editor of a small town newspaper in Central Otago. A former mainstay of the Rothmans profit margin, he embraced anti-smoking with what Eliot would have called the zeal of the convert, berating me for my by then furtive nicotine habit the last time we met face to face, in Wellington in the late 1980s.

Trevor was a great one for conspiracies and conspiracy theories, happy to invent them if they didn't exist. In this also he was a participant in the paranoid and yet hopeful spirit of the age. His poem 'They're Keeping Tabs', recently unearthed by Mark Pirie and Tim Jones for their *Voyagers* anthology, is an accurate summary of these preoccupations. In fact, there is so much of the Trevor I knew in it that I'd like to include the poem in full:

## **They're Keeping Tabs**

every time i smile a hole  
appears in the card in the file  
at the computer bank  
i'm plugged into –  
they're keeping tabs,  
even as i run scared  
and haunting, another hole appears  
which i'm not expected to dodge  
as they bug my stumbles  
aware of their hollow echo  
when i pause,  
tie my shoelace –  
threading the holes  
carefully – holes  
in my teeth, shivering  
as i labour, bent,  
up george street to the bank  
to have another hole punched:  
i'm drawing out all my money  
and i'm going to stand for election  
and have a punch-up with the government –  
they're keeping tabs,  
as i stand in a hole in queen's gardens  
preaching to people who pass  
unaware a pattern of holes  
accompanied by tapes whirring  
wormlike in my inner ear  
is impressing itself into the card  
at the computer bank –  
they're keeping tabs:  
my lawnmower, wife,  
electronic magnolia cultivator –  
my stampcollecting machine,  
my poems,  
are being loaded by robots  
into their time lorry  
at my house.  
masses of switches are stirring in alaska –  
far distant stars, out of sight, are spinning  
signals to each other –  
they're keeping tabs,  
but my tirade in queen's gardens  
goes on

while machinery burns  
hollowness in my cranium  
brain like blue vein cheese  
berating punch-drunk pedestrians  
screaming of my fateful fateful  
fate  
and my death  
as i die –  
but they're keeping tabs;  
yes, another hole  
and the card is a picture frame  
its innards in tatters;  
an arm has transferred this card  
that my soul has sieved through  
to a file-machine marked D  
and the time lorry has arrived  
in queen's gardens  
and a robot emerges to push  
my corpse into the hole  
along with my stampcollecting machine,  
my electronic magnolia cultivator,  
lawnmower, wife,  
and all my poems, including this  
one:  
they're keeping tabs,  
and they've levelled dirt  
over the hole and pedestrians are  
mincing their sticky soft stiletto heels  
over my sky  
and packing my flesh and possessions  
into a lightless holy bundle.  
you may just hear D-file machine  
humming softly over my card  
at the computer bank;  
i'm dead,  
yes  
i'm dead,  
but they're keeping tabs –  
they're keeping tabs

Trevor Reeves died in the week the GCSB Bill was inching its inevitable way through Parliament. The technology described in his poem has of course advanced unrecognisably, but little else has changed. He was a true New Zealand original who knew what was going on. We are poorer without him.